

UKRAINE CONFLICTS UPDATES 2023

This page is a collection of ISW and CTP's Ukraine War updates from 2023.

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 collection of reports from 2022

[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, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 31, 2023, 5:10pm ET

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

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on December 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual New Year's address on December 31 to concretize Russian ideological priorities for 2024, notably omitting any mentions of the war in Ukraine and instead focusing on setting ideological conditions for the upcoming year. In stark contrast to last year's New Year's address, wherein Putin addressed the nation at the headquarters of the Southern Military District surrounded by uniformed military personnel and talked explicitly about Russia's goals in Ukraine, Putin's 2023 address shows him standing alone against the backdrop of the Kremlin, without a single mention of the "special military operation."^[1] Putin instead opted to very briefly thank Russian military personnel for fighting for "truth and justice," and otherwise focused on emphasizing Russian national unity.^[2] Putin also stated that 2024 will be the "Year of the Family," emphasizing that the Russian family is the backbone of "the multinational people of Russia," and that Russia is "one big country, one big family."

Putin has in recent weeks frequently discussed Russia's continued maximalist intentions for the war in Ukraine, and Putin likely sought to set more domestically-oriented ideological conditions during his New Year's speech.^[3] Putin's invocation of 2024 as the "Year of the Family," as well as his emphasis on Russian "multinationalism," further serve to clearly delineate the Kremlin's ideological line going into 2024, orienting domestic policy around the preservation of traditional Russian family values and the protection of Russian multinationalism, which both fit into Putin's wider ideology of a Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) inclusive of groups within and beyond Russia.^[4] ISW has recently assessed that Putin is trying to re-establish the conception of the Russian World as the backbone of Russian domestic and foreign policy, and the 2023 New Year's address identifies Russian families and Russian multinationalism as pillars of this concretized Russian World.^[5] The Kremlin's conceptions of the Russian World will undoubtedly impact Russian administrative, bureaucratic, and sociocultural priorities in occupied Ukraine, as well as military goals on the battlefield in the year to come.

Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 31, underscoring a notable recent increase in the percentage of Russian Shahed-136/131 drones penetrating or avoiding Ukrainian air defenses. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces struck Kharkiv City with six S-300 missiles and launched 49 Shahed drones primarily at Ukrainian frontline positions as well as civilian, military, and infrastructure facilities in Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhia oblasts on the night of December 30 to 31.^[6] Ukrainian military sources



reported that Russian forces launched 12 missiles at targets in Ukraine on December 31, an unspecified number of which struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts.^[7] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 21 of the Shahed drones, a notably lower rate of interceptions for Ukrainian air defenses than ISW has previously observed.^[8] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yury Ihnat noted that Russian strikes on Ukrainian frontline positions with Shahed drones are "peculiar," and it is possible that the lower interception rate is a result of Russian forces targeting frontline areas that have less air defense coverage or coverage less optimized for intercepting drones than population centers in the rear.^[9] Ukrainian air defenses similarly had a lower-than-usual interception rate when Ukrainian forces shot down five out of 10 Shahed drones on December 30 and 27 out of 36 Shahed drones on December 29.^[10] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 29 that Russian forces launched Shaheds that are harder to detect because they are painted black and partially absorb radio signals.^[11] Ihnat previously stated on November 25 that Russian forces are beginning to use black paint and carbon fiber materiel on Shahed drones to complicate the work of Ukrainian air defense systems.^[12] It is unclear if adaptations to the Shahed drones are decreasing the Ukrainians' ability to intercept the drones or if the apparent trend in the decreased Ukrainian interception rate will continue.

Russian forces, particularly Russian airborne (VDV) Forces, are reportedly suffering heavy losses in simultaneous infantry-heavy Russian offensive operations on multiple fronts. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 31 that units of the Russian VDV forces are suffering heavy losses and are unable to rest and recover.^[13] The milblogger claimed that experienced and trained VDV contract servicemen (*kontraktniki*) form a lower proportion of the VDV's personnel, and that the VDV has suffered high losses amongst experienced members of the command cadre that had previously made up the core of the VDV forces. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets assessed on December 31 that elements of the newly formed 104th VDV Division, particularly its 328th and 337th VDV Regiments, will have to withdraw from the Krynyk area in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast for rest and replenishment after a month of almost continuous fighting in the area.^[14] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed on December 14 that elements of the 104th VDV Division likely suffered exceptionally heavy losses near Krynyk due to inadequate air and artillery support and the inexperience of many of its personnel.^[15] VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky implied on December 23 that the Russian military command is deploying new VDV officers and troops directly from graduation from initial training to the frontlines without having them complete pre-combat training.^[16] Teplinsky stated that some recent graduates of the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School will join the 104th Division in the Kherson direction.^[17]

The high casualty rate, particularly among units such as the VDV that were considered elite before 2022, is largely a reflection of the fact that the Russian military command has chosen to pursue simultaneous offensive operations along the entire frontline, often prioritizing marginal gains at the cost of disproportionate losses. The UK MoD stated on December 30 that "the average daily number of Russian casualties in Ukraine has risen by almost 300 during the course of 2023" and that if the current casualty rate continues Russian forces will have lost over half a million personnel total in Ukraine by the end of 2024.^[18] A declassified US intelligence assessment reportedly shared with Congress on December 12 stated that Russian forces have lost 315,000 personnel since the beginning of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[19] The current tempo and style of Russian offensives in Ukraine are reflective of these estimated casualty rates. Russian forces have conducted multiple waves of mass mechanized assaults and infantry-led assaults to capture Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, since October 10 despite heavy personnel losses, for example, and have rushed untrained VDV elements to defend against Ukrainian ground operations in the east bank of Kherson Oblast, where they have also taken heavy losses.^[20] The Russian military leadership has undertaken extensive force generation measures as part of efforts to offset manpower losses, however, including partial mobilization since September 2022 and ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.^[21] The current casualty rate should not be taken as permanent—the Russian military command could change the tempo and pace of offensive operations or take time to reconstitute its forces for more effective future offensive operations. Ukraine's Western partners must guard against complacency when assessing Russian losses and operational failures in Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed.^[22]

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power in Russia while reiterating a common Russian information operation aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity. The milblogger claimed on December 31 that the illegal Russian annexation of occupied Luhansk Oblast as the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), occupied Donetsk Oblast as the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), and occupied Crimea as the Republic of Crimea created three new republics that are specifically for "ethnic Russians."^[23] The milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power because there was not a republic dedicated to ethnic Russians prior to Russia's illegal annexation of the LNR, DNR and Crimea. The milblogger claimed that Russia has many republics dedicated to providing "statehood" to ethnic minorities such as the republics of Tatarstan, Karelia, and Dagestan.^[24] The milblogger claimed that Russians instead have "territories," likely referring to other designations for Russian federal subjects such as krais and oblasts. Russian republics, generally named after the ethnic minority inhabiting the area, are nominally allowed under Russian law to exercise more administrative autonomy than other Russian federal subjects.^[25] The milblogger argued that Russia needs more "ethnic Russian" republics to promote the interests of ethnic Russians, reflecting the Russian pro-war ultranationalist community's wider objective to eliminate non-Russian culture from Russian society. The milblogger's argument rests on the long-running Russian information operation denying the existence of Ukrainian identity by falsely claiming that Ukrainians are ethnic Russians.^[26] The milblogger's argument also attributes coherence to DNR and LNR governance where ISW has consistently observed administrative disorganization and ineptitude.^[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual New Year's address on December 31 to concretize Russian ideological priorities for 2024, notably omitting any mentions of the war in Ukraine and instead focusing on setting ideological conditions for the upcoming year.
- Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 31, underscoring a notable recent increase in the percentage of Russian Shahed-136/131 drones penetrating or avoiding Ukrainian air defenses.
- Russian forces, particularly Russian airborne (VDV) Forces, are reportedly suffering heavy losses in simultaneous infantry-heavy Russian offensive operations on multiple fronts.
- A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power in Russia while reiterating a common Russian information operation aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted positional engagements along the entire line of conduct, but there were no confirmed map changes on December 31.
- Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko is spearheading efforts to consolidate sociocultural control of occupied areas of Ukraine via the information space.

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 30, 2023, 6:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on December 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a large series of strikes against targets in Russia on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 30. Ukrainian security sources told Western and Ukrainian media that Ukrainian forces launched more than 70 drones on the night of December 29 to 30 at Russian military infrastructure and defense industrial facilities near Moscow, Belgorod, Tula, Tver, and Bryansk cities.^[1] The Ukrainian security sources reportedly characterized these strikes as a response to the Russian strikes on December 29, which was the largest series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion.^[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 32 Ukrainian drones in Bryansk, Orel, Kursk, and Moscow oblasts on the night of December 29 to 30.^[3] The discrepancy between these Russian and Ukrainian figures may suggest that Ukrainian forces struck many of their intended targets, as Ukrainian security sources suggested to Western and Ukrainian media.^[4] Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Kreminy El Plant in Bryansk City, which is Russia's second largest producer of microelectronics, 90 percent of whose manufactured products are reportedly components of Russian military equipment and systems.^[5] Geolocated footage published on December 30 shows explosions over Bryansk City.^[6] The Russian MoD stated that Russian air defenses shot down 12 Ukrainian MLRS rockets in Belgorod Oblast on December 29 and several more Ukrainian MLRS rockets near Belgorod City during the day on December 30.^[7] Ukrainian security sources reportedly told Western and Ukrainian media that the Ukrainian strikes on December 30 targeted Russian military targets near Belgorod City.^[8]

Russian forces conducted a lower number of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 30 following the large Russian strike series on December 29. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 10 Shahed-136/-131 drones at targets in southern Ukraine, an Iskander-M missile at Zaporizhzhia City, an unspecified number of Kh-59 missiles at Dnipro and Odesa cities, and six unspecified missiles at Kharkiv City.^[9] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted five of the drones, the Iskander-M missile, and one of the Kh-59 missiles.^[10] Russian forces reportedly struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv City, an enterprise in Odesa City, and the office of the Ukrainian Human Rights Commissioner in Kherson City.^[11] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 30 that the December 29 Russian strike series killed 39 people and wounded 159 and impacted hundreds of civilian objects.^[12] The *Economist* reported on December 29 that a source in Ukraine's defense industry stated that Russian strikes on December 29 predominately targeted defense industrial facilities in Ukraine, including those connected to Ukrainian missile and drone production.^[13] Russian strikes against Ukrainian defense industrial facilities likely mean to prevent Ukraine from developing key capacities to sustain operations for a longer war effort and disrupt Ukrainian efforts to seek Western partnerships for joint production in Ukraine.^[14]

Russian officials continued to clearly state that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine. Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Galuzin stated in an interview with Russian state outlet *RIA Novosti* on December 30 that Russia will agree to a settlement when Ukraine is "neutral, non-aligned, and nuclear-free," "demilitariz[ed]," and "denazi[fied]" — long-standing Russian demands for Ukraine's exclusion from NATO and EU membership, the removal of Ukraine's ability to defend its land and its people, and the replacement of the current elected Ukrainian government with a Kremlin-accepted government.^[15] Galuzin also reiterated the Kremlin narrative that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — and not Russian President Vladimir Putin — is to blame for the absence of negotiations and claimed that Zelensky's proposed peace plan "has nothing to do with peace" but "justif[ies] the continuation of hostilities." Galuzin claimed that Russia has never refused to engage in dialogue with Ukraine, but that Russia has "no choice" but to complete all its "assigned tasks" — Russia's maximalist objectives — in Ukraine.

The Kremlin's recent public rhetoric about its maximalist objectives and imperial designs in Ukraine are permeating the Russian information space. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on December 30 that Western media is disseminating "rumors" about negotiations that would end the war in Ukraine by giving Russia unspecified parts of Ukrainian territory.^[16] The milblogger stated that Russia is not interested in such "limited proposals," suggesting that the milblogger believes that Russia's war objectives extend beyond its currently occupied territory. The milblogger also claimed that Ukraine is not yet sufficiently demoralized and "exhausted" to accept a "catastrophic capitulation," suggesting that the milblogger believes that Russia should only accept such a "catastrophic [Ukrainian] capitulation" and is calling on Russia to achieve these maximalist objectives in part through psychological means. Russian sources specifically amplified Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's labelling of Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv as "Russian cities" on December 28. The prominent milblogger claimed on December 30 that the war will end when Ukraine allows Russia to take Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and other Ukrainian oblasts.^[17] Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed on December 30 that Russia's task for the war in Ukraine was previously "blurry" and "there was no understanding of where [Russian] borders should stop" but Medvedev's statement makes it clear that Russia has determined that its borders should allow for "complete [Russian] control" of the Black Sea and should include Kyiv.^[18] Basurin called Kyiv "the capital of [Russia's] large empire" and the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy and the word "Rus" (in reference to Kyivan Rus). Basurin's statements echo those of Putin, who featured similar claims in his July 2021 "Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" essay and who has recently reverted to narratives about Kyivan Rus as part of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) to frame Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a historically justified imperial reconquest.^[19]

Russia continues to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova. Russian state news wire *TASS* reported on December 27 that 19.1 percent of school children in Moldova choose to receive educational instruction in the Russian language.^[20] *TASS* claimed that the Moldovan government's refusal to recognize Russian as a state language in 1989 led to the war in Transnistria and the conflict with Gagauzia.^[21] *TASS* further claimed that the ruling pro-European Moldovan Party of Action and Solidarity is exacerbating these alleged long-standing language divides by failing to grant Russian language the status of "a language of interethnic communication."^[22] Russian forces have occupied Transnistria since 1992, and Russia has continually supported pro-Russian actors in Moldova to promote political instability and division.^[23] Claims that the Party of Action and Solidarity is threatening Russian speakers in Moldova allow Russia to frame any potential Russian support for pro-Kremlin actors in Moldova as a humanitarian attempt to protect Russian speakers instead of an attempt to politically destabilize Moldova itself. The Kremlin used exactly this line of argument as one of the bases for its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[24] Russia is likely attempting to justify any future actions in Moldova as an attempt to protect its "compatriots abroad," a term that Russia has broadly defined to mean ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside of Russia regardless of their citizenship. Russia continues to

justify its invasion of Ukraine, in part, by claiming Russia is protecting its “compatriots” in Ukraine and their right to use Russian language and will likely continue to use this narrative when discussing any future Russian attempts at imperial reconquests.[25]

Russia continues attempts to actively shape the Western information space to support Russian positions and undermine support for Ukraine while portraying these efforts as endogenous to the West. The *Washington Post* reported on December 30 that it obtained Kremlin documents from an unspecified European security service that show that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko oversees Kremlin operations to undermine support for Ukraine and NATO in the French information space and through French politicians and activists.[26] The Kremlin documents reportedly listed specific narratives that the Kremlin sought to promote in France including arguments that Western sanctions against Russia have harmed the French economy, that the provision of French weapons supplies to Ukraine has degraded France's ability to defend itself, that continuous support for Ukraine would lead to World War III, and that France should not fund a foreign war.[27] The Kremlin documents also reportedly show that Kremlin political strategists instructed a Russian troll farm employee to write a “200-character comment by a middle-aged French person” arguing that European support for Ukraine is a “stupid adventure” and that continued support for Ukraine is increasing inflation and lowering living standards.[28]

The *Washington Post* also reported that a six-month French government inquiry found that “Russia is conducting a long-term disinformation campaign in [France] to defend and promote Russian interests and to polarize [French] democratic society.”[29] The inquiry highlighted French far-right party National Rally’s links to the Kremlin and National Rally Party member and French politician Thierry Mariani’s continued pro-Russian positions.[30] Mariani, previously under investigation for Russia-related corruption, is the Co-Chair of the Russian government-founded French think tank, the Franco-Russian Dialogue Association.[31] Russia reportedly employs similar information tactics in Ukraine, the West, and worldwide. The Atlantic Council’s *Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab)* and the BBC’s *Verify* project recently found that Russian actors created thousands of fake accounts aimed at defaming former Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov and connected the effort to a previous Russian information campaign to discredit Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi in early 2023.[32] Independent social media monitor *Graphika* also found that Russian actors generated online content designed to appear as domestically generated to reduce Western support for NATO ahead of the July 2023 NATO summit.[33]

The Russian Ministry Foreign Affairs (MFA) emphasized Russia’s improving diplomatic relations with non-Western countries in way that suggests that the Kremlin is insecure about the possibility of diplomatic isolation against the backdrop of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian MFA published a list on December 30 outlining its accomplishments in gaining political and diplomatic support for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and expanding cooperation with countries and associations of the “world majority.”[34] Russia has previously defined the “world majority” as “a civilizational and cultural community that objectively opposes” the West and alleged that the world is divided into two camps: countries that support the United States and Ukraine and countries that are neutral or support Russia.[35] The MFA cited several accomplishments, such as improving relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America; having Sino-Russian relations reach an “unprecedented level”; bringing the Russian–North Korean relations to a new level; and developing Russian–Iranian relations. The MFA also claimed that Russia thwarted Western attempts to isolate Russia, responded to NATO’s and the European Union’s expansion, and withdrew from a series of treaties. It notably did not identify the expansion of NATO and the EU as the defeats for Russian diplomacy that they were. The Russian MFA has been trying recently to establish new diplomatic relations with African countries and even reopened its embassy in Burkina Faso for the first time since 1992 on December 28.[36] Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a bill in August committing Russia to reopen its embassy in Equatorial Guinea.[37] MFA Deputy Minister Yevgeny Ivanov announced on December 25 that Russia is planning to open additional embassies and diplomatic missions and claimed that while Western countries sent hundreds of Russian diplomats home, these diplomats were able to find other jobs within the MFA network.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a large series of strikes against targets in Russia on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 30.
- Russian forces conducted a lower number of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 30 following the large Russian strike series on December 29.
- Russian officials continued to clearly state that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin’s recent public rhetoric about its maximalist objectives and imperial designs in Ukraine are permeating the Russian information space.
- Russia continues to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova.
- Russia continues attempts to actively shape the Western information space to support Russian positions and undermine support for Ukraine while portraying these efforts as endogenous to the West.
- The Russian Ministry Foreign Affairs (MFA) emphasized Russia’s improving diplomatic relations with non-Western countries in way that suggests that the Kremlin is insecure about the possibility of diplomatic isolation against the backdrop of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces made confirmed gains near Kremenna, Bakhmut and Avdiivka as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- The Russian military command reportedly continued the dissolution of the “Kaskad” operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People’s Republic’s (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) to support its efforts to formalize control over Russian irregular forces.
- Russia continues efforts to integrate education systems in occupied Ukraine and expand education programs aimed at eliminating Ukrainian identity in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 29, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 29, 2023, 6:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on December 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted the largest series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion on the morning of December 29. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 36 Shahed-136/131 drones and over 120 missiles of various sizes at industrial and military facilities and critical infrastructure in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, and Odesa cities and Sumy, Cherkasy, and Mykolaiv oblasts.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched a total of 160 projectiles at Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces downed 27 Shaheds and 88 Kh-101, Kh-555, and Kh-55 missiles.^[2] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi reported that Russian forces first launched the 36 Shahed drones from the northern, southeastern, and western directions in the early hours of December 29.^[3] Zaluzhnyi reported that Russian strategic aircraft and bombers later launched at least 90 Kh-101, Kh-555, and Kh-55 cruise missiles and eight Kh-22 and Kh-32 missiles.^[4] Russian forces also struck Kharkiv City with modified S-300 air defense missiles and launched a total of 14 S-300, S-400, and Iskander-M ballistic missiles from occupied Crimea and Russia.^[5] Zaluzhnyi reported that Russian forces also launched five Kinzhal hypersonic air-launched ballistic missiles, four Kh-31P anti-radar missiles, and one Kh-59 cruise missile at unspecified targets in Ukraine.^[6] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reported that Russian forces struck civilian infrastructure such as a maternity hospital, educational institutions, a shopping center, a commercial warehouse, and residential buildings in cities throughout Ukraine.^[7]

The strike package that Russian forces launched on December 29 appears to be a culmination of several months of Russian experimentation with various drone and missile combinations and efforts to test Ukrainian air defenses. Over the past several months, Russian forces have conducted a series of missile and drone strikes of varying sizes, using various combinations of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles.^[8] In most of the more recent strikes, Russian forces notably used either exclusively Shahed-136/131 type drones or a majority of Shahed drones accompanied by a smaller number of missiles.^[9] In contrast, the December 29 strike package included 36 Shahed drones and 120 missiles of various sizes.^[10] Ukrainian military officials, including Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat, have long noted that Russian forces frequently use Shahed-type drones to probe Ukrainian air defense and determine what strike routes most effectively circumvent Ukrainian air defense clusters.^[11] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi also notably assessed on August 28 that Russian forces were likely employing strike packages comprised of more drones than missiles in order to determine flight paths that bypass Ukrainian air defenses and allow other projectiles to more reliably reach their intended targets.^[12] ISW assessed on October 21 that Russian forces were likely diversifying the mix of missiles, glide bombs, and drones used in strike packages in order to determine weaknesses in Ukrainian air defense coverage to optimize a strike package such as the one that Russian forces launched on December 29.^[13] Russia was likely deliberately stockpiling missiles of various sizes through the fall and early winter of 2023 in order to build a more diverse strike package and apply lessons learned over the course of various recent reconnaissance and probing missions—namely using Shahed drones to bypass Ukrainian air defenses while utilizing missiles to inflict maximal damage on intended targets.^[14] Ukrainian forces notably did not intercept any of the Kh-22/Kh-32 missiles, ballistic missiles (S-300s and Iskander-Ms), Kinzhal hypersonic air-launched ballistic missiles (Kh-47s), Kh-31P anti-radar missiles, or Kh-59 cruise missiles that Russian forces launched on December 29, which suggests that Russian forces have been able to successfully apply some lessons learned about effective strike package combinations and that the Shaheds that preceded the missiles may have distracted Ukrainian air defenses or otherwise enabled the strike.^[15]

Russia will continue to conduct strikes against Ukraine at scale in an effort to degrade Ukrainian morale and Ukraine's ability to sustain its war effort against Russia. Zaluzhnyi stated that Russian forces targeted critical infrastructure and industrial and military facilities in Ukraine on December 29.^[16] Ukrainian officials indicated that Russian forces primarily struck residential buildings, transportation infrastructure, and industrial facilities, although this is not a comprehensive list of the Russian target set.^[17] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) facilities and Ukrainian military infrastructure were the primary targets.^[18]

Russian forces conducted an initial mass strike campaign in fall 2022 and winter 2022-2023 against Ukrainian energy infrastructure that was aimed at collapsing the Ukrainian energy grid during winter to degrade Ukrainian morale to the point of breaking the Ukrainian will to fight.^[19] That effort failed, but Russian forces have conducted a consistent strike campaign in Ukraine that is still aimed at degrading Ukrainian morale and have also focused on inflicting compounding costs on Ukraine.^[20]

Ukraine has pursued a concerted effort to expand its defense industrial base (DIB) in the past year, and the reported Russian strikes against industrial facilities likely mean to prevent Ukraine from developing key capacities to sustain operations for a longer war effort.^[21] Ukraine has also sought Western partnerships for joint production in Ukraine, and Russian strikes on industrial facilities likely aim to increase risks for Western partners and companies above their current risk tolerance for operating in Ukraine.^[22]

Russian forces will likely conduct intensified strikes in the coming days to coincide with the New Year Holiday as they did last year in an effort to degrade Ukrainian morale.^[23] Russian forces may still decide to strike Ukrainian energy infrastructure at scale in the coming months, although ISW still assesses that a Russian effort to break Ukraine's will to fight is very unlikely to succeed. Russian forces likely also intend for strikes on residential areas to stir up societal discontent in connection with routine information operations that aim to exploit and amplify Ukrainian social tensions.^[24]

Current Russian missile and drone reserves and production rates likely do not allow Russian forces to conduct regular large-scale missile strikes, but likely do allow for more consistent drone strikes, which can explain the recent pattern of Russian strike packages. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on November 6 that Russian forces produced 115 long-range high-precision missiles in October 2023, including 30 Iskander-M cruise missiles, 12 Iskander-K cruise missiles, 20 Kalibr cruise missiles, 40 Kh-101 cruise missiles, 9 Kh-32 cruise missiles, and 4 Kinzhal ballistic missiles.^[25] Skibitskyi also stated on November 6 that Russian forces had a total of 870 high-precision operational-strategic and strategic missiles in reserve in November and that this number increased by 285 missiles between August and November. Although Ukrainian officials have recently stated that Russian forces have partially restored their cruise missile stockpiles, Skibitskyi's statements about recent Russian missile reserve totals and monthly production rates indicate that Russian forces are unable to sustain repeated large-scale missile strikes comparable to the December 29 strike series.^[26] The December 29 strikes, which included five Kinzhal missiles, for example, used roughly one month's worth of Russia's reported production of that system. Russia is able to domestically produce Shahed-136/131 drones at a much higher rate, however, largely due to the creation and expansion of the drone production facility in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in the Republic of Tatarstan.^[27] The Institute for Science and International Security reported on November 13 that even after a one-month delay in production the Alabuga facility planned to produce 1,400 Shahed-136 drones between February and October 2023 and plans to produce a total of 6,000 drones by

September 2025.[28] Russian forces will therefore likely be able to conduct more consistent Shahed strikes than missile strikes, as Ukrainian officials have previously indicated.[29]

The Kremlin's efforts to sufficiently mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) in support of its wartime objectives, including large-scale strike series, may have been more successful than Western officials previously assessed due in part to Russia's ability to procure military equipment from its partners and the redistribution of Russia's resources for military production purposes. Head of the German Ministry of Defense's Special Staff for Ukrainian Issues Major General Christian Freuding stated during an interview on December 29 that the German Armed Forces did not expect that Russia would succeed in expanding its DIB and increasing its production capacity in the face of Western sanctions.[30] Freuding stated that Germany did not account for Russia's ability to circumvent Western sanctions by procuring materiel from North Korea, China, and other countries.[31] Ukrainian outlet *Ekonomiczna Pravda*, citing data from *Forbes*, reported that Russia's December 29 strike cost Russia at least \$1.27 billion, calculating that Russia spent over \$720,000 to launch 36 Shahed-136/131 drones, over \$5 million to launch five Kh-47 hypersonic missiles, and an estimated \$1.17 billion on the over 90 Kh-101 missiles that it launched.[32] *Forbes* previously reported that Russian Kh-101 cruise missiles cost an estimated \$13 million per missile compared to Kh-22 missiles that cost an estimated \$1 million each and Iskander-M ballistic missiles that cost roughly \$3 million each.[33] Russian forces notably appear to be using larger quantities of the more expensive Kh-101 cruise missiles to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses and increase the chances of striking targets in Ukraine with smaller quantities of cheaper missile variants.

Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* estimated on December 29 that Russia's economy will most likely grow by more than three percent by the end of 2023, largely due to the Russian DIB's unprecedented levels of production that have bolstered Russian economic output.[34] *Meduza*, citing the Bank of Finland's Institute for Emerging Economies, reported that Russia's DIB generated 40 percent of Russian GDP growth in the first half of 2023 despite only accounting for six percent of Russian GDP. [35] *Meduza* credited the success of the Russian DIB to Russia's significantly increased, and still increasing, defense budget and the redistribution of Russia's civilian sector resources for military production purposes.[36] *Meduza* highlighted Russia's Tambov Bakery, a bakery that began assembling 230 to 250 combat drones per month in March 2023, as an example of the Russian economy's redistribution of money and resources towards military over civilian goods.[37] *Meduza* noted that the Russian DIB is unlikely to generate the same levels of economic growth in 2024, largely due to personnel shortages, already stretched production capacities, and its dependence on imported components and equipment.[38]

Russian forces have likely routinely attempted to draw and fix limited Ukrainian air defense systems away from the front, and the Russian strikes on December 29 follow recent indications that Ukrainian air defenses may be presenting significant challenges to Russian aviation operations along the frontline. Ukraine lacks the number of air defense systems required to provide even coverage to all of Ukraine, and Russian forces have likely conducted a consistent series of strikes, even if at a low intensity, in part to force Ukrainian forces to concentrate those air defense systems on protecting larger population centers far from the front instead of providing coverage for military operations.[39] Russian forces reportedly decreased their aviation activity after Ukrainian forces shot down three Russian Su-34s in southern Ukraine between December 21 and 22, which was subsequently followed by a notable decrease in the tempo of Russian ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[40] Russian forces had been relying on the mass use of glide bombs dropped from manned aircraft to support operations in Kherson Oblast and in eastern Ukraine, likely due to the reported Ukrainian ability to suppress long-range Russian artillery and shoot down Russian rotary wing aircraft.[41] A Ukrainian capability to suppress Russian aviation activity even in limited areas of the front would likely pose significant operational constraints on Russian forces.

Ukrainian forces have recently expanded their use of mobile air defense strike groups in an effort to avoid expending air defense missiles on routine Russian strikes with Shahed-136/131 drones.[42] The recent months of Shahed-heavy strikes and the relatively smaller number of Russian missile strikes may have eased pressure on Ukrainian air defenses in rear areas and allowed Ukrainian forces to strengthen air defense coverage along the front. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 24 that Ukrainian forces can deploy air defense systems in any direction and not only in those where Russian forces have recently suffered aviation losses.[43] The Russian military's increased use of missiles in the December 29 strike likely intends in part to reapply pressure on Ukraine's limited air defense umbrella and prevent the Ukrainian command from redeploying air defense systems from the rear towards the front.

Western aid remains vital for Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian strikes, and the end of such aid would likely set conditions for an expanded Russian air campaign in Ukraine. Ukrainian air defenses, in part buttressed by Western-provided systems and missiles, are crucial for Ukraine's ability to intercept Russian missiles and drones throughout Ukraine, especially as Ukrainian officials have indicated that Ukraine lacks enough air defenses to evenly cover the country. Ukrainian air defenses have proven successful at pushing Russian aircraft and glide bombs away from Ukrainian cities and even the frontline in some areas. Western-provided air defense systems have thus kept Ukraine's cities safe from bombing raids, which the Russian military would almost certainly begin to devastating effect in the absence of such systems.[44] Russia's inability to establish air superiority has helped Ukrainian forces prevent large-scale Russian advances along the entire line of contact. United Kingdom (UK) Defense Secretary Grant Shapps stated on December 29 that the UK would send about 200 air defense missiles to Ukraine following Russia's large-scale strike.[45] Western aid packages have in part focused on air defense systems and missiles recently, and the continuation of such aid is vital for continued Ukrainian defense of its people and its territory. ISW continues to assess that the collapse of Western aid would likely lead sooner or later to the advance of Russian forces far to the west and likely all the way to western Ukraine along the border with NATO member states.[46]

Western leaders largely viewed the massive Russian strike as evidence that Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine remain unchanged, in line with ISW's long-standing assessment that Putin is not genuinely interested in a ceasefire or any sort of negotiated settlement in Ukraine. US President Joe Biden stated that the large-scale Russian strikes on Ukraine are a reminder that Putin's objective – to "obliterate Ukraine" and "subjugate its people" – remains unchanged.[47] Biden also stated that the stakes of the war in Ukraine affect the entirety of NATO and European security, as ISW has previously suggested.[48] United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stated that the Russian strikes demonstrate that Putin intends to achieve his maximalist war aims of "eradicating freedom and democracy" and destroying Ukraine.[49] ISW has consistently assessed that, despite reports of Putin's backchannel signals about his interest in ceasefire negotiations, Russia's goals in Ukraine – which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender and which have been clearly stated in Kremlin public rhetoric – remain the same.[50]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted the largest series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion on the morning of December 29.

- The strike package that Russian forces launched on December 29 appears to be a culmination of several months of Russian experimentation with various drone and missile combinations and efforts to test Ukrainian air defenses.
- Russia will continue to conduct strikes against Ukraine at scale in an effort to degrade Ukrainian morale and Ukraine's ability to sustain its war effort against Russia.
- Current Russian missile and drone reserves and production rates likely do not allow Russian forces to conduct regular large-scale missile strikes, but likely do allow for more consistent drone strikes, which can explain the recent pattern of Russian strike packages.
- The Kremlin's efforts to sufficiently mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) in support of its wartime objectives, including large-scale strike series, may have been more successful than Western officials previously assessed due in part to Russia's ability to procure military equipment from its partners and the redistribution of Russia's resources for military production purposes.
- Russian forces have likely routinely attempted to draw and fix limited Ukrainian air defense systems away from the front, and the Russian strikes on December 29 follow recent indications that Ukrainian air defenses may be presenting significant challenges to Russian aviation operations along the frontline.
- Western aid remains vital for Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian strikes, and the end of such aid would likely set conditions for an expanded Russian air campaign in Ukraine.
- Western leaders largely viewed the massive Russian strike as evidence that Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine remain unchanged, in line with ISW's long-standing assessment that Putin is not genuinely interested in a ceasefire or any sort of negotiated settlement in Ukraine.
- Russian forces made recent confirmed advances northeast of Bakhmut and south of Avdiivka as positional engagements continued across the entire line of contact.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on December 29 that it has completed Russia's autumn 2023 conscription cycle, which began on October 1.
- Russia continues the forced integration of occupied areas of Ukraine into the Russian system using social services and infrastructure restoration projects.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 28, 2023

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Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov,

George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 28, 2023, 8pm ET

The *New York Times* (NYT) published an oped by a member of its editorial board calling for Ukraine to engage in negotiations with and cede territory to Russia after reports emerged that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using backchannels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire. The oped largely ignores near-constant Kremlin public signaling of Russia's continued maximalist goals in Ukraine. The oped argues that Ukraine should not "pass up" this opportunity to possibly achieve a ceasefire despite the fact that there are multiple reasons to believe that Putin's pro-ceasefire signaling may not be sincere, such as Putin's demonstrated untrustworthiness and the possibility that he may intend to use time spent on prolonged negotiations to his political and military benefit.^[1] The piece argues that Ukraine does not need to regain all its territory to emerge victorious from the war, but that a "strong, independent, prosperous, and secure" Western-oriented Ukraine is also a victory. The piece appeals to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to engage in ceasefire negotiations and not see negotiations as a defeat, implicitly blaming Zelensky – not Putin – for the absence of serious negotiations.

The oped's argument implicitly relies on the assumption that Putin's reported backchannel communications more accurately reflect Putin's thoughts and desires than his – and other Kremlin officials' – constant public rhetoric. Kremlin rhetoric to both international and domestic audiences has repeatedly indicated that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine – which are completely incompatible with a strong, independent, or secure Ukraine that is a part of the West. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev gave an interview to Russian state outlet *RIA Novosti* on December 28, for example, in which he responded to a question about the possibility of negotiations in 2024 by stating that the war will continue and that Russia's goals in Ukraine remain the "disarmament of Ukrainian troops" (alternative wording for the long-standing Russian demand for Ukraine's "demilitarization") and "the rejection by the current Ukrainian state of the ideology of neo-Nazism (alternative wording for the Kremlin's repeated demands for Ukraine's "denazification").^[2] Medvedev re-emphasized that the war would continue until Russia achieves regime change in Ukraine and also claimed that Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv (none of which Russia currently occupies) are "Russian cities" and complained that they are still marked as Ukrainian cities on maps. Medvedev's comments reinforce copious other indications that Russia intends to annex or militarily occupy territory beyond the current line of contact and beyond the four (illegally) annexed oblasts and Crimea.^[3] Medvedev also claimed that Russia has always been open to negotiations with Ukraine and that negotiations can continue up until the "complete defeat and capitulation" of Ukraine – in line with ISW's long-standing assessment that Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's maximalist objectives, which are tantamount to Ukrainian and Western surrender, are unchanged.^[4] The Ukrainian government, on the other hand, has consistently been working on its 10-point peace plan, and Zelensky stated on December 19 that Ukraine is preparing to be able to present the peace formula to Russia in the future.^[5]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a number of statements on December 28 that also run contrary to the reported backchannel messaging on which the NYT oped and similar arguments rely. Lavrov claimed on December 28 in another interview with *RIA Novosti* that "hints and leaks" in the Western media show that the West wants to look for a way to end the war in Ukraine while still declaring a Ukrainian victory – possibly in response to Western reports about Russia's willingness to negotiate.^[6] Lavrov also claimed that Ukrainian demands for the return of its 1991 borders amount to "demands for genocide." Lavrov claimed that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" and lamented the fall of the Soviet Union, after which millions of Russians were left outside of the borders of the Russian Federation-- echoing many statements that Putin has made.^[7] Lavrov's statements appear to invoke the Kremlin's concept of "compatriots abroad" that is used to justify Russia's

definition of its “sovereignty” and right to defend ethnic Russians and Russian speakers beyond its borders. The Kremlin has recently returned to its “compatriots abroad” narrative to justify its war in Ukraine and when discussing Russia’s imperial reconquests in and beyond Ukraine.[8]

The oped’s focus on the need for Ukraine to cede its land, finally, obscures the horrors that the Russian occupation is inflicting on the Ukrainian people living on that land. Russian forces and administrations have been engaging in large-scale and deliberate ethnic cleansing campaigns, forcibly and illegally deporting Ukrainians to Russia and replacing them with Russians and migrants to Russia.[9] Russian administrations have illegally deported tens of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia under various schemes, including causing Russian families to adopt them.[10] Russian administrations are systematically working to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, and ethnicity in the areas that Russian forces occupy, as ISW has repeatedly documented.[11] Many of these activities appear to violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and deserve at least a mention in discussions about how Ukraine’s president should cede Ukraine’s land and people to Russia.[12]

Russia has officially deployed a battalion formed of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to the frontline in Ukraine, further confirming a myriad of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs. Russian state-controlled outlets *RIA Novosti* and *Rossiya-1* reported on December 28 that soldiers from the “Bogdan Khmelnitsky” battalion, formed of Ukrainian POWs and subordinated to the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Ministry of Internal Affairs “Kaskad” formation, took part in their first engagement against Ukrainian forces near Urozhaine, western Donetsk Oblast.[13] Russian media had previously reported on October 27 that the battalion recruited around 70 Ukrainian POWs from penal colonies in Russia and sent them to train before deploying to the western Donetsk Oblast area in early November.[14] ISW continues to assess that the use of Ukrainian POWs in the “Bogdan Khmelnitsky” battalion is likely a violation of The Geneva Convention on POWs, which prohibits the use of POWs in military activities on the side of the power that has captured them and states that “no POW 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 labor which is of an unhealthy or dangerous nature.”[15]

Recent incidents of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs likely implicate elements of the now notorious 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division in the abuse of POWs.[16] Drone footage from December 27 showed Russian forces executing three Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and footage from December 13 additionally showed Russian forces in this area using Ukrainian POWs as human shields.[17] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General verified the authenticity of the December 27 video on December 28 and suggested that elements of the Russian 76th VDV Division are likely responsible for the executions, considering that the 76th is the principal Russian formation operating near Robotyne.[18] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* similarly suggested that the December 13 footage implicates elements of the 234th VDV Regiment of the 76th VDV Division in the crime of using Ukrainian POWs as human shields in the same area.[19] Various independent investigations in 2022 confirmed that the 76th VDV Division, particularly its 234th Regiment, participated in a deliberate “cleansing operation” that massacred Ukrainian civilians in Bucha, Kyiv Oblast.[20] The exact composition of the 234th VDV Regiment has likely changed since the massacres at Bucha, the continued participation of this regiment in apparent war crimes suggests that the wider VDV command may be encouraging, or at least not actively working to prevent, such practices as part of its *modus operandi*.

The Russian military command will reportedly disband the “Kaskad” operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People’s Republic’s (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) by December 31, 2023, likely as part of Russia’s ongoing force formalization campaign. The DNR MVD formed Kaskad in 2017, and Kaskad has operated semi-independently as a Russian irregular formation since.[21] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on December 26 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would disband one of “the most experienced, combat-ready, and well-coordinated units” in Donbas after the Russian General Staff ordered Kaskad to withdraw from its positions and disband by December 31.[22] The milblogger added on December 27 that the Russian military command had already begun withdrawing Kaskad elements from the frontlines, including 90 of its artillery systems and drone reconnaissance elements.[23] The milblogger added that Kaskad had 9,000 total personnel and claimed that Russian officials are trying to disband the formation ahead of the New Year holiday to deflect from their true intentions of seizing Kaskad’s property and assets. The milblogger claimed that many accused him of lying, but implied that he is in contact with Kaskad personnel and observed that Kaskad’s press service did not attempt to deny or downplay his original report. A Russian social media user, claiming to have connections with Kaskad elements, claimed that Kaskad is not being disbanded but rather reformed into a new structure that is not affiliated with the DNR MVD, which cannot have a police force fighting in armed combat on the frontlines according to Russian law.[24] The DNR’s “Vostok” battalion, which is part of the Kaskad formation and fighting on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, also noted that officials are currently deciding Kaskad’s and Vostok’s fates and noted that Kaskad is fully dependent on Russian military logistics.[25] Vostok added that the question of Kaskad’s existence first emerged after Russia (illegally) annexed part of the occupied Donetsk Oblast, which required the dissolution of the DNR MVD as an independent entity in order to fully integrate into Russian security structures under Russian law. Another milblogger claimed that the dissolution of Kaskad is irrelevant because its elements hid behind regular forces near Velyka Novosilka area in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and were not combat effective on the battlefield.[26]

The dissolution of Kaskad is likely part of the Russian MoD’s and the Kremlin’s effort to formalize control over some irregular forces, such as proxy militias. Russia had undertaken similar efforts to restructure and integrate the DNR’s and Luhansk People’s Republic’s (LNR) 1st and 2nd Army Corps in early 2023, which in some cases meant eliminating individual units’ autonomy, replacing commanders, and installing rules and regulations observed by the Russian Armed Forces.[27] The Russian MoD may offer Kaskad personnel the option to sign military contracts to join formalized DNR units or offer these forces contract for volunteer military service. Both scenarios, however, will likely have implications for Kaskad’s ability to maintain its pre-formalization structure and may degrade its combat effectiveness.

Ukrainian military officials revealed that Russian forces launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,900 Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine since launching the full-scale invasion. Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated on December 28 that Russia has launched about 7,400 missiles against Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, including around 2,470 S-300/400 missiles, 900 Iskander-M missiles, and 48 Kinzhal missiles.[28] Ukrainian StratCom also reported that Russian forces have launched about 3,700 Shahed drones against Ukraine, of which Ukrainian forces have destroyed about 2,900. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 28 that three Russian Kalibr cruise missile carriers — including two unspecified submarines and the *Admiral Makarov* Admiral Grigorovich-class frigate — sortied in the Black Sea on December 28 and warned of an increased risk of Russian missile strikes because Russian missile carriers have not sortied in the Black Sea for “a very long time.”[29] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched eight Shahed-131/136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and that Ukrainian forces shot down seven drones over Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, and Zaporizhia oblasts on the night of December 27 to 28.[30]

Russian mines continue to threaten civilian vessels in the Black Sea but will likely not deter civilian vessel usage of the Black Sea Humanitarian Corridor. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported on December 28 that a Russian naval mine damaged a civilian vessel sailing under the

Panamanian flag on the Black Sea while the ship was traveling to a Danube River port to pick up grain, causing a fire on the vessel and injuring two crew members. [31] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that stormy weather often increases the risk of vessels hitting mines and noted the importance of continued international support for demining the Black Sea.[32] US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink reported that as of December 305 civilian vessels have transported over 10 million tons of grain and other cargo through the civilian corridor in the Black Sea, presumably since the first civilian vessel successfully departed from a Ukrainian port through the corridor on August 15.[33] Civilian ships will very likely continue to use the corridor despite the risks of Russian mines, but Russian militarization of the Black Sea continues to pose a risk to civilian ships that are carrying out critical grain transportation tasks. Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria reportedly plan to sign an agreement on demining Russian naval mines that drift into the western Black Sea in January 2024.[34]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a \$250 million security assistance package for Ukraine on December 27.[35] The package includes additional air defense capabilities such as munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles; artillery ammunition including 155mm and 105mm rounds and over 15 million small arms ammunition rounds; and anti-tank weapons such as Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems.[36]

Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin acknowledged the end of his presidential campaign after failing to register with the Russian Central Elections Committee (CEC) on December 27. The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS), which had been organizing Girkin's campaign on his behalf due to his imprisonment, announced on December 27 that Russian authorities did not allow Girkin to meet with a notary to verify the signatures supporting his presidential nomination.[37] RDS published a statement from Girkin on December 28 in which he said that he "had no illusions" about succeeding in a "layered system of obstacles created by the system itself." [38] Girkin claimed that Russia is approaching a time of troubles (likely referencing the Russian Time of Troubles political crisis in the early 17th century that preceded the rise of the Romanov dynasty) and that Russia's ability to emerge from its hardships depends on its ability to unite and organize.[39] Girkin had announced his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential election on November 19.[40]

The Russian MoD rewarded prominent Russian milbloggers for their contribution to the "military-patriotic" and "military-political" sphere, mirroring previous Kremlin efforts to pander to and co-opt to the wider Russian milblogger community. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov reported on December 28 that the Russian MoD gave awards to *Rybar* project head Mikhail Zvinchuk and creative director Valeria Zvinchuk for their efforts in military-patriotic education and military-political work for the Russian Armed Forces.[41] Russian President Vladimir Putin had previously given Zvinchuk the Russian Order of Merit of the Fatherland Second Class on November 16 for Zvinchuk's efforts in supporting the Russian war in Ukraine.[42] ISW assessed at the time that Putin's award to Zvinchuk, whose *Rybar* channel has amassed 1.19 million followers as of December 28, 2023, was likely an attempt to gain control over the often-critical milblogger information space.[43] The tone of *Rybar*'s coverage has notably become more complacent towards Russian military failures in Ukraine and less overtly critical of the Russian MoD since the fall of 2022 when Zvinchuk began appearing as a featured military analyst on Russian state television.[44] The fact that Zvinchuk now holds both MoD and presidential awards suggests that the Russian leadership seeks to co-opt and control milblogger reporting on the war in Ukraine and hopes to use Zvinchuk's example to incentivize similar Kremlin-favorable reporting by other milbloggers.

Key Takeaways:

- The *New York Times* (NYT) published an oped by a member of its editorial board calling for Ukraine to engage in negotiations with and cede territory to Russia after reports emerged that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using backchannels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire. The oped largely ignores near-constant Kremlin public signaling of Russia's continued maximalist goals in Ukraine.
- Russia has officially deployed a battalion formed of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to the frontline in Ukraine, further confirming a myriad of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs.
- Recent incidents of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs likely implicate elements of the now notorious 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division in the abuse of POWs.
- The Russian military command will reportedly disband the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) by December 31, 2023, likely as part of Russia's ongoing force formalization campaign.
- Ukrainian military officials revealed that Russian forces launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,900 Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine since launching the full-scale invasion.
- Russian mines continue to threaten civilian vessels in the Black Sea but will likely not deter civilian vessel usage of the Black Sea Humanitarian Corridor.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a \$250 million security assistance package for Ukraine on December 27.
- Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin acknowledged the end of his presidential campaign after failing to register with the Russian Central Elections Committee (CEC) on December 27.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) rewarded prominent Russian milbloggers for their contribution to the "military-patriotic" and "military-political" sphere, mirroring previous Kremlin efforts to pander to and co-opt to the wider Russian milblogger community.
- Ukrainian forces made a confirmed advance near Bakhmut, likely within the past week.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances northwest of Avdiivka, near Marinka, and south of Hulyaipole.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on December 28 that Russia has over 640,000 contract servicemen (*kontrakniki*), the first Russian announcement about the number of *kontrakniki* in the Russian Armed Forces since the start of the full-scale invasion.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of medical necessity, despite an apparently growing number of cases of highly infectious diseases being transmitted among Ukrainian children *en route* to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 27, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 27, 2023, 6:30pm ET

Ukrainian drone footage published on December 27 showed another Russian execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] The geolocated video shows Russian servicemen shooting three Ukrainian soldiers whom Russian forces captured in a tree line west of Verbove (east of Robotyne). The video later depicts one Russian soldier shooting an already dead Ukrainian serviceman again at close range.[2] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office announced that it opened an investigation into Russian forces violating the laws and customs of war in addition to premeditated murder.[3] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office stated this incident occurred on an unspecified date in December 2023.[4] ISW previously reported observing drone footage of Russian servicemen using Ukrainian POWs as human shields near Robotyne on December 13.[5] The killing of POWs violates Article III of the Geneva Convention on the laws of armed conflict.[6]

Russian forces recently advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and retook positions that Ukrainian forces had captured during the summer 2023 counteroffensive, likely after Ukrainian forces withdrew to more defensible positions near Robotyne for the winter. Geolocated footage published on December 14 and 27 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced west of Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).[7] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated in an interview with BBC published on December 27 that Russia's leadership wants to retake Avdiivka at a minimum but has a more ambitious goal of capturing all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and recapturing the territory Russian forces lost in Zaporizhia Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[8] ISW assessed that the Ukrainian capture of nearby positions in August 2023 was tactically significant because it could have allowed Ukrainian forces to begin operating past the densest Russian minefields and subsequent Russian defensive layers but does not assess that the recapture of these positions by Russian forces is particularly significant at this time.[9] Recent Russian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast nevertheless support ISW's assessment that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate because the current balance can be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West or in Russia, and limited Russian gains could become significant especially if the West cuts off military aid to Ukraine.[10]

The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam on June 6, 2023, reportedly postponed a Ukrainian crossing of the Dnipro River that was likely intended to support Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. The Associated Press published an interview with Ukrainian Special Operations Forces personnel on December 26 wherein Ukrainian personnel stated that they were prepared to conduct a crossing of the Dnipro River to the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast in late May 2023 but that the destruction of the KHPP dam and subsequent flooding postponed these plans.[11] The Ukrainian personnel reportedly conducted limited crossing attempts in July, August, and September 2023, but Ukrainian forces did not launch a larger crossing aimed at establishing a bridgehead on the east bank until mid-October 2023.[12]

Ukrainian operations in the east bank of Kherson Oblast in October 2023 drew Russian forces from other sectors of the front and would have likely had a similar or even more pronounced effect in June 2023 at the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[13] Russian forces also transferred elements of the 7th Airborne (VDV) Division from Kherson Oblast following the destruction of the KHPP dam and proceeded to rely on them as critical elements of the Russian defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[14] It is unlikely that the Russian command would have transferred these elements away from Kherson in the event of a Ukrainian crossing in June 2023. Significant Ukrainian ground operations in the left bank of Kherson Oblast coordinated with Ukrainian counteroffensive operations throughout southern Ukraine and near Bakhmut would have placed greater pressure on Russian forces and would likely have limited the Russian military's ability to balance manpower and materiel requirements for defensive operations in four directions. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam thus likely played a role in the outcome of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi described continued Ukrainian battlefield challenges and requirements for future territorial advances during an interview with BBC published on December 27. Tarnavskyi stated that well-prepared Russian defenses, including superior Russian minefields, were one of the main factors that impacted the results of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, but noted that he does not believe that the front is at an impasse.[15] Tarnavskyi reiterated that Ukrainian forces are facing ammunition shortages, particularly shortages of 122mm and 152mm shells and that Ukrainian forces need additional supplies of air defense missiles and electronic warfare (EW) systems to defend against Russian drones.[16] Tarnavskyi also reiterated the need for Ukrainian air superiority.[17] Tarnavskyi noted that both Russian and Ukrainian forces are adjusting their tactics to increasingly include radio-electronic operations, drone operations, and surveillance.[18]

Ukrainian officials highlighted the Ukrainian defense industrial base's (DIB) increased production in 2023 and offered projections of Ukraine's domestic drone production capabilities on December 27. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine produced three times as much equipment and weapons in 2023 as in 2022.[19] Zelensky added that Ukraine is systematically expanding its production of ordnance for drones and has significantly increased its production of projectiles and missiles.[20] Ukrainian Minister of Strategic Industries Oleksandr Kamyshin stated that Ukraine also increased the production of mortar rounds by a factor of 42, the production of artillery shells by a factor of 2.8, and the production of armored personnel carriers by a factor of five in 2023.[21] Kamyshin stated that Ukraine is capable of producing over one million first-person viewer (FPV) systems, over 10,000 medium range strike drones, and over 1,000 drones with a range of 1,000 kilometers within an unspecified timeframe, presumably within the next year.[22] Kamyshin added that Ukraine is also developing hybrid air defense systems and that so-called FrankenSAM systems that merge advanced Western air defense missiles with modified Soviet launchers or other missile launchers are already operating on the battlefield.[23]

Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-136/131 drone strikes against Ukraine overnight on December 27. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 46 Shaheds in several waves from the directions of Balaklava (occupied Crimea) and Primorsko-Akhtarsk (Krasnodar Krai, Russia).[24] Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down 32 Shaheds, and Ukrainian air defense systems activated over Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Zaporizhia, Khmelnytskyi, and Kirovohrad oblasts. Ukrainian military officials reported that most of the drones that Ukrainian forces could not shoot down hit frontline areas, especially in Kherson Oblast.[25] Several Shaheds also fell without any consequences. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk reported that Russian forces have changed their tactics and are now attempting to direct Shaheds through residential areas, where Ukrainian forces reportedly cannot maintain stationary air defense systems.[26]

Satellite imagery from the successful December 26 Ukrainian strike on a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel in occupied Feodosia, Crimea indicates that the strike damaged the surrounding port infrastructure. Satellite imagery published on December 27 taken on December 26 indicates that the Ukrainian strike on the BSF's Novocherkassk Ropucha-class landing ship also damaged a pier at the Feodosia port and a nearby warehouse.[27] The satellite imagery shows that most of the ship is heavily burned and mostly submerged.[28] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmitry Pletenichuk stated on December 27 that the strike may have killed up to 80 Russian personnel.[29] Russian opposition news outlet Astra reported that there were 77 Russian military personnel aboard the Novocherkassk at

the time of the strike of whom 33 are missing and 19 are wounded.[30] A Russian sailor who reportedly served on the *Novocherkassk* told *Astra* that conscripts and contract servicemen (*kontraktniki*) were on the ship at the time of the strike.[31] Russian military officials have repeatedly stated that Russian conscripts would not deploy to Ukraine.[32] Russian conscripts were also aboard the BSF's flagship *Moskva* missile cruiser when Ukrainian forces destroyed it in April 2022.[33]

Russia maintains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine and is uninterested in good faith negotiations despite reports that Western officials are becoming more amenable to eventual Ukrainian negotiations with Russia to end the war. An unspecified Biden administration official and a European diplomat told *Politico* in an article published on December 27 that the Biden administration and European officials are shifting their focus from supporting Ukraine's total victory over Russia to improving Ukraine's position in presumed eventual negotiations with Russia to end the war.[34] *Politico* noted that such negotiations would likely force Ukraine to cede territory to Russia.[35] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on December 27 that the West intends to freeze the war in Ukraine then frame it as a victory and rhetorically asked what victories the United States achieved in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq after having attempted the same thing.[36] Lavrov's references to US involvement in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq suggest that Lavrov views the Western discussion about freezing the war and preparing for eventual Ukrainian negotiations with Russia as a Western willingness to accept Ukraine's defeat. Lavrov's statement is also consistent with recent Russian officials' statements that Russia is not interested in freezing the war or engaging in honest negotiations and will continue to pursue its expansionist territorial goals and efforts to "demilitarize" Ukraine.[37] ISW previously assessed that a temporary ceasefire would likely provide the Russian military time to prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine and that Russia would still ultimately maintain the same maximalist objectives for that renewed aggression.[38]

The Russian state-owned Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) found that Russians are increasingly less trusting of Russian state TV and are turning to social media and the internet for news.[39] VCIOM conducted a study in December, which found that Russian public trust in state TV channels had declined from 46 percent to 26 percent in a span of seven years. VCIOM concluded that the TV audience in Russia has also shrunk from 42 percent to 40 percent since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. VCIOM observed that the Russian audience that reportedly trusts the internet as its primary source of information constituted 44 percent of respondents and exceeded the number of Russians who relied on state TV for the first time. VCIOM specified that of Russians who prefer the internet as their primary source 19 percent rely on news sites, 14 percent get their news from social media networks, and 11 percent prefer instant messaging platforms including Telegram. The study found that over the past two years Russians' use of instant messaging platforms as their primary source of information increased almost threefold – likely reflecting the growing popularity of Russian milbloggers on Telegram over the nearly two years of Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. VCIOM also observed an increase in the number of Russians who do not trust any media or social networks from three percent prior to the full-scale invasion to eight percent in December 2023. These Russians reported preferring "kitchen conversations" for their information, which the Russian outlet *The Moscow Times* compared to information learning practices in the Soviet Union.

The decrease in Russian trust and reliance on state TV is likely partially reflected in changing technology and generational shifts, as well as public disillusionment with Russian TV propaganda since the start of the full-scale invasion. ISW previously reported on statistics that showed that the number of Russian bloggers on Telegram increased by 58 percent and that Telegram saw the highest percent increase of daily published content in the first eight months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[40] ISW assessed on November 20, 2022, that this increase of Telegram use for information purposes likely highlighted growing Russian distrust of Kremlin media.[41] The Kremlin, however, continues to support the expansion of the Russian ultranationalist online community and is attempting to lure key voices in the Russian information space to amplify state narratives to the growing internet-based audience.[42]

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on December 27 in a likely effort to maintain Russia's critical trade relationship with India.[43] Putin told Jaishankar that Russia knows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's position on Russian-Indian relations and attitude towards complex processes and the "situation in Ukraine."^[44] Jaishankar stated that Modi intends to visit Russia in 2024. Lavrov stated that he and Jaishankar discussed Russian-Indian military-technical cooperation and the launch of the North-South International Transport Corridor. [45] Lavrov also stated that Russia is ready to help India produce military equipment in the framework of the Make India program.[46] Indian banks and officials have routinely insisted on settling payments for Russian oil and military goods in rupees, but Russia and India suspended a months-long effort to address the issue in May 2023.[47] The Kremlin likely seeks to reassure India about this dispute in their bilateral trade relationship due to India's increasing importance as a customer for Russian oil exports and its potential as a partner in defense production. Russian oil exports to India rapidly grew in 2023 with India becoming the second largest buyer of Russian crude oil.[48] Bloomberg reported on December 20 that roughly five million barrels of Russian crude oil that were scheduled to reach Indian refineries in the past four weeks had not done so for unspecified reasons, however.[49] Oil revenues have buoyed Russian budgets in recent months, and the Kremlin continues to search for new ways to expand defense industrial cooperation with other countries in an effort to relieve pressures on Russia's heavily sanctioned defense industrial base (DIB).[50]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian drone footage published on December 27 showed another Russian execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces recently advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and retook positions that Ukrainian forces had captured during the summer 2023 counteroffensive, likely after Ukrainian forces withdrew to more defensible positions near Robotyne for the winter.
- The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam on June 6, 2023, reportedly postponed a Ukrainian crossing of the Dnipro River that was likely intended to support Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi described continued Ukrainian battlefield challenges and requirements for future territorial advances during an interview with BBC published on December 27.
- Ukrainian officials highlighted the Ukrainian defense industrial base's (DIB) increased production in 2023 and offered projections of Ukraine's domestic drone production capabilities on December 27.
- Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-136/131 drone strikes against Ukraine overnight on December 27.
- Satellite imagery from the successful December 26 Ukrainian strike on a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel in occupied Feodosia, Crimea indicates that the strike damaged the surrounding port infrastructure.
- Russia maintains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine and is uninterested in good faith negotiations despite reports that Western officials are becoming more amenable to eventual Ukrainian negotiations with Russia to end the war.

- The Russian state-owned Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) found that Russians are increasingly less trusting of Russian state TV and are turning to social media and the internet for news.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on December 27 in a likely effort to maintain Russia's critical trade relationship with India.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and Verbove as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- A Russian insider source claimed that Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has created his own private military company (PMC).
- The Ukrainian "Cyber Resistance" movement obtained information about a Russian deputy commander of the 171st Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment (51st Air Defense Division) committing sexual crimes against minors in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 26, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 26, 2023, 9:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:15pm ET on December 26 and covers both December 25 and December 26 due to the fact that ISW did not publish a Campaign Assessment on December 25 in observance of the Christmas holiday. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia's likely capture of Marinka in Donetsk Oblast represents a limited Russian tactical gain and does not portend any operationally significant advance unless Russian forces have dramatically improved their ability to conduct rapid mechanized forward movement, which they show no signs of having done. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 25 and claimed that Russian forces completely captured Marinka (immediately west of Donetsk City).^[1] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on December 26 that combat has effectively destroyed Marinka, acknowledged that Ukrainian forces withdrew in part from Marinka, and stated that Ukrainian forces nonetheless are still operating in the northern outskirts of Marinka and have prepared a defensive line outside of the settlement.^[2] Geolocated footage posted on December 25 indicates that Russian forces advanced in the northern sections of Marinka.^[3] ISW assesses that Russian forces likely control most if not all of Marinka despite not yet observing visual confirmation of the complete Russian capture of Marinka as of December 26. Putin claimed that the Russian capture of Marinka will allow Russian forces to push Ukrainian combat units away from occupied Donetsk City and create a wider operational space for Russian forces.^[4] Many Russian milbloggers acknowledged the capture of Marinka as a tactical victory and claimed that it will allow Russian forces to conduct offensive operations toward settlements up to 15km west of Marinka in the coming weeks and months, threatening nearby Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs).^[5] Russian forces have attempted to capture Marinka since 2014 and have been conducting daily frontal assaults on the settlement since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, intensifying those assaults starting in early October 2023.^[6] Both Russian and Ukrainian officials have acknowledged that fighting has completely destroyed Marinka, a small settlement with a pre-invasion population of roughly 9,000.^[7]

A small and completely destroyed settlement does not offer Russian forces a secure operational foothold from which to launch further offensive operations. Marinka is located less than a kilometer from the pre-invasion frontline and Ukrainian forces have long fortified many of the surrounding settlements, which Russian forces have been similarly struggling to capture.^[8] Russian forces have advanced roughly over three kilometers in depth into Marinka since February 24, 2022, and there are no indications that the rate of Russian advance to the next settlements identified as tactical Russian objectives will be any quicker, especially considering the rate of attrition that Russian forces suffered to capture a small settlement directly on the border of territory Russia has controlled since 2014. Russia's capture of Marinka follows several months of highly attritional marginal gains and is not the result of a sudden rapid mechanized Russian advance. Russian forces have not conducted any offensive operation that resulted in a rapid and mechanized forward advance since Spring 2022, and Russian capabilities to conduct the mechanized maneuver that would be required for such an advance have been severely degraded.^[9] Russian forces have recently illustrated the lack of these capabilities in failed waves of mass mechanized assaults to capture Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and those offensive operations resulted in further armored vehicle losses that have prompted the Russian command to transition to infantry-heavy ground attacks.^[10] Rapid maneuver warfare also requires combat effective mechanized units, and the Russian units that have participated in the effort to capture Marinka have largely been elements of poorly trained and less effective Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) units.^[11] Russian forces are highly unlikely to make rapid operational advances from Marinka, and the reported Russian capture of the settlement at most sets conditions for further limited tactical gains.

Localized Russian offensive operations are still placing pressure on Ukrainian forces in many places along the front in eastern Ukraine, however, and can result in gradual tactical Russian advances. Zaluzhnyi stated that holding Ukrainian territory is important but that Ukrainian forces are prioritizing the preservation of their personnel.^[12] Zaluzhnyi added that he believes that Russian forces can repeat "what happened in Bakhmut" (using high-casualty frontal attacks to force tactical gains over a protracted period) in Avdiivka in the next two to three months, which would force Ukrainian forces to retreat to save their personnel and retake the settlement at a later date.^[13] Russian forces captured Bakhmut in May 2023 after months of gradual tactical gains during the Wagner Group's infantry-heavy urban offensive operation to capture the city, which resulted in staggering Russian losses including the effective destruction of the Wagner Group following the abortive armed mutiny that those losses precipitated.^[14] Russian forces are conducting similarly attritional ground assaults in localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine, although not at the scale that Wagner did during the battle for Bakhmut. These Russian offensive operations will continue to pressure defending Ukrainian forces and produce limited tactical gains. The accumulation of marginal Russian gains amid continued heavy fighting may produce tactical scenarios wherein the Ukrainian command may choose to withdraw forces from endangered positions of limited operational significance if it determines that the preservation of personnel is more expedient.

Ukrainian forces conducted a successful missile strike that destroyed a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel and potentially damaged port infrastructure in occupied Feodosia, Crimea on December 26. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian air force aircraft conducted a strike on the BSF's Novocherkassk Ropucha-class landing ship in occupied Feodosia with unspecified cruise missiles.^[15] Geolocated footage from the strike shows that Ukrainian

forces struck the *Novocherkassk*, causing most of it to burn and sink.[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the *Novocherkassk* suffered "damage" while "repelling" a Ukrainian strike.[17] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 26 that the Ukrainian strike possibly also damaged surrounding port infrastructure and other nearby Russian support vessels.[18] Ihnat noted that the only missiles that Ukrainian forces possess that are capable of conducting long-range strikes are SCALP and Storm Shadow missiles, heavily insinuating that one or the other of these kinds of missiles were used in the strike. [19] Ihnat also stated that Russian forces continue to use various short, medium, and long-range air defense systems and that Ukrainian pilots employ specific tactical techniques to ensure the maximum number of strikes reach their target.[20] A Russian milblogger claimed that units of the 31st Air Defense Division, which are operating S-400 air defense systems in Feodosia, failed to identify two Ukrainian cruise missiles.[21] United Kingdom Defense Secretary Grant Schapps stated that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 20 percent of the BSF over the past four months.[22] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes on BSF assets have forced the Russian military to move BSF assets to the eastern part of the Black Sea on an enduring basis.[23]

Russian forces struck a train station in Kherson City where civilians were waiting for evacuation on December 26.[24] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in his nightly address on December 26 that Russian forces struck a railway station in Kherson City, and Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko clarified that Russian forces began shelling the railway station as 140 civilians were awaiting departure onboard an evacuation train.[25] Ukrainian media posted footage depicting the destruction in the aftermath of the strike and reported that the shelling killed at least one and wounded four.[26]

Russian forces conducted additional waves of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the nights of December 24-25 and December 25-26. Ukrainian military sources reported that overnight on December 24-25, Russian forces launched 31 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from Cape Chauda and Balaklava, occupied Crimea, a Kh-59 missile from the Zaporizhia Oblast direction, and a Kh-31P anti-radar missile from the direction of the Black Sea.[27] Ukrainian forces destroyed 28 of the Shaheds and both of the missiles.[28] Ukrainian military sources then reported on December 26 that overnight on December 25-26 Russian forces launched 19 Shahed drones from Balaklava and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, at Ukraine, 13 of which Ukrainian forces shot down over Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.[29] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that Russian forces struck an infrastructure object in Odesa Oblast and an industrial facility in Mykolaiv Oblast.[30]

Russian forces have reportedly decreased the tempo of their operations on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, likely in connection with decreasing Russian aviation activity after Ukrainian forces recently shot down several Russian aircraft. Ukrainian military officials reported on December 24 and 25 that Ukrainian forces shot down one Russian Su-34 aircraft in the Mariupol direction and one Russian Su-30SM over the Black Sea in addition to the three Su-34 aircraft that Ukrainian forces shot down over southern Ukraine between December 21 and 22.[31] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 26 that Russian forces on the east bank Kherson Oblast are conducting half as many ground attacks against Ukrainian positions per day in comparison to the previous average of 30 assaults daily.[32] Humenyuk also reported that the destruction of several Russian aircraft has weakened Russian forces' ability to conduct glide bomb strikes and that Russian forces have deployed high-caliber artillery and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to east bank Kherson Oblast in order to compensate for a lack of aviation support.[33] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported on December 25 that Russian forces stopped conducting active hostilities in the Kherson direction after Ukrainian forces shot down three Russian Su-34 aircraft in southern Ukraine. [34] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 25 that Russian aviation in Kherson Oblast has not been operating for the past three days due to the destruction of Russian Su-34 aircraft.[35] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on December 26 that the Russian military has not been able to restore its number of Su-34/34M aircraft to its pre-full-scale invasion amount and now must supplement Su-34/34M aircraft operations with the older Su-24 aircraft. [36] Mashovets reported that Russian forces rarely deploy Su-34/34M aircraft to Russian bases in occupied Crimea, likely in an attempt to keep them out of Ukrainian strike range.[37] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may have recently intensified their use of glide bombs against Ukrainian forces on west (right) bank Kherson Oblast in part due to Ukrainian forces' successful suppression of Russian long-range artillery.[38] Russian forces may currently be opting to bring long-range artillery closer to the Dnipro River shoreline rather than risk the destruction of more aircraft, however. The potential deployment of Russian long-range artillery closer to the frontline may present an opportunity for Ukrainian forces to more easily target Russian long-range artillery systems and operate more freely and safely along the Dnipro River coast and in rear areas in west bank Kherson Oblast.

The Ukrainian government continues efforts to systematize and increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term. The Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers submitted a set of proposed amendments to Ukraine's mobilization, military registration, and military service laws on December 25, which include provisions to lower the conscription age for mobilization from 27 to 25 years old, discharge servicemen after they serve for 36 months provided there is no Ukrainian manpower crisis or a major escalation on the battlefield, and allow servicemen to rotate from the front every six months.[39] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi noted the complexity of legislating mobilization and service requirements during wartime on December 26, stating that war develops according to its own laws and that the situation along the front is dependent on the Russian military's actions.[40] Zaluzhnyi added that Ukraine cannot predict what the war will look like in five to six months.[41]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a gracious Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, while contrasting his apparent attention to the Russian irregular forces' with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) incompetence. Putin demonstratively ordered Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on December 25 to promote a Russian volunteer, Senior Lieutenant Alexander Troshin, to the rank of major for his efforts in fighting for Marinka (west of Donetsk City) - allowing Troshin to bypass the rank of captain.[42] Prior to the order, Putin asked Shoigu if he had any suggestions on how to best award Troshin, to which Shoigu responded that the only rank he can offer him is the rank of captain despite the fact that Troshin is a commander of a tank battalion – a role usually occupied by lieutenant colonels. Shoigu stated that although Troshin is a successful fighter and joined the war effort as a volunteer rather than as an officer, the military command cannot promote him to a higher rank because of a presidential decree that prohibits such a promotion. Putin said that he is aware of the military service regulation on ranks but noted that "this regulation is approved by the presidential decree, so the president has the right to amend this regulation." Putin notably ignored the regulation rather than amending it, however, suggesting that he sees himself not merely as the lawgiver but also as above the law. Putin concluded this discussion by stating that the Russian military command should support fighters like Troshin who want to become professional servicemen – likely in reference to those who want to become contract servicemen (*kontrakniki*) within the Russian Armed Forces. Putin's discussion with Shoigu made it seem as though Putin was indirectly blaming Shoigu for failing to change the structure of the Russian Armed Forces to accommodate the new class of Russian servicemen – the volunteers (*dobrovoltsy*). Russian milbloggers have consistently complained that the Russian command does not award higher ranks to *dobrovoltsy* despite their combat experience, instead reserving these ranks for Russian professional servicemen.[43] Putin's statement is likely part of an ongoing effort to blame the Russian MoD and the Russian General Staff for failing to address *dobrovoltsy*'s concerns while presenting himself as an involved war-time leader who is actively working on resolving

these disparities.[44] Putin's recent focus on defining and interacting with Russian irregular volunteer formations may also be indicative of Russia's formalization efforts and possible integration of *dobrovoltsy* as a new but separate class of forces within the Russian Armed Forces.

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states met during a series of meetings in St. Petersburg on December 25 and 26. The EAEU signed a full-scale trade agreement with Iran on December 25, replacing the temporary agreement approved in 2019.[45] Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan notably attended the meeting after refraining from attending equivalent Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) events for the past several months against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.[46] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin would have a "great opportunity" to speak during the meetings, and Putin was later pictured chatting with Pashinyan on December 26.[47]

Russian actors seized on ongoing protests in Serbia against Serbian President Alexander Vucic to blame Western actors for causing instability in Serbia, which Russia perceives as a long-term European ally. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that unspecified "third parties," including from abroad, are attempting to provoke unrest in Serbia.[48] Russian sources, including Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Bocan-Harchenko, accused the West of attempting to overthrow Serbia's government and pursuing a "Maidan scenario," referring to Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, which resulted in the removal of pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovych and which the Kremlin has consistently falsely characterized as a Western hybrid war against Russia.[49] The Russian information space will likely continue to exploit protests in Serbia to drive a wedge between Serbia and the West.

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine," creating rhetorical parallels between Russian narratives about Ukraine and Finland, and further suggesting that Russia maintains future ideological and territorial objectives that far exceed the war in Ukraine. The milblogger claimed on December 26 that the US now has access to a total of 35 military bases in Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, including a Finnish base that is 137km from the Russian border.[50] The US has recently signed defense cooperation agreements with both Finland and Sweden that grant American troops access to 15 military installations in Finland and 17 in Sweden.[51] The milblogger additionally claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine" due to the purported prominence of Finnish neo-Nazi organizations and the alleged rise of Finnish nationalist movements, such as the Karelian National Battalion.[52] The milblogger's invocation of the concepts of neo-Nazism and nationalism echoes some of the major ideological justifications that the Kremlin has used to support its invasion of Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.[53] Russia has recently undertaken several measures to posture against Finland militarily, namely through the recreation of the Leningrad Military District (LMD), which will have an area of operation largely along the Russo-Finnish border.[54] ISW has frequently assessed that Russia maintains maximalist aims in Ukraine.[55] The increasingly aggressive Russian rhetorical and military posturing towards Finland suggests that Russia maintains expansive goals beyond the battlefield in Ukraine, which is particularly relevant due to Finland's recent accession to NATO.[56] ISW does not assess that Russia has the current military capacity or intent to threaten Finland or any NATO member militarily at this time, but rhetoric setting conditions for future threats and tensions with NATO members is cause for concern about Russia's long-term aims.

Key Takeaways:

- Russia's likely capture of Marinka in Donetsk Oblast represents a limited Russian tactical gain and does not portend any operationally significant advance unless Russian forces have dramatically improved their ability to conduct rapid mechanized forward movement, which they show no signs of having done.
- Localized Russian offensive operations are still placing pressure on Ukrainian forces in many places along the front in eastern Ukraine, however, and can result in gradual tactical Russian advances.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a successful missile strike that destroyed a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel and potentially damaged port infrastructure in occupied Feodosia, Crimea on December 26.
- Russian forces struck a train station in Kherson City where civilians were waiting for evacuation on December 26.
- Russian forces have reportedly decreased the tempo of their operations on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, likely in connection with decreasing Russian aviation activity after Ukrainian forces recently shot down several Russian aircraft.
- The Ukrainian government continues efforts to systematize and increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a gracious Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, while contrasting his apparent attention to the Russian irregular forces' with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) incompetence.
- Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states met during a series of meetings in St. Petersburg on December 25 and 26.
- Russian actors seized on ongoing protests in Serbia against Serbian President Alexander Vucic to blame Western actors for causing instability in Serbia, which Russia perceives as a long-term European ally.
- A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine," creating rhetorical parallels between Russian narratives about Ukraine and Finland, further suggesting that Russia maintains future ideological and territorial objectives that far exceed the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kupyansk, Avdiivka, Marinka, and Robotyne as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a series of laws on December 25 to help further bolster Russia's force generation capacity.
- The Kremlin further formalized avenues to coerce residents of occupied Ukraine to receive Russian passports using maternity capital payments.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 24, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 24, 2023, 5:35pm ET

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

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on December 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs High Representative Josep Borrell stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin is not interested in a limited territorial victory in Ukraine and will continue the war “until the final victory.”[1] Borrell reported on December 24 that Putin would not be satisfied with capturing a “piece” of Ukraine and allowing the rest of Ukraine to join the EU.[2] Borrell added that Putin will not “give up the war” and called on the West to prepare for a “conflict of high intensity for a long time.”[3] Borrell’s statements are consistent with ISW’s assessment that Russia is not interested in a ceasefire or good-faith negotiations with Ukraine but retains its maximalist goals of a full Russian victory in Ukraine.[4]

Russian forces are reportedly decreasing aviation activity and their use of glide bombs in Ukraine after Ukrainian forces shot down three Russian Su-34s in southern Ukraine between December 21 and 22. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 24 that Russian forces decreased their use of glide bombs and air strikes in southern Ukraine.[5] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on December 24 that Russian forces are limiting their use of manned aviation near occupied Crimea, particularly in the northwestern Black Sea region.[6] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may have recently intensified their use of glide bombs against Ukrainian forces on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River in part because Ukrainian forces reportedly suppressed Russian long-range artillery in the area.[7] Continued decreased Russian glide bomb strikes in Kherson Oblast may present an opportunity for Ukrainian forces to operate more freely in near rear areas in west bank Kherson Oblast and establish a safer position on the east (left) bank from which to conduct future operations if the Ukrainian high command so chose. Russian forces reportedly use glide bomb strikes so that Russian aircraft can remain 50 to 70 kilometers behind the line of combat engagement, and the decreased Russian use of glide bombs suggests that Russian forces are concerned about Ukrainian air defense capabilities following recent losses.[8] Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on December 23 that Russian forces also reduced their use of aviation and increased their use of strike drones in the Kupyansk and Bakhmut directions.[9] Ihnat also stated on December 24 that Ukrainian forces can deploy air defense systems in any direction, not only in those where Russian forces suffered aircraft loses.[10]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 23 to 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 16 Shahed-131/136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and that Ukrainian forces downed 15 drones over Mykolaiv, Kirovohrad, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.[11] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched two missiles of an unknown type against civil infrastructure in Kherson City.[12] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Russian forces continue to conduct strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure and that although Ukrainian forces down these projectiles, Ukrainian officials purposefully do not identify Ukrainian infrastructure objects that Russian forces target.[13] Yusov also stated that Russian forces are conducting strikes “more frugally” than in winter 2022 but noted that Russian forces are still capable of conducting powerful missile strikes.[14]

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustom Umerov further detailed Ukraine’s efforts to establish a sustainable wartime force-generation apparatus and an effective defense industrial base (DIB) during an interview published on December 24. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* published an interview on December 24 wherein Umerov stated that Ukrainian military and civilian officials are developing a more transparent recruitment process for military service that will more clearly communicate to the Ukrainian public how one enters military service, undergoes training, receives leave, and concludes service during the war.[15] Umerov stated that there will be no “demobilization” until after the war is over but that Ukraine must find solutions that provide rest and partial release from military service.[16] Umerov added that Ukrainian officials are trying to improve bureaucratic force-generation systems by unifying draft databases and streamlining notification systems.[17]

Umerov stated that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will soon submit a plan to address a Ukrainian military proposal to mobilize another 450,000 to 500,000 Ukrainians, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged on December 19.[18] Umerov did not disclose the nature of the plan or the number of Ukrainians whom the Ukrainian MoD will propose to mobilize.[19] Umerov commented that the Ukrainian MoD will propose a 25-to-60 draft-age range only if Ukrainian society accepts the arguments behind the proposal.[20] Ukraine’s current lower-end age limit for conscription is 27, which is high for a state fighting an existential war at the scale of the one that Ukraine is fighting. The current age limit likely aims to allow a generation of Ukrainians to continue receiving an education and provide critical human capital to Ukraine in the long-term. Developing and implementing a stable force-generation approach that addresses Ukrainian military requirements is a complicated political, social, and military issue — one that will continue to produce tensions normal for a society at war.

Umerov also stated that Ukraine has developed a strategy for domestic defense production and has launched programs to reduce the risk of shortages of ammunition, missiles, and other military equipment.[21] Umerov stated that the Ukrainian MoD is currently weighing the financial avenues for its DIB development strategy, including issuing contracts and developing joint ventures between Ukrainian and foreign enterprises.[22] Umerov stated that Ukraine is beginning to work with several hundred drone manufacturers to improve the “huge bureaucracy” involved in producing drones and plans to provide Ukrainian forces with an unspecified number of drones that Ukrainian officials have previously called for to be produced in 2024.[23] Zelensky stated on December 19 that Ukraine intends to produce a million drones in 2024.[24]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to portray himself as a gracious leader who cares about the well-being of Russian military personnel, while also presenting himself as an effective Commander-in-Chief of the Russian armed forces. Kremlin journalist Pavel Zarubin published footage on December 24 of a December 19 ceremony at the Russian National Defense Management Center where Putin spoke with Russian military personnel who said that they wanted to see their loved ones but that their commanders had to give them leave. Putin responded, “Let them rest! The commander has already decided. That’s me.”[25] Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, present at the time, said simply, “It is.”[26] Putin seemingly spontaneously granting Russian personnel leave is indicative of Putin’s continued effort to portray himself as an involved wartime leader who responds to his troops’ requests and rewards those who are loyal to him, while reminding the Russian public that Gerasimov is subordinate to him.[27] The interaction between Putin and the Russian servicemen was likely staged in order to bolster Putin’s reputation and once again cast Gerasimov in the role of inefficient bureaucrat, as Putin began to do during his “Direct Line” session on December 14.[28]

Russia appears to be continuing its efforts to build out a military occupation force in Ukraine separate from its frontline units through the use of its newly formed Rosgvardia units. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on December 24 that the Russian command completed the deployment of the three newly formed regiments of Rosgvardia’s 116th Special Purpose Brigade — the 900th, 901st, and 902nd Special Purpose Regiments — to occupied Donetsk Oblast.[29] Mashovets stated that the Russian command based the 116th Special Purpose Brigade in Chystiakove (70km east of Donetsk City); the 900th Special

Purpose Regiment in Melekyne (22km southwest of Mariupol); the 901st Special Purpose Regiment in Snizhne (80km east of Donetsk City); and the 902nd Special Purpose Regiment seven kilometers north of Chystiakove. Mashovets assessed that the 116th Special Purpose Brigade will perform “stabilization functions” in occupied Ukraine on a “permanent basis.” Russian local media reported that Rosgvardia began forming the 116th Special Purpose Brigade specifically for service in occupied Donetsk Oblast in early September 2023.[30] ISW later observed in late October that the 116th Special Purpose Brigade received a Russian T-80BV tank that Wagner Group fighters used in the June 2023 armed rebellion.[31]

The short timeframe and the deployment locations of the new Rosgvardia regiments indicate that the Kremlin is actively attempting to use these forces to solidify Russia’s control over occupied rear areas. Mashovets observed that Rosgvardia likely moved up to 6,000 troops from Russia to occupied Ukraine as part of the deployment of the 116th Special Purpose Brigade, increasing the number of Rosgvardia personnel in occupied Ukraine to 34,300 troops. While ISW cannot independently verify Mashovets’ number of deployed Rosgvardia personnel in occupied Ukraine, Russia’s recent efforts to legalize Rosgvardia’s access to recruiting volunteers, the Kremlin’s approval to provide Rosgvardia heavy military equipment, and the 116th Special Purpose Brigade’s basing in occupied Donetsk Oblast are indicators that Russia is attempting to expand Rosgvardia forces to establish a separate military occupation force.[32] Moscow is likely trying to recruit and deploy military occupation forces to further impede Ukraine’s counteroffensive efforts, establish permanent control over occupied areas, and suppress partisan activity without fixing frontline troops in occupation duty indefinitely.

The Russian Black Sea Fleet’s 810th Naval Infantry Brigade edited its acknowledgement that its personnel are deliberately using chemical weapons in Ukraine in a likely effort to hide what could be evidence of an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is party. The 810th Naval Infantry Brigade stated on its Telegram channel on December 22 that the brigade is using a “radical change in tactics” against Ukrainian forces in Krynyk (on the eastern bank of Kherson Oblast) by dropping K-51 grenades from drones onto Ukrainian positions.[33] K-51 aerosol grenades are filled with irritant CS gas (2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile), a type of tear gas used for riot control (also known as a Riot Control Agent [RCA]), which the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) prohibits as a method of warfare.[34] Between the time of ISW’s data collection on December 23 and this December 24 update the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade’s Telegram edited the post to delete the specific reference to the K-51 grenade.[35] The original phrasing of the post, however, can be still observed on Russian social media accounts that posted screenshots of it, directly reposted the original acknowledgement (since edits to Telegram posts do not affect reposts of an unedited post), or archived the original post — all confirming that the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade did publish the use of K-51 grenades and then edited its post.[36] ISW has not determined when the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade made the edit. A Russian milblogger indirectly criticized the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade on December 22 for exposing a new tactic, which suggests that Russian forces may intend to deliberately use K-51s or other RCAs elsewhere along the front.[37] The Russian milblogger’s complaints or wider reporting about the acknowledgement may have prompted the 810th Naval infantry Brigade, or some Russian official to tell the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, to edit the post.

Russia’s labor shortage, which is partially a result of the war in Ukraine, reportedly amounted to about 4.8 million people in 2023 and will likely continue to exacerbate struggling Kremlin efforts aimed at increasing Russian economic capacity. Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Izvestiya* reported on December 24 that according to the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) data indicates that the number of workers needed to fill vacant positions in mid-2023 was 6.8% of the total number of employed people, amounting to about 4.8 million people across Russia.[38] Russian President Vladimir Putin noted the connection between labor shortages and the development of Russia’s migrant policy on December 4.[39] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is struggling to reconcile inconsistent and contradictory policies that attempt to appease the Russian ultranationalist community by disincentivizing migrant workers from working in Russia while simultaneously trying to increase Russian industrial capacity and force generation.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs High Representative Josep Borrell stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin is not interested in a limited territorial victory in Ukraine and will continue the war “until the final victory.”
- Russian forces are reportedly decreasing aviation activity and their use of glide bombs in Ukraine after Ukrainian forces shot down three Russian Su-34s in southern Ukraine between December 21 and 22.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 23 to 24.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov further detailed Ukraine’s efforts to establish a sustainable wartime force-generation apparatus and an effective defense industrial base (DIB) during an interview published on December 24.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to portray himself as a gracious leader who cares about the wellbeing of Russian military personnel, while also presenting himself as an effective Commander-in-Chief of the Russian armed forces.
- Russia appears to be continuing its efforts to build out a military occupation force in Ukraine separate from its frontline units through the use of its newly formed Rosgvardia units.
- The Russian Black Sea Fleet’s 810th Naval Infantry Brigade edited its acknowledgement that its personnel are deliberately using chemical weapons in Ukraine in a likely effort to hide what could be evidence of an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is party.
- Russia’s labor shortage, which is partially a result of the war in Ukraine, reportedly amounted to about 4.8 million people in 2023 and will likely continue to exacerbate struggling Kremlin efforts aimed at increasing Russian economic capacity.
- Russian forces made confirmed advanced near Kreminna and near Avdiivka as positional engagements continues along the entire line of contact.
- The newly formed 337th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (104th VDV Division) operating in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near Krynyk is continuing to suffer losses.
- Russian officials claimed that Russia’s handling of the situation at the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) is sufficient, despite recent unsafe incidents during Russian occupation of the plant.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 23, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 23, 2023, 8:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on December 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The *New York Times* (NYT) - citing former and current senior Russian, US, and international officials - reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using back channels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire, despite Putin's recent public statements to the contrary.^[1] NYT reported that Western officials have been picking up renewed signals through backchannels since September 2023 that Putin is interested in a ceasefire that freezes the current frontlines, but noted that Western officials warned the backchannels could be "Kremlin misdirection" and may not reflect a "genuine willingness" to negotiate.^[2] NYT suggested several possible motivations Putin may have for his reported interest in a ceasefire: the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential election, a desire to "keep his options open" regarding the war's resolution and take advantage of perceived waning Western support for Ukraine, and the "distraction" of the Israel-Hamas war.^[3] All these motivations reflect temporary reasons why Putin might pursue a temporary ceasefire that would benefit Russia by allowing Russia the time to prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine, as ISW has routinely assessed. The NYT noted that Putin's public rhetoric, which has recently reasserted Russia's maximalist objectives that are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender, is at odds with Putin's reported private desire to "declare victory and move on."^[4] Neither the NYT nor its sources offered any reason to believe Putin's backchannel communications would be more reflective of his goals than his public speeches addressing domestic, Ukrainian, and international audiences. The NYT report also failed to make clear whether Putin's alleged interest in a ceasefire is for a temporary pause or a permanent end to the war.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told the NYT that "Russia continues to be ready [for negotiations], but exclusively for the achievement of its own goals" in response to a question about Russia's willingness to negotiate a ceasefire on the current lines.^[5] Putin has recently reiterated that his maximalist objectives in Ukraine - "denazification," "demilitarization," and the imposition of a "neutral status" on Ukraine - remain unchanged, and Putin and senior Kremlin officials have increasingly expressed expansionist rhetoric indicating that Putin's objectives do not preclude further Russian territorial conquests in Ukraine.^[6]

The timing of Putin's reported interest in a ceasefire is more consistent with Russia's ongoing efforts to delay and discourage further Western military assistance to Ukraine, than with a serious interest in ending the war other than with a full Russian victory. ISW observed similar Kremlin efforts to mislead Western policymakers into pressuring Ukraine to negotiate with Russia in winter 2022-2023, and effectively redirecting Western focus onto hypothetical negotiations rather than ensuring that Ukraine has sufficient materiel before its spring-summer counteroffensive.^[7] The Kremlin is likely using backchannels to achieve a similar effect amidst Western debates for further military aid to Ukraine.

Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky obliquely indicated that VDV forces are under significant pressure to conduct rapid offensive operations near Bakhmut and repel Ukrainian attacks on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast. Teplinsky published a prerecorded commencement speech on December 23 to congratulate the winter graduates of the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School in which he outlined the VDV's involvement in ongoing combat operations in Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.^[8] Teplinsky claimed that VDV forces repelled the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast throughout the summer and fall of 2023 and added that elements of the Russian 98th Guards VDV Division and 106th Guards VDV Divisions began offensive operations on the Soledar-Bakhmut direction in November. Teplinsky carefully caveated his discussion of VDV operations with the observation that the VDV is deliberately maintaining a slow tempo of attacks in the Bakhmut direction to avoid high casualty rates and to prioritize attriting Ukrainian forces over pushing them out from their positions. Teplinsky's emphasis on slow advances may be an attempt to message to the highest echelon of the Russian military command – such as Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov – that the command's expectations of rapid advances near Bakhmut are unrealistic without significant VDV casualties and sacrifices. Teplinsky released a similar video in February 2023 in which he condemned the higher military command for committing VDV troops to senseless attacks to achieve minor tactical gains at a high manpower cost, likely in reference to VDV involvement in battles for Soledar in January 2023.^[9]

Teplinsky also stated that elements of the newly formed 104th VDV Division are tirelessly fighting to repel Ukrainian forces from the east bank of the Dnipro River in occupied Kherson Oblast, despite the fact that these elements are not as combat effective as other (more experienced) VDV forces. Teplinsky stated that despite the VDV's efforts Ukrainian forces are continuing to deploy additional reinforcements to the east bank but claimed that Russia's victory is only a matter of time. ISW observed Russian President Vladimir Putin single out the tactical and operational situation in Krynyk on the east bank during his "Direct Line" forum on December 14, which may have reflected Putin's sensitivity to continued Russian information space neuralgia about Russian operations in the area.^[10] ISW assessed that Putin's comment highlighting Russian forces' inability to oust Ukrainian forces from the east bank was likely also a critique of Teplinsky, whom he appointed to command Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces in late October 2023.^[11] Teplinsky has repeatedly weaponized the Russian information space to his advantage and may have used this commencement speech to respond to the pressure from the Russian military command and the Kremlin.^[12] Teplinsky specifically uses greeting videos addressed to Russian military personnel to indirectly voice his problems with the Russian military command, and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) notably even removed his August 2 VDV Day greeting after he revealed the total number of VDV casualties since February 2022.^[13] Teplinsky may also be setting information conditions to retain support from other commentators who have repeatedly voiced concern about Russia's inability to push Ukrainian forces to the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.^[14]

Teplinsky also implied that the Russian military command is deploying new VDV officers and troops promptly to the frontlines without having them complete pre-combat training. Teplinsky stated that "unfortunately" the April graduates of the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School deployed to combat zones before their intended unspecified autumn deployment date. While Teplinsky did not specify *why* the April graduates deployed significantly earlier than their slated deployment date, it is likely that these VDV forces were meant to undergo some advanced individual or unit-wide training over a six-month period – a requirement that the Russian military command evidently neglected. Teplinsky added that April graduates have already suffered casualties on the frontlines in November in an unspecified direction. Teplinsky stated that many of the December graduates will join the ranks of the 104th VDV Division in the Kherson direction and noted that the graduates have hard work ahead of them to "speed up" Ukraine's defeat. Teplinsky may have explicitly observed that the 104th VDV Division is less combat effective to resurface the issue of the Russian command sending recent graduates of military command schools to the frontlines. ISW has long assessed that the Russian military command is committing all available forces to immediately reinforce its war effort in Ukraine at the expense of combat effectiveness and long-term capacity building, and Teplinsky's account further demonstrates that similar issues also plague formerly elite forces such as the VDV.^[15]

Russia's Black Sea Fleet's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade confirmed that it is deliberately using chemical weapons against Ukrainian forces in an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is a party. The 810th Naval Infantry Brigade published a long post to its Telegram channel on December 22 detailing a "radical change in tactics" that the brigade is using against Ukrainian forces in Krynyk (on the eastern bank of Kherson Oblast).^[16] The post

claimed that elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade rotated into the Krynyk area and are applying the new tactic of "dropping K-51 grenades from drones" onto Ukrainian positions to smoke Ukrainian forces out of their positions and expose them to fire from various arms.[17] The 810th Naval Infantry Brigade additionally published footage that apparently shows such a K-51 drop on a Ukrainian position, presumably in Krynyk.[18] K-51 aerosol grenades are filled with irritant CS gas (2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile), a type of tear gas used for riot control (also known as a Riot Control Agent [RCA]).[19] The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) prohibits the use of RCAs as a method of warfare, and Russia has been a state party to the CWC since 1997.[20] ISW previously observed that Russian forces used K-51 grenades against Ukrainian positions in Donetsk Oblast in November 2022.[21]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-136/131 drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 22-23. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched nine Shahed drones from Balaklava, occupied Crimea and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai on the night of December 22 to 23 and that Ukrainian forces shot down all of the drones.[22]

Recent analysis by OSINT analyst MT Anderson confirms that while Russian forces have moved the bulk of Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets away from occupied Sevastopol, the BSF maintains a limited naval presence in Sevastopol.[23] Anderson posted high-resolution satellite imagery from December 20 showing that two Bora-class corvettes, two Ropucha-class landing ships, one Krivak-class frigate, and the *Matros Kosha* bulk carrier remain at the otherwise empty BSF frigate pier in southern Sevastopol.[24] Anderson noted that it appears that Russian forces have rebuilt many of the defenses at the entrance of Sevastopol Harbor following a powerful Black Sea cyclone at the end of November.[25] Anderson also posted satellite imagery of the BSF headquarters in Sevastopol and noted that it does not appear to be undergoing renovations following a massive Ukrainian strike on the headquarters on September 22.[26] The satellite imagery additionally shows that one Ropucha-class landing ship, one Natya-class minesweeper, one Alexandrit-class minesweeper, and the *Ivan Khurs Ivanov*-class intelligence ship remain at the pier at Pivdenna Bay, but that the submarine pen is empty.[27] The satellite imagery confirms the absence of several major BSF naval assets, including specialized Kalibr cruise missile carriers, from the docks at Sevastopol, which supports ISW's assessment that Russia has moved many major BSF assets out of Sevastopol to Novorossiysk on an enduring basis.[28]

The Russian information space exploited news of a Ukrainian journalist's decision not to return to Ukraine after an assignment abroad to amplify ongoing Russian information operations about resistance to full mobilization efforts in Ukraine that purposefully ignore the much more substantial Russian resistance to Russia's partial mobilization of reservists in September 2022. Russian state media and milbloggers amplified news that a Ukrainian television journalist decided to stay in Brussels after covering the EU Summit there from December 14 to 15.[29] Russian milbloggers claimed that the Ukrainian journalist stayed in Brussels to avoid mobilization.[30] Russian outlets naturally did not mention that at least 700,000 Russians immediately left Russia when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the "partial mobilization" of 300,000 reservists on September 21, 2022.[31] The unpopularity of Russia's partial mobilization and ensuing mass emigration led Russian authorities to engage in crypto-mobilization efforts that continue today, including recruiting volunteers and forcibly conscripting migrants and newly naturalized Russian citizens.[32] Resistance to mobilization is to be expected in a protracted and bloody war, and the disproportionate amplification of a singular prominent Ukrainian citizen's behavior is part of ongoing Russian information operations that attempt to paint a picture of widespread resistance to the full mobilization in Ukraine made necessary by Russia's invasion.

Russian milbloggers used the granting of Russian citizenship to Palestinian refugees on December 23 to promote the idea of Russia's "compatriots abroad" - an oft-used Kremlin justification for its war in Ukraine. Dagestani authorities granted 45 Palestinian refugees, including seven minors, Russian citizenship on December 23, after the refugees reportedly evacuated to Dagestan from Gaza.[33] Select Russian milbloggers, including Kremlin-appointed Russian Human Rights Council member Alexander "Sasha" Kots, expressed shock at the speed and ease of the refugees' citizenship process and called for Russian authorities to apply this expedited citizenship process to the whole country and to Russian "compatriots" abroad who are "risking everything" to support Russia.[34] The Kremlin has intentionally and broadly defined "compatriots" as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in the Russian sphere of influence, which is not limited to those with Russian citizenship or residing in Russia.[35] Russian President Vladimir Putin has recently renewed his rhetoric about the concept of "compatriots abroad" when discussing Russia's "sovereignty," the fiction of a "genocide in Donbas," and Russia's duty to protect these "compatriots" as part of justifications for Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine.[36] The fact that Kots, who is notably one of the "trusted persons" who can campaign on Putin's behalf, invoked the narrative about "compatriots abroad" in connection with news about Palestinian refugees – as opposed to other Kremlin narratives more directly related to the Israel-Hamas war, such as Putin's recent anti-Israel rhetoric - suggests that the "compatriots abroad" narrative may be of particular importance to the Kremlin, or is perceived as such at least by important voices in the Russian information space.[37] Select Russian information space actors may continue to seize on the issue of Palestinian refugees in Russia to advocate for a more maximalist and holistic approach to Putin's Russian World (Russkiy Mir) ideology and the intensified integration of Russian "compatriots" into the Russian world.

Key Takeaways:

- The *New York Times* (NYT) - citing former and current senior Russian, US, and international officials - reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using back channels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire, despite Putin's recent public statements to the contrary.
- The timing of Putin's reported interest in a ceasefire is more consistent with Russia's ongoing efforts to delay and discourage further Western military assistance to Ukraine, than with a serious interest in ending the war other than with a full Russian victory.
- Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky obliquely indicated that VDV forces are under significant pressure to conduct rapid offensive operations near Bakhmut and repel Ukrainian attacks on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Teplinsky also implied that the Russian military command is deploying new VDV officers and troops promptly to the frontlines without having them complete pre-combat training.
- Russia's Black Sea Fleet's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade confirmed that it is deliberately using chemical weapons against Ukrainian forces in an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is a party.
- Recent analysis by OSINT analyst MT Anderson confirms that while Russian forces have moved the bulk of Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets away from occupied Sevastopol, the BSF maintains a limited naval presence in Sevastopol.
- The Russian information space exploited news of a Ukrainian journalist's decision not to return to Ukraine after an assignment abroad to amplify ongoing Russian information operations about resistance to full mobilization efforts in Ukraine that purposefully ignore the much more substantial Russian resistance to Russia's partial mobilization of reservists in September 2022.

- Russian milbloggers used the granting of Russian citizenship to Palestinian refugees on December 23 to promote the idea of Russia's "compatriots abroad" - an oft-used Kremlin justification for its war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces made recent confirmed advances near Kupyansk and Kreminna, northeast of Bakhmut, southwest of Donetsk City, and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact.
- Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec subsidiary United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) Head Yuri Slyusar stated during a television interview on December 19 that UAC will increase its production of combat aircraft in 2024 and 2025, including its production of new types of aircraft.
- Russian occupation authorities are building out electoral infrastructure in occupied Ukraine to set conditions for the upcoming presidential election.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment: December 22, 2023

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

December 22, 2023, 7:30pm ET

Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russia maintains its maximalist objectives and additional goals for territorial conquest in Ukraine, despite recent comments made by Western officials suggesting that Russia is already defeated. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on December 22 that Russian President Vladimir Putin "has lost Ukraine altogether" and can "no longer achieve its war goals," which is a "major strategic defeat."^[1] Stoltenberg also cautioned against expectations in the West of a rapid end to the war. Stoltenberg's comments echo comments made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on December 20, wherein Blinken stated that Russia has already failed to achieve its principal objective of erasing and subsuming Ukraine.^[2] Deputy Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Major General Vadym Skibitskyi, however, also stated on December 22 that even if Russia failed to achieve its operational-strategic objectives in 2023, Putin will simply shift Russia's objectives to the next year, suggesting that it is premature to talk about Russia's complete failure in the war thus far.^[3] Skibitskyi's statement is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russia continues to pursue Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine and that the current failure of Russian operations in Ukraine thus far is not a permanent condition.^[4] A Russian source seized on Blinken's comment and similar statements made by Western officials to propagate the narrative that these comments aim to justify reducing Western support for Ukraine.^[5] Russian information space actors will likely continue to exploit Western statements regarding the failure of Russian operations in 2023 and falsely frame such statements as indicators that Western leaders intend to stop supporting Ukraine.

Ukraine will very likely receive the first batch of F-16s before the end of 2023. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte confirmed on December 22 during a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the Dutch government will prepare an initial 18 F-16 fighter jets for delivery to Ukraine.^[6] While Rutte did not confirm the timeline for F-16 delivery, a recent Estonian Ministry of Defense strategy document stated that the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Belgium have already committed to donating F-16s to Ukraine "before the end of the year [2023]."^[7]

The Russia Aerospace Forces (VKS) reportedly lost three Su-34 attack aircraft in southern Ukraine between December 21-22. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces downed three Su-24 aircraft on December 22 in the southern direction, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian air defenses downed the Russian aircraft in the Kherson direction near Krynky.^[8] Russian milbloggers responded to the isolated incident with great concern about Ukraine's air defense capabilities in southern Ukraine.^[9] The VKS previously lost two Mi-8 helicopters, a Su-34 bomber, and a Su-35 fighter during an incident in Bryansk Oblast on May 13, 2023, which Russian forces similarly seized on to voice anxiety over Ukrainian air defense capabilities.^[10]

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) named Russian President Vladimir Putin's close ally and Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as the individual responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.^[11] The WSJ, quoting Western intelligence officials and former Russian intelligence sources, reported that Patrushev, with Putin's permission, gave the order to "dispose" of Prigozhin in early August 2023 by planting an explosive on the wing of Prigozhin's jet. ISW had originally assessed on August 23 that Russian forces might have shot down Prigozhin's jet on Putin's orders, but evidence for that assessment was circumstantial, and ISW has no reason to doubt that the sources of the WSJ report are more reliable. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused the WSJ of putting forward a "pulp fiction" conspiracy theory about Prigozhin's death, however.^[12]

The WSJ reported that Patrushev and other Kremlin officials warned Putin against using parallel armies, but that Putin committed Wagner forces shortly after Russian regular forces failed to accomplish the Kremlin's invasion plan in February 2022. Patrushev reportedly began to warn Putin about Prigozhin's intentions in summer 2022, but Putin reportedly disregarded those concerns as Wagner forces were achieving battlefield successes. ISW previously assessed on March 12, 2023, that Putin allowed Prigozhin to expand the Wagner Group in spring and summer 2022 to avoid ordering an unpopular mobilization after Russian regular forces failed to capture Kyiv and culminated in western Luhansk Oblast.^[13] Prigozhin became bolder throughout the summer and early fall of 2022 and started openly criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the General Staff in hopes of installing pro-Wagner commanders and officials within the Kremlin establishment.^[14] ISW has previously observed that Putin encourages competition among different factions within the Kremlin and likely permitted the continuation of conditions in which Prigozhin could attack the Russian MoD to balance Kremlin officials and ensure that different factions competed to please him by accomplishing his stated objectives.^[15] Kremlin sources similarly told the WSJ that Putin stood by his long-term practice of allowing the feud between Prigozhin and the Russian MoD to continue despite Patrushev's concerns.

A former Russian intelligence officer reported that Putin's relationship with Prigozhin changed after Prigozhin scolded Putin over the Wagner Group's shortage of supplies over a phone call, which Patrushev and other Kremlin officials overheard in October 2022. ISW reported in late October about the Putin-Prigozhin discussion of battlefield realities and observed Putin issuing an oblique warning to Prigozhin on October 5, 2022, in an odd allusion to the Pugachev Rebellion that challenged Catherine the Great's authority in the mid-1770s.^[16] Patrushev reportedly seized on the phone call to convince Putin to distance himself from Prigozhin as Prigozhin showed disrespect to Putin's authority – and Patrushev was ultimately successful in influencing Putin to cut communication with Prigozhin by December 2022. Putin's trust in and affinity for Prigozhin may have also declined as Prigozhin failed to capture Bakhmut before the start of 2023 as he had likely previously promised to do. ISW assessed on March 12, 2023, that Putin likely allowed the Russian MoD to replace Wagner in Bakhmut in early January because Wagner had failed to capture

Bakhmut by late December 2022. In March 2023, ISW observed Prigozhin publicly entertaining a claim that Patrushev and Putin were planning to "neutralize" Wagner and Prigozhin given that there would be nothing remaining of Wagner in April or May 2023.^[17] The claim that Prigozhin amplified also included Patrushev's observation that Prigozhin would try to "unite the former and remaining active Wagner fighters under a far-fetched pretext," arm them, and "send them to the territory of Russia in order to seize power in the regions bordering Ukraine with a possible advance inland" if Russian officials destroyed Wagner in Ukraine.^[18] Prigozhin denied knowing about such claims at the time, and it appeared that the claim was falsely attributed to a Russian outlet.^[19] Prigozhin's engagement with the claim was likely deliberate, as he may have been attempting to obliquely signal to the public about Patrushev's efforts to eliminate Wagner,

The WSJ's sources revealed that the Kremlin then announced plans to dismantle Wagner as a fighting force by forcing all fighters to register with the Russian MoD by July 1 – leading to Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 23 and June 24. Prigozhin reportedly wanted to confront Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Rostov-on-Don. Both of them were reportedly at the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters on the day of the mutiny before escaping as Wagner forces surrounded and seized the headquarters building. Patrushev reportedly took charge of the crisis and began arranging calls with Prigozhin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – who refused to assist Putin in quelling Prigozhin's rebellion. Lukashenko reportedly presented Prigozhin with Patrushev's proposal to allow Wagner to move to Belarus and to let Prigozhin operate abroad. Following the mutiny, the Kremlin let Prigozhin continue a seemingly normal life without punishment, and a US official noted that Kremlin officials were likely collecting information on Prigozhin and his allies prior to Patrushev's assassination plan in August 2023.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 21 to 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 24 of 28 Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones.^[20] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian drones struck port infrastructure in Mykolaiv Oblast and targeted port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.^[21] Kyiv City Administration stated that Russian forces conducted a third series of drone strikes against Kyiv City in the last six days on the night of December 21 to 22, striking a multi-story residential building.^[22] Russian sources claimed that Russian drones also struck targets in Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa oblasts.^[23]

The Kremlin continues to position itself as a neutral arbitrator in the Israel-Hamas war despite its recent increasing anti-Israel rhetoric. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on December 22 to discuss issues related to the "unprecedented" escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, primarily in the Gaza Strip.^[24] Putin reportedly informed Abbas about Russian efforts to deliver humanitarian aid, including medicines and medical equipment, to Gaza.^[25] Putin and Abbas reportedly called for an end to fighting and the resumption of a political settlement between Israel and Palestine.^[26] Russian officials proposed on December 22 that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) amend a humanitarian aid resolution to call for an "urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities."^[27] The Kremlin has routinely postured itself as a neutral actor ready to alleviate human suffering and de-escalate the conflict since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.^[28] The Kremlin has expressed a much more anti-Israel position in recent weeks, however, and this increasingly non-neutral framing signals potential increased support for Iranian interests in the region and a Russian willingness to antagonize Israel.^[29]

US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on December 22 granting the US Treasury Department the authority to impose sanctions on banks and other financial institutions that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion. The executive order allows the US Treasury Department to prohibit financial institutions facilitating Russian sanctions evasion from opening accounts in the US and to block all of a financial institution's current and future property and interests in the US.^[30] The order stipulates that any bank or financial institution may face these measures if it conducts or facilitates transactions on behalf of a person or entity that the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has sanctioned for their involvement in the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) or in sectors that support Russia's DIB.^[31] US Treasury Secretary Jannet Yellen stated on December 22 that "no one should doubt the resolve of the US and [its] partners when weighing the real risks" associated with support for Russian sanctions evasion.^[32] The executive order also places sanctions on imports of Russian non-industrial diamonds, alcoholic beverages, and seafood.^[33]

Russian officials continue to downplay deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations, possibly as part of a concerted campaign to improve the bilateral relationship amid concerns about Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus. Russian Ambassador to Armenia Sergei Kopyrkin stated during an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS on December 22 that Russia and Armenia remain "partners and strategic allies" united by common interests and history, despite "certain differences" in their bilateral and multilateral agendas.^[34] Kopyrkin noted that the Armenian government maintains that it is not considering withdrawing from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the latter of which Armenia is scheduled to chair in 2024.^[35] Kopyrkin stated that Russian and Armenian officials are negotiating new military-technical agreements and recently met to discuss the creation of "operational communication channels" to resolve any disagreements in the bilateral relationship, specifically disagreements between Russian and Armenian media outlets.^[36] Armenian TV and Radio Commission recently revoked the license of the *Radio Tospa* station, which is affiliated with Russian propaganda outlet *Radio Sputnik*, for 30 days due to derogatory comments made by Russian propagandists about Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the Armenian people.^[37] ISW has observed Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, similarly downplay the deterioration of Russian-Armenia relations as Armenia has distanced itself from Russia following Russia's failure to support Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in fall 2023.^[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russia maintains its maximalist objectives and additional goals for territorial conquest in Ukraine, despite recent comments made by Western officials suggesting that Russia is already defeated.
- Ukraine will very likely receive the first batch of F-16s before the end of 2023.
- The Russia Aerospace Forces (VKS) reportedly lost three Su-34 attack aircraft in southern Ukraine between December 21-22.
- The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) named Russian President Vladimir Putin's close ally and Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as the individual responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.
- The Kremlin continues to position itself as a neutral arbitrator in the Israel-Hamas war despite its recent increasing anti-Israel rhetoric.
- US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on December 22 granting the US Treasury Department the authority to impose sanctions on banks and other financial institutions that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion.
- Russian officials continue to downplay deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations, possibly as part of a concerted campaign to improve the bilateral relationship amid concerns about Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus.

- Russian forces made confirmed advances northeast and southwest of Bakhmut and southwest of Avdiivka and continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact.
- A Ukrainian intelligence official reported that Russian forces are intensifying force generation efforts to keep pace with the rate of Russian losses in Ukraine so that they can sustain ongoing offensive operations along the front.
- Kremlin-appointment Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova outlined new social support measures meant to further integrate occupied Zaporizhia Oblast into Russia during a working visit to the occupied oblast on December 22.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 21, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 21, 2023, 7:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on December 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The failure of Russian operations in Ukraine to achieve Russian President Vladimir Putin's maximalist objectives thus far is not a permanent condition, and only continued Western support for Ukraine can ensure that Putin's maximalist objectives remain unattainable. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on December 20 that Putin has already failed to achieve his principal objective of "erasing [Ukraine] from the map and subsuming it into Russia."^[1] The Russian military has failed to force Ukraine to capitulate to Putin's maximalist objectives to replace the Ukrainian government with one acceptable to the Kremlin under veiled calls for "denazification," to destroy Ukraine's ability to resist any future Kremlin demands under calls for "demilitarization," and to prohibit Ukraine's right to choose its own diplomatic and military partnerships under calls for Ukrainian "neutrality."^[2] The Kremlin has also pursued additional undefined objectives for territorial conquest in Ukraine that have resulted in the illegal annexation of parts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts and the occupation of small parts of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv oblasts, none of which represents either a departure from or the full accomplishment of Putin's initial "principal" objectives.^[3]

Putin has recently re-emphasized that his maximalist objectives in Ukraine remain unchanged, and Putin and senior Kremlin officials have increasingly expressed expansionist rhetoric indicating that these objectives do not preclude further Russian territorial conquests in Ukraine.^[4] Russian victory on Putin's terms does not necessarily portend the full-scale annexation of Ukraine into Russia and the erasure of a Ukrainian state altogether, to be sure, but they certainly entail at least the destruction of the current Ukrainian state and its recreation into an entirely Russian-dominated entity, for which the full-scale Russian military occupation of Ukraine will very likely be required.

ISW has assessed that the collapse of Western aid would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate because the current instable balance could readily be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West.^[5] Continued Western security assistance that empowers Ukrainian forces to repel ongoing and future Russian offensive efforts and to liberate more Ukrainian territory is the only course of action at this time that can make the Russian failure to achieve Putin's maximalist objectives in Ukraine permanent.

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the White House assesses that Russian forces will be able to conduct offensive operations more easily when winter weather conditions become more conducive for mechanized maneuver warfare (likely in January–February 2024) — an assessment that is consistent with ISW's observations and assessments about the tempo of fighting in Ukraine during the winter. Kirby stated on December 20 that Russian forces intend to continue offensive operations, particularly around Avdiivka, and that the White House believes that it will be easier for Russian forces to conduct offensive operations when cold temperatures freeze the ground in the end of January and into February 2024.^[6] The fall mud season has hampered ground maneuver for both Ukrainian and Russian forces since 2014, but periods of prolonged freezing temperatures that typically start in late December freeze the ground and allow armored vehicles to move more easily than in muddy autumn and spring months.^[7] Weather is variable, however, and the upcoming period of hard freeze may come later in the year — or not at all if it is a mild winter — and presents a shorter window of favorable terrain for mechanized maneuver warfare. Russian forces have launched localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative rather than waiting for the hard freeze.^[8] Russian forces will likely try to sustain or intensify these offensive operations regardless of weather conditions this winter, as Russian forces did in winter 2022–2023.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 20 to 21. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 35 Shahed-131/-136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk in Krasnodar Krai, occupied Cape Chuada in Crimea, and Kursk Oblast targeting Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Cherkasy, Kherson, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Khmelnytskyi, Sumy, Poltava, Chernihiv, and Kirovohrad oblasts.^[9] The Ukrainian Air Force stated that Ukrainian forces shot down 34 Shaheds.^[10]

Japan is reportedly preparing to revise its defense equipment export policy to backfill US stockpiles of Patriot missiles and UK artillery ammunition stores.^[11] The Japanese government will reportedly meet on December 22 to finalize plans to allow for Japan's first export of lethal military equipment since 1967, when Japan established its Three Principles on Arms Exports, which prohibits the export of defense equipment to countries party to a conflict.^[12] The revision will reportedly allow Japanese manufacturers to export completed defense equipment to the country in which the manufacturing license for that weapon originated.^[13] Japanese Patriot missiles exported to the US will help fill US stockpiles, allowing the US to send more Patriot missiles to Ukraine. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on December 21 that Japan is also considering exporting 155mm artillery shells to the United Kingdom (UK) to indirectly aid Ukraine in a similar way.^[14]

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) objected to military exercises in Japan involving the Japanese military, possibly in an effort to deter or respond to the Japanese government's decision to change its defense equipment export regulations. The Russian MFA claimed on December 21 that it sent an official objection to the Japanese Embassy in Russia on December 18 about regular military exercises among Japan, the US, and Australia on Hokkaido Island,

claiming that the exercises posed a potential security threat to Russia.^[15] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on December 18 that Russia has "closed" all territorial disputes with Japan.^[16] Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi disputed Lavrov's claim on December 19, stating that Russia did not want to continue negotiations on its territorial disputes with Japan after Tokyo imposed sanctions on Russia.^[17] The Yama Sakura 85 trilateral exercises with the US, Japan, and Australia occurred from December 4 to 12, and US Indo-Pacific Command stated that the exercises symbolize the participants' commitment to the shared vision of a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, suggesting that the exercises are highly likely aimed at China, not Russia.^[18] Russia's insistence that exercises on Japanese territory involving the Japanese military threaten Russia, despite Russia's alleged and self-proclaimed lack of territorial disputes with Japan, suggests that Russia wants to be seen as a Pacific power as part of the Kremlin's pursuit of an equal defense partnership with China.^[19] The MFA may also have announced its complaints about the exercises' alleged threat to Russian security in an effort to deter Japan from making the reported possible changes to Japanese defense equipment export regulation policies.

The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov after Russian ultranationalist and former Russian State Duma Deputy Zakhar Prilepin suggested that Russia should annex part of Uzbekistan, likely demonstrating post-Soviet countries' concerns about intensifying Russian imperial designs against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Prilepin stated that Russia should annex territory from which labor migrants in Russia originate, "for example, [territory] in Uzbekistan," at a press conference on December 20.^[20] Prilepin is a prominent Russian ultranationalist voice who has affiliations with Rosgvardia and led a Russian battalion to fight in Donbas prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[21] Prilepin also survived an alleged Ukrainian assassination attempt in May 2023.^[22] The Uzbek MFA reported that it had summoned Malginov to a meeting regarding Prilepin's statements and noted that "such rash statements" do not correspond with Uzbekistan and Russia's strategic partnership.^[23] Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that Prilepin's statements do not "even remotely" reflect the official Russian government position on its relations with Uzbekistan and claimed that Russia's use of foreign labor migrants benefits both Russia and migrants' countries of origin.^[24] Prilepin's statements likely reflect increasing public discontent in the Russian ultranationalist community about the role of migrants in Russian society.^[25] The Uzbek MFA's response likely indicates that the Uzbek government views Prilepin's statements as sufficiently threatening to warrant a demand for an official Russian response. Central Asian governments have notably previously responded to statements from Russian officials questioning Central Asian states' territorial integrity and sovereignty by summoning their respective Russian ambassador.^[26]

An investigation by Africa-based French-language outlet *Jeune Afrique* highlights the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to maintain and expand Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel while subsuming Wagner Group operations on the continent.^[27] *Jeune Afrique* noted that since the Wagner Group's aborted June 24 armed rebellion and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's subsequent death in August, operatives of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) have increasingly accompanied Wagner fighters in Mali as part of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s efforts to take control of former Wagner elements in Mali and other African states. *Jeune Afrique* cited an anonymous source reportedly close to French intelligence who claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to consolidate control over former Wagner operatives in Mali so as to not "create another Frankenstein's monster" by overly empowering Wagner's independent operations in Africa. The *Jeune Afrique* investigation also highlighted efforts by the Russian MoD and GRU to assure the leadership of the CAR, where Wagner has historically been particularly active, that the CAR-Russian partnership will continue to operate fruitfully even following Prigozhin's death. *Jeune Afrique* additionally emphasized that the Burkinabe junta is trying to expand relations with Russia for "military and security purposes" and that Russia is generally interested in working with the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, comprised of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. CTP previously assessed that Russia is exploiting shifting power dynamics in Africa by strengthening partnerships with Sahelian juntas.^[28] These partnerships allow Russia to evade Western sanctions levied against Russia due to the war in Ukraine and to spoil Western strategic influence on the continent.^[29]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to formalize avenues for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of humanitarian services. Putin signed a decree on December 21 "on measures of social support for families with children affected by the aggression of Ukraine," which expands Russian control over occupied areas of Ukraine through financial coercion and includes a key provision that further formalizes an existing set of deportation schemes under medical pretexts.^[30] The decree holds that the guardians of children who were under the age of 18 after February 2022 and suffered an injury while living in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts are eligible to receive a one-time 100,000-ruble (\$1,076) compensation payment. The financial support provision codifies social control of occupied areas of Ukraine in a threefold way—first, by generating financial dependence on Russian authorities for social support payments; second, by collecting personal information on Ukrainian children and their guardians; and finally, by framing the Ukrainian military as dangerous to Ukrainian civilians in a way that propagates a negative view of the Ukrainian state. The decree also stipulates that occupation authorities must refer children to "sanatorium-resorts" or otherwise provide children with the "opportunity to travel to a place of rest or treatment" in the case of certain "medical indicators." This provision of the decree essentially will allow Russian occupation officials to tabulate personal information on children who have been registered as injured and send those children to Russia for treatment and rehabilitation purposes. ISW has frequently reported that Russian occupation officials use the promise of various medical and psychiatric programs in Russia to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.^[31] The deportation of children on humanitarian and medical grounds is likely still a violation of international law because Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine created the conditions that endangered Ukrainian children in the first place.^[32]

Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to implicate herself in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia against the backdrop of the death of a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl in Russian custody. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on December 21 that a 12-year-old girl from Sorokyne (Krasnodon), occupied Luhansk Oblast, died from an excessively high fever on a train that was traveling from the "Olympic" Children's camp in Tyumen Oblast back to occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[33] Russian media reported that following the girl's death, Russian Railways stopped the train in Penza, Saratov Oblast, and the Russian Health Ministry reported that it hospitalized 86 children from the train with symptoms of Acute Respiratory Viral Infection (AFVI).^[34] Lvova-Belova responded to the situation and emphasized that she is monitoring what is happening with the remaining children who are hospitalized in Saratov Oblast, acknowledging that the children from Sorokyne were on the train for "vacation" in Tyumen Oblast.^[35]

Russian occupation officials have long used children's vacation and rest/rehabilitation camps to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, while also using the camps to instill pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Ukrainian children, as ISW has frequently assessed.^[36] It is notable that Lvova-Belova acknowledged that the Tyumen Oblast "Olympic" children's camp is part of the network of children's camps that figure into Russia's wider scheme of deporting Ukrainian children, which implicates her further in the overall deportation process. The Ukrainian girl's death also further demonstrates an apparent violation of Russia's obligations under international law. Under international law, Russia, as the occupying power, must ensure the health and safety of "protected persons" that are part of a removed or deported population, including children.^[37] The apparent rapid spread of AFVI and dangerous flu-like symptoms to up to 86 Ukrainian children, toward whom Russia has international legal obligations, represents a further case of Russia's contempt for international standards.

The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced a series of sanctions against oil traders with opaque ownership and a Russian-owned ship manager that have been helping Russia skirt the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products. OFAC announced on December 20 that it sanctioned a Russian-owned ship manager who managed a vessel that OFAC previously identified as having transported Russian crude oil above the \$60 price cap under the cover of a US-based service provider.[38] OFAC also sanctioned two ship managers based in Hong Kong and one based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have reportedly made over 150 port calls to transport Russian oil above the price cap since summer 2023.[39] OFAC stated that it will strengthen review processes for service providers to better enforce the price cap in accordance with recent G7 commitments.[40]

Bloomberg reported on December 20 that roughly five million barrels of Russian crude oil that were scheduled to reach Indian refiners have not done so in the past four weeks for unspecified reasons.[41] Bloomberg reported that five ships that intended to deliver the Russian crude oil are idling several kilometers from their destination and belong to Russian state tanker company Sovcomflot PJSC, which owns six of the eight tankers that OFAC has previously sanctioned.[42] Another Sovcomflot-owned tanker reportedly loaded oil cargo on December 19 and still set course for delivery to Indian refiners scheduled for January 5, however.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- The failure of Russian operations in Ukraine to achieve Russian President Vladimir Putin's maximalist objectives thus far is not a permanent condition, and only continued Western support for Ukraine can ensure that Putin's maximalist objectives remain unattainable.
- ISW has assessed that the collapse of Western aid would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate because the current instable balance could readily be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the White House assesses that Russian forces will be able to conduct offensive operations more easily when winter weather conditions become more conducive for mechanized maneuver warfare (likely in January–February 2024) — an assessment that is consistent with ISW's observations and assessments about the tempo of fighting in Ukraine during the winter.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 20 to 21.
- Japan is reportedly preparing to revise its defense equipment export policy to backfill US stockpiles of Patriot missiles and UK artillery ammunition stores.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) objected to military exercises in Japan involving the Japanese military, possibly in an effort to deter or respond to the Japanese government's decision to change its defense equipment export regulations.
- The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov after Russian ultranationalist and former Russian State Duma Deputy Zakhar Prilepin suggested that Russia should annex part of Uzbekistan, likely demonstrating post-Soviet countries' concerns about intensifying Russian imperial designs against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.
- An investigation by Africa-based French-language outlet *Jeune Afrique* highlights the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to maintain and expand Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel while subsuming Wagner Group operations on the continent.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to formalize avenues for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of humanitarian services.
- Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to implicate herself in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia against the backdrop of the death of a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl in Russian custody.
- The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced a series of sanctions against oil traders with opaque ownership and a Russian-owned ship manager that have been helping Russia skirt the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka and continued positional meeting engagements along the entire frontline.
- The Russian government continues efforts to digitalize and organize conscription through a unified digital register as part of ongoing attempts to improve the effectiveness of issuing military summonses and prevent draft dodging.
- Russian authorities are using Rosgvardia to perform law enforcement functions and strengthen occupational control in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 20, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 20, 2023, 6pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on December 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill made a series of anti-migrant and xenophobic remarks that directly contradict Russian President Vladimir Putin's ongoing efforts to reestablish the inclusive Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology. During the Moscow Diocesan Assembly on December 20, Kirill blamed migrants for increasingly threatening interreligious and interethnic peace in Russia by refusing to integrate into Russian society and forming criminal and extremist organizations.[1] Kirill added that life for the ethnically Russian "indigenous population" is almost unbearable in some areas, including Moscow, claiming that if such trends continue then the Russian Orthodox people will "lose Russia." Kirill's statements contrast with Putin's recent efforts to present himself as a centrist figure and to reestablish the concept of the Russian World, which includes all people of different ethnicities and religious affiliations who have lived or are living in geographical areas that belonged to Ancient Rus (Kyivan Rus), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation.[2] Putin notably also stated during the Meeting of the Council of Legislators on December 20 that the Russian constitution and government are trying to ensure harmony in a diverse and large Russia – reemphasizing his efforts to present Russia as an inclusive and harmonious multicultural Russian state.[3]

Putin, on the one hand, has been increasingly reimagining himself as a modern tsar who is defending Russian sovereignty to justify his war in Ukraine and to appease his ultranationalist constituencies who tend to have more intolerant views on religion and Russian identity.[4] But Putin has, on the other hand, been trying to seem to be an inclusive leader to incentivize all religious and ethnic groups to support his regime and war efforts. ISW assessed on November 28 that Kirill's anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric is more closely aligned with Russian government policies towards migrants and non-Russian ethnicities in Russia than Putin's more inclusive rhetoric in the context of the Russian World.[5] These narratives and policies are thus contradictory and may ultimately complicate Putin's efforts to appease different constituency groups in Russia and may trigger further interethnic and interreligious conflicts.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explicitly stated that the Kremlin is uninterested in negotiations with Ukraine, suggesting that the Kremlin is moving away from its information operation meant to feign interest in negotiations. Peskov responded to a question on December 20 about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's December 19 statement that the issue of negotiations with Russia is currently "irrelevant," stating that the Kremlin has repeatedly said that there is no "basis" or "foundation" for negotiations with Ukraine.[6] Peskov also stated that the "prerequisites" for negotiations are absent, likely referring to Russia's unchanged maximalist objectives in Ukraine - which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.[7] ISW has long assessed that the Kremlin does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine or the West in good faith.[8] The Kremlin previously pushed information operations feigning interest in negotiations with Ukraine in order to cast itself as a responsible party and blame Ukraine for refusing "reasonable" Russian negotiations, but the Kremlin appears to be moving away from this information operation, as ISW suggested on December 15.[9]

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 19 to 20. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 19 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from Chauda and Balaklava, occupied Crimea, and that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 of the drones over Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytskyi, Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Kirovohrad oblasts.[10] The Ukrainian Air Force also reported that Russian forces launched two S-300 missiles at Kharkiv Oblast from Belgorod Oblast.[11] The Kyiv City Military Administration noted that this is the fifth Russian air attack against Kyiv Oblast in the month of December.[12]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps announced a recruitment campaign targeting former and current Wagner Group personnel and people with combat experience in the war in Ukraine. The Africa Corps, a Russian MoD initiative to expand Russian military presence in the Middle East and Africa, announced that it started recruitment on December 20.[13] Africa-focused Russian media outlet *African Initiative* stated that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov is "supervising" the new unspecified leadership of the Africa Corps.[14] The Africa Corps claimed that its command staff consists of former combat commanders of elite units in the Russian military and unspecified private military companies (PMCs) - possibly referring to the Redut PMC (affiliated with the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff [GRU]).[15] The Africa Corps advertised an unspecified "high salary," but noted that interested applicants who are currently fighting in the war in Ukraine cannot transfer to serve in the Africa Corps, though active-duty Russian military personnel not fighting in the war can transfer to serve in the Africa Corps.[16] The Africa Corps also clarified that an individual cannot transfer from Rosgvardia to the Africa Corps before completing their Rosgvardia contract.[17] The Africa Corps' desire to clarify eligibility for service suggests that its advertisement campaign has successfully generated interest among former Wagner personnel given that some Wagner fighters signed contracts with the Russian MoD or Rosgvardia after the death of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.[18] The Africa Corps suggested that it would operate in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso - areas consistent with ISW's previous assessment of the Africa Corps' area of operations.[19]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed bilateral economic cooperation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on December 20. Mishustin stated that the previous two Russian-Chinese summits in March and October 2023 indicated the importance of further strengthening the "comprehensive partnership" and "strategic interaction" between the two countries.[20] Mishustin and Xi highlighted increased Russian-Chinese trade in 2023, which has reportedly already surpassed its goal of \$200 billion, and Mishustin continued to claim that Russian and Chinese transactions are almost entirely done in national currencies (the yuan and ruble). China and Russia issued a joint communique on December 20 which stated that the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the two countries is in line with the two states' interests, not aimed at third parties, and not subject to external influence.[21] The communique highlighted Russian-Chinese energy and investment cooperation and the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The communique included Russian statements about Taiwan but did not mention Ukraine, which suggests that the Kremlin continues to be concerned with China's reticence to participate fully in the no-limits partnership that Russia wants to establish, and that China continues to hold the upper hand in the Russian-Chinese relationship.[22]

Moscow State University (MGU) is reportedly ending its master's program in "information and hybrid warfare" aimed at teaching students how to create information operations and conduct hybrid warfare, generating outrage from Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov. MGU Higher School of Telecommunications Dean Vitaly Tretyakov defended MGU's decision to discontinue the master's program on Solovyov's show on December 18 because students graduating from the program would face difficulties finding employment abroad.[23] Tretyakov also argued that the master's program, which offers a course in "special propaganda" (a Russian term for information and psychological operations), would threaten MGU's reputation.[24] Solovyov dismissed Tretyakov's explanations and questioned the patriotism of MGU's students and faculty.[25] Solovyov praised the now-closing master's program and noted that Russian universities need to teach "special propaganda" and combat Western narratives of history.[26] Former Duma Deputy Elena Panina echoed Solovyov's support for the program and claimed that the Russian government should fund similar programs at various universities.[27] MGU announced the creation of the master's program in 2022, the same year it admitted its first class of students, reportedly to teach and promote Russian objectives for the war in Ukraine.[28] MGU also is reportedly closing the program due to the low salaries of the professors teaching its courses and an ongoing scandal regarding faculty bribery.[29]

The Kremlin continues to set conditions to create a veneer of legitimacy over the upcoming March 2024 presidential election. Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova reported on December 20 that the CEC has already received applications for 16 individuals who are running as presidential candidates and that 29 Russian federal subjects will use remote electronic voting for the first time during the presidential election.[30] ISW has long assessed that the Kremlin uses the remote electronic voting system to manipulate election results.[31] Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin claimed that Russia has developed all the necessary legal frameworks to ensure that the election is "competitive, open, and legitimate."^[32] By contrast, a Russian insider source claimed that the CEC has been tasked with ensuring a voter turnout of 75 percent, 80 to 85 percent of which will reportedly vote for Putin.[33] While ISW cannot independently verify the veracity of the insider source's claim, the insinuation that the Kremlin is interested in creating the guise of Putin's legitimate election is consistent with ISW's assessment that Putin remains interested in engaging in legal theater to legitimize his regime.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill made a series of anti-migrant and xenophobic remarks that directly contradict Russian President Vladimir Putin's ongoing efforts to reestablish the inclusive Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explicitly stated that the Kremlin is uninterested in negotiations with Ukraine, suggesting that the Kremlin is moving away from its information operation meant to feign interest in negotiations.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps announced a recruitment campaign targeting former and current Wagner Group personnel and people with combat experience in the war in Ukraine.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed bilateral economic cooperation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on December 20.
- Moscow State University (MGU) is reportedly ending its master's program in "information and hybrid warfare" aimed at teaching students how to create information operations and conduct hybrid warfare, generating outrage from Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov.
- The Kremlin continues to set conditions to create a veneer of legitimacy over the upcoming March 2024 presidential election.
- Russian forces made a confirmed advance north of Bakhmut and continued positional meeting engagements along the entire line of contact.
- Russian officials issued military summonses to migrants at a naturalization ceremony on December 20 as part of ongoing efforts to target naturalized migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts and to placate the Russian ultranationalist community.
- Russian occupation administrators continue to use educational organizations to facilitate the temporary deportation of Ukrainians to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 19, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 19, 2023, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:15pm ET on December 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly invoking the Kremlin's pre-invasion pseudo-historical rhetoric to cast himself as a modern Russian tsar and framing the invasion of Ukraine as a historically justified imperial reconquest. Putin addressed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium on December 19 and largely reiterated boilerplate Kremlin rhetoric on the war in Ukraine by blaming NATO and the collective West for encroaching on Russia's borders and exculpated himself for issues faced by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine by deflecting the blame towards the Russian MoD bureaucracy.^[1] Putin additionally lauded Russian battlefield operations and Russia's defense industrial base's net output in 2023, furthering several of his standard talking points. Putin once again invoked the concept of "compatriots abroad" when discussing residents in "southeastern Ukraine" who, he asserted, have historical, cultural, and linguistic attachments to Russia, in order to justify the invasion of Ukraine on ideological grounds. ISW previously assessed that Putin rhetorically contextualized Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine within a wider framing of Russian "sovereignty" at Putin's "Direct Line" event on December 14.^[2] Putin notably claimed that while Russia is the sole guarantor of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia will also not interfere in "territorial disputes" in western Ukraine, where he claimed that many residents want to return to either Poland, Romania, or Hungary, concluding that "history will put everything in its place."

Putin's claim that Russia can be the only true guarantor of Ukraine's sovereignty is not a new narrative. In a 2021 essay entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin similarly claimed that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible precisely in partnership with Russia."^[3] In the same essay, Putin also utilized a pseudo-historical framework of Ukraine's and Russia's relationship that essentially defines the lands of modern, sovereign Ukraine as either part of Malorossiya (Little Russia), Novorossiya (New Russia), or fragments of other historical empires.^[4] This essay dismissed Ukraine's historical claim to its own sociocultural development, historical sovereignty, and territorial integrity, which the Russian Federation formally recognized and, indeed, guaranteed, in 1994.^[5] During the December 19 Collegium Address, Putin further engaged with this pseudo-historical framing to suggest that western Ukraine is also not truly Ukrainian and claimed that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin "gave it away" to Ukraine from pieces of Poland, Romania, and Hungary following the Second World War.^[6] Putin baselessly claimed that people living in western Ukraine want to return to their "historical homeland," suggesting that western Ukraine could feasibly return to 17th-century conceptions of state borders and become parts of Poland, Romania, or Hungary. **This statement suggests that Putin is selectively weaponizing facets of Eastern and Central European history as they suit his ideological line to further rhetorically strip Ukraine of its internationally recognized sovereignty.**

Putin's MoD Collegium claims are rife with rhetorical contradictions and are dependent on tenuous historical allegories that fall apart when considered in different historical contexts. During a November 28 speech at the World Russian People's Council, Putin defined the concept of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) as "all other peoples who have lived and are living in [Russia]," geographically defined as what belonged to Ancient Rus (Kyivan Rus), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation, which suggests that Putin was broadly including parts of eastern European states such as Poland and Romania in this conception of the Russian World.^[7] During the December 19 Collegium Address, however, Putin appeared to diverge from this maximalist interpretation of the Russian World by differentiating Poland, Romania, and Hungary as having their own historical claims to western Ukraine.^[8] These contradictions emphasize the fact that Putin relies on historical narratives that intentionally ignore contemporary contexts when they are suitable to the Kremlin narrative. The contradictions also exhibit another known characteristic of Russian information operations, which is that Russian information operations often are not necessarily internally consistent with each other. Based on Putin's interpretation of eastern European history, the modern map of Europe could also ridiculously be redrawn with Poland and Sweden controlling the Baltic States and parts of Belarus and Russia, and the Russian borders extending to Alaska and the California coast.^[9] One could also make an absurd and nonsensical argument that a revived Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania has rights to most of eastern Europe and parts of western Russia. Putin's selective references to convenient historical "claims" reflect the facile nature of his narrative.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated during the Russian MoD Collegium on December 19 that the Russian MoD will prioritize continuing the war in Ukraine and training newly formed units and formations in 2024, while also reiterating threats against Finland and the wider NATO alliance. Shoigu stated that the Russian military is undergoing work to expand its combat power to 1.32 million personnel from 1.15 million in accordance with Putin's December 1 decree.

[10] ISW previously assessed that Russian this decree was likely a formal recognition of the Russian military's current end strength and not an order to immediately increase the number of Russian military personnel, and Shoigu appears to be merely reamplifying Putin's original statement as opposed to outlining major changes in Russian end strength.[11] Shoigu stated that the Russian military formed two fully-equipped armies (likely in reference to the newly formed 18th and 25th Combined Arms Armies), a mixed aviation corps, four divisions, including 50 other units and formations of lower echelons, 18 brigades, and 28 regiments in 2023.[12] Shoigu initially outlined the creation of these new formations on paper at the MoD Collegium in December of 2022, the establishment of several of which ISW has independently confirmed.[13] It is highly unlikely that any of these new formations are "fully equipped" or operating at their doctrinal end strengths at this time, however. [14]

Shoigu reiterated that the Russian military is forming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) in connection with Finland's accession to NATO and the upcoming accession of Sweden.[15] Shoigu also announced that Russia will prioritize implementing operational and combat training measures to combat the "threats of further NATO expansion east" in 2024.[16] Shoigu's attempt to present the creation of the LMD and MMD as a response to alleged "NATO expansion" echoes an ongoing Russian information operation aimed at shifting responsibility for the war in Ukraine away from Russia to the West by framing Russia's actions as reactive. Finland and Sweden only applied to join NATO shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely fearing further Russian aggression on their borders.[17] Russia's decision to reform the Western Military District (WMD) into the LMD and MMD is part of a long-term restructuring and expansion effort that aims to prepare Russia for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO while balancing the Russian operational requirements in Ukraine.[18]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave an end-of-the-year press conference on December 19 during which he commented on Russia's continued unwillingness to negotiate, his confidence in future Western aid provisions, Ukrainian domestic weapons production, and possible future mobilization in Ukraine. Zelensky stated that the Kremlin did not achieve its military objectives in Ukraine in 2023, likely referring to Russia's inability to occupy the entirety of its illegally annexed territory, particularly by failing to reach the administrative borders of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.[19] Zelensky stated that Ukraine is working on a peace formula at international summits to possibly present to Russia in the future but that the issue of negotiations with Russia is currently "irrelevant" as Putin's recent statements about Russia's unchanged goals in Ukraine indicate that Putin does not want peace. (ISW has long assessed that Russia is unwilling to negotiate with Ukraine in good faith.)[20] Zelensky expressed confidence that the US and EU will provide aid to Ukraine in the near future.[21] Zelensky noted that Ukraine will domestically produce one million drones and increase production of artillery in 2024, and that Ukraine is working to produce unspecified projectiles and create the infrastructure needed to deliver domestically produced weapons to the front. Zelensky stated that financing issues have prevented him from making a decision on the Ukrainian General Staff's proposal to mobilize an additional 450,000–500,000 military personnel. Zelensky also emphasized that he would not sign a possible future bill on the mobilization of women but that he may lower the mobilization age to 25.[22] Zelensky answered a question about the possible dismissal of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, stating that he and Zaluzhnyi have a "working relationship." [23] Russian sources have increasingly been promoting reports about internal Ukrainian political-military tension in an effort to discredit Ukrainian leadership, sow domestic distrust between Ukrainian citizens and the government, and weaken Western support for Ukraine.[24]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed Russian and Chinese economic cooperation and bilateral relations with Chinese Premier Li Quang in Beijing on December 19.[25] Mishustin claimed that Russia and China have "completely gotten rid of third-country currencies in mutual transactions" in 2023 and that both countries are strengthening their business contacts and increasing the share of national currencies in mutual transactions. Mishustin added that one of Russia's most important strategic objectives is to bring the trade and investment between Russia and China to a higher level.[26] Mishustin arrived in Beijing to attend the 28th regular meeting of heads of the Russian and Chinese governments and will also meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping over the next two days.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly invoking the Kremlin's pre-invasion pseudo-historical rhetoric to cast himself as a modern Russian tsar and framing the invasion of Ukraine as a historically justified imperial reconquest.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated during the Russian MoD Collegium on December 19 that the Russian MoD will prioritize continuing the war in Ukraine and training newly formed units and formations in 2024, while also reiterating threats against Finland and the wider NATO alliance.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave an end of the year press conference on December 19 during which he commented on Russia's continued unwillingness to negotiate, his confidence in future Western aid provisions, Ukrainian domestic weapons production, and possible future mobilization in Ukraine.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed Russian and Chinese economic cooperation and bilateral relations with Chinese Premier Li Quang in Beijing on December 19.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances northeast of Kupyansk, north of Bakhmut, and southwest of Avdiivka, and continued positional meeting engagements along the entire line of contact.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that the Russian military intends to recruit up to 745,000 contract personnel by the end of 2024 at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium on December 19.
- Russian authorities continued attempts to use military conscription in occupied Ukraine to augment force generation efforts and legitimize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 18, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 18, 2023, 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.

[Click here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on December 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and may delay future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated in an interview with *Reuters* published on December 18 that Ukrainian forces have shortages of 122mm and 152mm shells along the entire frontline. [1] Tarnavskyi stated that the shortages are prompting Ukrainian forces to redistribute artillery ammunition and replan military tasks. [2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister General Ivan Havrylyuk also acknowledged on December 18 that Ukrainian artillery ammunition shortages will continue. [3] Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces are also having issues with artillery ammunition, although Ukrainian and Western officials have reportedly assessed that the Russian forces are currently conducting artillery fire at a rate five to seven times greater than the Ukrainian forces. [4]

Both Russian and Ukrainian forces have likely expended large portions of their Soviet-era stocks of 122mm and 152mm artillery shells, forcing both to look abroad for other stocks of this artillery ammunition. Russia has recently received large quantities of these shells from North Korea, and Ukraine and its Western partners have engaged in efforts to source these shells from foreign stocks. [5] It is unclear what delays or impediments there may be in Ukrainian and Western efforts to source 122mm and 152mm shells and how any such delays may be contributing to current Ukrainian shortages. Ukrainian forces are increasingly using Western-provided 155mm artillery systems along the front, and possible delays in Western security assistance may impact available supplies of 155mm shells, although US assistance packages have recently included 155mm shells. [6] Havrylyuk stated that Ukraine is currently focusing on the domestic production of drones to offset artillery shortages and is planning to produce 155mm ammunition in Ukraine with Western companies in 2024. [7]

Artillery shortages and delays in Western security assistance will create uncertainty in Ukrainian operational plans and likely prompt Ukrainian forces to conserve resources, which may force Ukrainian forces to make tough decisions about prioritizing certain sectors of the front over sectors where limited territorial setbacks are least damaging. *BBC*'s Russian service reported that Ukrainian officials said that they make periodic changes to what could be considered rough operational plans for 2024 based on the situation at the front. [8] A Ukrainian official reportedly stated that it is difficult to make military calculations for these plans due to the significant reduction in Western aid to Ukraine since September 2023. [9] Tarnavskyi stated that Ukraine is preparing reserves for further large-scale actions. [10] Artillery shortages and delays in Western aid will very likely decrease Ukraine's ability to plan and prepare for these actions. Delays in concrete Ukrainian operational planning and the materiel necessary for counteroffensive preparations will likely in turn delay 2024 counteroffensive operations.

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi declined to comment on recent Western reporting about Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russian offensive plans for 2024. Zaluzhnyi stated on December 18 that he would not comment on Ukraine's military plans for 2024 and responded to *BILD*'s recent article about Russia's strategic goals in Ukraine through 2026 by stating that German intelligence officers have a right to their opinion. [11]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat stated on December 18 that Russian forces have enough drones to launch daily strikes against Ukraine from different directions. [12] Ihnat stated that Russian forces are also stockpiling cruise and ballistic missiles, including Iskander, S-400, Kh-101, and Kh-555 missiles. [13] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed five Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones and a Kh-39 missile over Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts. [14]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly forming four new military transport aviation (VTA) regiments, although these efforts are likely aimed at reorganizing existing VTA units in support of Russia's force posturing rather than adding new capability in the short term. Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Izvestia*, quoting an unnamed Russian MoD official, claimed that the MoD decided to create and deploy four new VTA regiments to operate in the northern, southern, and western strategic directions and has already created the first of these regiments in the Russian Far East. [15] *Izvestia* claimed that Russian officials held an event in Ulan Ude, Republic of Buryatia on December 1 celebrating the reactivation of the 600th VTA Regiment. [16] The Soviet Union originally formed the 600th VTA in 1963, which was based in Shadrinsk, Kurgan Oblast until the regiment relocated to the Lithuanian Soviet Republic in 1965. Russia disbanded the 600th VTA in 1998 by merging the regiment with the 8th Guards VTA Regiment alongside other VTA formations. The reactivation of this unit suggests that the Russian MoD is restructuring its existing VTA forces more along Soviet-era lines. *Izvestia* added that the Russian MoD plans to base another VTA regiment in Tambov, Tambov Oblast by the end of 2023 and has been expanding local airfield infrastructure to support this basing. The Russian MoD source claimed that the VTA command will task the new regiments with transporting personnel, weapons, and military equipment, as well as supporting landings for airborne (VDV) troops and reconnaissance units. The Russian MoD source also claimed that the new VTA regiments will receive new and modernized Il-76 airlifters, An-26 transport aircraft, and possibly Mi-26 helicopters to help improve Russian logistics. *Izvestia* claimed that the Russian MoD began working on creating new VTA regiments in 2021 and aims to allocate more than 100 new and modernized Il-76s to the new regiments by the end of the decade – a goal that the Russian defense industrial base may struggle to fulfill. *Izvestia* also claimed that Russian An-124 and Il-76 aircraft conducted over 10,000 sorties since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian Government Commission on Legislative Activity supported a bill that would criminalize "Russophobia" abroad, likely as part of ongoing efforts to maintain and increase Russian influence in post-Soviet countries. Russian State Duma Deputy from the United Russia party, Irina Yarovaya, proposed a draft bill that would punish foreign citizens and stateless individuals who do not permanently reside in Russia for "Russophobia" outside of Russia. [17] The current law can only punish foreign officials, foreign citizens employed by international organizations, and foreign citizens using their official positions for spreading "Russophobia" publicly or committing "Russophobic" acts. [18] The law defines "Russophobia" as acts or public calls to commit discriminatory actions against Russian citizens or "compatriots." [19] Russia has intentionally and broadly defined "compatriots" as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and does not limit the definition to those holding Russian citizenship or residing in the Russian Federation. [20] Russian officials have routinely criticized efforts in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that promote indigenous languages and education at the perceived expense of Russian language and education. [21] Russian officials may use the proposed bill to threaten foreign officials with criminal proceedings for promoting indigenous language and education programs by labeling these initiatives "Russophobic." Russian

authorities may use this new bill to intensify criticisms against foreign citizens and officials by initiating criminal proceedings as part of ongoing efforts to enforce foreign compliance with Russian-supported and pro-Russian initiatives, programs, and narratives.

Russian officials simplified requirements to obtain Russian citizenship for Belarusian, Kazakh, and Moldovan citizens amid continued hostility towards migrants in Russian society. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on December 18 allowing Belarusian citizens to submit a citizenship application without proof of a prior long-term permanent residence in Russia or proficiency in Russian language, history, and civics.[22] Kazakh and Moldovan citizens must still provide proof of Russian language proficiency.[23] This distinction in requirements is in line with the fallacious Kremlin assertions that Belarusians and Ukrainians are actually Russians and that neither Belarus nor Ukraine has a distinctive language or culture.[24] Belarusians, Kazakhs, and Moldovans are also required to submit identifying documents and proof of their current residence in Russia.[25] Russian efforts to simplify citizenship for migrants appear hypocritical and inconsistent with ongoing migrant crackdowns aimed at coercing migrants into Russian military service and placating the xenophobic Russian ultranationalist community.[26] The simplification of Belarusian citizens' citizenship requirements may be related to long-term efforts to absorb Belarus into Russia through the Union State structure and to pursue other objectives in Kazakhstan and Moldova.[27]

The European Union (EU) adopted its 12th sanctions package in connection with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The European Council (EC) adopted a sanctions package on December 18 that aims to weaken sources of funding for Russia's war effort and degrade Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).[28] The sanctions include measures banning the import of Russian diamonds, prohibiting the re-export of dual use goods and technologies, instituting strict export restrictions on 29 legal entities that directly support the Russian DIB, enforcing a transit ban for all goods that Russian forces use on the battlefield in Ukraine, and strengthening compliance rules for the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- A combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and may delay future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi declined to comment on recent Western reporting about Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russian offensive plans for 2024.
- Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 18 that Russian forces have enough drones to launch daily strikes against Ukraine from different directions.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly forming four new military transport aviation (VTA) regiments, although these efforts are likely aimed at reorganizing existing VTA units in support of Russia's force posturing rather than adding new capability in the short term.
- The Russian Government Commission on Legislative Activity supported a bill that would criminalize "Russophobia" abroad, likely as part of ongoing efforts to maintain and increase Russian influence in post-Soviet countries.
- Russian officials simplified requirements to obtain Russian citizenship for Belarusian, Kazakh, and Moldovan citizens amid continued hostility towards migrants in Russian society.
- The European Union (EU) adopted its 12th sanctions package in connection with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made a confirmed advance southwest of Donetsk City.
- Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that more than 25,000 Russian personnel are serving with Cossack volunteer formations in Ukraine as of December 18.
- Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continues to deny Russian and Belarusian involvement in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 17, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 17, 2023, 9:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on December 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened Finland and the wider NATO alliance in a statement ostensibly meant to dismiss concerns about the threat that Russia poses to NATO. Putin gave an extended interview with Russian state TV channel Rossiya 1 on December 17, wherein he attempted to deny US President Joe Biden's December 6 warning that Russia would attack a NATO country in the future if it won the war in Ukraine.[1] Putin argued that Russia does not have any geopolitical, economic, military, or territorial reason to fight NATO and that Russia is interested in developing relations with NATO member states.[2] Putin followed this supposed reassurance with an accusation that NATO member states artificially created conflict between Russia and Finland and "dragged" Finland into the NATO alliance.[3] Putin stated that "there will be problems" with Finland and that Finland's NATO accession prompted Russian officials to start forming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and concentrating military units in northwestern Russia.[4] The Russian military is currently redividing the Western Military District (WMD) to reform the LMD and the Moscow Military District (MMD) as part of a long-term restructuring and expansion effort that aims to prepare Russia for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO.[5] The WMD is responsible for the Russian border with NATO members Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland but has largely been committed to the fight in Ukraine, where it has incurred significant losses.[6] The restoration of the LMD and MMD is likely intended to balance Russian operational requirements in Ukraine with Russian military posturing along the Russian border with NATO.[7] Putin's justification for the formation of the LMD, which will be responsible for an area bordering Finland, Sweden, and the Arctic, suggests that he sees the LMD as a military response to the "problems" of current and future NATO members in Scandinavia.

Putin's reassurances about his peaceful intentions toward NATO ring hollow in the context of the threats he and Kremlin pundits have recently been making against NATO member states. Putin threatened Poland on July 21, stating that Russia would respond "with all the means" at its disposal after Warsaw sent troops to the Belarusian-Polish border due to the redeployment of Wagner Group fighters to Belarus.^[8] Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev threatened on August 29 that Russia had "an opportunity to act within the framework of *jus ad bellum* against everyone in NATO countries" when commenting on Western support of Ukrainian strikes on occupied Crimea.^[9] Medvedev similarly threatened Poland in November when he stated that Russia deems Warsaw to be a "dangerous enemy" that could lose its "statehood."^[10] A Russian propagandist suggested on Russian state TV on December 2 that Baltic states would be Russia's next military target and that they would fall shortly after Ukraine.^[11] Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, Medvedev, and other pundits consistently threaten to use nuclear weapons against the United States and other NATO countries.^[12] These threats are part of long-standing Russian narratives about attacking NATO that predated Finland's application and acceptance into the alliance on April 4.^[13] The statements of Russian pundits do not pose a military threat to NATO countries, to be sure, but they are important context for Putin's ostensible effort to calm the waters during his December 17 interview. Putin's proclamation that Russia has no interest in invading NATO is also very similar to the Kremlin's persistent claims in late 2021 and early 2022 — including right up to the eve of the invasion — that Russia did not intend to invade Ukraine.^[14] The interview was likely a deliberate attempt to reamplify the Kremlin's efforts to misrepresent the Russian military threat as an imaginary and artificial NATO invention.^[15]

Putin has been seeking to curtail and weaken NATO for two decades and continually demands changes to the alliance that would amount to dismantling it Putin stated on December 17 that Russia does not have any "territorial disputes" with NATO countries in order to mask his actual long-standing objective to weaken Western unity and coerce NATO into abandoning its core principles, such as the "Open Door Policy," which allows the alliance at its discretion to admit new members and is enshrined in the NATO Charter.^[16] Putin has been consistently pursuing this goal throughout his regime and demonstrated his full commitment to it by ordering the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) to issue ultimatums to the US and NATO in December 2021 demanding "security guarantees" from NATO and commitments not to expand, among other things.^[17]

Putin's decades-long goal is to set conditions in which NATO would undermine its own global power, creating a structurally and ideologically defeated NATO that cannot resist Russia's future objectives — which can include territorial conquests or the establishment of Russian suzerainty over states that Moscow deems to be in its proper sphere of control.^[18] ISW has long assessed that growing friction between the United States and Europe and within NATO and other Western structures would weaken Western collective measures against the Kremlin's aggressive behavior and allow Putin to develop a new web of coalitions to support Russia's objectives.^[19] Putin routinely reiterates his distaste for Western alliances, calling for the formation of a multipolar world order in which Russia has a veto over key global events.^[20] Putin wants NATO to recognize Russia's claims, demands, and perceived sphere of influence and has repeatedly indicated Russia's intent to end "US hegemony."^[21] Putin had been largely using hybrid war efforts to weaken the West and its place in the world order before invading Ukraine in 2014 (apart from his 2008 invasion of Georgia), and his justifications for the full-scale invasion of 2022 did not rely on so-called territorial disputes.^[22]

Putin's interview indicated that he continues to perceive the West as weak, contrasting with his confidence in the growth of Russia's power over the past two decades. Putin stated that he believes that the United States was interested in inflicting a "strategic defeat" on Russia 20 years ago but that this objective is not currently in the US national interest.^[23] Putin responded to a journalist's question about how Russia can find common ground with the United States, stating that the United States will need to be the one to find common ground as the United States will need to "reckon" with Russia, suggesting that Putin believes the US to be the weaker power and that Russia's perceived position of strength means that Russia has no need to find "common ground" or engage in serious diplomatic negotiations with the United States.^[24] Both these statements can be perceived as thinly-veiled threats against the United States and NATO. Putin's statements indicate that he continues to believe that the West has been weakening relative to Russia over the past two decades — a view Putin has been articulating since at least 2014.^[25] ISW previously assessed that Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in part because he believed that NATO was weak — not because the Kremlin felt militarily threatened by NATO.^[26] ISW also assessed that Putin only respects military might, which he anticipated the United States and NATO would not use to defend Ukraine, and may be anticipating that Western support for Ukraine will collapse.^[27] Putin's perception of Russia's increased relative power aligns with his statement on December 14 continuing to stand by his maximalist objectives in Ukraine — which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.^[28] Kremlin officials have also recently made statements with expansionist rhetoric that emphasize the Kremlin's confidence in its ability to fulfill its objectives in Ukraine with force.^[29]

Putin is increasingly invoking a purposefully broad, vague, and pseudo-realist conception of Russian sovereignty in an effort to justify Russian goals to impose Putin's will in Ukraine and beyond. Putin also addressed the United Russia Party Congress on December 17 in Moscow and argued that "being strong is a vital necessity for Russia" since Russia is either a sovereign, self-sufficient state or does not exist at all.^[30] Putin made similar statements during his December 14 "Direct Line" Forum, where he stated that in his next term as Russian president, he would focus on protecting Russian external sovereignty, which he said encompasses Russia's defense capacity and external security environment.^[31] Putin has long employed an expansive definition of Russia's sovereignty that frames any efforts to challenge Russian power or ambitions as infringements of Russian sovereignty.^[32] Russian national security and foreign policy documents also provide for Russia's right to "protect the rights of compatriots abroad," and Russia has intentionally defined "compatriots" in broad terms as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and not just those holding Russian citizenship.^[33] The Kremlin has intentionally obscured the definition of "ethnic Russians" to falsely include Ukrainians and Belarusians and is promoting the notion of a wider "Russian world" (*Russkiy Mir*) that includes other ethnic groups in Russia and the former territory of the Soviet Union and Russian empire.^[34] The vague conception of external Russian sovereignty and who falls under its protections is meant to justify the forceful imposition of Russia's strategic objectives upon other countries as a legitimate expression of the duties and rights of the Russian state in defense of its sovereignty. Putin and Russian officials have routinely invoked these conceptions of Russian sovereignty to justify Putin's maximalist objectives in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[35]

Putin's focus on the ties between strength and sovereignty frames Russian aggressive efforts to achieve Russia's strategic objectives and diminish perceived Western power as defensive measures protecting Russian sovereignty. This framing allows Putin to claim that any measures that increase Russian power are in defense of the Russian people, which he has a duty to protect.^[36] The focus on power suggests that he views states that are unable to unilaterally impose their will upon others as devoid of sovereignty. Putin and other Russian officials have routinely characterized Ukrainian partnerships with the West as nullifying Ukrainian sovereignty, for example.^[37] This view of sovereignty allows Russian officials to justify any Russian action against any state that Putin deems to be not strong enough to protect itself and illustrates that legitimate appeals to the protections of sovereignty as customarily defined by international law will continue to mean very little to Putin.

Putin continues to express a world view in which Russia must impose its will without any compromise or face existential consequences. Putin stated in his interview with *Rossiya 1* that he was naive in the 2000s and thought that the West understood that there was no basis for confrontation with Russia.^[38] Putin accused the West of continuing to fight Russia as it had done with the Soviet Union because it had not rethought the Cold War era structures that the West had constructed.

[39] Putin also accused some in the West of pursuing the full destruction and balkanization of Russia, framing Putin's perceived geopolitical confrontation with the collective West in existential terms.[40] Putin has built a world view over two decades of rule in which dissatisfaction with the West has grown into a hardened zero-sum view of Russian and Western power.[41] Putin has increasingly expressed a narrative alleging that there is a concerted decades-long Western effort to diminish Russian power and inflict a permanent strategic defeat upon it, and he has grouped any geopolitical setback however minor into that narrative.[42] Putin's worldview suggests that Putin regards anything less than full Western surrender to Russian grand strategic objectives as insufficient.[43]

This zero-sum world view of geopolitics is indicative of Putin's personal philosophy, which prizes power above all else and frames any compromise as defeat. Putin implied in the *Rossiya 1* interview that he did not apologize to his mother as a child (despite her punishments and numerous requests for an apology) but held firm until she finally wavered in punishing him.[44] This anecdote, bizarrely intruded into a conversation about Russian strategic objectives, may have been an indirect reference to Putin's commitment to force those opposed to him to capitulate. This view is also clearly seen in the key thesis of Putin's quasi-auto-biography *First Person*, which argues that Putin concluded that it was necessary to impose his will upon the world, first himself and then Russia's survival.[45]

The Kremlin's repeated rhetoric about its hostile intent towards NATO, coupled with Russia's potential future military capabilities in the event of Russian victory in Ukraine, poses a credible — and costly — threat to Western security. If Russia were able to achieve its stated maximalist objective of full Ukrainian capitulation, likely leading to a Russian military occupation of Ukraine, Russia would be able to deploy forces right up to NATO's border from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean.[46] ISW recently assessed that the sudden collapse of Western aid would likely lead sooner or later to the collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military.[47] Given Russia's demonstrated hostile intent towards NATO and its potential military capabilities along almost the entirety of NATO's eastern border, the West would be obliged to prepare to defend against possible Russian action against NATO. The cost of these defensive measures would be astronomical and would likely be accompanied by a period of very high risk.[48] Support for Ukraine offers the West the best opportunity to avoid these costs and the expanded Russian threat.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drones strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 16 to 17. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched a Kh-59 missile from occupied Crimea and Kherson Oblast and an Iskander-M missile.[49] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces also launched 20 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai as well as Cape Chauda, occupied Crimea.[50] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down the Kh-59 missile and all of the drones over Odesa, Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.[51] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 17 that Russian forces targeted Kherson City and Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast. [52] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 16 that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 104 out of 112 Russian Shahed drones launched at Ukraine in the past week.[53]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down 35 Ukrainian drones over Lipetsk, Rostov, and Volgograd oblasts on the night of December 16 to 17 and in the morning of December 17.[54] Rostov Oblast Governor Vasily Golubev claimed on December 17 that Russian forces shot down "most" of the drones.[55] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that a Ukrainian drone damaged at least one Russian aircraft at Morozovk airfield in Rostov Oblast.[56]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened Finland and the wider NATO alliance in a statement ostensibly meant to dismiss concerns about the threat Russia poses to NATO.
- Putin's reassurances about his peaceful intentions toward NATO ring hollow in the context of the threats he and Kremlin pundits have recently been making against NATO member states.
- Putin has been seeking to curtail and weaken NATO for two decades and continually demands changes to the alliance that would amount to dismantling it.
- Putin's interview indicated that he continues to perceive the West as weak, contrasting with his confidence in the growth of Russia's power over the past two decades.
- Putin is increasingly invoking a purposefully broad, vague, and pseudo-realist conception of Russian sovereignty in an effort to justify Russian goals to impose Putin's will in Ukraine and beyond.
- Putin continues to express a world view in which Russia must impose its will without any compromise or face existential consequences.
- The Kremlin's repeated rhetoric about its hostile intent towards NATO, coupled with Russia's potential future military capabilities in the event of Russian victory in Ukraine, poses a credible - and costly - threat to Western security.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drones strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 16 to 17.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia on December 17 and advanced in some areas.
- Relatives of Russian mobilized personnel continue to appeal directly to high-ranking Russian military and political officials about demobilization and the return of their relatives from Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues attempts to expand political infrastructure in occupied Ukraine in an effort to further integrate occupied territories into Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 16, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 16, 2023, 8:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00 pm ET on December 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continue operations on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast amid reported difficult conditions in the area as part of an apparent effort to set conditions for future Ukrainian operations and the resettlement of west (right) bank Kherson Oblast. The *New York Times* published a series of interviews with Ukrainian military personnel operating on the east bank and along the Dnipro River on December 16, wherein the commander of a Ukrainian regiment stated that Ukrainian drone strikes have heavily suppressed Russian long-range artillery on the east bank in recent months.^[1] Ukrainian officials previously stated that Ukrainian forces established several bridgeheads on the east bank as part of an operation that aims to push Russian forces out of artillery range of west bank Kherson Oblast.^[2] The reported suppression of long-range Russian artillery may allow Ukrainian forces to operate more freely in near rear areas in west bank Kherson Oblast, which may partially explain intensified Russian glide bomb strikes against Ukrainian targets on the west bank.^[3] The much more abundant 152mm tube artillery systems that Russian forces widely operate in Ukraine have an approximate range of 25km, although Russian forces are unlikely to deploy these systems to immediate frontline areas due to the threat of Ukrainian counterbattery fire.

The withdrawal of tube artillery beyond 25km from the west bank and the suppression of long-range Russian artillery would remove consistent threats to populated areas on the west bank and allow the many Ukrainians who fled the Russian occupation of west bank Kherson Oblast to return more safely. The reduction of Russian artillery fire on the west bank would also allow Ukrainian forces to operate more freely along ground lines of communication (GLOCs), deploy more critical counterbattery and air defense systems within the vicinity of the Dnipro River, and more securely launch operations across the Dnipro River. A bridgehead is meant to provide security for crossing forces to continue operations, and the withdrawal of Russian artillery further from the Dnipro River would establish a safer position from which to conduct future operations if the Ukrainian high command so chose.^[4]

The Ukrainian commander also reportedly stated that Ukrainian operations on the east bank of the Dnipro River currently aim to draw Russian forces to the area and inflict heavy losses upon them.^[5] The Ukrainian commander reportedly added that the effort to draw Russian forces to the area has been successful as the Russian command transferred unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) elements from western Zaporizhia Oblast to east bank Kherson Oblast.^[6] Russian officials have acknowledged that elements of the 7th VDV Division are operating in Kherson Oblast, and it is possible that limited elements of the 7th VDV division operating near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast (the 247th VDV Regiment, the 108th VDV Regiment, and the 56th VDV Regiment) have redeployed to defend on the east bank, although ISW has observed elements of those units still committed to defending and counterattacking in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[7] Ukrainian military officials previously reported that Ukrainian operations on the east bank between October 17 and November 17 killed 1,126 Russian personnel and wounded 2,217, suggesting that Ukrainian forces may be inflicting significant losses on Russian forces in the area.^[8] Russian President Vladimir Putin similarly described Russian defensive operations on the east bank as an intentional attempt to lure and attrit Ukrainian forces, however, and ISW cannot currently assess if there is an asymmetrical attrition gradient in this sector of the front. The degradation of defending Russian forces on east bank Kherson Oblast may be an immediate operational objective, but one that can facilitate the wider stated operational objective of pushing Russian forces out of artillery range of west bank Kherson Oblast.

The *New York Times* also published interviews with Ukrainian soldiers who have fought on the east bank who described difficult conditions in operating across the Dnipro River and in establishing positions on the east bank.^[9] These difficulties are to be expected for what is an economy of force operation with limited positions on a riverbank and may continue until Ukrainian operations set conditions for a more secure Ukrainian bridgehead if the Ukrainian high command chooses to seek to establish one. The expressed Ukrainian objective to push Russian artillery away from the Dnipro River would partially address some of the difficult conditions that Ukrainian personnel described if fully achieved.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's supporters formally nominated him as an independent candidate for the 2024 presidential elections on December 16, further solidifying Putin's image as a figure above the Russian political system. The Russian "initiative group of voters" composed of over 500 politicians, actors, athletes, milbloggers, occupation officials, and even a Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) battalion commander, unanimously supported Putin's decision to run as a self-nominated candidate during the elections.^[10] Secretary of the United Russia Party's General Council Andrey Turchak stated that Putin will be able to establish his election campaign headquarters after completing all procedures for self-nomination – such as registering the initiative group and gathering 300,000 constituents' signatures – and that the United Russia Party fully supports Putin's campaign.^[11] Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin also stated that the entire Russian government is "Putin's team" and that Putin's decision to run in the presidential elections corresponds to constituencies' demands.^[12] Putin had previously run as an independent candidate in 2018, and ISW's non-resident Russia fellow Nataliya Bugayova then assessed that Putin creates conditions in which most Russians believe that other Russians support him - an outcome that self-nomination is likely meant to simulate.^[13] Bugayova also assessed in 2018 that Putin cares about the perceived legitimacy of the presidential elections, despite the fact that most Russians recognize the regime's policy failures and the limitations it imposes on their civil liberties. The proclaimed support for Putin of the United Russia Party, other factions, and the government creates the illusion that Putin stands above the Russian political fray and establishes him as a unique figure uniting all of Russia.

Putin also met with faction leaders, Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, and First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko on December 15 to similarly portray himself as above Russian politics.^[14] Putin told faction leaders that the presidential election must happen on a competitive basis and called on them to form their positions with a deep understanding of Russian national interests and their responsibility to the Russian public. Putin appears to be positioning himself as a referee able to speak to and guide Russian factions from above even as he nominally "runs" for an office he is certain to win. Putin likely seeks to portray himself as above Russian politics in an effort to distance himself from the controversies of some of these factions and appear as a singular candidate – a role-play that is likely increasingly important to Putin as the veneer of competitive elections in Russia becomes ever thinner.

Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitri Polyanskiy more clearly defined recent statements from high-ranking Russian officials that align with ISW's long-standing assessment that Russia is unwilling to negotiate with Ukraine in good faith. Polyanskiy stated on December 16 that Ukraine missed its chance to negotiate a "favorable" settlement and that any possible "deal" between Russia and Ukraine would have to entail Ukrainian "capitulation."^[15] Polyanskiy's statement more clearly explicates Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's statement of December 15, which said the same thing in slightly more coded language.^[16] Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on December 14 that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine – which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender – are unchanged.^[17]

Putin responded to a question from a French correspondent during Putin's "Direct Line" forum on December 14 about Putin's possible plans to speak with French President Emmanuel Macron, stating that he and Macron used to enjoy a good working relationship but that Macron stopped this relationship.^[18] Macron stated on December 15 that he would speak to Putin if Putin had any "serious proposals" for establishing peace in Ukraine.^[19]

Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-136/131 drone strikes across Ukraine overnight on December 15 to 16. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 31 Shaheds from Bryansk Oblast, Primorsko-Akhtarsk (Krasnodar Krai), and Kursk Oblast and that Ukrainian forces shot down 30 Shaheds over Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Chernihiv, Poltava, Cherkasy, Kherson, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.[20] Ukraine's Southern Military Command reported that 12 Shaheds targeted southern Ukraine.[21] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces can launch Shahed drones from a vehicle and that Shahed launchers are mobile.[22] Ihnat added that Russian forces are trying to change Shahed routes by moving them five to 10 kilometers to the left or right to bypass Ukrainian air defenses and reiterated that Ukrainian mobile fire groups are actively destroying Russian drones. Ihnat also observed that Russian forces started launching Shaheds from that Balaklava area (south of Sevastopol) in occupied Crimea – making Balaklava the fifth Russian launching area for Shahed drones.[23]

The Financial Times (FT) reported on December 15 that the G7 may consider using frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine.[24] FT reported that US officials circulated a discussion paper about how G7 members and other states could seize Russian sovereign assets in a way "consistent with international law" as a "countermeasure to induce Russia to end its aggression" in Ukraine during G7 committee meetings. FT reported that the G7 could use a portion of the \$300 billion worth of frozen Russian assets to fund assistance packages to Ukraine and that a US official stated that G7 leaders may discuss the proposal at their meeting in February 2024.

Russian actors continue information operations aimed at discrediting and dividing Ukraine's military and political leadership, specifically Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rostem Umerov stated on December 16 that Russia is working to discredit Ukraine in the information space by creating artificial conflict within Ukraine's leadership and a false illusion that Ukraine does not have the support of its Western partners.[25] The Atlantic Council's *Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab)* and the BBC's *Verify* project published a joint report on December 16 that details a Russian information operation that levied corruption accusations against former Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov ahead of his resignation in September 2023.[26] DFRLab and Verify concluded that Russian actors created thousands of fake accounts aimed at defaming Reznikov and connected the effort to a previous Russian information campaign to discredit Zaluzhnyi in early 2023.[27] ISW has consistently observed Russian actors, including Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin and Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, baselessly claim that high-ranking Western officials intend to "replace" Zelensky and that there is an unspecified conflict between Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi.[28] Russian sources are increasingly promoting reports about internal Ukrainian political tension in an effort to discredit Ukrainian leadership, sow domestic distrust between Ukrainian citizens and the government, and weaken Western support for Ukraine.[29]

A Russian "Storm-Z" assault unit instructor implied that Russian President Vladimir Putin lied about the unregulated status of private military companies (PMCs) during his "Direct Line" forum on December 14 given the state's significant administrative control over PMCs and other irregular formations. [30] The instructor quoted Putin's claim that the state cannot account for elements of illegal PMCs fighting in Ukraine because these troops sign contracts directly with the PMCs, which complicates Russia's ability to grant veteran statuses and provide state benefits. The instructor responded by stating that the Russian State Duma had already adopted a bill in April 2023 that allows the state to recognize all individuals that have fought in Ukraine as veterans, likely implying that the state already has the responsibility to provide veteran statuses to all combatants – even if PMCs are technically illegal.[31] The instructor's statement was also likely in response to Putin's concluding observation that Russia might need to adjust the law to account for PMC personnel.[32] The instructor noted that while PMCs, volunteer formations, and other irregular forces may appear as "a whole scattering of some murky and incomprehensible structures," the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian institutions account for these troops when they sign contracts or fill out certain questionnaires before being placed in irregular units. The instructor noted that Russia has documentation of most personnel entering volunteer formations under a voluntary contract and that Russian officials improved documentation after they began the formalization campaign in 2023. The instructor further challenged Putin's claim that most PMC fighters received payments in cash for their service and noted that state structures determine monetary allowances for irregular forces. The instructor observed that the underlying issues are that the Kremlin did not task the MoD officials with ensuring that irregular forces receive their promised benefits, and that the Russian military enlistment system is struggling to account for Russian regular forces not including irregular forces.

The instructor also observed that Russia began to replenish volunteer formations – which operate as irregular forces alongside Russian Armed Forces – with contract servicemen (*kontraknik*), mobilized personnel, and convicts in 2023.[33] This observation further implies that Russia has notable administrative control over irregular forces, given that mobilized personnel and *kontrakniki* are part of the Russian Armed Forces and cannot serve in volunteer formations without a directive of the Russian MoD.[34] The Kremlin has to pardon convicts in order for them to serve in volunteer formations. The instructor's observations not only invalidate Putin's efforts to distance himself from his decision to expand irregular forces to support his war in Ukraine, but further confirm prior media investigations into the Kremlin's control of irregular forces.[35] ISW has routinely assessed that Putin's vast crypto-mobilization campaign that aimed to avoid declaring full-scale mobilization is committing Russia to a long-term financial responsibility - a responsibility that Putin is attempting to downplay.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continue operations on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast amid reported difficult conditions in the area as part of an apparent effort to set conditions for future Ukrainian operations and the resettlement of west (right) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's supporters formally nominated him as an independent candidate for the 2024 presidential elections on December 16, further solidifying Putin's image as a figure above the Russian political system.
- Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitri Polyanskiy more clearly defined recent statements from high-ranking Russian officials that align with ISW's long-standing assessment that Russia is unwilling to negotiate with Ukraine in good faith.
- Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-136/131 drone strikes across Ukraine overnight on December 15 to 16.
- The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on December 15 that the G7 may consider using frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine.
- Russian actors continue information operations aimed at discrediting and dividing Ukraine's military and political leadership, specifically Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.
- A Russian "Storm-Z" assault unit instructor implied that Russian President Vladimir Putin lied about the unregulated status of private military companies (PMCs) during his "Direct Line" forum on December 14 given the state's significant administrative control over PMCs and other irregular

formations.

- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 16 and advanced in some areas.
- A Russian milblogger claimed that Russia will have at least ten Project 22350 Admiral Gorshkov-class frigates in an unspecified time period.
- Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko and the Ukrainian Telegram channel Mariupol Resistance stated on December 16 that Ukrainian partisans recently blew up the car of the commander of an unspecified Russian unit from the North Caucasus in occupied Mariupol.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 15, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 15, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00 pm ET on December 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

German outlet *BILD* stated on December 14 that unspecified intelligence findings and sources indicate that Russia plans to occupy Ukrainian territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed Ukrainian oblasts throughout 2024-2026. *BILD* stated that Russia plans to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and up to the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast by the end of 2024.^[1] These reported goals are in line with ongoing localized Russian offensive operations in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv oblasts. Russia also reportedly plans to take large parts of Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv oblasts, including Kharkiv City if possible, in 2025 and 2026. *BILD* reported that an insider source stated that Russia plans to occupy large parts of eastern Ukraine located east of the Dnipro River within the next 36 months. Russia is reportedly planning to hold the current front line in Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and is only concerned about preventing Ukrainian forces in southern Ukraine from advancing towards occupied Crimea. *BILD* stated that Russia's plans are based on mobilizing Russia's defense industrial base (DIB), suffering annual casualties of around 100,000 military personnel in attritional offensive operations, and benefiting from the possible election of a US president in 2024 who dramatically reduces or stops military support to Ukraine. *BILD* reported that a source familiar with the intelligence findings stated that the Kremlin plans to rely on "sham negotiations" while continuing to conduct offensive operations similar to the way in which Russia negotiated the Second Minsk agreement in 2015 while the Russian military continued to occupy additional Ukrainian settlements. *BILD* previously published largely accurate intelligence findings about Russia's plans for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in December 2021 which assessed that Russia would attack Ukraine from the south from Crimea, from Russian-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine, and from the north in late January or early February 2022, although the Russian invasion as executed did not perfectly align with *BILD*'s reporting.^[2]

ISW cannot independently authenticate *BILD*'s reporting, but Russia's reported plans for the war in Ukraine through 2026 are in line with continued Russian preparations for a prolonged war effort. The Russian military command is pursuing long-term restructuring and expansion efforts to form strategic reserves, and Russia has been gradually mobilizing its DIB to sustain a long war.^[3] Russia's reported medium to long-term plans to occupy territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed territories are also plausible considering that Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, have reverted to expansionist rhetoric recently, and Russian forces continue offensive operations to expand their positions in Kharkiv Oblast. Russian officials have issued statements about Russia's intention to occupy and annex additional Ukrainian territory beyond the current front lines and the four (illegally) annexed territories.^[4] ISW recently assessed that the sudden collapse of Western aid would likely lead sooner or later to the collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military, and Russian forces could ultimately push all the way to the western Ukrainian border in such a scenario.^[5]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview published on December 14 that Russia currently has no intention of changing its plans for the war in Ukraine in 2025, however.^[6] Budanov stated that Russia may develop a new plan if nothing changes on the front line by the end of 2024.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threateningly urged Ukraine to negotiate with Russia sooner rather than later in framing consistent with the ISW assessment that Russia intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine through military means. Lavrov said at a December 15 meeting of the collegiums of the Russian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries that the longer the war in Ukraine continues, the more difficult negotiating conditions will be for Ukraine.^[7] Lavrov's statement suggests that the Kremlin believes that the longer the war continues, the more territory Russia will be able to occupy and the course of the war will increasingly put Ukraine in a weaker negotiating position. Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated on December 14 that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine - which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender - are unchanged.^[8] ISW continues to assess that Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith.^[9] The Kremlin has repeatedly pushed information operations feigning interest in negotiations with Ukraine, and Lavrov's statement is likely also an attempt to set conditions for Russia to move away from this information operation.^[10]

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba published an op-ed entitled "There is a Path to Victory in Ukraine" on December 15, wherein he argues that Ukrainian military objectives remain feasible despite increasingly pessimistic discussions in the West. Kuleba stated in the op-ed published in *Foreign Affairs* that Ukrainian objectives are still attainable as long as three factors remain in place: an adequate level of Western military aid; the rapid development of

industrial capacity in the US, Europe, and Ukraine; and a principled and realistic approach to the prospects of negotiations with Russia.[11] Kuleba acknowledged that the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive did not achieve the "lightning fast" liberation of Ukrainian territory but said that observers would be mistaken to make judgments about the entire course of the war based on one stage of fighting.[12] Kuleba pointed to Russian gains in eastern Ukraine in summer 2022 and the following successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts as an example of how one stage of fighting does not indicate how subsequent stages of fighting may develop.[13] Kuleba added that a negotiated ceasefire would allow Russia to reinforce positions, making it difficult for Ukrainian forces to liberate territory in the future while also giving Russia respite to launch a more intense offensive campaign in the following years.[14] ISW has routinely assessed that the Kremlin would leverage any pause or ceasefire to prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine.[15]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 14 to 15. Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed 14 Shahed-131/136 drones, an S-300 missile, and a Kh-59 missile.[16] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched three Kinzhal missiles in the direction of Kyiv City, Kyiv Oblast and Starokostyantyniv, Khmelnytskyi Oblast on December 14 and that Ukrainian forces destroyed one Kinzhal over Kyiv Oblast.[17] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck targets in Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Khmelnytskyi, Kharkiv, Poltava, Kyiv, and Odesa oblasts on the night of December 14 to 15.[18]

Finnish authorities closed Finland's border checkpoints with Russia again on December 15 amid continued Russian hybrid warfare efforts to orchestrate an artificial migrant crisis. The Finnish Ministry of the Interior announced on December 12 that Finland would reopen two border checkpoints with Russia on December 14 and warned that Finland would close the border again if Russia continued its "hybrid operation." [19] The Finnish Ministry of the Interior announced on December 14 that Finland would close the two checkpoints on December 15 after a reported 36 asylum seekers arrived on the Finnish-Russian border several hours after the checkpoints re-opened.[20] Reuters reported that Finland typically received less than one asylum seeker per day prior to Russian efforts to artificially inflate the number of migrants seeking asylum in Finland.[21] Finnish Minister of the Interior Mari Rantanen stated that this is a sign that Russian authorities are continuing their hybrid operation against Finland.[22] Finland's border checkpoints with Russia will remain closed until January 14, 2024.[23]

Germany announced new military and humanitarian aid packages to Ukraine on December 14. The German military aid package includes a Patriot air defense system and missiles, 40mm and 155mm ammunition, mine clearing systems, and drone detection systems.[24] The German government also announced an aid package valued at 6.1 million euros of winter humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, including generators, heaters, and tents.[25]

Key Takeaways:

- German outlet *BILD* stated on December 14 that unspecified intelligence findings and sources indicate that Russia plans to occupy Ukrainian territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed Ukrainian oblasts throughout 2024-2026.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threateningly urged Ukraine to negotiate with Russia sooner rather than later in framing consistent with the ISW assessment that Russia intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine through military means.
- Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba published an op-ed entitled "There is a Path to Victory in Ukraine" on December 15, wherein he argues that Ukrainian military objectives remain feasible despite increasingly pessimistic discussions in the West.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 14 to 15.
- Finnish authorities closed Finland's border checkpoints with Russia again on December 15 amid continued Russian hybrid warfare efforts to orchestrate an artificial migrant crisis.
- Germany announced new military and humanitarian aid packages to Ukraine on December 14.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Kupyansk, northeast and near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed advances in several areas.
- Kremlin newswire TASS reported on December 14 that "Grom" special units (elite anti-drug special units of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]) will fully transition to being subordinated to Rosgvardia in early 2024.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted Russia's intention to build high-speed railways in occupied Ukraine, likely hours after Ukrainian partisans damaged a key railway line in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 14, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 14, 2023, 10:25pm 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.

[Click here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:00pm ET on December 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin displayed notable confidence in publicly discussing Russia's war on Ukraine during a joint event combining his annual press conference and "Direct Line" forum on December 14 but did not clearly define his envisioned end state for the full-scale invasion he launched on February 24, 2022. The "Direct Line" is an annual highly staged forum in which Putin answers pre-selected questions from the Russian public. Putin notably skipped the "Direct Line" in 2022, the first time he did not hold it since 2012. Putin routinely abstained from discussing the war in depth at high profile events throughout 2022, suggesting that he was uncertain about his ability to shape the Russian information space on this topic.^[1] Putin used the December 14, 2023, event to discuss his objectives in Ukraine, specific operational and tactical situations along the front, and specific concerns from Russian military personnel and volunteers in a much more public and prolonged fashion than in his previous statements about the war since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin's willingness to center large portions of the event on the war in Ukraine suggests an increased confidence in his ability to address the Russian public on the subject, which may be indicative of his own personal confidence in Russia's prospects in Ukraine following the relatively successful Russian defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and perceived wavering Western support for Ukraine. Putin did not offer a new approach to the war, describe how Russia intends to achieve victory in Ukraine or specify what a Russian victory would look like. Many of Putin's statements on December 14 are similar to the boilerplate claims about the Russian war in Ukraine that he made during a speech at a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium meeting almost a year ago, for example.^[2]

Putin reiterated his maximalist objectives for the Russian war in Ukraine, which are likely purposefully opaque to be inclusive of additional goals that Putin may seek to pursue now or later. Putin responded to a question about whether Russia's goals in Ukraine are the same as they were by stating that Russia's goals have not changed and include the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine and imposing a "neutral status" on Ukraine.^[3] Russian calls for "denazification" are thinly-veiled calls for regime change -- demands for the removal of the elected Ukrainian government and its replacement with a government acceptable to the Kremlin. Putin has not described what change to the Ukrainian Armed Forces would constitute "demilitarization," although Russia's goal is almost certainly to strip Ukraine of the means to defend itself and allow Russia to impose its will upon Ukraine through force whenever the Kremlin so chooses. Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces lost almost 750 tanks during the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive and stated that this is "demilitarization," acknowledging that the term encompasses a large-scale reduction in military capabilities.^[4] Russian calls for Ukrainian "neutrality" are demands that Ukraine amend its constitution, which currently commits Ukraine to seeking NATO membership, and commit not to join NATO or the European Union (EU). They are part of a longer list of broader Russian objectives beyond Ukraine that include a permanent moratorium on NATO expansion (which would require a change in NATO's charter that, in turn, would require the negotiation and ratification of a new treaty between NATO member states), a ban on the deployment of Western strike weapons near Russia, and the de facto withdrawal of NATO forces to their 1997 posture.^[5]

Putin claimed that Ukrainian officials were open to Russian demands for "denazification" and "demilitarization" during negotiations in Istanbul in March 2022, likely in an effort to portray these objectives as reasonable.^[6] Putin stated that Ukrainian officials withdrew from agreements about "demilitarization" and "denazification," a departure from a recurring Russian information operation that falsely alleges that Western officials coerced Ukraine to reject an agreement favorable to Russia.^[7] Putin once again expressed his unwillingness to engage in meaningful negotiations with Ukraine and stated that there will only be peace when Russia achieves its maximalist objectives.^[8] ISW continues to assess that Putin's maximalist objectives are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.^[9]

These maximalist objectives also do not exclude Russia's annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories or additional territorial conquests. The Kremlin appears to be returning to expansionist rhetoric last observed before the full-scale invasion about a "partitioned Ukraine" that rejects key components of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and which includes the stated intention of the occupation and annexation of additional Ukrainian territory.^[10] This rhetoric does not set limits for further Russian expansion and may be aimed at allowing Putin to introduce new territorial objectives in Ukraine when he sees fit. Putin notably echoed this heightened expansionist rhetoric on December 14 by claiming that Russia historically controlled the entire Black Sea region and that the entire region, like Crimea, has nothing to do with Ukraine.^[11] Russian control of the "entire Black Sea region" would encompass not just occupied Crimea and Kherson Oblast but also large parts of Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.^[12] Putin falsely claimed that Odesa City is a "Russian city," a rhetorical line that Russian officials have often used to justify the Russian occupation of Ukrainian cities in eastern and southern Ukraine.^[13] Putin stated that Ukraine's alleged "pro-Russian" southeast, an area where Russia now occupies a large amount of territory, has always been important to Russia, although it is unclear how Putin views the boundaries of this "pro-Russian" southeastern Ukraine.

Putin attempted to rhetorically contextualize Russia's continued maximalist objectives in Ukraine within the wider conception of Russian "sovereignty," an ideological line that has been consistent in the Kremlin's framing of Russian national security and foreign policy since before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "Direct Line" host and Russian journalist Ekaterina Berezovskaya asked Putin about his announcement to run for president again in 2024, including what Putin's main goals are for Russia domestically and abroad.^[14] Putin responded to Berezovskaya's question by invoking the concept of Russian sovereignty (*suverenitet*), suggesting that his central policy as president is to protect and maintain Russian sovereignty. Putin clarified that the conception of sovereignty is informed by external sovereignty, meaning Russia's defense capacity and external security environment; public sovereignty, meaning the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens as facilitated by Russia's political system; and economic-technological sovereignty, which enables Russia to secure its own future. The concept of Russian sovereignty is not unique to rhetorical justifications for Russia's invasion of Ukraine—rather it has been enshrined in Russia's pre-war National Security Strategy (2021) and Russia's updated 2023 Foreign Policy Concept.^[15] The National Security Strategy outlines Russia's right to "protect the rights of compatriots abroad," which Russia has intentionally defined in broad terms as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad.^[16] Russia also purposefully does not define "compatriots" as only those holding Russian citizenship.^[17] As Putin continues to employ the concepts of "denazification" and the fiction of a "genocide in Donbas" of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers as justifications for the invasion of Ukraine, the idea of Russian sovereignty will become increasingly synonymous with Russia's grand-strategic objectives in Ukraine.^[18]

Putin claimed that the Russian force grouping in Ukraine is far larger than even Russian officials have characterized, likely in an attempt to both address persistent Russian concerns about a new mobilization wave and to demoralize the West and Ukraine. Putin stated that there are 617,000 Russian personnel in the "combat zone" when discussing the length of the frontline, notably different from the 420,000 Russian military personnel that Ukrainian intelligence officials estimated were in Ukraine in September 2023.^[19] Putin's figure likely includes all military personnel such as mobilized personnel, contract soldiers (*kontraktniki*), and volunteers (*dobrovoltsy*) in irregular formations operating along the frontline and in the rear.^[20] Russian authorities often use "combat zone" and "special military operation zone" interchangeably, which can include rear areas in occupied Ukraine and Russia.^[21] Putin claimed that 244,000 mobilized personnel out of the 300,000 total personnel mobilized during partial mobilization are operating in Ukraine and that Russia recruited a total of 486,000 people in crypto-mobilization efforts since the beginning of 2023.^[22] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed on November 9 that the Russian military has recruited 410,000 contract, volunteer, and conscripted military personnel since January 1, 2023, then later claimed on December 1 that the Russian military recruited over 452,000 personnel since January 1, 2023.^[23]

The difference in the reported numbers of Russian personnel involved in the war is likely due to different categorizations of Russian military personnel and does not reflect a significant increase in Russian personnel on the frontline, which Ukrainian forces have consistently been repelling. Putin notably offered these figures in response to a question about a second wave of mobilization and explicitly stated that these force generation figures show that there is no need for a subsequent mobilization wave. Putin also likely meant for the 617,000 number to scare the West and Ukraine with Russia's force generation capabilities, although Putin's figure is for the Russian army currently fighting in Ukraine and thus suggests that the Ukrainian military has been repelling offensive operations and conducting counteroffensive operations against a far larger enemy force than was previously reported.

Putin notably addressed the tactical and operational situation in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast but refrained from discussing active Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. Putin stated that almost all Russian forces are in "the active stage of action," a phrase notably different from his and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's previous characterization of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine as an "active defense."^[24] Putin acknowledged Russian operations attempting to repel Ukrainian forces from Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) but framed Russian forces' failure to push Ukrainian forces to west (right) bank Kherson Oblast as an operation to purposefully lure and attrit Ukrainian forces operating near Krynyk.^[25] Putin's emphasis on the tactical situation near Krynyk and his decision not to discuss any other sector of the frontline may reflect his sensitivity to continued Russian information space neuralgia about Russian operations on east bank Kherson Oblast. Russian milbloggers have been increasingly critical of the Russian failure to repel Ukrainian forces from the east bank of the Dnipro River.^[26] Putin's comment highlighting Russian forces' inability to oust Ukrainian forces from the east bank is likely also a critique of Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, who may be struggling to establish a unified command for the grouping of forces.^[27] The current Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces is comprised of disparate elements of recently transferred and degraded units and formations and at least two subordinate elements of the newly formed 104th Airborne (VDV) Division.^[28] The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that elements of the 104th VDV Division suffered "exceptionally heavy losses" attempting to repel Ukrainian forces from east bank Kherson Oblast in early December 2023 during its combat debut.^[29] Ukrainian military observer Kostyanty Mashovets also stated that elements of the Russian 328th and 337th VDV Regiments (104th VDV Division) suffered high equipment and personnel losses during five days of continuous attacks on the east bank.^[30] These reported heavy losses among the 104th VDV Division challenge Putin's description of a successful Russian operation effort to disproportionately attrit Ukrainian forces on the east bank.

Putin's public discussions about issues at the front and about the Russian war effort in general may redirect public anger about problems in the war toward the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Putin has historically used his highly staged annual "Direct Line" event to create a clear divide between incompetent, corrupt, and overly bureaucratic Russian officials and himself as a capable and caring leader who can quickly resolve average Russians' issues.^[31] The Kremlin has often included highly personal calls for assistance in the event so that Putin can publicly resolve issues in front of a live audience. This year's "Direct Line" event applied this highly personal model to specific issues that Russian military personnel and volunteers are facing along the front and with receiving benefits and promised support.^[32] This year's event, inadvertently or not, cast the MoD in the role of the incompetent, corrupt, and overly bureaucratic Russian authority, a characterization that Russian ultranationalist milbloggers have routinely levied at the MoD.^[33] The Kremlin allowed Russian ultranationalists to express criticism against the MoD and Russian military leadership for Russian failures in Ukraine up until that is expressed itself in the Wagner Group's June 24, 2023, rebellion.^[34] Since the Wagner rebellion Russian authorities have attempted to establish more control over the Russian information space through self-censorship efforts that largely achieved the intended effect of reducing public criticism of how the Russian military is conducting the war in Ukraine.^[35] Putin also publicly backed the Russian military leadership following Wagner's rebellion and has shown no indications that he intends to reverse course from his support for Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov.^[36] Putin will likely face the risk of increasing public ire at the Russian MoD, possibly undoing some of the Kremlin's work to reestablish the MoD as an organ worthy of deference and respect, if he desires to discuss specific issues about the war in public during his 2024 presidential campaign. Putin may intend to shift responsibility for Russian failures and issues with the war to the MoD during his presidential campaign but does so at the risk of emboldening the same widespread anti-MoD sentiments that prompted Wagner's rebellion.

Putin also attempted to convince the Russian public that the Russian economy is resilient in the face of international sanctions and the fallout of the war in Ukraine. Putin stated that international observers and Russians were surprised that Russia had created the margin of economic and financial stability required to weather Western sanctions following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[37] Putin listed a series of statistics detailing the growth and stability of the Russian economy and only acknowledged that inflation may pose a problem for Russia in 2024.^[38] Putin specifically claimed that Russians will see average increases in real wages and income, a talking point in line with previous reports that Putin would attempt to promote economic stability as a main component of his presidential campaign.^[39] Putin later talked about specific issues with rising prices of consumer goods, strains on the Russian automobile market, and systemic issues with Russian civil aviation production, all contrasting with his earlier depiction of a strong Russian economy.^[40] Putin has routinely attempted to assuage the Russian public's concern that the war in Ukraine will have long-term economic impacts and he will likely continue to address Russian economic anxiety throughout his 2024 presidential campaign.^[41]

Putin continued to express an increasingly anti-Israel position on the Israel-Hamas war, likely signaling a continuing decline in Russian-Israeli relations. In response to a question posed by a Turkish journalist, Putin called the situation in Gaza a "disaster," while praising Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his attempts to find a resolution to the conflict.^[42] Putin reiterated his support for a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem and claimed that Russia discussed providing additional measures of humanitarian support to Gaza with several Arab countries, but that Israel rejected the suggestion.^[43] Putin notably used his response to several questions unrelated to the Israel-Hamas war to indirectly criticize Israel.^[44] A journalist also posed a question that would have allowed Putin to reiterate a Russian rhetorical line directly denouncing antisemitism, but Putin chose to focus on other aspects of the question.^[45] Putin has continually expressed anti-Israel positions while feigning interest in being a neutral arbitrator for the conflict, most recently in a December 10 telephone conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.^[46]

Putin attempted to downplay deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations and extricate Russian peacekeeping forces from any responsibility for Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participating in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Putin claimed that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's absence from formal CSTO, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) events is due to Armenian domestic processes and not related to any intent to end its membership in any of these organizations. Putin also claimed that "it was not [Russia] who abandoned Nagorno-Karabakh" and claimed that Armenia did not inform Russia about its decision to "recognize that Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan."^[47]

The European Union (EU) decided on December 14 to formally open EU accession negotiations to Ukraine. European Council President Charles Michel announced that the European Council will open accession negotiations to both Ukraine and Moldova.^[48] Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has notably

consistently opposed talks on Ukraine's accession to the EU, responded to Michel's announcement and stated that Hungary did not participate in the decision, calling it a "bad decision."^[49]

The US Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2024 on December 14, which notably includes an extension of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAID). The NDAA approves \$886.3 billion for defense and authorizes \$300 million for the Ukrainian Security Assistance Initiative for fiscal years 2024 and 2025, while also extending the Initiative until the end of 2026.^[50] The USAID is notably meant to fund the federal government to pay relevant industries directly to produce weapons and security assistance for Ukraine, as opposed to providing Ukraine with assistance from the US's existing stockpiles.^[51]

Drone footage reportedly taken from western Zaporizhia Oblast shows Russian forces using Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) as human shields in an apparent violation of international humanitarian law. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) stated on December 13 that it received drone footage from Ukraine that shows Russian soldiers covering themselves behind Ukrainian POWs as they advance on Ukrainian positions near Robotyne.^[52] The Ukrainian POWs in the video appear unarmed, while the Russian soldiers force them forward at gunpoint, and at some point, a Russian soldier fires at and apparently kills the Ukrainian POW as the POW tries to run away.^[53] RFE/RL noted that elements of the 234th Airborne Assault (VDV) Regiment (76th VDV Division) are active in the Robotyne area, suggesting that the command of this regiment would be responsible for the apparent violations of international humanitarian law.^[54] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office initiated criminal proceedings on the "violation of laws and customs of war" based on the video.^[55] Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets responded to the video and called it an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention.^[56] The Geneva Conventions prohibit the use of "protected persons" as human shields to protect against attacks or "prevent reprisals during an offensive," and POWs are specifically classified as protected persons under international law.^[57]

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against port infrastructure in southern Ukraine on the night of December 13-14. Ukraine's Air Force reported on December 14 that Russian forces launched 42 Shahed-136/131s mainly at port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast from the directions of Balaklava and Chauda, occupied Crimea, as well as Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai.^[58] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 41 of the 42 Shaheds--32 Shaheds over Odesa Oblast, two over Kherson Oblast, and five over Mykolaiv Oblast.^[59] The Romanian Ministry of Defense also noted that one drone fell on an uninhabited area near Grindu, a small settlement in Romania on the Ukraine-Romania border.^[60] Ukrainian military sources also stated that Russian forces fired six S-300 missiles from occupied Kherson Oblast at areas in Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts in tandem with the wave of Shahed launches.^[61]

Ardent Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin went on trial and pled not guilty to extremist charges in Moscow City Court on December 14.^[62] Girkin's lawyer, Gadzi Aliyer, stated that the trial was adjourned until December 20 after the Moscow Court read Girkin his charges and heard his plea on December 14.^[63] Girkin's other lawyer, Alexander Molokhov, told Russian opposition outlet Sota that Girkin testified about making an "emotional comment" after reading a complaint on May 25, 2022, which claimed that mobilized Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) personnel did not receive compensation for their service.^[64] Girkin's comment read as follows: "citizens, it is not enough to shoot [officials] for something like this [lack of compensation for mobilized DNR personnel]." Girkin testified that this comment, which became the official reason for his criminal charge, was a figurative expression that was not meant to be taken literally. Girkin added that Russia needed to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2014, that Russia is fighting against the West, and that Russia needs to announce a country-wide martial law instead of freezing the war.^[65]

Chairman of the Girkin-led "Angry Patriots Club" Pavel Gubarev publicly denounced Girkin on December 13, a day prior to Girkin's first trial hearing. Gubarev had previously vaguely implied that he had a conflict with Girkin in September following Girkin's arrest and announcement of his intent to run for president but has refrained from renouncing his ties with him.^[66] Gubarev called Girkin a "lying hypocritical vile schemer and nonentity" on December 13 and claimed that he will release an essay exposing Girkin in the coming days.^[67] Gubarev compared Girkin's arrest to the political arrests of Belarusian opposition leaders and doubled down on his previous claims that the Kremlin imprisoned Girkin over his presidential ambitions.^[68] Gubarev claimed that he intends to shatter the public perception of Girkin as a "noble principled warrior and hero" and expose him for being a myth in the information space and a psychopathic personality. Several Russian milbloggers that support the "Angry Patriots Club" claimed that Gubarev's statement further confirmed that people should not work with Girkin on political issues and denounced Girkin's presidential ambitions.^[69] One milblogger claimed that many people thought that Russian, Ukrainian, or Israeli security and intelligence agents published Gubarev's rants, but noted that Gubarev's statements are rooted in a personal conflict with Girkin.^[70] While it is unclear what prompted Gubarev to denounce Girkin a day before his trial, this statement and these essays will likely further alienate Girkin's supporters and damage Girkin's reputation in the ultranationalist community.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin displayed notable confidence in publicly discussing Russia's war on Ukraine during a joint event combining his annual press conference and "Direct Line" forum on December 14 but did not clearly define his envisioned end state for the full-scale invasion he launched on February 24, 2022.
- Putin reiterated his maximalist objectives for the Russian war in Ukraine, which are likely purposefully opaque to be inclusive of additional goals that Putin may seek to pursue now or later.
- These maximalist objectives also do not exclude Russia's annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories or additional territorial conquests.
- Putin attempted to rhetorically contextualize Russia's continued maximalist objectives in Ukraine within the wider conception of Russian "sovereignty," an ideological line that has been consistent in the Kremlin's framing of Russian national security and foreign policy since before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Putin claimed that the Russian force grouping in Ukraine is far larger than even Russian officials have characterized, likely in an attempt to both address persistent Russian concerns about a new mobilization wave and to demoralize the West and Ukraine.
- The difference in the reported numbers of Russian personnel involved in the war is likely due to different categorizations of Russian military personnel and does not reflect a significant increase in Russian personnel on the frontline, which Ukrainian forces have consistently been repelling.
- Putin notably addressed the tactical and operational situation in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast but refrained from discussing active Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine.
- Putin's public discussions about issues at the front and about the Russian war effort in general may redirect public anger about problems in the war toward the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

- Putin also attempted to convince the Russian public that the Russian economy is resilient in the face of international sanctions and the fallout of the war in Ukraine.
- Putin continued to express an increasingly anti-Israel position on the Israel-Hamas war, likely signaling a continuing decline in Russian-Israeli relations.
- Putin attempted to downplay deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations and extricate Russian peacekeeping forces from any responsibility for Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participating in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 13, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 13, 2023, 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.

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on December 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin appears to be returning to expansionist rhetoric last observed before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in an effort to resurface its claims that Ukraine is part of historically Russian territory and discuss the borders Russian leaders regard as appropriate for a rump Ukrainian state. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev misrepresented US President Joe Biden's response to a media question about whether the United States' policy is to win the war or help Ukraine to defend itself during a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on December 12.^[1] Biden stated that the United States wants to see Ukraine win and that "winning means Ukraine is a sovereign, independent nation [...] that can afford to defend itself today and deter further aggression." Medvedev misrepresented Biden's statements to suggest that the United States would be content if Ukraine simply existed as a country but does not care what Ukraine's borders look like.^[2] Medvedev claimed that Ukraine can still technically be a sovereign country if the whole country remains within the borders of Lviv Oblast, for example.^[3] Medvedev also falsely claimed that Biden implied that the United States only supports Ukraine in defending itself but will not help Kyiv launch counteroffensives to liberate more of its land and people. Medvedev added that Ukraine could hypothetically "defend itself" as a rump state within the borders of Lviv Oblast.

Medvedev routinely and deliberately makes outlandish statements, but the timing of these statements and focus on the idea that Ukraine could exist only as a rump state within the territory of Lviv Oblast is consistent with earlier indicators that the Kremlin is returning to its domestic framing that Russia is fighting the war to "liberate its historic lands." Medvedev's comments follow shortly after Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's December 9 interview with *AFP*, which had likely marked an official rhetorical shift in the Kremlin's framing of the war.^[4] Zakharova reiterated the Kremlin's maximalist demands for full Ukrainian political capitulation and Kyiv's acceptance of Russia's military terms and introduced a vague prerequisite that Ukraine must withdraw its troops from "Russian territory" to resolve the war. ISW assessed at the time that Zakharova was likely referring to the illegally annexed four Ukrainian regions – which are not fully under Russia's occupation.^[5] Zakharova's statement, however, may have been purposely vague to allow Russia the freedom to define what it deems to be "Russian territories." Medvedev's and Zakharova's comments closely parallel Russia's long-standing information operation that Ukraine could be partitioned into Russian-controlled "Malorossiya" (most of Ukraine) and a small rump Polish-controlled western Ukraine.^[6] ISW observed Russian propagandists intensify this information operation in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion and its notable decrease from then until now.

The return of the Kremlin's notion of a "partitioned Ukraine" is likely an organized effort to mislead the international community into rejecting key components of Ukraine's sovereignty: its territorial integrity as defined in 1991 and its right to self-determination. ISW assessed that the Kremlin used similar information operations in late 2021 and early 2022 to create conditions for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine while misleading the West into the search for a diplomatic de-escalation.^[7] Russia is still pursuing its maximalist objective of controlling all of Ukraine and is using these information operations to deter further military aid to Ukraine and to stall for time needed to rebuild its defense industrial complex (DIB) and reconstitute its military.

Medvedev's musings and Zakharova's statement considered in the context of the information operations the Kremlin used before the full-scale invasion cast serious doubt on the notion that Moscow would be satisfied even with all the territory of the four Ukrainian oblasts it has illegally annexed, let alone with where the front lines currently stand. It is also noteworthy that the Kremlin appears to be revising its explicit territorial aims upward as US support for Ukraine appears to waver and Western voices reportedly argue for pressing Ukraine to offer territorial concessions.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 13 that Ukraine's decision to transition to defensive operations is motivated by winter weather conditions and not a "crisis," in response to a recent *New York Times* (NYT) article.^[8] Zelensky stated during a joint press conference at the Ukraine-Northern Europe Summit in Oslo, Norway on December 13 that winter weather slows both offensive and defensive operations and added that there were no Russian victories in 2023.^[9] Zelensky stated that the most important objective for Ukrainian forces is to hold and destroy the Russian military in Ukraine.^[10]

Russian and Ukrainian sources continue to report on the impacts of challenging weather conditions on offensive and reconnaissance operations throughout the front, even as reported freezing and snowy winter conditions in eastern Ukraine offer the prospect of better conditions for maneuver. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 13 that poor weather conditions are complicating Russian and Ukrainian combat operations in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[11] Humenyuk stated that fog and other weather conditions prompted by temperature fluctuations are making it difficult to conduct offensive operations and use drones and artillery.[12] Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lysohor stated that poor weather conditions are affecting Russian air strikes and drone operations in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.[13] A Russian milblogger claimed that mud, freezing rain, snow, and ice are impeding Ukrainian and Russian ground attacks north of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[14] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and Avdiivka despite “extremely unfavorable” weather conditions, including ice, which are negatively impacting Russian FPV and aerial reconnaissance drones.[15] One Russian milblogger suggested that a recent snowstorm improved the conditions for ground operations in occupied Luhansk Oblast, however.[16] It will likely take more than one snowstorm and continual below-freezing temperatures to harden the ground enough to restore maneuver combat. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are taking advantage of the challenging weather conditions to conduct ground operations while Ukrainian reconnaissance drones cannot operate.[17] Russian forces have likely committed to offensive operations in multiple sectors of the front during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative prior to the Russian presidential elections in March 2024 and to achieve informational effects in the United States and the West while Ukrainian forces establish and consolidate defensive positions to conserve manpower and resources for future offensive efforts.[18]

A Russian “Storm-Z” assault unit instructor complained that deputy commanders of Russian irregular armed formations are spreading illogical and false claims that present an overly optimistic view of the situation on the front in the Russian media and information space. The instructor stated that an unnamed Russian deputy commander of a “Russian Volunteer Corps” detachment “fooled” a “serious” media outlet by stating that volunteer units cut the last Ukrainian supply route near Bakhmut and Soledar (northeast of Bakhmut) and that taking control of this area would open up a route for Russian forces to advance to Kramatorsk.[19] The instructor stated that another deputy commander of a Volunteer Corps unit claimed that Ukrainian forces are abandoning their fortifications near Chasiv Yar (10km west of Bakhmut) and do not control the roads in the area and that these conditions will allow Russian forces to advance to Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut) and create a “horseshoe” around Chasiv Yar. The deputy commander effectively claimed that Russian forces were threatening a settlement significantly further from their current lines to achieve a tactical victory in a contested area near Russian positions. The instructor stated that these various claims and forecasts were illogical and questioned if the deputy commanders had confused the names of settlements when making their assessments. The instructor compared the claims about creating a “horseshoe” around Chasiv Yar to repeated Russian claims that Russian forces have done the same around Avdiivka — claims which the instructor sarcastically noted have not prevented Russian forces from continually dying in the area. The instructor also referred to a December 13 post by a Russian milblogger, who, the instructor stated, usually provides adequate reporting from the front. The post highlighted a Russian serviceman from the Volunteer Corps operating near Bakhmut at the front who claimed that Bohdanivka is a “strategic” settlement that if captured will allow Russian forces to advance to Chasiv Yar and cut off Ukrainian logistics.[20] The instructor doubted the Volunteer Corps serviceman’s understanding of the word “strategic” and Ukrainian geography as the instructor stated that Russian forces would have to advance through several settlements in the lowlands to reach Chasiv Yar.[21]

The instructor’s complaint about Russian sources spreading unsubstantiated and maximalist claims largely aligns with ISW’s mapping practices. ISW’s “claimed Russian control over Ukrainian territory” map layer reflects all the claims of ISW’s regular sources, including the most maximalist and unlikely, which is why this layer is often significantly different from ISW’s “assessed Russian advances” map layer. This phenomenon is particularly clear in ISW’s most recent control of terrain maps showing Avdiivka and Donetsk City, where the “Russian claims” map layer is up to 3.5 kilometers closer to Avdiivka than the geolocated “assessed Russian advances” map layer.[22] ISW has chosen this mapping approach to accurately reflect even the most maximalist Russian claims and compare these claims to geo-confirmed Russian advances. ISW has previously observed Russian milbloggers criticize other actors in the Russian information space for distorting the reality of the Russian war efforts and overly positive reporting.[23] Russian milbloggers previously claimed that the Russian General Staff is increasingly requiring positive reports from frontline commanders, and the Russian military may be pressuring the commanders of irregular armed formations and other sources to provide similarly positive reports.[24]

The Russian MoD is likely using formalized irregular unit commanders as a conduit to spread incorrect information about Russian battlefield successes within the Russian information space in order to circumvent the MoD’s responsibility. Kremlin state media is increasingly publishing interviews with servicemen and commanders of irregular formations, who appear to be making exaggerated claims about Russian successes on the battlefield.[25] The instructor observed that it is strange that sources who are not directly affiliated with the Russian MoD are making such exaggerated battlefield claims.[26] The Russian MoD has previously routinely spread exaggerated and absurd claims of Russian battlefield successes, which were subsequently quickly proven false, and Russian milbloggers have criticized the Russian MoD for this practice.[27] The Russian MoD has continually attempted to censor Russian milbloggers, and select milbloggers have exposed and complained about these efforts.[28] The Russian MoD is likely attempting to use irregular unit commanders and servicemen operating on the frontline to give a veneer of legitimacy to Russian MoD-controlled narratives because many Russians are likely unaware that numerous Russian irregular formations are indirectly controlled by the Russian MoD and other security forces.[29]

The Kremlin may also be using Russian milbloggers to promote irregular unit commanders’ incorrect information. Russian President Vladimir Putin is reportedly considering the Russian milblogger who posted the alleged information from the Volunteer Corps serviceman near Bakhmut to be a “trusted person” in his presidential campaign, and ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin will likely use the March 2024 presidential election to leverage milblogger “trusted persons” to reestablish Kremlin dominance over the information space and conduct information operations.[30]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes on the night of December 12 to 13. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 10 Shahed-131/136 drones from occupied Balaklava, Crimea and launched 10 missiles, likely Iskander-M ballistic or S-300/400 anti-aircraft guided missiles, targeting Kyiv City.[31] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces downed all of the missiles and drones, but that missile debris injured civilians in Kyiv City.[32] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that the Russian military currently has a limited number of missiles and will not be able to conduct missile strikes *en masse* as Russian forces did in winter 2022 but will launch more Shaheds instead.[33]

A Russian hacker group reportedly linked to the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) and a Russia-aligned hacker group both claimed responsibility for the cyberattack on Ukrainian mobile operator Kyivstar. Pro-Russia hacker group Killnet claimed on December 12 that it conducted an attack on unspecified Ukrainian mobile operators and banks but did not offer any details or evidence of their involvement.[34] Russian hacker group Solntsepek claimed on

December 13 that it “takes full responsibility for the cyberattack on Kyivstar” and posted screenshots allegedly showing Kyivstar databases and systems. [35] Solntsepk claimed that it conducted the cyberattack because Kyivstar provides communications to the Ukrainian military, government agencies, and law enforcement agencies. [36] Solntsepk claimed that it destroyed 10,000 computers and more than 4,000 servers including all cloud storage and backup systems, but Kyivstar denied these claims. [37] Solntsepk implied that it was able to access the Kyivstar systems through the company’s employees, and Kyivstar CEO Oleksandr Komarov stated on December 13 that hackers broke through Kyivstar’s cyber security via a compromised account of one of the company’s employees. [38] Ukrainian Head of the Rada Subcommittee on Cyber Security stated on December 13 that cyberattacks against Ukraine are constantly occurring and that the Ukrainian State Intelligence Service and private companies are regularly working to protect Ukrainian digital systems. [39] Solntsepk is reportedly known for claiming responsibility for attacks conducted by other groups and has reportedly been used as a front for GRU Military Unit 74455 “Sandworm.” [40] Kyivstar stated on December 13 that Kyivstar restored voice communications in Ukraine and is continuing work to restore other services. [41]

The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stripped naturalized Russian citizens of their Russian citizenship for the first time, likely as part of ongoing migrant crackdowns aimed at coercing migrants into Russian military service while placating the xenophobic Russian ultranationalist community. The MVD reported on December 13 that it stripped two naturalized Russian citizens of their Russian citizenship after Russian law enforcement arrested them on drug trafficking charges. [42] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* noted that this is the first instance of Russian authorities stripping naturalized citizens of their Russian citizenship since the law, which expanded the list of crimes under which Russian authorities can revoke an individual’s citizenship, came into force in October 2023. [43] Russian reporting did not specify what Russian authorities intend to do with the two individuals stripped of their Russian citizenship, however. The Russian government may send the two individuals to a migrant detention center where Russian authorities routinely coerce migrants without Russian citizenship into signing contracts with the Russian military. [44] Russian state-controlled outlet *RIA Novosti* reported on December 13 that Russian authorities arrested the former Head of the St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast MVD Migration Office, Andrei Kolesnikov, on suspicion of complicity in “legalizing over 100,000 foreigners” in 2022. [45] The Russian government is likely trying to publicize Kolesnikov’s arrest in order to appease the Russian ultranationalist community, which supports the war in Ukraine and opposes the inclusion of migrants into Russian society while continuing to rely on migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts and to offset domestic labor shortages. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin does not have a clearly defined policy regarding migrants as Russian authorities continue to pursue incoherent and competing efforts to restrict migrant work in Russia, coerce them into the Russian military, and exploit their labor.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky attended the second Ukraine-Northern Europe Summit in Oslo, Norway on December 13. [46] Zelensky met with the leaders of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland at the Ukraine-Northern Europe Summit who jointly published a letter in *Financial Times* on December 12 stating that “this is a critical time for Ukraine, Europe, and global security” and that “Russia is eager to exploit divisions.” [47] Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that Denmark will approve a military aid package to Ukraine including ammunition, tanks, and drones valued at about \$1.1 billion. [48] Norwegian Prime Minister Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store announced that Norway would provide additional air defense equipment to Ukraine. [49] Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson stated that Sweden will approve a winter aid package to Ukraine to support civilian infrastructure. [50] Finnish President Sauli Niinisto announced that Finland is preparing its next aid package to Ukraine, which will consist of unspecified military equipment, and that Finland plans to double its ammunition production. [51] US President Joe Biden similarly announced on December 12 that Ukraine will receive a military assistance package valued at \$200 million consisting of AIM-9M missiles, High-speed Anti-radiation (HARM) missiles; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems, and artillery and small arms ammunition. [52]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin appears to be returning to expansionist rhetoric last observed before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in an effort to resurface its claims that Ukraine is part of historically Russian territory and discuss the borders Russian leaders regard as appropriate for a rump Ukrainian state.
- The return of the Kremlin’s notion of a “partitioned Ukraine” is likely an organized effort to mislead the international community into rejecting key components of Ukraine’s sovereignty: its territorial integrity as defined in 1991 and its right to self-determination.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 13 that Ukraine’s decision to transition to defensive operations is motivated by winter weather conditions and not a “crisis,” in response to a recent *New York Times* (NYT) article.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources continue to report on the impacts of challenging weather conditions on offensive and reconnaissance operations throughout the front, even as reported freezing and snowy winter conditions in eastern Ukraine offer the prospect of better conditions for maneuver.
- A Russian “Storm-Z” assault unit instructor complained that deputy commanders of Russian irregular armed formations are spreading illogical and false claims that present an overly optimistic view of the situation on the front in the Russian media and information space.
- The instructor’s complaint about Russian sources spreading unsubstantiated and maximalist claims largely aligns with ISW’s mapping practices.
- The Russian MoD is likely using formalized irregular unit commanders as a conduit to spread incorrect information about Russian battlefield successes within the Russian information space in order to circumvent the MoD’s responsibility.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes on the night of December 12 to 13.
- A Russian hacker group reportedly linked to the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) and a Russia-aligned hacker group both claimed responsibility for the cyberattack on Ukrainian mobile operator Kyivstar.
- The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stripped naturalized Russian citizens of their Russian citizenship for the first time, likely as part of ongoing migrant crackdowns aimed at coercing migrants into Russian military service while placating the xenophobic Russian ultranationalist community.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky attended the second Ukraine-Northern Europe Summit in Oslo, Norway on December 13.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, north of and near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west of Donetsk City, along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in various sectors.
- The Chuvash Republic is offering bonuses to foreigners who fight in the war in Ukraine, likely as part of efforts to recruit migrants to the Russian military.
- Occupation authorities continue efforts to destroy Ukrainian national and historical identity.

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Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 12, 2023, 7:35pm ET

US intelligence reportedly assessed that Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in fall 2023 and through the upcoming winter aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine instead of achieving any immediate operational objectives. The US intelligence community reportedly shared a declassified intelligence assessment with Congress on December 12 wherein US intelligence assessed that Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine but have only resulted in heavy Russian losses and no operationally significant Russian battlefield gains.^[1] This assessment of high Russian losses and lack of operationally significant Russian gains is consistent with ISW's assessment. US National Security Council Spokesperson Andrienne Watson reportedly stated that Russian forces have suffered more than 13,000 casualties and lost 220 combat vehicles along the Avdiivka-Novopavlivka axis (Avdiivka direction through western Donetsk Oblast) since launching offensive operations in October 2023.^[2] Watson added that Russia appears to believe that a military "deadlock" through the winter will drain Western support for Ukraine and give Russian forces the advantage despite high Russian losses and persistent Russian shortages of trained personnel, munitions, and equipment.^[3] ISW has assessed that Russian forces have been trying to regain the theater-level initiative in Ukraine since at least mid-November 2023 and have now likely committed to offensive operations in multiple sectors of the front during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative.^[4]

Russian forces may be conducting costly offensive operations at a time unfavorable for ground maneuver to time the potential shift in battlefield initiative with ongoing conversations in the West about continued support to Ukraine. Russian forces launched a large offensive effort to capture Avdiivka on October 10 and subsequently intensified localized offensive operations elsewhere in eastern Ukraine while Ukrainian forces started to scale back counteroffensive operations on their own accord.^[5] The Russian military command decided against waiting to prepare for offensive efforts later this winter or in spring 2024 following the decreased tempo of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, as they had done between the successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in summer and fall 2022 and the failed Russian winter-spring 2023 offensive.^[6] The Russian military command's decision to launch offensive efforts in fall 2023 may have been an opportunistic reaction to a perceived wavering of Western support for Ukraine. The increased Western discussions about continuing military assistance to Ukraine following the relatively successful Russian defensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast was predictable and may have factored into the Russian command's calculations. The Kremlin has been orchestrating long running information operations aimed at deterring Western security assistance to Ukraine, and the Russian command may have determined that those information operations were yielding increasing returns and that Russian military efforts to seize the initiative could prompt further Western debates about aid to Ukraine.^[7]

Russian forces have routinely conducted military operations in Ukraine aimed at shaping Western behavior instead of achieving operational battlefield objectives, and the US intelligence assessment that ongoing Russian offensive operations do not have an immediate operational military objective is entirely plausible.^[8] Russian forces have yet to seize the initiative throughout Ukraine, but Russian forces may attempt to pursue an immediate operational objective if they do seize the initiative. The Russian military command has also reportedly conducted offensive operations with domestic political goals in mind, and internal Kremlin dynamics may be influencing Russian military decisions about ongoing Russian offensive operations.^[9] ISW is not offering an assessment of the primary intent of ongoing Russian offensive operations at this time but concurs with the US intelligence community assessment that Russia has absorbed very high losses without making operationally significant gains or setting conditions to make such gains.

US intelligence also assessed that the war in Ukraine has devastated the pre-war Russian military, although Russia has partially offset these losses and continues to prepare for a long war in Ukraine. The declassified intelligence assessment reportedly stated that Russian forces have lost 87 percent of the total number of their pre-war active-duty ground troops and two-thirds of the tanks in their inventory before February 24, 2022.^[10] The declassified intelligence assessment reportedly stated that Russian forces lost 315,000 personnel out of the 360,000 personnel, 2,200 out of 3,500 tanks, and 4,400 out of 13,600 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers that participated in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[11] The assessment reportedly stated that Russian ground forces have lost over a quarter of their pre-invasion stockpiles of military equipment as of late November 2023, reducing the complexity and scale of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine.^[12]

The Russian leadership has undertaken extensive force generation measures to offset manpower losses, however, and Ukrainian intelligence reported in September 2023 that Russian forces had 420,000 personnel in occupied Ukraine.^[13] Partial mobilization began in September 2022 and ongoing Russian crypto-mobilization efforts have very likely offset the Russian losses reported by US intelligence, although new Russian personnel likely have lower combat capabilities than those they replaced.^[14] The Russian military command is also pursuing long-term restructuring and expansion efforts to form strategic reserves and prepare for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO, although short-to-medium-term manpower requirements in Ukraine are likely undermining these efforts.^[15] Russia has been gradually mobilizing its defense industrial base (DIB) to address materiel losses in Ukraine and sustain a prolonged war effort, although there are no indications that Russia has made significant progress in offsetting armored vehicle losses in Ukraine.^[16] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 11 during a speech at the US National Defense University that Russian President Vladimir Putin is shifting the Russian economy and society to a war-time footing.^[17]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with various US officials, including President Joe Biden, and spoke to Congress about US military assistance to Ukraine in Washington, DC on December 12. Zelensky met with Biden, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown, House Speaker Mike Johnson, and other US officials.^[18] Zelensky stated at a press conference with Biden that Ukraine has had important battlefield successes and thanked the US for its support and for fostering an effective partnership.^[19] Biden announced that he approved a military assistance package valued at \$200 million for Ukraine including air defense and artillery ammunition and reiterated continued US support for Ukraine.^[20] Zelensky also met with various US defense manufacturers about joint Ukrainian-US production of artillery and air defense munitions and systems.^[21]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting Ukraine on December 12. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 15 Shahed-131/136 drones from occupied Balaklava Raion, Crimea, and two Kh-59 missiles at targets in Ukraine, and that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed nine of the drones and both missiles.^[22] Ukrainian military officials reported that the missiles targeted Zaporizhia Oblast and Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.^[23] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that a Russian drone strike damaged an administrative building in Odesa City.^[24]

Ukrainian officials stated that Russian special services may have conducted the major cyberattack on Ukrainian mobile operator Kyivstar on December 12. Kyivstar CEO Oleksandr Komarov stated that a powerful cyberattack targeted Kyivstar on the morning of December 12 and caused technical failures but did not compromise subscribers' personal data.[25] Komarov stated that the cyberattack partially destroyed Kyivstar's IT infrastructure and that it is unclear how long restoration will take.[26] Ukrainian officials stated that the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office opened criminal proceedings and that the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) is investigating the possible involvement of Russian security services in the attack.[27] Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated that the cyberattack did not cause any major problems for Ukrainian forces on the front.[28] The cyberattack disrupted Kyivstar's national roaming services in Ukraine; the ATMs of two major Ukrainian banks, PrivatBank and Oschadbank; streetlights in Lviv City; air raid warning systems in Sumy City, Kyiv Oblast, and Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast; and municipal hotlines in Rivne City and Dnipro City.[29]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that GUR cyber units recently conducted a successful cyber operation against the Russian Federal Tax Service (FNS). The GUR stated on December 12 that GUR cyber units broke into the FNS's central servers and 2,300 regional services throughout Russia and occupied Crimea and conducted two cyberattacks on unspecified dates, eliminating the configuration files that allowed the Russian tax system databases to function.[30] The GUR reported that Russian authorities have been unsuccessfully attempting to restore the FNS for four days.[31] The GUR, citing unspecified experts, stated that the effects of the attack will continue to paralyze the FNS until at least January 2024 and that Russian authorities may not be able to fully resuscitate the tax system.[32] The FNS denied the GUR's report that Ukrainian cyber units hacked the FNS and claimed that all tax services are operating normally.[33] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* noted that the FNS reportedly informed a Russian Telegram channel that users may have problems accessing its online services but that the FNS refused to explain the reasons for the problems.[34]

Russian news outlet RBK reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin has designated prominent Russian milbloggers as "trusted persons" in his presidential election campaign for the first time. RBK reported on December 12 that Putin has designated Russian ultranationalist *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reporter and Kremlin Human Rights Council member Alexander "Sasha" Kots as a "trusted person," and is also considering designating milblogger Alexander Sladkov and *WarGonzo* Telegram channel founder Semyon Pegov as "trusted persons." [35] Russian law allows presidential candidates to designate up to 600 individuals as "trusted persons" to campaign on behalf of a certain candidate and sometimes act on behalf of the candidate in certain cases.[36] RBK noted that Putin's "trusted persons" will also include Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Sparta" Battalion Commander Artem Zhoga, whom the Kremlin portrayed as asking Putin to run for re-election in 2024, as well as individuals from organizations that support the Russian war in Ukraine, including the state-run "Defenders of the Fatherland" Foundation and the Families of Soldiers of the Fatherland Committee.[37] ISW has previously observed Putin rewarding the loyalty of Kots, Sladkov, and Pegov, and Putin is likely using this "trusted persons" designation to further reward ultranationalist milbloggers who are loyal to him.[38] The Kremlin will likely use the March 2024 presidential election to leverage these and likely other milbloggers to reestablish Kremlin dominance over the information space and conduct information operations about Putin and the election.[39]

A St. Petersburg court sentenced three underage Uzbek migrants and their parents to deportation for extinguishing the Eternal Flame in St. Petersburg amid ongoing tension between Central Asian communities in Russia and Russian authorities. Russian authorities detained the three minors in St. Petersburg on December 10 and circulated footage of the children extinguishing the Eternal Flame, a memorial to Soviet servicemen killed in the Second World War, in St. Petersburg with snow.[40] Russian news outlet RBK reported on December 12 that Russian authorities are holding one of the children in a temporary detention center for juvenile offenders and will also fine and deport the children's parents for failing to register with Russian migration authorities.[41] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that Russian authorities regularly detain people on administrative offenses for crimes against Eternal Flame memorials throughout Russia, but that criminal cases are not uncommon.[42] The Russian State Duma approved amendments allowing Russian courts to fine or assign compulsory work to migrants convicted of a crime in place of deportation on December 11, suggesting that the Kremlin's migrant policy has yet to be defined clearly.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- US intelligence reportedly assessed that Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in fall 2023 and through the upcoming winter aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine instead of achieving any immediate operational objectives.
- Russian forces may be conducting costly offensive operations at a time unfavorable for ground maneuver to time the potential shift in battlefield initiative with ongoing conversations in the West about continued support to Ukraine.
- US intelligence also assessed that the war in Ukraine has devastated the pre-war Russian military, although Russia has partially offset these losses and continues to prepare for a long war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with various US officials, including President Joe Biden, and spoke to Congress about US military assistance to Ukraine in Washington, DC on December 12.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting Ukraine on December 12.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian special services may have conducted the major cyberattack on Ukrainian mobile operator Kyivstar on December 12.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that GUR cyber units recently conducted a successful cyber operation against the Russian Federal Tax Service (FNS).
- Russian news outlet RBK reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin has designated prominent Russian milbloggers as "trusted persons" in his presidential election campaign for the first time.
- A St. Petersburg court sentenced three underage Uzbek migrants and their parents to deportation for extinguishing the Eternal Flame in St. Petersburg amid ongoing tension between Central Asian communities in Russia and Russian authorities.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 12 and advanced in some areas.
- The Russian State Duma adopted a series of laws on December 12 to help further bolster Rosgvardia's and the Federal Security Service's (FSB) force generation capacity.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to use the Kremlin-funded pseudo-volunteer "Dvizheniye Pervykh" (Movement of the First) youth organization to indoctrinate Ukrainian youth in occupied Ukraine with Russian and cultural national identities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 11, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

December 11, 2023, 5:50pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on December 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) announced on December 11 that Russia will conduct voting for the 2024 presidential election in occupied Ukraine, likely in an attempt to legitimize the Russian occupation and Russian President Vladimir Putin's rule.^[1] The CEC reported that it made the decision to hold the election in occupied territories – all of which except Crimea are under martial law – in consultations with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), the Federal Security Service (FSB), and occupation authorities.^[2] Russian law notably requires the CEC to consult with these agencies when considering holding elections in areas under martial law, including occupied Ukraine.^[3] Russia will likely use the March 2024 presidential election to further establish a veneer of legitimacy for its occupation of Ukraine as it has done during the illegal 2022 annexation referenda and the 2023 regional elections.^[4] Russian CEC Chairperson Ella Pamfilova stated on December 7 that elections in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts "will differ somewhat" in procedure from elections in Russia and occupied Crimea.^[5] The CEC will likely use these differing procedures to falsify votes in Putin's favor and claim a high voter turnout while falsely portraying occupied Ukraine's participation in the election as legitimate to the international community.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 10 to 11. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 18 Shahed-131/136 drones from occupied Cape Chauda and Belbek, Crimea and eight ballistic missiles from Bryansk Oblast targeting Kyiv Oblast.^[6] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian forces downed all 18 Shaheds and all eight ballistic missiles.^[7] Ukrainian Eastern Air Command reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Kh-59 cruise missile over Kryvyi Rih Raion, Zaporizhia Oblast on December 11.^[8]

The United Kingdom (UK) and Norway will lead a coalition aimed at providing short-term and long-term assistance to the Ukrainian Navy as the UK announced additional maritime aid provisions to Ukraine. The UK announced on December 11 that the UK and Norway would lead the Maritime Capability Coalition to provide short-term assistance to Ukraine and help in long-term efforts aimed at making the Ukrainian navy more interoperable with NATO.^[9] The Norwegian Defense Ministry reported that the Maritime Capability Coalition is one of several "Capability Coalitions" discussed during the most recent meeting of the 50-nation strong Ukraine Contact Group on November 22.^[10] Ukrainian Navy Commander Oleksiy Neizhpapa stated that the coalition is designed to last until at least 2035.^[11] UK Defense Minister Grant Shapps announced that the UK will provide Ukraine with 20 Viking amphibious armored vehicles and 23 raiding boats.^[12] Shapps also announced that the UK transferred two Sandown-class minehunter vessels to Ukraine as part of a plan that predicated Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[13] Neizhpapa stated that the two minehunters are currently in the UK and cannot yet be brought to Ukraine due to the Montreux Convention.^[14] Turkey has used the Montreux Convention since February 28, 2022, to deny access to the Russian warships wishing to pass through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits per Article 19 which stipulates that "vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers shall not...pass through the Straits."^[15] Russia has reportedly relied on civilian ships to bypass the Turkish use of the Montreux Convention to transport war materiel through the straits.^[16]

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his intention to expand Russian naval capabilities in areas well beyond Ukraine and Eastern Europe, likely in an effort to strengthen and expand Russia's ability to threaten the West. Putin attended the flag-raising ceremony for two nuclear-powered strategic missile submarine carriers, the cruise missile carrier *Krasnoyarsk* (Yasen-M class submarine) and the intercontinental ballistic missile carrier *Emperor Alexander III* (Borei-A Class submarine), at the Sevmash shipbuilding plant in Severodvinsk, Arkhangelsk Oblast, on December 11.^[17] Putin stated that the two new submarines would join the Russian Pacific Fleet (Eastern Military District) to defend Russia's far eastern borders.^[18] Putin stated that Russia plans to quantitatively strengthen the Russian navy and strengthen Russian naval power in the Arctic and Far East and in the Black, Baltic, and Caspian seas.^[19] Putin claimed that the Sevmash plant intends to transfer three more Borei-A class submarines and five more Yasen-M class submarines to the Russian navy in the coming years.^[20] The construction and launch of new naval craft are expensive and time-consuming undertakings, and Putin's interest in expanding Russian naval capabilities in all areas where Russia has naval basing suggests that the Russian leadership may intend to include naval expansion as part of its long-term force expansion effort.^[21]

The Russian military's long-term restructuring and expansion effort aims to prepare Russia for a future-large scale conventional war against NATO, and the commitment of expensive naval resources to areas beyond Ukraine and Eastern Europe likely aims to threaten NATO and its allies across multiple regions.^[22] The Kremlin has routinely stressed that Russia is a Pacific naval power in its pursuit of an equal defense partnership with China, and Russia engaged in naval posturing in the Sea of Okhotsk in May 2023 aimed at deterring further Japanese support for Ukraine.^[23] Putin further emphasized Russian strategic interest in the Arctic later on December 11 at a meeting on the economic development of Russia's Arctic zone, a region in which Russia may intend to strengthen naval capabilities given Finland's recent NATO accession and Sweden's pending NATO accession.^[24] It is unclear whether Russian naval manufacturers will be able to produce strategic naval craft at the Kremlin's desired scale and quality in the coming years, although Russia continues efforts to gradually mobilize its defense industrial base (DIB) and may decide to focus these efforts on Russian naval manufacturers.

The Russian State Duma approved amendments allowing Russian courts to fine or assign compulsory work to foreigners who are convicted of crimes in Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into Russian military service. The Russian State Duma Committee on State Construction and Legislation approved amendments that would allow Russian judges to issue 40,000 to 50,000 rubles (about \$440 to \$550) in fines or 150 to 200 hours of compulsory work to migrants convicted of a crime in place of deportation.[25] The amendment will allow Russian judges to determine if deportation is an “excessive” or “disproportionate” punishment based on the criminal record of the foreigner convicted.[26] The amendment likely aims to reduce the number of deportations so that Russia can continue to benefit from migrant labor amid labor shortages and continue wider efforts to coerce migrants, both with and without Russian citizenship, into Russian military service. Russian authorities have increasingly conducted mass detentions of migrants, during which Russian authorities have served those with Russian citizenship military summonses and have threatened to revoke Russian citizenship from naturalized migrants if they refuse to serve in the Russian military. [27] Russian authorities have also targeted migrants without Russian citizenship in crypto-mobilization efforts by proposing restrictions on the actions and job opportunities of foreign citizens in Russia, advertising Russian military contract service in Central Asian languages, and coercing migrants into contract service in exchange for Russian citizenship.[28] ISW assesses that the Russian government continues to struggle to reconcile the incoherent and competing objectives of exploiting migrant labor to alleviate Russian labor shortages and prioritizing crypto-mobilization efforts to send migrants to the frontline.[29] Russian authorities are also likely using these measures to appease Russian ultranationalists who generally oppose the inclusion of migrants into the Russian economy and society.

Russian National Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev announced on December 11 that the Russian government will make “targeted changes” to the Russian constitution. Medvedev emphasized that the Russian government must make amendments to the constitution very carefully and that there is currently no reason to discuss a new constitution altogether.[30] Medvedev did not specify what these “targeted changes” will be, and the nature and degree of these changes are currently unclear.[31] Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin called on November 22 for Russia to codify an unspecified state ideology, which would legally require an amendment to the Russian constitution, as Article 13 of the Russian constitution forbids Russia from proclaiming a state ideology and commits the Russian state to recognize ideological diversity.[32] Russian state TV channel Rossiya 1 reported on December 10 that Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet with Russian Constitutional Court judges in the coming week. Putin may use this meeting to articulate to the judges or publicly announce the specific constitutional changes Medvedev was referencing.[33]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will meet with US government officials in Washington, D.C. on December 12. Zelensky will meet with US President Joe Biden and members of Congress, including House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson.[34] ISW will cover these events on December 12.

Imprisoned Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny’s team reported that Navalny has gone missing as of December 11, just days after Russian President Vladimir Putin’s 2024 presidential election campaign announcement. Navalny’s Press Secretary Kira Yarmysh reported on December 11 that authorities at Russian penal colony no.6 in Vladimir Oblast stated that Navalny is no longer registered to the penal colony after preventing Navalny’s lawyers from visiting him on December 8 and 11.[35] Yarmysh reported that authorities at penal colony no.7, also in Vladimir Oblast, told Navalny’s lawyers that Navalny is also not at penal colony no 7, and Yarmysh stated that Navalny’s current location is unknown.[36] Yarmysh reported that Navalny was in ill health when his lawyers last visited him.[37] ISW has no independent confirmation of Yarmysh’s statements. Navalny’s reported disappearance comes just days after Putin’s December 8 presidential campaign announcement and the Navalny team’s December 9 announcement of a presidential campaign strategy, which several other Russian opposition figures endorsed.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) announced on December 11 that Russia will conduct voting for the 2024 presidential election in occupied Ukraine, likely in an attempt to legitimize the Russian occupation and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s rule.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 10 to 11.
- The United Kingdom (UK) and Norway will lead a coalition aimed at providing short-term and long-term assistance to the Ukrainian Navy as the UK announced additional maritime aid provisions to Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his intention to expand Russian naval capabilities in areas well beyond Ukraine and Eastern Europe, likely in an effort to strengthen and expand Russia’s ability to threaten the West.
- The Russian State Duma approved amendments allowing Russian courts to fine or assign compulsory work to foreigners who are convicted of crimes in Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into Russian military service.
- Russian National Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev announced on December 11 that the Russian government will make “targeted changes” to the Russian constitution.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 11 and advanced in some areas.
- Ukrainian military officials indicated that Russian forces recently intensified mechanized offensive operations near Avdiivka.
- A Russian law went into effect on December 11 likely aimed at preventing Russian conscripts from fleeing military service.
- Russia continued to illegally deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia under the guise of rehabilitation and medical programs as Kremlin-appointed Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continued attempts to dispute this practice.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 10, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 10, 2023, 6pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45 pm ET on December 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova emphasized that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine have not changed, repeating the Kremlin's demand for full Ukrainian political capitulation and Kyiv's acceptance of Russia's military and territorial demands rather than suggesting any willingness to negotiate seriously. In a written interview with *AFP* on December 9, Zakharova claimed that a "comprehensive, sustainable, and fair resolution" in Ukraine can only happen if the West stops "pumping up the Armed Forces of Ukraine with weapons" and that Ukraine surrenders Russia's claimed Ukrainian territory and "withdraws its troops," presumably from Ukrainian territory Russia claims to have annexed.[1] Zakharova emphasized the Kremlin's longstanding claim that Russia invaded Ukraine for "de-militarization," "denazification," and to "ensure the rights of Russian-speaking citizens" in Ukraine.[2] The Kremlin has consistently used the term "denazification" as code for the removal of the elected government of Ukraine and its replacement by some government the Kremlin regards as acceptable—i.e., regime change.[3] "De-militarization" would obviously leave Ukraine permanently at Russia's mercy. Zakharova's comments clearly highlight the fact that the initial goals of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as set out by Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 24, 2022, have not changed, and that Putin does not intend to end the war unless his maximalist objectives have been accomplished.[4] ISW continues to assess that Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith and that negotiations on Russia's terms are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.[5]

Zakharova's demand that Ukraine withdraw its troops from "Russian territory" as a necessary prerequisite for the resolution of the war suggests that Russia's maximalist objectives include controlling the entirety of the four oblasts it has illegally annexed parts of. Russian forces currently militarily control portions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts, but Russia formally (and illegally) annexed the entirety of these oblasts in September of 2022. [6] Zakharova's suggestion that Ukrainian forces must entirely withdraw from territory that Russia has claimed through its sham annexation suggests that the Russian demands include the surrender of additional Ukrainian territory that Russian forces do not currently control up to the administrative borders of the four occupied oblasts. Calls for Ukraine's capitulation under the current circumstances of Russian control of Ukrainian territory up to the current frontline are already unacceptable from the standpoint of vital Ukrainian and Western national security interests, as ISW has previously assessed.[7] The Russian demand for an even more expansive surrender of Ukrainian-held territory that Russian forces could likely conquer only at the cost of tremendous additional blood, treasure, and time, if they can do it at all, indicates that Russia's aims far transcend keeping the territory Russian forces have already seized. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Russian forces continue to conduct offensive operations in eastern Kharkiv Oblast, which Russia has not claimed to have annexed, suggesting that Russia's territorial aims may be even more expansive than those Zakharova laid out.

The Kremlin continues to express an increasingly anti-Israel position in the Israel–Hamas war despite feigning interest in being a neutral arbitrator in the conflict. NOTE: A version of this text appears in ISW-CTP's December 10 Iran Update. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a telephone conversation on December 10, which reportedly lasted for 50 minutes and heavily focused on the Israel–Hamas war.[8] Putin reportedly noted that there is a "disastrous humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip" and stressed that avoiding consequences for the civilian population while countering terrorist threats is just as important as rejecting and condemning terrorism.[9] Putin's comments are noteworthy in light of the devastation the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought to the civilian population there and Russia's deliberate efforts to inflict suffering on Ukrainian civilians by attacking energy infrastructure going into winter. Putin reportedly reiterated the Kremlin's initial rhetorical position on the Israel–Hamas war by claiming that Russia is ready to alleviate civilian suffering and de-escalate the conflict.[10] Putin has increasingly shifted away from this more neutral rhetoric to a much more anti-Israel position in recent weeks, notably claiming that the war is leading to the "extermination of the civilian population in Palestine."[11] Netanyahu reportedly expressed dissatisfaction with Russian positions towards Israel that Russian officials have articulated at the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral organizations.[12] Netanyahu also reportedly criticized Russia for its "dangerous cooperation" with Iran, notably following Putin's meeting with Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in Moscow on December 7.[13] Putin likely aimed to assuage Israeli concerns about Russian support for Hamas and the deepening Russian–Iranian security partnership, but Israeli and Russian rhetoric surrounding the conversation suggests that Putin likely failed to do so.[14] The Kremlin's increasingly non-neutral framing of the Israel–Hamas war signals potential increasing support for Iranian interests in the region and increased willingness to antagonize Israel.[15]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Latin America on December 10 likely in order to secure Latin American support for Ukraine. Zelensky met with Paraguayan President Santiago Peña Palacios, Uruguayan President Luis Lacalle Pou, and Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa to discuss Latin America's involvement in the Ukrainian Peace Formula and a future Ukraine–Latin America summit.[16] Zelensky thanked all the presidents for their vocal support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's full-scale invasion.[17] Zelensky noted Uruguay's prior participation in the Ukrainian Peace Formula and expressed hope that Uruguay and other Latin American countries will participate in the Peace Formula's fourth meeting of national security and foreign policy advisors in January 2024.[18] Zelensky stated that it is important for Ukraine to have the support of Latin America during its fight for freedom and democracy.[19]

Russian military authorities in Armenia are likely attempting to maintain military power over Armenia amidst the continued deterioration of Armenian-Russian relations. The international human rights organization Helsinki Citizens' Assembly's Armenian branch in Vanadzor reported on December 8 that Russian military police at the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, detained Russian citizen Dmitri Setrakov on December 6 or 7 for desertion.[20] The Russian 519th Military Investigation Department, located in Armenia, subsequently opened a criminal case against Setrakov for unauthorized abandonment of his unit.[21] Setrakov reportedly served as a contract soldier in the Russian military before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine but refused to participate in Russian operations in Ukraine and moved to Armenia.[22] Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor Head Artur Sakunts told *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*'s Armenian Service *Radio Azatutyun* that Armenian law enforcement was not involved in Setrakov's arrest and stated Russian law enforcement does not have the right to arrest people, including Russian citizens, on Armenian territory.[23] Sakunts called the arrest an "attack on the Armenian legal system and against Armenia as a sovereign state."^[24] Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor called on the Armenian government, Prosecutor General's Office, and other law enforcement agencies to protect Setrakov under Armenian law and initiate criminal proceedings against Russian military police in Armenia to prevent Setrakov's extradition.[25] Armenian government officials have not responded to Setrakov's arrest or Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor's statement at the time of this publication. Russian authorities' arrest of Setrakov may generate criticism of Russia's military presence in Armenia at the 102nd Military Base despite recent statements from Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Mnatsakan Safaryan that Armenia is not considering leaving the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or discussing the withdrawal of Russia's 102nd Military Base.[26] Armenia has effectively abstained from participation in the CSTO by not attending four recent high-level CSTO events and exercises.[27]

Russian forces conducted a small series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 9 and 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed a Kh-29 missile and Shahed-136 drone on December 9 and that Russian forces struck Velykyi Burluk, Kharkiv Oblast with two S-300 missiles on December 10.[28] The United Kingdom's Ministry of Defense (UK MOD) assessed on December 10 that Russian forces likely conducted the first missile strike series of the anticipated winter strikes campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of December 7.[29] ISW has observed preparations for

Russia's anticipated winter strikes campaign since October 2023 and has also noted relatively larger drone and missile strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure so far in December before the night of December 7.[30] ISW is not currently prepared to forecast a start date of the anticipated winter strike campaign.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova emphasized that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine have not changed, repeating the Kremlin's demand for full Ukrainian political capitulation and Kyiv's acceptance of Russia's military and territorial demands rather than suggesting any willingness to negotiate seriously.
- Zakharova's demand that Ukraine withdraw its troops from "Russian territory" as a necessary prerequisite for the resolution of the war suggests that Russia's maximalist objectives include controlling the entirety of the four oblasts it has illegally annexed parts of.
- The Kremlin continues to express an increasingly anti-Israel position in the Israel–Hamas war despite feigning interest in being a neutral arbitrator in the conflict.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Latin America on December 10 likely in order to secure Latin American support for Ukraine.
- Russian military authorities in Armenia are likely attempting to maintain military power over Armenia amidst the continued deterioration of Armenian-Russian relations.
- Russian forces conducted a small series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 9 and 10.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Russian milbloggers continue to criticize the purported Russian military ban on the use of civilian vehicles for military purposes.
- Russian authorities continue long-term efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian students in occupied Ukraine by directing funding to educational institutions in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 9, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 9, 2023, 6pm ET

Russian forces have likely committed to offensive operations in multiple sectors of the front during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative prior to the Russian presidential elections in March 2024. Russian forces are currently pursuing offensive efforts along much of the frontline in Ukraine, particularly along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border, near Bakhmut, and towards Avdiivka as Ukrainian military officials have repeatedly noted, and Russian forces are also conducting continuous ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] The current pace of fighting across the entire frontline in Ukraine is generally consistent with ISW's standing assessment that Russian forces have been trying to regain the theater-level initiative since at least mid-November 2023.[2] Recent Ukrainian military official statements further suggest that Russian forces have succeeded in seizing the initiative along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border, near Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City axis, while Ukrainian forces maintain the initiative in key areas of southern Ukraine, as evidenced by continued Ukrainian counterattacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast and the sustained, larger-than-usual Ukrainian presence in east bank Kherson Oblast.[3]

It is noteworthy that Russian forces have made a concerted effort to regain the theater-wide initiative and initiate offensive operations during the period of the most difficult weather conditions for mechanized offensive operations in the fall, supporting ISW's long-standing assessment that poor weather conditions may slow but do not stop combat along the frontline.[4] Russian forces likely chose to attempt to regain the initiative during such poor weather because Ukrainian forces had largely deprived Russian forces of the ability to regain the initiative and conduct offensives during the summer period of weather much more conducive to military operations. [5] Russian concern over the impending Ukrainian counteroffensive even preceding the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in early June 2023 kept Russian forces in southern Ukraine in the first half of 2023 on the defensive, depriving them of the ability to pursue offensive opportunities in the south in that period.

Over the past several weeks, Russian forces have continued offensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border despite snow, frost, and mud in eastern Ukraine, and have conducted continuous ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast despite muddy conditions and strong winds throughout most of the south.[6] Large areas of the frontline, particularly in northeastern and eastern Ukraine, are now transitioning into a period of hard freeze as the temperatures drop and the muddy ground freezes over, which will facilitate mechanized operations for both Russian and Ukrainian forces. The fact that Russian forces sought to seize the initiative and pursue offensive operations in early to mid-November 2023, during the most challenging weather conditions of the year, rather than waiting for the hard freeze suggests that Russian forces are under pressure to fully seize and maintain the initiative into the early months of 2024 prior to the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential elections. The Russian command may also have sought to cause the Ukrainian counteroffensive to culminate or to ensure that Ukrainian forces would be unable to resume it early this winter. The timing of events suggests, however, that Kyiv had decided to significantly scale back its counteroffensive operations of its own accord before the Russian offensive operations began.

It remains unclear whether current Russian offensive operations will set conditions for Russian forces to make operationally significant gains in the near future, however. Difficult weather conditions have likely slowed the rate of Russian advance along much of the frontline, increased Russian losses, and further damaged the morale of Russian soldiers. The rate of Russian losses along the entire frontline in Ukraine appear to be close to the rate of Russian force generation, as ISW has previously observed, likely indicating that Russian forces are not amassing uncommitted reserves in preparation for more extensive winter operations.[7]

Ukrainian forces, by contrast, appear to be using this period of challenging weather and ongoing Russian offensive operations to establish and consolidate defensive positions along the parts of the frontline where they have not been conducting counteroffensive operations, thereby conserving

manpower and resources for future offensive efforts. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi recently signaled Ukraine's current intent to increase fortifications and defensive capabilities throughout the theater, particularly in the aforementioned areas of the front where Russian forces are pursuing offensive operations.[8] The establishment of Ukrainian tactical defensive positions will most likely strengthen Ukrainian forces' capabilities to defend against ongoing and costly Russian attacks with fewer forces of their own and/or while suffering fewer casualties in the defense. Furthermore, the establishment of Ukrainian tactical defensive positions may become a springboard for future Ukrainian offensive operations where and when Ukrainian forces choose to re-initiate offensive operations. The establishment of local defensive positions in areas Kyiv is not prioritizing for current or imminent counteroffensive operations is a prudent step and not an indication that Ukraine has abandoned all plans for future counteroffensives.

The Kremlin-backed United Russia party is spearheading Russian President Vladimir Putin's nomination as an independent candidate in the 2024 Russian presidential election, and Putin's re-election campaign initiatives group includes people with a variety of backgrounds and constituencies to create the image of widespread support for Putin's presidency. Putin's re-election campaign initiatives group includes United Russia Secretary Andrei Turchak, Young Guard of United Russia Chairperson Anton Demidov, and other figures from the military, arts, medicine, and sports.[9] Turchak stated that the United Russia party and its All-Russian Popular Front social movement will organize the procedures necessary to nominate Putin, including collecting signatures and conducting his election campaign.[10] The re-election campaign initiatives group also includes Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Sparta" Battalion Commander and Speaker of the DNR Parliament Artem Zhoga, whom the Kremlin portrayed on December 8 in Putin's presidential bid announcement as responsible for prompting Putin to run for re-election.[11] A Russian insider source claimed on December 9 that the Kremlin is considering Zhoga for several high political positions following the 2024 elections, including the Deputy Speaker of the Russian State Duma or the head of the DNR should current DNR Head Denis Pushilin resign or transfer to another position.[12] Zhoga's rapid political advancement, if it occurs, may create tension in the Pushilin-Putin relationship, which may in turn impact aspects of Russia's occupation of Donetsk Oblast during the election cycle.

Multiple Russian political opposition figures have reportedly developed a common campaign strategy for the upcoming presidential campaign cycle aimed at compelling Putin to address topics he seeks to avoid and revealing the breadth of Russian opposition against Putin. Imprisoned opposition figure Alexei Navalny's team announced the Anti-Corruption Foundation's (FBK) election strategy on December 7, which involves calling on Russians to advocate against Putin *en masse* for 100 days leading up to the election and voting for any candidate except for Putin.[13] Former FBK Chairperson Leonid Volkov noted in a statement to opposition outlet *Meduza* on December 9 that many outlets are misreporting the FBK's strategy as simply voting against Putin and stated that the vote alone will not make an impact.[14] Volkov stated that the FBK aims to force Putin to confront difficult topics that he seeks to avoid, such as the Russian war in Ukraine, and noted that these topics are Putin's "weak point." Volkov noted that the FBK does not expect to oust Putin from office through this campaign strategy. Russian politician and opposition figure Maxim Kats stated to *Meduza* on December 9 that he approves of the FBK's strategy and that the next step in this strategy is to develop a united campaign headquarters to combine resources and that many opposition entities have agreed to join and expressed hope that the FBK will also join.[15] Kats stated that this campaign aims to galvanize enough Russians to vote against Putin that they will protest when the Central Election Commission (CEC) falsifies votes in favor of Putin, ultimately revealing to the world, Russian elites, and even Putin himself how many Russians actually oppose Putin. Russian opposition activist Mikhail Khodorkovsky expressed support for the FBK's strategy on December 7, encouraged Russians to boycott voting or cast protest votes as part of a "No to Putin" strategy, and stated that these efforts aim to show Putin that Russians are "tired" of him.[16]

Select Russian milbloggers accused the Armenian government of promoting Russophobic policies that inspire violence against Russian media figures in Armenia on December 9. Russian milbloggers seized on footage of an Armenian man assaulting a Russian social media figure in Yerevan on December 9, claiming that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's "Russophobic policies" and "dehumanization" of Armenian men are inspiring violence against Russians.[17] One milblogger claimed that ethnic Armenians living in Russia should consider the dangers of Pashinyan's policies and warned against the possibility of war between Russia and Armenia.[18] Russian sources, including ultranationalist milbloggers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), previously expressed anger and accused Armenia of targeting Russians following the detention of a pro-Russian blogger in Armenia in September 2023.[19] Perceived crimes against Russian public figures may become a more prominent point of tension within the Russian ultranationalist information space amid the increasingly deteriorating Russia-Armenia relationship. [20]

The European Union (EU) will allow member states to restrict Russian gas imports in an effort to restrain Russian petroleum revenues. The EU Council and Parliament reached a provisional agreement regarding hydrogen and gas market regulations on December 8 that allows EU states to restrict imports of natural gas, including liquified natural gas (LNG), from Russia or Belarus.[21] Bloomberg reported on December 6 that Russia's net oil revenue in October 2023 was the highest since May 2022 and that Russia's domestic oil tanker fleet and "shadow fleet" allowed Russian officials to control exports and increase prices despite the G7's and EU's price cap on Russian petroleum products in established December 2022.[22]

A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian decoy missiles failed to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses during December 8 missile strikes against Kyiv City. The milblogger claimed on December 9 that Russian forces used decoy Kh-55 cruise missiles, which closely resemble the modernized Kh-101 missile variant, to confuse Ukrainian air defenses.[23] The milblogger claimed that Russia's use of decoy missiles explains why Russian missiles did not successfully strike any targets in Kyiv City.[24] The milblogger complained that it is "virtually impossible" for Russian forces to launch enough decoy Kh-55 missiles to overload Ukrainian air defenses due to Russia's limited number of Tu-95 and T-160 bombers.[25] Russian forces previously used Kh-55 missiles along other missile and drone variants as decoys to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses and compensate for dwindling high-precision missile stockpiles.[26] Ukrainian officials have repeatedly emphasized that Ukrainian forces do not have enough air defense systems to cover all areas of Ukraine to the same degree that Ukrainian air defenses currently protect Kyiv.[27] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on December 8 that Russian forces are conducting increased aerial reconnaissance prior to launching large-scale long-range strikes against targets in eastern and southern Ukraine.[28] Mashovets stated that Russian forces conducted seven reconnaissance flights ahead of the December 8 missile strikes, a notable increase compared to one to two flights on the previous days.[29] Russian forces are likely attempting to counter Ukraine's limited air defenses ahead of an anticipated large-scale winter strike campaign.[30]

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rустем Умеров highlighted Ukrainian anti-corruption efforts and preparations for the arrival of F-16 fighter jets in the near future on December 9. Umerov met with US Department of Defense (DoD) Inspector General Robert Storch on December 9 and stated that Ukraine has already begun to work with the Office of the Inspector General on a system to control and prevent violations and crimes involving American security assistance to Ukraine.[31] Umerov also announced on December 9 that Ukraine will soon receive F-16 fighter jets and that Ukraine is already preparing infrastructure for the jets' arrival.[32]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces have likely committed to offensive operations in multiple sectors of the front during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative prior to the Russian presidential elections in March 2024.
- Ukrainian forces, by contrast, appear to be using this period of challenging weather and ongoing Russian offensive operations to establish and consolidate defensive positions along the parts of the frontline where they have not been conducting counteroffensive operations, thereby conserving manpower and resources for future offensive efforts.
- The establishment of local defensive positions in areas Kyiv is not prioritizing for current or imminent counteroffensive operations is a prudent step and not an indication that Ukraine has abandoned all plans for future counteroffensives.
- The Kremlin-backed United Russia party is spearheading Russian President Vladimir Putin's nomination as an independent candidate in the 2024 Russian presidential election, and Putin's re-election campaign initiatives group includes people with a variety of backgrounds and constituencies to create the image of widespread support for Putin's presidency.
- Multiple Russian political opposition figures have reportedly developed a common campaign strategy for the upcoming presidential campaign cycle aimed at compelling Putin to address topics he seeks to avoid and revealing the breadth of Russian opposition against Putin.
- Select Russian milbloggers accused the Armenian government of promoting Russophobic policies that inspire violence against Russian media figures in Armenia on December 9.
- The European Union (EU) will allow member states to restrict Russian gas imports in an effort to restrain Russian petroleum revenues.
- A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian decoy missiles failed to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses during December 8 missile strikes against Kyiv City.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustom Umerov highlighted Ukrainian anti-corruption efforts and preparations for the arrival of F-16 fighter jets in the near future on December 9.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Kremenna.
- Relatives of mobilized Russian military personnel continued to appeal to the Russian government for the return of their relatives from the war in Ukraine.
- The Russian Ministry of Culture continues to orchestrate efforts to Russify Ukrainian children and facilitate their deportation to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 8, 2023

[Click to read the full report with maps](#)

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 8, 2023, 7:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on December 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his presidential bid for 2024 on December 8 in an obviously staged effort to seem that he was running at the request of Russian servicemen. Putin announced that he would run for president in the 2024 elections in conversation with Russian military personnel after the presentation of Gold Star medals in the Grand Kremlin Palace on December 8.[1] Putin quietly announced his presidential campaign after Artem Zhoga, commander of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Sparta" Battalion, claimed that the people of Donbas want him to run in the elections.[2] Zhoga specifically emphasized that Russia needs Putin as president to integrate occupied Ukrainian territories and restore peace. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov absurdly claimed that Putin's announcement was "completely spontaneous" and was "a reaction to people's appeal." [3] Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matvienko similarly framed Putin's announcement as a response to requests from Russians.[4] Russian State Duma Deputy Chairman of the Federal Assembly Sergey Neverov stated that the leading United Russia party "unconditionally supports" Putin's nomination as a presidential candidate and "will do everything for his victory." [5] Russian "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovskiy responded to Putin's announcement, claiming that although the results of the elections are already known, the "process needs to be arranged appropriately." [6] Khodakovskiy claimed that new Russian political energies are emerging - implying that some Russians want to oust Putin - but that Russia does not need such "political games" during wartime. One Russian milblogger claimed that Russians are more concerned about the rising price of eggs than Putin's announcement.[7]

Putin's announcement of his presidential bid in a military setting indicates that his campaign may focus on Russia's war in Ukraine more than ISW previously assessed, although the extent of this focus is unclear at this time. ISW previously assessed that Putin's presidential campaign would likely not focus on the war in Ukraine and instead would focus on domestic stability and criticisms of the West.[8] Putin's presidential bid announcement at a ceremony rewarding Russian military personnel fighting in Ukraine in a conversation with a DNR combatant suggests that the war in Ukraine may play a more significant role in his campaign strategy. These staged circumstances were possibly directed at a very important constituency: Russians directly affected by the war in Ukraine including the roughly 2.2 million military personnel the Kremlin claims are currently under arms, personnel previously wounded, and their relatives (as well as relatives of those killed in action).[9] Relatives of Russian mobilized personnel have recently appealed to the Russian government and military for the release of their relatives from military service and for better treatment of mobilized servicemen in the Russian military, and the Kremlin has repeatedly attempted to censor these groups.[10] These Kremlin censorship attempts suggest that the Kremlin is concerned about the possible negative effects of these protests on Putin's image during the presidential campaign. [11] The Kremlin may be using Putin's military-focused announcement in an attempt to convince this large group of voters that the Russian military will large supports Putin. Putin's announcement may alternatively aim to demonstrate that he has the support of the Russian military in order to make any further discussion of the war in Ukraine during his campaign unnecessary. The Kremlin may have tasked the Russian military with capturing Avdiivka, and possibly Kupyansk, before the March 2024

elections, and this exhibition of the military's support for Putin's candidacy is possibly meant as a hedging strategy should the Russian military be unable to meet these given deadlines.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 7 to 8. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on December 8 that Russian forces launched seven Shahed-131/136 drones and six S-300 missiles on the night of December 7 to 8 and 19 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles against Kyiv Oblast and infrastructure facilities in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on the morning of December 8.[12] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces also launched an Iskander-M ballistic missile against an unspecified target.[13] Ukrainian forces downed five Shahed drones and 14 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles.[14] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Head Oleh Synehubov reported that Russian S-300 missiles struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv City, Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck targets in Pavlohrad, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[15] Kyiv City Military Administration Head Serhii Popko stated that the December 8 strike was the first Russian cruise missile strike launched from a Tu-95MC strategic bomber against Kyiv City since September 20, 2023 -- 79 days ago.[16] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russia has "somewhat restored" its cruise missile stockpiles by not launching large-scale strikes during the fall months.[17]

Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin forecasted on December 7 that there will be "no agreement" between Russia and Ukraine to end the war and "no freeze" of the frontlines in Ukraine, marking a notable shift from Girkin's prior claims that the Russian military intended to "freeze the frontline" until after the Russian presidential elections. Girkin stated during an interview with Russian news outlet *Baza* published on December 7 that the situation in Ukraine has "radically worsened" and that Russia has entered a period of "acute instability." [18] Girkin added that Russia's tactical successes during summer and fall 2023 do not "eliminate or balance" the facts that the war is entering its 21st month and that there is no end in sight. Girkin's interview with *Baza* was almost certainly approved by the Kremlin, and the Kremlin thus likely put constraints on what Girkin could and could not say about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and other topics such as his criminal case, his patron within the *siloviki*, and the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Girkin claimed in a letter on October 9 that he was "99 percent" certain that the Kremlin will decide to "freeze the frontline" until after the 2024 presidential elections and that Russian forces would continue conducting a strategic defense on the existing frontline.[19] Girkin has repeatedly claimed and expressed great concern that there is a faction within the Kremlin in favor of freezing the current frontline in Ukraine competing with another faction in favor of continued Russian offensive operations for influence over Russian President Vladimir Putin.[20]

Girkin may be adjusting his forecast in response to private and/or public indications that Putin has sided with the latter faction. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on November 27 that the West is trying to "freeze" the war in Ukraine to rearm Ukraine for future attacks against Russia and advocated against negotiations, a likely Kremlin-sanctioned acknowledgement of the prolonged Russian war effort.[21] Lavrov also did not promote previous Kremlin information operations feigning interest in negotiations with Ukraine and freezing the war during his speech at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Council of Foreign Ministers on November 30.[22] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin may have strategically allowed Russian opposition party Yabloko founder Grigory Yavlinsky to advocate for a ceasefire in Ukraine during an interview on December 5 to deter factions within the Kremlin that may want to freeze the frontline in Ukraine from publicly or privately voicing their opinions.[23] Girkin's adjusted forecast is yet another indication that Putin retains his maximalist objectives and is unlikely to enter peace negotiations with Ukraine, except to buy time to reconstitute for future offensive operations.[24]

The Russian military has reportedly banned the use of civilian cars for military purposes likely as part of ongoing formalization efforts, sparking criticisms from Russian milbloggers. Russian milbloggers and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Deputy Information Minister Daniil Bezsonov circulated an image of a putative Russian military order stating that the Russian military command prohibited Russian forces from using personal and humanitarian vehicles and that any vehicles from civilian government entities need to be logged on a military unit's balance sheet.[25] The order also allegedly bans Russian soldiers who are not mechanics or who lack driver's licenses from driving the vehicles. This measure, if reports are accurate, likely supports Russian formalization efforts to centralize administrative control over Russian military supplies, especially those not provided by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). This measure would also impact grassroots Russian efforts to provide Russian frontline soldiers with supplies, including civilian or dual-use vehicles.

The Russian information space largely criticized these alleged reforms as unnecessary and harmful. Bezsonov and Russian milbloggers claimed that this order will hinder Russian military movement, supplies and ammunition deliveries, and casualty evacuations, and will thus ultimately demoralize military personnel. Bezsonov claimed that this order is unreasonable because some DNR personnel have been trying to register their cars with the Russian MoD for a year and instead called for the Russian military to eliminate bureaucracy to make soldiers' lives easier.[26] A milblogger claimed that Russian military personnel do not want to register their cars with the Russian military because the command will not allow a soldier to deregister a car and will then commandeer the car as MoD property.[27] Russian milbloggers have resisted prior Russian formalization efforts that impose greater rules on Russian military personnel, including requiring soldiers to register personal cars with their units and establishing grooming standards about beards.[28]

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is expanding its ability to guard Russian officials and entities abroad likely to better surveil Russian and international actors outside of Russian territory. The FSB published amendments to its regulations on December 8 that allow it to offer protection services for various Russian representative offices and Russian companies in addition to the Russian diplomatic institutions to which the FSB already offers service.[29] The FSB would guard such entities, which could include trade and commercial entities, through a mutual agreement and at the entity's expense.[30] The FSB claimed to have made the amendments in response to the "growing number of protests and demonstrations" in front of Russian government and business offices abroad.[31]

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to artificially alter the demographic composition of occupied Ukraine. The Ukrainian Helsinki Union on Human Rights – a union composed of 26 human rights-focused nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – reported on December 6 that Russian authorities have resettled up to 800,000 Russian citizens in occupied Crimea and forced around 100,000 Ukrainian citizens to leave Crimea since 2014.[32] The Union reported that Russian authorities relied on policies such as preferential mortgage lending, relocation of Russian officials and their families, expulsion of Ukrainian citizens to mainland Ukraine, and "encouragement" of Ukrainian citizens to move to Russia to free up residences in Crimea and encourage Russian citizens to resettle.[33] The Union reported that Russian occupation authorities in other areas are implementing similar repopulation efforts. The Union reported that Russian authorities are currently struggling to encourage Russians to resettle in occupied Crimea due to the high intensity of hostilities near Crimea, however.[34]

Ukraine's partners continued to announce military and financial aid packages to Ukraine recently. Germany announced on December 7 that it delivered aid to Ukraine, including 1,750 155mm artillery shells, 10 reconnaissance drones, 70 grenade launchers, and 100,000 first aid kits.[35] Japanese Prime Minister Fumio

Kishida also pledged \$4.5 billion to Ukraine, including \$1 billion in humanitarian aid to support Ukraine's recovery efforts and \$3.5 billion to fund credit guarantees for World Bank loans to Ukraine.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his presidential bid for 2024 on December 8 in an obviously staged effort to seem that he was running at the request of Russian servicemen.
- Putin's announcement of his presidential bid in a military setting indicates that his campaign may focus on Russia's war in Ukraine more than ISW previously assessed, although the extent of this focus is unclear at this time.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 7 to 8.
- Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin forecasted on December 7 that there will be "no agreement" between Russia and Ukraine to end the war and "no freeze" of the frontlines in Ukraine, marking a notable shift from Girkin's prior claims that the Russian military intended to "freeze the frontline" until after the Russian presidential elections.
- The Russian military has reportedly banned the use of civilian cars for military purposes likely as part of ongoing formalization efforts, sparking criticisms from Russian milbloggers.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is expanding its ability to guard Russian officials and entities abroad likely to better surveil Russian and international actors outside of Russian territory.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to artificially alter the demographic composition of occupied Ukraine.
- Ukraine's partners continued to announce military and financial aid packages to Ukraine recently.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Udmurt Republic Head Alexander Brechalov announced on December 7 that the region formed and will soon deploy four new units to fight in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 8 that Russia is trying to destroy Ukrainian children's connection to Ukraine and that swift intervention is necessary to maintain this connection during a speech at the first meeting of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line on December 8 and reportedly made unconfirmed advances. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced east of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and near Synkivka (9km east of Kupyansk) and Bilohorivka (13km south of Kremenna), although ISW has not observed visual evidence of these claims.[37] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks in the Kupyansk direction near Synkivka and Ivanivka (20km southwest of Kupyansk) and in the Lyman direction near Spirne (25km south of Kremenna) and Terny (17km west of Kremenna).[38] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated that Russian forces are also attacking near Veselye (31km south of Kremenna).[39] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces intensified offensive operations in the Lyman direction.[40] Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 283rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (144th Motorized Rifle Division, 20th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) unsuccessfully attacked east of Terny; elements of the 228th Motorized Rifle Regiment (90th Guards Tank Division, Central Military District) unsuccessfully attacked between Dibrova (6km southwest of Kremenna) and Kuzmyne (3km southwest of Kremenna); and elements of the 7th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps) unsuccessfully attacked Bilohorivka from the southeast.[41] One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are also attacking from Dibrova towards Yampolivka (17km west of Kremenna) and near the Serebryanske forest area (10km southwest of Kremenna).[42]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line on December 8. Russian Western Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Sergei Zybinsky claimed on December 8 that Russian forces repelled five Ukrainian attacks near Synkivka and Lake Lyman northwest of Synkivka, and Russian Central Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Alexander Savchuk claimed that Russian forces repelled two Ukrainian attacks near Yampolivka.[43]

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances on December 8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 8 that Ukrainian forces continued assault operations south of Bakhmut.[44] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the Bakhmut direction near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) on December 8.[45]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut but did not make any confirmed advances on December 8. Russian milbloggers claimed on December 7 and 8 that Russian forces advanced to the eastern outskirts of Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut); south of the Berkivka reservoir (about 2km northwest of Bakhmut) and Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut); in the heights north of Klishchiivka; and towards Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).[46] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 8 that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Bohdanivka, Ivanivske, Klishchiivka, and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[47] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps [AC], Northern Fleet [NF]) are operating near Bohdanivka.[48] Another Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division and the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade are operating near the Berkivka reservoir.[49] Russian sources claimed that elements of the Russian 346th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff Main Directorate [GRU]), 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps), and Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces are operating near Klishchiivka.[50]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Avdiivka and made a confirmed advance on December 8. Geolocated footage published on December 8 indicates that Russian forces advanced to the sewage treatment plant south of Krasnohorivka (5km northwest of Avdiivka).[51] Russian sources claimed on December 7 and 8 that Russian forces advanced towards Novokalynove (13km northeast of Avdiivka), to the outskirts of the Avdiivka Coke Plant northwest of Avdiivka, and in the industrial zone southeast of Avdiivka.[52] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 8 that Russian forces are consolidating positions in Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka) and are clearing the settlement, whereas another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces maintain positions on the eastern outskirts of Stepove.[53] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked east of Novobakhmutivka (9km northwest of Avdiivka); south of Tonenke (5km west of Avdiivka); and near Stepove, Avdiivka, and Pervomaiske (10km southwest of Avdiivka).[54] Russian sources claimed on December 7 and 8 that Russian forces also attacked north of the Avdiivka Coke Plant and near Ocheretyne (15km northwest of Avdiivka), Novokalynove, Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), and the industrial zone.[55] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 8 that positional battles are ongoing in the Vodyane (7km southwest of Avdiivka) and Tonenke directions.[56] A Russian source claimed that difficult weather conditions have slowed the tempo of both Russian and Ukrainian operations near Avdiivka.[57] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that there are more than 40,000 Russian troops fighting in the Avdiivka direction and that Russian forces are redeploying reserves from Storm-Z units and mobilized personnel who lack training and provisions to the area in order to make up for losses.[58]

A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked west of Donetsk City in Marinka (on the western outskirts of Donetsk City) on December 8.[59]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations west and southwest of Donetsk City but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances on December 8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Krasnohorivka (directly west of Donetsk City), Marinka, Pobieda (5km southwest of Donetsk City), and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City).[60] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces do not completely control Marinka and that fighting is ongoing in the northwestern part of the settlement.[61]

Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces reportedly continued limited offensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 8 but did not advance. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces attacked near Staromayorske and Urozhaine (both about 9km south of Velyka Novosilka) as well as Zolota Nyva (11km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[62] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces did not conduct any ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, however.[63]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 8 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Robotyne, west of Verbove (9km east of Robotyne), and west of Novofedorivka (21km southeast of Orikhiv).[64] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces also repelled Ukrainian attacks near Nesteryanka (11km southwest of Orikhiv) and Uspenivka (11km southeast of Orikhiv).[65] Some Russian milbloggers claimed that poor weather conditions prevent both Russian and Ukrainian forces from making significant advances or operating large reconnaissance drones in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[66] Russian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 8 and recently advanced. Geolocated footage published on December 7 shows that Russian forces made an advance south of Robotyne towards Novoprokopivka (2km south of Robotyne).[67] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 8 that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Robotyne and west of Verbove.[68] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces are taking advantage of the reduced tempo of Ukrainian offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast to reorganize their force grouping and create operational reserves but noted that Russian forces currently cannot allocate significant resources to these reserves.[69]

Ukrainian forces continued ground operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on December 8. Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting continues in Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) and that Ukrainian forces have increased the tempo of operations in the area.[70] A milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces temporarily advanced south of Krynyk before Russian artillery fire forced Ukrainian forces back again on December 7-8.[71] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces thwarted multiple Ukrainian attempts to land sabotage and reconnaissance groups on the east bank between December 3 and 8.[72] Other milbloggers claimed on December 8 that Russian forces are increasing the intensity of glide bomb strikes against Ukrainian positions in this area.[73] Another milblogger claimed that Russian forces have changed defensive tactics in east bank Kherson Oblast and are now trying to exhaust Ukrainian personnel on the east bank with heavy air and artillery strikes.[74]

Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)

Udmurt Republic Head Alexander Brechalov announced on December 7 that the region formed and will soon deploy four new units to fight in Ukraine.[75] Brechalov stated that the newly-formed "Yevgeniy Dragunov" Separate Anti-Aircraft Missile Battalion, the "Cheptsya" Anti-Aircraft Missile Division, the "Varmun" Motorized Battalion, and the "Kama" Air Assault (VDV) Division will soon deploy to Ukraine. Brechalov claimed that Udmurt residents staffed these new units after signing unspecified contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). These units appear to be Russian irregular formations with unknown strengths that likely do not

correspond with the doctrinal end strengths of their reported echelons. Authorities in the Republic of Udmurtia are likely recruiting local volunteers to staff these units to immediately reinforce the frontlines in Ukraine.

The Russian MoD claimed that Russia further simplified the procedure for issuing combat veteran certificates for participants of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian MoD announced on December 8 that Russian fighters will no longer need to apply to receive their veteran certificates because the MoD will automatically issue these certificates based on the already-available information about the combatant.^[76] The simplification of this procedure may be part of an ongoing Russian formalization effort that seeks to reestablish Russia's administrative control over irregular forces involved in the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russian regional authorities continued efforts to forcibly coerce migrants into military service. Russian opposition and local outlets reported that Udmurt military police raided a migrant community in Izhevsk and reportedly will force migrant men aged 18 to 27 into military service.^[77] Udmurt officials are reportedly offering to allow migrant men older than 27 to sign a contract with the Russian MoD to fight in Ukraine. Vladivostok City officials reportedly conducted a similar raid on migrant taxi drivers and issued summonses to the military registration office to 10 detained migrants.^[78] BBC's Russia service reported that Russian officials also recruited detained migrants who attempted to cross the Russian-Finnish border to fight in Ukraine before returning some of these migrants to the Republic of Karelia from Rostov Oblast.^[79] BBC's Russia service reported that some migrants refused to deploy to Ukraine after realizing that Russia intended to commit them to battle in exchange for dropping their deportation cases.

Russia reportedly continues to defend its border with Ukraine with a limited number of conscripts. A Russian conscript told Russian outlet *Mozhem Obyasnit* (*We Can Explain*) that there are almost no Russian border guards defending the Russian state border in Bryansk Oblast.^[80] The conscript claimed that at least 10 conscripts had died as a result of shelling on the Russian-Ukrainian state border.

Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian forces are trying to copy Ukrainian naval drones that have been targeting the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF).^[81] GUR Representative Andriy Yusov stated that Russian forces are collecting fragments of Ukrainian naval drones and are trying to improve their drone production.

A Ukrainian head of a volunteer organization stated that Russia is actively relying on automatic optical drone navigation and that Ukraine does not have a systematic way to counteract Russian automation.^[82] Head of the Ukrainian "Victory Drones" volunteer initiative (and director of the Aerointelligence Support Center) Maria Berlinskaya stated that Russia is increasingly trying to automate its drones, shift towards automatic optical navigation, and move to launching "drone swarms" to overwhelm Ukrainian forces. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have launched 3,083 Shahed 136/131 drones since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine based on data published by the Ukrainian General Staff.^[83]

A Russian milblogger amplified footage purporting to show that Russian forces installed the first sets of "Soltik-BL" DMR AES256 radio communications systems for armored vehicles, which will allow these vehicles to receive a publicly available standard connection with relay capability.^[84] The milblogger specified that volunteers produced the "Soltik-BL" DMR AES256 systems.

Radio Liberty's Schemes project found that Russian security services spied on Ukrainian state and private infrastructures since 2014 via thousands of security cameras that operated on Russian "TRASSIR" software belonging to the Russian "DSSL" company.^[85] *Schemes* found that the companies storing information from these security cameras are linked to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 8 that Russia is trying to destroy Ukrainian children's connection to Ukraine and that swift intervention is necessary to maintain children's Ukrainian identity during a speech at the first meeting of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children.^[86] Zelensky stated that forced deportation is one of Russia's most "cynical" war crimes and that Russian authorities are teaching children lies about Ukraine and the war. Zelensky noted that Russia's crimes against Ukrainian children and families are "organized" efforts to erase the national identity of young Ukrainians. ISW continues to assess that Russia's forced deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children likely constitutes a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.^[87]

Russian state news wire *RIA Novosti* reported that Russian officials detained Russian "Donbas Railways" Director Vladimir Kabatsyi in Donetsk City on December 8 under suspicion of abuse of power.^[88]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russia will not negotiate with Ukraine on Ukraine's terms in response to US Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer on December 8. Finer stated that the US wants to position Ukraine in such a way that Russia will need to decide to negotiate on Ukraine's terms or confront a stronger Ukraine by the end of 2024.^[89] Peskov responded by stating that Finer's comments are "absolutely unrealistic."^[90] The Kremlin consistently signals that it is not interested in any negotiations that do not offer Russia full capture of Ukraine.

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger criticized the Russian government for missing an opportunity to provide Kyrgyzstan with Russian school textbooks to further spread Russian ideology in Central Asia.^[91] The milblogger commented on Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Kyrgyzstan Akylbek Japarov's announcement that Kyrgyzstan will replace Soviet STEM and hard sciences textbooks with textbooks from Oxford and Cambridge.^[92] The milblogger claimed that Kyrgyzstan is now increasingly advocating for the Kyrgyz language and national identity and noted that Russian officials' inaction allowed the United Kingdom to occupy an "extremely important niche" in the Kyrgyz education sphere.^[93]

Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with United Arab Emirates (UAE) President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan on December 8.[94] Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Al Nahyan on December 6.[95]

Belarusian military officials met with Egyptian officials on December 8 during the International Exhibit for Defense and Military Industries (EDEX-2023) in Cairo, Egypt. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced that a Belarusian military delegation, headed by Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces Commander Major General Andrei Lukyanovich, met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Egyptian Air Force Commander Air Marshal Mahmoud Foaad Abd El-Gawad, and Egyptian Air Defense Forces Commander Lieutenant General Mohamed Hegazy Abdul Mawgoud in Egypt to discuss bilateral military cooperation and the modernization of air defense systems.[96]

Belarusian military officials, including Assistant to the Belarusian Defense Minister for International Military Cooperation Colonel Valery Revenko, attended the Commonwealth of Independent State's (CIS) Coordination Meeting on International Military Cooperation in Moscow on December 8.[97]

A Russian milblogger claiming to be affiliated with the Wagner Group amplified footage on December 7 claiming to show elements of the Belarusian "Typhoon" Spetsnaz Detachment of military unit 5522 training with Wagner instructors.[98]

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.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 7, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 7, 2023, 6:45pm ET

Russian forces may be suffering losses along the entire front in Ukraine at a rate close to the rate at which Russia is currently generating new forces. Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on December 7 that Russian forces lost almost 11,000 personnel (presumably killed or rendered hors de combat by injury) in the Kupyansk, Lyman, and Bakhmut directions in November 2023.[1] The operational tempo in the Kupyansk, Lyman, and Bakhmut directions is currently lower than in the Avdiivka direction. These reported losses suggest that the Russian casualty rate in the Avdiivka area may be even higher given the higher operational tempo there. Ukrainian officials previously reported that Russian forces lost 5,000 personnel killed and wounded near Avdiivka and Marinka (west of Donetsk City) between October 10 and 26, when Russian forces launched two waves of heavily mechanized assaults to capture Avdiivka.[2] Russian forces are currently conducting mass infantry-led assaults to capture Avdiivka in an apparent effort to conserve armored vehicles despite the risk of even greater manpower losses.[3] Ukrainian officials have notably indicated that Russian defensive efforts are resulting in significant casualties as well, with Ukrainian forces reportedly killing over 1,200 Russian personnel and wounding over 2,200 on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast between October 17 and November 17.[4] Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and are likely inflicting similar losses on defending Russian forces in this sector of the front. ISW cannot confirm Ukrainian-provided Russian casualty figures, and reliable figures for Russian casualties in Ukraine are not available. If the Ukrainian-provided figures are generally accurate they suggest that Russian operations in Ukraine are highly attritional overall and that high Russian losses are not just the result of the costliest Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka.

Russian and Ukrainian officials have reported that Russian crypto-mobilization efforts produce roughly 20,000 to 40,000 personnel a month, a rate that could be lower than Russia's current casualty rate in Ukraine.[5] Ukrainian officials reported in spring and summer 2023 that Russia recruits roughly 20,000 personnel through crypto-mobilization efforts per month.[6] Ukrainian officials have reported that the Russian force grouping along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast front has roughly not changed since summer 2023, suggesting that the commitment of new personnel to the area is offsetting Russian losses but not increasing the strength of that grouping.[7] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev previously claimed that the Russian military recruited 42,000 personnel between November 9 and December 1.[8] Ukrainian figures for Russian casualties along the front suggest that Russian monthly casualties could exceed the 20,000 monthly recruitment figure and may be even close to Medvedev's much higher figure. Russian operations in Ukraine recently prompted the Russian military command to rush newly created and understrength formations to Ukraine to reinforce sectors of the front, impeding longer-term efforts to form operational and strategic reserves and restructure the Russian ground forces.[9] Both recruiting and casualty figures likely fluctuate over the course of the year, and all available figures are likely exaggerated. The reported numbers match observed battlefield conditions, however, as well as other Ukrainian reports that the Russian military has only been able to sustain its current manning level in Ukraine despite its reportedly high numbers of new recruits. **High Russian casualties will likely prevent Russian forces from fully replenishing and reconstituting existing units in Ukraine and forming new operational and strategic reserves if Russian force generation efforts continue at current rates while the Russian military continues operations. Russia does appear able to continue absorbing such losses and making them good with new recruits, however, as long as President Vladimir Putin is willing and able to absorb the domestic consequences.**

Russian forces conducted another series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 6 to 7. Ukrainian military sources reported on December 7 that Ukrainian forces downed 15 of 18 Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones that primarily targeted Khmelnytskyi and Odesa oblasts.[10] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones struck port infrastructure in Izmail Raion, Odesa Oblast, damaging a warehouse and a grain elevator.[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian drones also struck the Starokostyantyniv airfield, Khmelnytskyi Oblast and other targets in Odesa Oblast.[12] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Russian forces do not have enough resources to strike Ukrainian energy infrastructure on a larger scale than last winter.[13]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package and joint weapons production pledge to Ukraine against the backdrop of the International Forum for Defense Industries (DFNC1) in Washington, D.C. on December 6-7. The DoD announced a new aid package on December 6 that is valued at up to \$175 million and includes: AIM-9M and AIM-7 missiles; High-speed Anti-radiation (HARM) missiles; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; artillery ammunition; and additional unspecified equipment.[14] The DoD also announced that the US and Ukraine signed a statement of intent regarding the joint production of critical weapons and the priority exchange of technical data.[15] US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated that the partnership will allow Ukraine to produce spare parts for US-provided military equipment and return repaired equipment to the front lines faster.[16] The White House stated that the US will send an advisor to Ukraine's Ministry of Strategic Industries to help accelerate Ukraine's interoperability with NATO, combat corruption, and attract foreign investment in critical industries.[17] Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov met with Austin on December 7 and advocated for continued US support for Ukraine in 2024.[18]

Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed developing Russian-Iranian economic relations with Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in Moscow on December 7. Putin stated that trade between Russia and Iran grew by 20 percent in 2023 and reached over five billion dollars.[19] Putin reported that Russia and Iran are constructing a railway line along an unspecified section of the North-South Corridor (a planned railway route that will connect Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran).[20] Putin also announced that he and Raisi intend to sign an agreement establishing a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) at the end of December 2023.[21] The continued progress on the North-South Corridor and the planned establishment of an EEU-Iranian free trade zone are likely part of continued Russian efforts to procure Iranian materiel support for Russian operations in Ukraine while facilitating both Russian and Iranian sanctions evasion efforts. Putin also noted the "importance [for him and Raisi] to exchange views on the situation in the region, especially in Palestine" and commended Iranian-Russian energy and education cooperation.[22] Putin met with Omani Crown Prince and Minister of Culture, Sports, and Youth Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tariq Al Said on December 7 on the sidelines of the "Russia Calling!" investment forum in Moscow, likely a continuation of bilateral meetings with Persian Gulf State leaders after Putin's December 6 meetings in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.[23]

Attacks on public figures in Russia have prompted officials to propose increased security measures for Russian political and public figures and some ultranationalists to call for the resurrection of Soviet security organizations. Russian Federation Council Deputy Speaker Konstantin Kosachev announced on December 7 that the Federation Council will prepare proposals on the protection of Russian and political figures by December 13.[24] Kosachev's announcement comes immediately after the assassination of former pro-Russian Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada deputy Ilya Kiva in Moscow Oblast on December 6, and Kosachev claimed that Russia and the international community need to prepare "much more systemic actions" to protect prominent Russians from Ukrainian attacks.[25] Kiva's assassination is the latest in a series of attacks targeting high profile pro-Russian figures, including the assassinations of Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky) in April 2023 and Daria Dugina, the daughter of Russian political commentator Alexander Dugin in August 2022.[26]

Some prominent ultranationalist voices have begun calling for Russia to bolster its counterintelligence agencies with powers reminiscent of SMERSH, the umbrella organization for three Soviet military counterintelligence agencies formed in the wake of the German invasion of Russia in 1941. Russian State Duma Deputy and former Southern Military District Commander Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev has consistently claimed since August 2022 that Russia needs to "recreate" SMERSH within the bounds of existing counterintelligence organizations.[27] Gurulev claimed on December 3 that Russia has instituted an unspecified organization that "operates approximately in the same way [as SMERSH]" in occupied Ukraine but claimed that Russia still needs a similar organization to protect Russia itself.[28] Some prominent Russian milbloggers issued similar calls for Russia to recreate SMERSH and criticized Russian counterintelligence services for allowing attacks in Russia, including Kiva's assassination, to occur.[29] Reestablishing SMERSH as it existed during the Soviet era would be a technically challenging undertaking, as the governmental structure of the contemporary Russian Federation is not comparable with that of Stalinist Russia. The reestablishment of SMERSH would require the Russian state to develop a pervasive Soviet-style counterintelligence and internal policing system that currently does not exist in Russia. Although the reestablishment of a Soviet-style SMERSH organization in Russia remains unlikely, the ultranationalists' calls for reestablishing SMERSH is significant, as they demonstrate the ultranationalists' advocacy for reestablishing elements of totalitarian Soviet-style governance that has not existed in Russia for decades.

The Russian Federation Council adopted a resolution confirming that the upcoming Russian presidential elections will occur on March 17, 2024, amid continued Kremlin efforts to legitimize the elections.[30] Russian state-owned polling institution All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) released a poll on December 7 detailing Russians' interests in participating in the upcoming Russian presidential elections. VTsIOM claimed that 78 percent of total respondents stated that they will vote in the presidential elections, including 61 percent who stated "with full confidence" that they will vote, while only eight percent of participants indicated that they are "not yet ready to vote." [31] VTsIOM claimed that 36 percent of Russians could name the exact date, month, or time of year in which upcoming elections will occur, despite the recency of the Federation Council's confirmation of the election date.[32] Independent Russian polling organization Levada Center published the results of a similar poll on December 7. The Levada Center reported that only 33 percent of participants "absolutely" intend to vote in the upcoming Russian presidential elections, while 33 percent would "most likely vote." [33] The Levada Center also reported that 20 percent of respondents stated that they would not vote.[34] The Russian government is likely attempting to set conditions to legitimize the upcoming presidential elections by reporting an inaccurately high percentage of voter interest that will likely correspond with a similarly fabricated high voter turnout.

Russian security organs conducted mass arrests targeting high-profile gangs in Moscow and St. Petersburg, including members and co-conspirators within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and other internal security organs. The MVD announced on December 6 that it detained MVD and Rosgvardia personnel who are members of a high-profile gang that had been committing crimes, including murders, kidnappings, and robberies, in Moscow and Kaluga oblasts and Krasnoyarsk Krai since 1998.[35] The MVD claimed that those arrested include Special Rapid Reaction Squad (SOBR) "Lynx" detachment Chief of Staff Alexey Alpatov and that the Moscow gang's leader previously lived in Ukraine and would visit Russia to coordinate activities until his arrest in spring 2023.[36] A Russian source claimed on December 7 that SOBR forces conducted a search of the 59th MVD Department in Vyborg Raion, St. Petersburg, as part of an investigation into MVD patronage of an ethnic-based gang.[37] The source claimed some MVD personnel in the 59th Department were protecting members of an Azerbaijani criminal gang operating in St. Petersburg.[38] Russian milbloggers have expressed increasing hostility towards alleged Azerbaijani criminal gangs and other ethnic groups during a general period of heightened ethnic tensions within Russia. Both the Moscow and St. Petersburg raids allow Russian security organs to consolidate internal control against dissidents and corruption while setting informational conditions to portray foreigners – including those from Ukraine, the south Caucasus, and Central Asian states – as threats to Russian internal security that Russia must extinguish.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces may be suffering losses along the entire front in Ukraine at a rate close to the rate at which Russia is currently generating new forces.
- Russia does appear able to continue absorbing such losses and making them good with new recruits, however, as long as President Vladimir Putin is willing and able to absorb the domestic consequences.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package and joint weapons production pledge to Ukraine against the backdrop of the International Forum for Defense Industries (DFNC1) in Washington, D.C. on December 6-7.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed developing Russian-Iranian economic relations with Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in Moscow on December 7.
- Attacks on public figures in Russia have prompted officials to propose increased security measures for Russian political and public figures and some ultranationalists to call for the resurrection of Soviet security organizations.
- The Russian Federation Council adopted a resolution confirming that the upcoming Russian presidential elections will occur on March 17, 2024, amid continued Kremlin efforts to legitimize the elections.
- Russian security organs conducted mass arrests targeting high-profile gangs in Moscow and St. Petersburg, including members and co-conspirators within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and other internal security organs.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and marginally advanced near Avdiivka.
- Russian authorities continue to rebuff appeals from the relatives of mobilized Russian military personnel.
- Ukrainian partisans and residents in occupied territories continue to provide Ukrainian officials with targeting information.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 6, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 6, 2023, 6:50pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on December 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov credited Western security assistance for empowering Ukrainian forces to liberate half of the territory that Russia occupied since February 24, 2022.[1] Umerov credited Western security assistance for previous Ukrainian counteroffensive success during an interview with Fox News on December 5 and stated that the Ukrainian forces have a plan for 2024.[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on November 8 that the Ukrainian forces have planned for several paths of future advance in 2024 to liberate more of the occupied territories.[3] ISW continues to assess that Ukraine must liberate strategically vital areas still under Russian occupation to ensure Ukraine's long-term security and economic viability.[4] Umerov also stated that Ukraine plans to conduct all calculations for procurement, acquisition, planning, and operations according to NATO standards and that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) first priority is Ukraine's accession to NATO.[5] The adoption of NATO standards throughout the Ukrainian military and defense establishment will facilitate NATO oversight of current and future Western security assistance to Ukraine.

Russian forces conducted a notably large series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 5 to 6. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 50 Shahed-131/136 from Kursk Oblast and Cape Chauda in occupied Crimea and that Ukrainian air defenses downed 41 Shaheds.[6] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down Russian drones in Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, Kirovohrad, and Zhytomyr oblasts.[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia to meet with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman in a series of bilateral meetings on December 6. Putin and Al Nahyan discussed Russia's role in OPEC+, the construction of a Russian school in the UAE, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war, and other bilateral issues during a meeting in the UAE.[8] Putin stated during his meeting with Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia that Russian-Saudi relations reached a new level over the past seven years under the guidance of Mohammed bin Salman and his father.[9] Putin noted the "very good" political and economic relations between the two countries and the need to "exchange information and assessments" about what is happening in the region, likely referring to the Israel-Hamas War. Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Putin and Mohammed bin Salman met for three hours and paid particular attention to the North-South transport corridor and energy issues.[10] Putin's meetings in the UAE and Saudi Arabia and upcoming meeting with Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi on December 7 are likely focused on strengthening Russia's position with the Gulf States while continuing to solidify the deepening Russian-Iranian security partnership.

Russian oil revenues continue to increase due to a concerted Russian effort to skirt the G7 price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products. Bloomberg reported on December 6 that Russia made \$11.3 billion in revenue from the sale of crude oil and petroleum products in October 2023, the highest level of Russian oil and petroleum revenue since May 2022 and above the monthly Russian oil and petroleum revenues in the year before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[11] The October 2023 oil and petroleum revenues reportedly represented 31 percent of revenues in the Russian federal budget for the month.[12] The G7 and the EU introduced a \$60 price cap on Russian crude oil and price caps for other Russian petroleum products in December 2022, and the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air reported on December 5, 2023, that this cap immediately led to a 45 percent decrease in Russian oil and petroleum revenues in January 2023.[13] Russian officials undid the impacts of the G7 price cap in 2023 by increasingly relying on aging oil tankers with obscure ownership and insurance from unknown or non-Western sources in order to build a "shadow fleet" to transfer and sell crude oil and petroleum products above the price cap.[14] Bloomberg reported that Russia's domestic oil tanker fleet and "shadow fleet" transferred over 70 percent of Russian oil cargoes in the first nine months of 2023, allowing Russian officials to exert more control over oil exports and progressively increase prices.[15] The Kremlin likely hopes that engagement with OPEC+ on

agreed upon output cuts can allow Russian officials to further increase oil prices and continue to buoy federal budget revenues in an effort to manage the increasing Russian federal deficit associated with the war in Ukraine.[16]

Bloomberg added that ships with Greek ownership have transferred roughly 20 percent of Russian oil shipments in 2023, but did so under the G7 price cap.[17] Greek officials reportedly lobbied the EU to water down measures that would have resulted in more stringent restrictions on shipping companies' ability to trade with Russia. [18] Three major Greek shipping firms stopped transporting Russian oil in November 2023 following the initial imposition of US sanctions on third party shipping firms helping Russia to skirt the G7 price cap in October 2023.[19]

Russian society appears interested in discussing the outcome of the war in Ukraine despite the Kremlin's increasing aversion to more in-depth public discussions of the war. Independent Russian polling organization Levada Center released a poll on December 5 detailing the questions Russians want to ask Russian President Vladimir Putin during the upcoming "Direct Line" forum on December 14. The Levada Center found that 21 percent of all questions in the open-ended poll pertained to the end and outcome of the war in Ukraine.[20] Levada Center reported that questions in this category included questions about the timeframe for an end to the war, the end of mobilization, and the possibility of peace or a Russian victory.[21] Levada Center noted that the second and third most frequent questions asked, accounting for 8 percent of responses each, pertained to pensions and social programs.[22] The poll indicates that the Russian public continues to have questions about the end and outcome of the war despite the Russian government's attempts to silence anti-war rhetoric and protests to mobilization. The Russian public's continued questions about the timeline for an end to the war and mobilization and the prospects for peace are consistent with recent independent Russian polling indicating that Russians increasingly support a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and showing that over half of Russian respondents believe that Russia should begin peace negotiations with Ukraine.[23] Putin will reportedly center his presidential campaign on Russia's alleged domestic stability and increased criticism of the West instead of focusing on the war, so it is unclear if Putin intends to address questions about the war during the "Direct Line" event, which will likely serve as the launch of Putin's 2024 presidential campaign.[24] The Kremlin also appears to be increasingly implementing measures to ensure that Putin's actual electoral success does not depend on battlefield successes and domestic force generation efforts.[25]

Unspecified actors killed former pro-Russian Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada deputy Ilya Kiva in Moscow Oblast on December 6. The Russian Main Investigative Directorate for Moscow Oblast stated on December 6 that unspecified actors killed Kiva in Suponevo, Odintsovo urban raion, Moscow Oblast.[26] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported on December 6 that its sources in Ukrainian law enforcement agencies stated that the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) conducted the operation that killed Kiva.[27] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov confirmed Kiva's death and stated that "a similar fate will befall other traitors to Ukraine and henchmen of the Putin regime."^[28] Kiva, who defected to Russia at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely aided a Kremlin-backed COVID-19 disinformation campaign in Ukraine in 2020.[29] A Russian milblogger criticized Russian intelligence services for not preventing alleged SBU personnel from assassinating someone in Russia.[30]

Moscow's 2nd Western Military District Court convicted two Russian air defense officers for negligence for failing to prevent a Ukrainian strike on Russian territory in April 2022, likely to set an example to improve discipline across the Russian military. Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on December 5 that the court sentenced Russian Lieutenant Colonel Anatoly Bondarev and Major Dmitry Dmitrakov to four years in prison for violating article 340 of the Russian Criminal Code (violation of the rules of combat duty to repel a surprise attack on the territory of the Russian Federation).[31] Violations of the Russian rules of combat duty include unauthorized abandonment of a combat post or transfer of such post to anyone; performing combat duties without the permission of the commander on duty; reducing the readiness of military equipment and weapons; and consuming alcohol on duty.[32] The court tried the servicemen in connection with a Ukrainian Tochka-U strike against a Russian ammunition depot in Belgorod Oblast in April 2022, a relatively obscure strike that the Russian command may have chosen to litigate to avoid recalling attention to more high-profile Ukrainian strikes on Russian targets in occupied Ukraine and Russia.[33] Ukrainian forces conducted several drone strikes on Moscow City in July and August 2023, which likely resulted in the detention of the commander of the 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense Army on corruption and bribery charges instead of dereliction of duty charges.[34] *Kommersant*, citing unspecified sources, reported that Russian authorities are conducting large-scale investigations into every successful Ukrainian strike on Russian territory since 2014 and any negligence on the part of the Russian servicemen involved in defending against these strikes.[35] The Russian military command likely intends for the case to set a precedent across the Russian military, and not just for Russian air defenders, to improve discipline among the Russian forces in Ukraine.

Russian officials are reportedly attempting to funnel migrants who have ended up in Russia due to Russia's failed hybrid war tactics on the Russian-Finnish border into ongoing force generation efforts. BBC Russia Service reported on December 6 that Russian military officials are attempting to recruit migrants from the Middle East and Africa whom Russian authorities detained *en masse* along the Russian-Finnish border in mid-November following the closure of Russian-Finnish border crossings.[36] Russian officials are reportedly offering to stay deportations for these migrants if the migrants fight in Ukraine.[37] One migrant reportedly stated that Russian officials immediately transferred migrants who signed military contracts to the Russian-Ukrainian border.[38] Russia artificially created a migrant crisis on the Finnish border as a hybrid warfare tactic meant to destabilize NATO and the EU, but the Finnish response quickly caused the effort to fail.[39] Russian officials appear to be trying to salvage some benefit from the failed effort by recruiting migrants as a part of the widespread crypto-mobilization effort targeting migrants in Russia.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov credited Western security assistance for empowering Ukrainian forces to liberate half of the territory that Russia occupied since February 24, 2022.
- Russian forces conducted a notably large series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 5 to 6.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia to meet with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman in a series of bilateral meetings on December 6.
- Russian oil revenues continue to increase due to a concerted Russian effort to skirt the G7 price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products.
- Russian society appears interested in discussing the outcome of the war in Ukraine despite the Kremlin's increasing aversion to more in-depth public discussions of the war.
- Unspecified actors killed former pro-Russian Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada deputy Ilya Kiva in Moscow Oblast on December 6.
- Moscow's 2nd Western Military District Court convicted two Russian air defense officers for negligence for failing to prevent a Ukrainian strike on Russian territory in April 2022, likely to set an example to improve discipline across the Russian military.

- Russian officials are reportedly attempting to funnel migrants who have ended up in Russia due to Russia's failed hybrid war tactics on the Russian-Finnish border into ongoing force generation efforts.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.
- The Russian State Duma will reportedly consider a bill allowing Russian conscripts to serve in the Federal Security Service's (FSB) Border Service.
- Ukrainian partisans may have conducted an attack in occupied Luhansk City on December 6 that killed Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) People's Council Deputy Oleg Popov.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 5, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 5, 2023, 6:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:10pm ET on December 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian military targets in occupied Crimea on the night of December 4 to 5. Ukrainian media reported on December 5, citing sources in the Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) and Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), that GUR and SBU elements struck a Russian military oil terminal in Feodosia, a Nebo-M radar system near Baherove (13km west of Kerch), and a helicopter landing pad, P-18 Terek radar system, and a Baikal-1M anti-aircraft missile control system in unspecified areas of Crimea.^[1] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian air defenses, electronic warfare (EW) systems, and small-arms fire downed up to 35 Ukrainian drones near Baherove, Feodosia, Cape Chauda, and over the Sea of Azov but did not say that any Ukrainian drones struck their intended targets.^[2] Another group of Russian sources, including Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo, claimed that Russian air defenses downed up to 41 Ukrainian drones over northern Crimea and the Sea of Azov and claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to strike Russian air defense systems and fuel storage facilities.^[3] Ukrainian forces have been conducting an interdiction campaign against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea, primarily Black Sea Fleet assets, since June 2023 to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine.^[4]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine on the night of December 4 and 5. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 17 Shahed-136-131 drones from Kursk Oblast and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and six S-300 missiles at targets in Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 10 of the drones.^[5] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that the Russian missiles targeted civilian objects in Donetsk and Kherson oblasts.^[6] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones struck civilian residences and infrastructure in Lviv Oblast and Izyum and Chuhuiv raions, Kharkiv Oblast.^[7]

The Russian State Duma will reportedly consider a proposed bill that would recognize the Sea of Azov as an internal Russian body of water, likely setting conditions to coerce recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of occupied Crimea and Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Donetsk oblasts. Russian State Duma Deputy representing occupied Crimea Mikhail Sheremet stated on December 5 that the Duma will try to adopt a proposed bill that would formally designate the Sea of Azov as an internal water of Russia by the end of 2023.^[8] Russia and Ukraine signed and ratified a treaty in 2003 and 2004 that included stipulations that the Sea of Azov is a historically internal water of both Russia and Ukraine and that vessels flying Ukrainian or Russian flags in the Sea of Azov enjoy freedom of navigation.^[9] The Ukrainian Rada denounced the treaty in February 2023, stating that Russia had violated the stipulation that all issues concerning the Sea of Azov should be resolved by peaceful, bilateral means and that the treaty's authorization of Russian warships to freely navigate the sea posed a threat to Ukrainian national security.^[10] Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law in June 2023 that also denounced the treaty, claiming that Ukraine lost its status as a littoral state of the Sea of Azov when Russia (illegally) annexed Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts in 2022.^[11] The proposed bill likely portends a series of corresponding Russian administrative measures that would require maritime traffic *en route* to or from ports on the Sea of Azov to formally recognize the sea as a Russian internal body of water and, therefore, to de facto recognize Russia's illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories.

Russian opposition party Yabloko founder Grigory Yavlinsky advocated for a ceasefire in Ukraine as part of his presidential bid on December 5 likely in an attempt to distinguish himself from Russian President Vladimir Putin and give voice to Russians who support a ceasefire. Yavlinsky stated in an interview with Russian state outlet RBK published on December 5 that he believes that it is in Russia's interest to sign a ceasefire agreement with Ukraine as quickly as possible.^[12] Yavlinsky expressed doubt that recent Russian surveys claiming to show that Russians support the war in Ukraine are true given the scale of Russian propaganda, which he believes has created a widespread sense of fear in Russia in the past year and a half.^[13] Yavlinsky stated that he is currently collecting the signatures needed to run in the 2024 presidential election and explained that his sequential presidential platform includes signing a ceasefire and exchanging prisoners of war (POWs) with Ukraine first, releasing political prisoners in Russia second, and beginning to reform the Russian judicial system third.^[14] Yavlinsky advocated against Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022 and called for Russia to withdraw from the war in Syria during his 2018 presidential campaign.^[15] Yavlinsky likely believes that these anti-war positions and the call for a ceasefire are the most direct way to oppose Putin and to garner support from the public. Recent Russian opinion polls indicate that more Russians support a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine than do not and that a majority of Russians believe that Russia should begin peace negotiations with Ukraine.^[16]

The Kremlin may be strategically allowing Yavlinsky to criticize the Russian government in order to preserve its veneer of electoral legitimacy and to delegitimize possible support for a ceasefire among factions in the Kremlin. A Russian insider source claimed on December 4 that Yavlinsky made an agreement with the Russian Presidential Administration that if he were allowed to participate in the 2024 presidential elections, he would criticize the Ukrainian government, especially Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.^[17] The insider source claimed that the Presidential Administration is not against "moderate" criticisms of Russia's war in Ukraine as this can demonstrate that there is a "pluralism of opinions" in Russian presidential elections.^[18] The insider source claimed that the Kremlin would allow Yavlinsky to garner no more than one to 1.5 percent of the vote in the election, which is consistent with Yavlinsky's results in the 2018 presidential elections.

[19] Yavlinsky stated in the *RBK* interview that Russian authorities have sentenced or are investigating other members of the Yabloko party but that this occurs only at the regional level and that he is unsure why the federal government has not shut down Yabloko.[20] The Kremlin is likely refraining from punishing Yavlinsky and Yabloko at the federal level so as to maintain its carefully crafted façade of opposition, democracy, and electoral legitimacy.[21] The Kremlin is also likely allowing Yavlinsky to widely promote the idea of a ceasefire in a state media outlet so as to associate the idea with the “opposition,” thereby likely deterring factions within the Kremlin that may want to freeze the frontline in Ukraine from publicly or privately voicing their opinions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the benefits that migrants provide to the Russian economy, while promoting ongoing efforts to Russify migrants in Russia and citizens of post-Soviet countries at the Russian Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights meeting on December 4. Putin stated that Russian economic demands, including a labor shortage, largely shape policy regarding migrants and noted that Russia must maintain an “ethnocultural balance.”[22] Putin criticized migrants for creating “ethnic enclaves” in Russian cities and failing to register with the Russian military after they acquire Russian citizenship.[23] Putin also stressed that migrants must be linguistically and culturally prepared to work in Russia and must abide by Russian traditions and laws.[24] Putin claimed that 20 to 50 percent of children of migrants have a low level of Russian language proficiency or do not speak Russian at all and noted the Russian government is creating special programs and classes for these children to study the Russian language and integrate into the Russian educational system.[25] Putin also noted that Russia is working with Central Asian and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries to establish Russian schools and teach the Russian language in these countries.[26] The Russian government has continually promoted opening Russian and Russian-speaking schools and universities in post-Soviet countries and has criticized countries for promoting the use of their indigenous languages in educational institutions.[27] Russia likely uses these educational programs and institutions in Russia and abroad to promote Russian narratives and foster a Russian identity among youth.

Russian milblogger and Russian Human Rights Council member Alexander Kots criticized the Russian government for failing to help ethnic Russian citizens of Central Asian countries receive Russian citizenship while granting Russian citizenship to ethnically Central Asian citizens of Central Asian countries.[28] Kots praised the Russian government for granting citizenship to foreigners who served in the Russian military, however.[29] Kots further commended Russian State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtein for successfully requesting that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) grant Uzbek citizen Alexander Babkov temporary asylum in Russia with the future prospect of obtaining Russian citizenship.[30] Babkov, an ethnic Russian from Uzbekistan who allegedly fought in the Wagner Group near Bakhmut and Soledar, reportedly faced deportation to Uzbekistan in January 2024 and feared subsequent imprisonment.[31] An Uzbek court sentenced an Uzbek citizen to prison for fighting in the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) military from 2014–2015, and a Kazakh court sentenced a Kazakh citizen who reportedly served in Wagner to prison on charges of mercenarism.[32] Khinshtein’s intervention on Babkov’s behalf may be a response to increasing calls for the Russian government to protect ethnic Russians abroad, particularly those who served in the Russian military.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will travel to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on December 6 and will host Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in Russia on December 7 — a bout of diplomatic outreach likely focused on strengthening Russia’s position with Gulf States while continuing to solidify the deepening Russian–Iranian security partnership. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated on December 5 that Putin will exchange views on bilateral relations, international agendas, and regional agendas during his meetings with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.[33] Peskov responded to a question about Russian, Saudi, and Emirati oil cooperation and stated that discussions will occur within the OPEC+ framework.[34] OPEC+ members recently agreed on November 30 to cut oil output in early 2024 to stabilize oil prices.[35] Russian Presidential Assistant Yuri Ushakov stated that Putin intends to discuss the Palestinian–Israeli conflict; the war in Ukraine; and conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Sudan during his meetings in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[36] The Kremlin likely aims to use cooperation on oil output and diplomatic engagement on the Israel–Hamas war and other regional conflicts to strengthen engagement with Gulf States while balancing potential Saudi and Emirati concerns about Russia’s increasing reliance on its security partnership with Iran. Peskov and Ushakov stated that Putin will meet with Raisi on December 7, and the Iranian state-owned *Islamic Republic News Agency* stated that Putin and Raisi will also discuss the situation in Palestine.[37] Ushakov announced that Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) intend to sign a cooperation agreement by the end of 2023, likely to facilitate and expand Iran’s role in Russian sanctions evasion schemes and in the supply of weapons and critical components to Russia.[38]

Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participation in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The Spokesperson for the Armenian Parliament Chairman, Tsovinar Khachatryan, confirmed on December 5 that Armenia will not send a representative to the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Moscow on December 19.[39] The CSTO Parliamentary Assembly meeting represents the fourth consecutive high profile CSTO event or exercise that Armenia has abstained from amid the backdrop of deteriorating Russian–Armenian relations.[40] Armenia did not participate in the CSTO Collective Security Council session in Minsk, Belarus on November 23; the CSTO’s summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on October 13; or the CSTO “Indestructible Brotherhood-2023” exercises in Belarus in early October.[41] Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Mnatsakan Safaryan reiterated on November 23 that Armenia is not considering leaving the CSTO or discussing the withdrawal of Russia’s 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia.[42] CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov stated on November 20 that Armenia asked the CSTO to remove provisions on assistance to Armenia from the agenda of the CSTO summit in Minsk.[43] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated in October that Armenia is currently in the process of diversifying its security partnerships, and Armenia signed a military cooperation agreement with France on October 23.[44]

The Kremlin continues to intensify censorship efforts, targeting prominent Russian messaging and social media app Telegram. A Moscow court fined Russian communications company Telegram Messenger Inc. four million rubles (\$44,300) on December 5 for refusing to remove prohibited information at the request of Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor.[45] Moscow’s Tagansky Court previously fined Telegram four million rubles for failing to remove false information about the Russian Armed Forces and information aimed at destabilizing Russia on November 21, 2023.[46] These fines are likely a mild punishment for Telegram rather than a concerted effort by Russian authorities to shut down the app.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian military targets in occupied Crimea on the night of December 4 to 5.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine on the night of December 4 and 5.
- The Russian State Duma will reportedly consider a proposed bill that would recognize the Sea of Azov as an internal Russian body of water, likely setting conditions to coerce recognition of Russia’s illegal annexation of occupied Crimea and Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Donetsk oblasts.
- Russian opposition party Yabloko founder Grigory Yavlinsky advocated for a ceasefire in Ukraine as part of his presidential bid likely in an attempt to distinguish himself from Russian President Vladimir Putin and give voice to Russians who support a ceasefire.

- The Kremlin may be strategically allowing Yavlinsky to criticize the Russian government in order to preserve its veneer of electoral legitimacy and to delegitimize possible support for a ceasefire among factions in the Kremlin.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the benefits that migrants provide to the Russian economy, while promoting ongoing efforts to Russify migrants in Russia and citizens of post-Soviet countries.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will travel to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on December 6 and will host Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in Russia on December 7—a bout of diplomatic outreach likely focused on strengthening Russia's position with Gulf States while continuing to solidify the deepening Russian-Iranian security partnership.
- Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participation in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).
- The Kremlin continues to intensify censorship efforts, targeting prominent Russian messaging and social media app Telegram.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.
- Russian forces are reportedly quickly sending poorly trained convict recruits to reinforce assault elements in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are reportedly intensifying their seizure of Ukrainian property in occupied Berdyansk, Donetsk Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 4, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 4, 2023, 5:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on December 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia continues to reckon with the economic ramifications of labor shortages partially resulting from the war in Ukraine. Russian state media outlets reported on December 4 that Russian consulting company Yakov and Partners has recorded increased labor shortages in domestic production that will likely grow to a deficit of two to four million workers by 2030, 90 percent of whom are likely to be semi-skilled workers in critical industries.^[1] Yakov and Partners noted that this supply shortage will place upward pressure on workers' wages that will outpace GDP growth and make Russian companies even less attractive to foreign investment. [2] Russian outlet RBK cited Russian economic experts who stated that this problem can only be resolved through improved interactions between Russian businesses and the state, including through dedicated programs to repatriate Russians who fled the country due to the war and programs to attract "highly-qualified" migrants from other countries.^[3] ISW previously assessed that Russia continues to face shortages in both skilled and unskilled labor, a problem that is further compounded by the Kremlin's inconsistent and often inflammatory messaging about Russians who fled Russia because of the war and against migrant workers within Russia.^[4] The Russian economy will likely continue to grapple with the Kremlin's competing desires to bolster Russia's force generation and industrial capacity while simultaneously disenfranchising key labor groups, which is likely to lead to continued concerns over Russian economic output and potential resulting social grievances.

Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 3 to 4. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 23 Shahed-131/136 from Cape Chauda in occupied Crimea and one Kh-59 cruise missile from occupied Kherson Oblast and stated that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 Shaheds and the Kh-59 missile.^[5] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that the Russian military has increased its production of Shahed drones, which are likely to be the main systems that Russian forces will use to target Ukrainian energy infrastructure throughout winter 2023-2024.^[6] Ihnat also reported that Russian forces are increasing their "strategic stockpile" of missiles.^[7]

Ukraine's Western partners continue efforts to provide Ukraine with military and economic support. German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall announced on December 3 that it won a contract to provide Ukraine with €142 million worth of 155mm artillery rounds, which Germany will deliver to Ukraine in 2025.^[8] Rheinmetall stated that it will deliver around 40,000 rounds to Ukraine from a separate order in 2024. British outlet *The Times* highlighted Ukraine's use of British-provided Martlet lightweight missiles to deter a large-scale Russian Shahed drone strike on Kyiv City in late November 2023.^[9] *The Times* noted that the British Army trained Ukrainian operators on Martlet systems in the UK earlier this year. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov additionally met with his Belgian counterpart, Ludivine Dedonder, on December 4 to further develop the bilateral Ukrainian-Belgian relationship, particularly in regard to building out Ukraine's defense industrial base with Belgian support.^[10] Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Andriy Yermak spoke with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan about the upcoming Ukrainian-American conference on arms production that will take place on December 6 and 7 in Washington, DC.^[11]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko discussed deepening Belarusian-Chinese relations with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, China on December 4. Lukashenko stated that the "historical increase in the level of [Belarusian-Chinese] relations" has created an impetus for further deepening bilateral cooperation.^[12] Lukashenko reiterated Belarus' role as a "reliable" partner to China and expressed support for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Chinese Community of a Common Destiny concept.^[13] Lukashenko and Xi discussed strengthening strategic and economic cooperation, and their meeting reportedly lasted three times longer than planned.^[14] Xi stated that he opposes unspecified external interference in Belarusian internal affairs and expressed support for strengthening cooperation with Belarus through the UN and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).^[15] Chinese news outlet *Xinhua* stated that Lukashenko and Xi "exchanged views on the Ukraine crisis."^[16] Lukashenko and Xi signed several documents promoting industrial, technical, and scientific cooperation that may have facilitated Russian sanctions evasion by channeling Chinese aid to Russia through Belarus during Lukashenko's previous visit to China in March 2023.^[17]

Kremlin-backed United Russia State Duma deputies and Federation Council senators proposed a bill to introduce criminal punishments for leaking personal data, likely as part of ongoing efforts to control the Russian information space ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections. The United Russia legislators proposed a bill that would allow Russian authorities to sentence individuals to up to four years in prison for storing, transferring, or collecting personal data "obtained illegally," and up to five years if the information contains unspecified "special categories of data" or personal biometric data.^[18] The bill also stipulates that Russian authorities could punish someone with up to six years in prison for "illegal use of personal data for selfish interest" and could punish someone with up to eight years in prison and a two million ruble (about \$21,850) fine for transferring "illegally acquired" personal data abroad.^[19] Russian opposition

outlet *Agentstvo Novosti* reported that the bill's definition of personal data includes an individual's first name, surname, patronymic, address, phone number, address, and email.^[20] *Agentstvo Novosti* noted that the bill's implementation would criminalize database analysis – one of the few tools left to independent Russian investigative journalists.^[21] The Russian government has been prosecuting Russian internet service companies Yandex and Google under laws about illegal storing of personal data of Russian users likely to gain further control over internet companies operating in Russia to better track Russians' personal information and online data ahead of the Russian 2024 presidential election.^[22] The bill is also likely part of ongoing Russian government efforts to restrict Russian citizens' access to information on the internet and the activities of opposition figures and media outlets.^[23]

The Kremlin likely continues efforts to insert itself into power vacuums in several African countries as Wagner Group elements continue to operate in the Central African Republic (CAR). Nigerien state media stated that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Nigerien junta Defense Minister Lieutenant General Salifou Modi signed a document strengthening defense cooperation on December 4 after meeting on December 3 in Niamey, Niger.^[24] Reuters reported on December 4 that the Nigerien junta also revoked its military partnership with the European Union (EU), further isolating post-coup Niger from the EU.^[25] Yevkurov previously met with Malian junta head Assimi Goita, Malian junta Defense Minister Sadio Camara, and Modi on September 16 and with Burkinafabe junta head Ibrahim Traore on September 1.^[26] Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali previously created the Alliance of Sahel States, a collective defense pact, on September 16, following Yevkurov's visits with the junta heads in September.^[27] A French open-source intelligence project assessed on December 4 that Russia is using two structures – the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled "Africa Corps" and the newly formed, pseudo local media outlet called "African Initiative" that employs former Wagner Group fighters – to establish a foothold in Burkina Faso.^[28] ISW previously reported that the Russian MoD has begun to publicly recruit for the "Africa Corps," which is aimed at subsuming Wagner operations in Africa after the MoD made failed attempts to directly recruit former Wagner personnel.^[29] *The New York Times* also reported on November 26 that Wagner maintains a major presence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and controls the largest gold mine and over 1,000 personnel in the country, including personnel likely working as security for CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and other senior personnel running the Russia House cultural center in Bangui.^[30] The Kremlin is likely attempting to expand Russian MoD-controlled "Africa Corps" operations in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, as well as to expand Russian information operations on the continent in part to counter Wagner operations in the CAR.

Voronezh Oblast Governor Alexander Gusev confirmed on December 4 the death of Russian 14th Army Corps Deputy Commander Major General Vladimir Zavadsky in Ukraine.^[31] Various Russian and Ukrainian sources claimed on November 28 and 29 that Zavadsky died after stepping on a mine in Kherson Oblast on November 28.^[32]

Key Takeaways:

- Russia continues to reckon with the economic ramifications of labor shortages partially resulting from the war in Ukraine.
- Ukraine's Western partners continue efforts to provide Ukraine with military and economic support.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko discussed deepening Belarusian-Chinese relations with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, China on December 4.
- Kremlin-backed United Russia State Duma deputies and Federation Council senators proposed a bill to introduce criminal punishments for leaking personal data, likely as part of ongoing efforts to control the Russian information space ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections.
- The Kremlin likely continues efforts to insert itself into power vacuums in several African countries as Wagner Group elements continue to operate in the Central African Republic (CAR).
- Voronezh Oblast Governor Alexander Gusev confirmed on December 4 the death of Russian 14th Army Corps Deputy Commander Major General Vladimir Zavadsky in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on December 4.
- Select Russian Duma deputies appear to be at odds over the issue of extending Russian conscript service.
- Russian Presidential Administration Head for Domestic Policy Andrei Yarin reportedly visited occupied Ukraine as part of ongoing efforts to legitimize Russian authority over occupied Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential election.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 3, 2023

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

Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 3, 2023, 5:25pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on December 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's December 1 decree is likely a formal recognition of the Russian military's current end strength and not an order to immediately increase the number of Russian military personnel. Putin signed a decree on December 1 increasing the official end strength of the Russian military from 2.039 million personnel to 2.209 million personnel and total Russian combat personnel from 1.15 million to 1.32 million.^[1] The increase of 170,000 Russian combat personnel between Putin's previous August 25, 2022 decree and the December 1, 2023 decree is likely a formal acknowledgement of a net increase of 170,000 combat personnel between August 25, 2022, and December 1, 2023, and not a call to immediately increase the current number of combat personnel by an additional 170,000.^[2] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed on November 9 that the Russian military has recruited 410,000 contract, volunteer, and conscripted military personnel since January 1, 2023, then later claimed on December 1 that the Russian military has recruited over 452,000 personnel since January 1, 2023.^[3] The Russian government announced in September 2022 that the Russian military would mobilize 300,000 personnel under Putin's partial mobilization decree.^[4] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on November 29 that Russian forces have suffered over 300,000 casualties (killed and wounded personnel) in Ukraine since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.^[5] Ongoing widespread crypto-mobilization efforts (such as volunteer recruitment and the coercion of migrants into the Russian military), partial mobilization, the number of Russian personnel concluding military service, and

Russian casualties in Ukraine plausibly account for a net 170,000-combat personnel increase between August 25, 2022, and December 1, 2023.[6] Putin's December 1, 2023 decree is thus likely establishing 2.209 million personnel as the new official end strength rather than ordering a significant new increase in the total size of the Russian military.

Ukrainian air defense coverage along the front line is reportedly incentivizing Russian forces to rely more heavily on remote strikes with glide bombs. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on December 3 that Ukrainian forces shoot down Russian attack helicopters, such as Ka-52 and Mi-24 helicopters, as soon as they enter the range of Ukrainian air defense systems.[7] Shtupun stated that this Ukrainian air defense capability has prompted Russian forces to use Su-35 and Su-34 attack aircraft to launch remote strikes with glide bombs from 50 to 70 kilometers behind the line of combat engagement.[8] Russian forces effectively used helicopters to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast in summer 2023 but decreased the use of rotary wing aircraft following the downing of Ka-52 helicopters in the area in mid-August 2023.[9] Shtupun's statements are consistent with these observations as well as with the increased Russian use of glide bombs throughout the frontline, particularly in southern Ukraine.[10]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 3 that Ukrainian air defenses are similarly prompting Russian forces to increase their use of KAB glide bombs because FAB glide bombs require Russian aircraft to fly within range of Ukrainian air defenses.[11] Ihnat added that KAB bombs are inaccurate and that Russian forces therefore launch a large number of the glide bombs to strike Ukrainian targets.[12] Ihnat stated that Russian aviation launches about 100 glide bombs on average at Ukrainian targets along the front line each day and stated that Ukraine needs long-range air defense systems and F-16 fighter jets to counter the current Russian aviation threat.[13]

The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that Russian air defense systems are also constraining Ukrainian operations along the front, specifically Russian SA-15 TOR short-range surface-to-air missile systems (SAMs).[14] The UK MoD reported that Russian forces use the SA-15 SAMs to provide cover for Russian ground forces at the front line and have effectively employed them to counter Ukrainian drone operations.[15]

Ukrainian officials appealed to international organizations to investigate video footage published on December 2 showing Russian forces killing surrendering and reportedly unarmed Ukrainian soldiers. A Russian source published footage on December 2 showing Russian forces shooting two Ukrainian soldiers after they surrendered near Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka).[16] Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations to investigate this violation of international law, and Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on December 3 that Ukrainian authorities will give the evidence of the war crime to the appropriate international institutions.[17] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office stated that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has begun a pre-trial investigation for criminal proceedings for violations of the Ukrainian Criminal Code.[18] A few Russian milbloggers dismissed the video and the accusations against the Russian forces.[19] Attacking soldiers recognized as *hors de combat*, specifically including those who have clearly expressed an intention to surrender, is a violation of Article 41 of the Geneva Convention on the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts.[20]

Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes on the night of December 2 and 3. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 12 Shahed drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and one Kh-59 missile from Belgorod Oblast and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 10 of the drones over Mykolaiv and Khmelnytskyi oblasts as well as the Kh-59 missile.[21] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched the drones in waves.[22] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian aviation, drones, missiles, and artillery struck a Ukrainian command post in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast; fuel depots near Myrhorod, Poltava Oblast and Khmelnytskyi City; and an ammunition depot in Mykolaiv Oblast.[23]

The Russian government is likely continuing attempts to censor relatives of mobilized Russian military personnel on social media out of concern about their protests' possible negative effect on Russian President Vladimir Putin's still unannounced 2024 presidential campaign. BBC Russia reported on December 3 that online bots using fake names and profile pictures accused the relatives of mobilized Russian personnel in their "Way Home" Telegram channel of having connections to imprisoned Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation.[24] The "Way Home" group previously issued a manifesto on November 27 calling for the return of mobilized personnel and an end to "indefinite" mobilization.[25] Relatives of mobilized personnel have also repeatedly appealed to the Russian government and military for the release of their relatives from military service and for better treatment of mobilized servicemen in the Russian military, and the Russian government has made efforts to censor these demands and complaints and prevent relatives of mobilized personnel from protesting publicly.[26] Putin's presidential campaign will reportedly not focus on the war in Ukraine, and the Kremlin likely considers the relatives of mobilized personnel to be a social group that may pose one of the greatest threats to his campaign.[27]

A prominent Russian milblogger claimed to have given a "masterclass" to press heads and communications personnel at Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, likely in support of an effort that allows the Russian government to normalize the war without directly involving the Kremlin. The Rybar Telegram channel claimed that its founder, Mikhail Zvinchuk, gave the "masterclass," which involved an analysis of 23 Telegram accounts of Russian enterprises and a discussion on the importance of Telegram and other social media to achieve results.[28] Zvinchuk recommended that Rostec increase coverage of its production processes, modernize its approaches to publicizing their products, and humanize the corporation. Many of Rostec's subsidiaries are involved in the Russian Ministry of Defense's efforts to ramp up DIB production to support Russia's long war effort in Ukraine.[29] Rostec and its subsidiaries using Telegram to promote DIB products would help normalize the revitalization of Russia's DIB and the Russian long war effort to the Russian public without directly attributing this normalization to the Kremlin. The Kremlin has consistently failed to bring Russian society to a wartime footing and is unlikely to do so in the near term as the Kremlin reportedly seeks to downplay the war as it prepares for the 2024 Russian presidential elections.[30]

The milblogger's "masterclass" represents an avenue by which the Kremlin can further benefit from milbloggers and shows how possible financial incentives could temper milbloggers' criticisms of the Russian leadership. The Kremlin has sought to appeal to select milbloggers, including Rybar, and Zvinchuk is the only prominent Russian milblogger to receive a state award from Russian President Vladimir Putin for war reporting.[31] The Kremlin has consistently struggled to conduct effective information operations inside Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion and may seek to use more milbloggers to help improve the Kremlin's conduct of its information operations directed at domestic audiences.[32] Rybar publishes calls for donations multiple times per week and has also advertised companies affiliated with Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko and Russian media.[33] ISW previously assessed that milbloggers' reliance on advertisements for an income provides a financial incentive to refrain from criticizing the Kremlin as attempted censorship and legal issues may deter

advertisement deals.[34] Consultations with Russian officials on public messaging and information operations could become an additional source of income for select milbloggers, which would likely lead to further self-censorship.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's December 1 decree is likely a formal recognition of the Russian military's current end strength and not an order to immediately increase the number of Russian military personnel.
- Ukrainian air defense coverage along the front line is reportedly incentivizing Russian forces to rely more heavily on remote strikes with glide bombs.
- Ukrainian officials appealed to international organizations to investigate video footage published on December 2 showing Russian forces killing surrendering and reportedly unarmed Ukrainian soldiers.
- Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes on the night of December 2 and 3.
- The Russian government is likely continuing attempts to censor relatives of mobilized Russian military personnel on social media out of concern about their protests' possible negative effect on Russian President Vladimir Putin's still unannounced 2024 presidential campaign.
- A prominent Russian milblogger claimed to have given a "masterclass" to press heads and communications personnel at Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, likely in support of an effort that allows the Russian government to normalize the war without directly involving the Kremlin.
- The milblogger's "masterclass" represents an avenue by which the Kremlin can further benefit from milbloggers and shows how possible financial incentives could temper milbloggers' criticisms of the Russian leadership.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.
- Russia continues to use the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to indoctrinate Russian children into Russian nationalism and set conditions for long-term force generation efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continue to strengthen the Kremlin-backed United Russia party in occupied Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line on December 3 but did not make confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks northeast of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and near Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk), Ivanivka (20km southwest of Kupyansk), Stelmakhivka (15km northwest of Svatove), and the Serebryanske forest area (10km south of Kremenna).[35] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced toward Ivanivka, near Torske (15km west of Kremenna), and in the Serebryanske forest area on December 2 and 3. [36] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue attacking near Synkivka and Kyslivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk) but have not made substantial progress in the past several months.[37] The Russian "Russkiy Legion" (BARS-13) irregular armed formation claimed that Russian forces attacked south of Dibrova (7km southwest of Kremenna).[38] Footage published on December 3 purportedly shows elements of the 123rd Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps) operating near Berestove (30km south of Kremenna).[39]

Ukrainian forces continued localized ground attacks near Kremenna on December 3 and recently made a confirmed advance. Footage published on November 29 and geolocated on December 2 indicates that Ukrainian forces recently advanced west of Dibrova.[40] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Synkivka, Yampolivka (17km west of Kremenna), Torske, and the Serebryanske forest area.[41]

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut on December 3 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued assault actions south of Bakhmut.[42] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[43]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut but did not make any confirmed advances on December 3. Russian sources claimed on December 2 that Russian forces advanced south of the Berkivka reservoir (about 2km northwest of Bakhmut), towards Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), east of Klishchiivka, and near Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[44] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Bohdanivka, Ivanivske, Klishchiivka, and Andriivka.[45] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also attacked from Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) towards Hryhorivka (9km northwest of Bakhmut).[46] A Russian source claimed that elements of the Russian 58th Spetsnaz Battalion (Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] 1st Army Corps) are operating in the Bakhmut direction.[47] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that the "Shulyr" detachment of the Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz and elements of the Russian 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] 2nd Army Corps) are operating near Klishchiivka.[48]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Avdiivka on December 3 and recently made confirmed advances. Footage published on November 28 and geolocated on December 2 indicates that Russian forces advanced west of the railway north of Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka).[49] Additional geolocated footage published on December 2 indicates that Russian forces advanced southwest of Pervomaiske (10km southwest of Avdiivka).[50] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 2 and 3 that Russian forces advanced south and southeast of Stepove, with some Russian milbloggers claiming that Russian forces advanced 300 meters near the settlement.[51] Russian milbloggers also claimed on December 2 and 3 that Russian forces advanced south of Novokalynov (13km northeast of Avdiivka) and west of Krasnohorivka (5km northwest of Avdiivka) on Avdiivka's northern flank as well as on the southern flank near Pervomaiske and Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka).[52] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked east of Novobakhmutivka (9km northwest of Avdiivka) and Novokalynov; south of Tonenke (5km west of Avdiivka); and near Stepove, Avdiivka, Sieverne, and Pervomaiske.[53] Russian sources claimed on December 3 that Russian forces also attacked on the northern flank from Kamianka (5km northeast of Avdiivka) and on the southern flank near the industrial zone southwest of Avdiivka.[54] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 2 that Russian forces are conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations and are regrouping to resume assault operations near the industrial zone southeast of Avdiivka.[55] Ukrainian Avdiivka Military Administration Head Vitaliy Barabash stated on December 3 that Russian forces opened two additional directions of attack on the industrial zone southeast of Avdiivka and from Spartak (4km south of Avdiivka) during the third wave of assaults on Avdiivka in order to distract Ukrainian forces.[56] Barabash also stated that Russian forces are waiting for weather conditions to improve in order to use heavy equipment in assaults again.

Russian forces conducted offensive operations west and southwest of Donetsk City but did not make any confirmed advances on December 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Marinka (on the western outskirts of Donetsk City) and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City) and southeast of Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City).[57] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attacked in Marinka but that there were no significant changes.[58] A Russian source claimed that Russian forces are pushing Ukrainian forces out of the outskirts of Marinka, and another Russian source claimed that Russian forces have almost taken control of the settlement but must still overcome long-prepared Ukrainian defenses in the area.[59] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that claims about Russian advances in Marinka are not true.[60]

A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked west of Donetsk City in Marinka on December 2 but did not specify an outcome.[61]

Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 3 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).[62] A Russian milblogger posted footage purporting to show elements of the Russian 36th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) striking Ukrainian forces in Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).[63]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 3 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[64] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian forces repelled small Ukrainian infantry assaults near Robotyne and Novopropkivka (3km south of Robotyne) and northwest of Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).[65] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 2 and 3 that Ukrainian forces retain the initiative in the Robotyne area and that Russian forces are still conducting an elastic defense.[66]

Russian forces continued to counterattack in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 3 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian counterattacks south of Robotyne, northwest of Verbove, and near Novopokrovka (12km northeast of Robotyne).[67] A Russian milblogger amplified footage purporting to show elements of the Russian 76th Airborne (VDV) Division capturing a Ukrainian stronghold near Robotyne.[68] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 2 that VDV assault groups pushed Ukrainian forces out of unspecified positions north of Verbove.[69]

Ukrainian forces continued ground operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on December 3 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the east bank and are conducting counterbattery fire in the area.[70] Russian milbloggers claimed that meeting engagements continued near Kryny (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) but that the tempo of fighting has decreased due to fog and rain.[71] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 2 and 3 that Ukrainian forces continued attempts to transfer reinforcements and supplies to positions on the left bank of the Dnipro River.[72]

The consequences of the November 27 cyclone in the Black Sea continue to impact Russian military infrastructure in left bank Kherson Oblast and occupied Crimea. Ukrainian research group Center for Journalistic Investigations reported on December 2 that satellite imagery shows that recent storms washed away the spit connecting Dzharylhach Island to occupied Kherson Oblast in three places.[73] Ukrainian officials reported in May 2023 that Russian forces were filling the crossing to Dzharylhach Island with sand to create a more stable connection between occupied Kherson Oblast and the island, where Russian forces reportedly were forming a training ground for mobilized personnel.[74] Satellite imagery posted on December 2 shows that recent storms damaged several Russian fortifications at the entrance of the Sevastopol harbor in occupied Crimea.[75]

Russian sources claimed that Russian air defense intercepted two Ukrainian S-200 missiles targeting Krasnodar Krai over the Sea of Azov on December 2.[76] Krasnodar City Mayor Yevgeny Naumov claimed that there were two explosions in Krasnodar Krai far away from Krasnodar City.[77]

Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)

Russia continues to use the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to indoctrinate Russian children into Russian nationalism and set conditions for long-term force generation efforts. The ROC's Moscow Patriarchate Publishing House is selling a children's novel *To Live: To Serve the Motherland* that prepares children to serve in the Russian military using nationalist and religious ideals.[78] The book includes chapters about: "Holy Fathers on War, Peace, and the Russian Military;" "There is No Life in War without Digging;" "Combat Training: Strength, Bravery, and Dexterity," and "Russian Land is All under God."[79]

Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

Russian MLRS manufacturer NPO Splav, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, has patented a new MLRS projectile that reportedly has an extended range and is supersonic. Russian state newswire TASS reported that it obtained the patent, which claims that the new projectile has improved aerodynamic characteristics, accuracy, and firing range.[80] TASS did not report the exact specifications or name of the new projectile.

Russian forces on the frontline are likely employing new adaptations to protect themselves from Ukrainian drones and loitering munitions. Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov and a Russian milblogger amplified images on December 3 of Russian soldiers using mobile frame "cocoons" of thermal blankets camouflaged with grass, dirt, and tree branches in the Vuhledar direction in Donetsk Oblast.[81] Butusov and the milblogger claimed that the "cocoons" hide soldiers' thermal signatures and protect against drone strikes.

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian occupation officials continue to strengthen the Kremlin-backed United Russia party in occupied Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo participated in a conference for Kherson Oblast's United Russia branch in occupied Henichesk on December 2 and claimed that there are 6,500 United Russia members and supporters in occupied Kherson Oblast, including 200 oblast-level and local-level officials. [82] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on November 3 that Russian occupation officials are attempting to use United Russia activities in occupied Ukraine to generate support among locals and legitimize the Russian occupation.[83]

The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 3 that Russian occupation authorities forcibly deported 100 Ukrainians from occupied Kherson Oblast to Russia under evacuation schemes in November 2023.[84] Russian occupation officials routinely use the guise of evacuations, medical treatment, vacation opportunities, and educational programs to deport residents from occupied Ukraine to Russia.[85]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Pro-Kremlin actors are amplifying reports of Ukrainian social and governmental division, specifically those involving Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, to discredit Ukrainian leadership and weaken Western support for Ukraine. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) and Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) warned about renewed Russian efforts to spread propaganda to reduce support for Ukraine and split Ukrainian society from within by fostering mistrust between government officials and between civilians and the government.[86] This effort is congruent with the erroneous pre-war Kremlin understanding of the Ukrainian government, namely that Ukrainians did not support their government and would welcome Russia's attempt at regime change, that likely influenced Russian decision-making to conduct the 2022 full-scale invasion.[87] This new wave of Russian information operations is therefore part of an existing narrative line that Russian actors are promoting towards a new aim. The GUR and SBU reported that Russian sources specifically intend to sow mistrust in Ukrainian state bodies that organize prisoner of war exchanges (POWs) and hope to garner Ukrainian support for a negotiated settlement with Russia to freeze the frontlines. Domestic tensions are not unusual while sustaining a war effort, particularly in a free country with a robust civil society facing a protracted and difficult conflict like the one in Ukraine.

Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko arrived in Beijing, China on December 3 and will meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping on December 3 and 4 to discuss trade, economic investment, and international cooperation.[88]

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.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 2, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 2, 2023, 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.](#)

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[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:45pm ET on December 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Poor weather conditions continue to slow the pace of Ukrainian and Russian combat operations across the entire frontline but have not completely halted them. Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated that Russian forces actively use aviation in the Bakhmut direction when the weather permits it.[1] Fityo added that weather does not significantly affect Russian artillery fire in the Bakhmut direction. Russian milbloggers, claimed on December 1 that strong winds near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast prevented Russian forces from using drones and artillery over the past two days, however.[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that although light rain allows Russian forces to conduct aerial reconnaissance near Verbove (9km east of Robotyne) the muddy terrain makes it challenging for infantry and wheeled vehicles to advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[3] The milblogger added that Russian forces can only move on tracked vehicles and that Ukrainian forces continue intense artillery fire despite the poor weather conditions in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov amplified footage on December 2 that shows muddy roads on the Robotyne-Novoprokopivka-Verbove line in western Zaporizhia Oblast and claimed that these conditions have practically immobilized Ukrainian wheeled vehicles, forcing Ukrainian troops to conduct infantry-only attacks.[4] Rogov amplified additional footage showing an infestation of rats and mice in a Ukrainian trench in Zaporizhia Oblast, which he claimed was the result of the cold weather in the region.[5]

Russian forces launched another series of Shahed 136/131 drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine overnight on December 1-2. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 11 Shahed drones from Cape Chauda in occupied Crimea and a Kh-59 cruise missile from the airspace over occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[6] The Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 10 Shahed drones over Odesa Oblast and the Kh-59 cruise missile over Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[7] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that a Russian Shahed drone struck an unspecified infrastructure object in Odesa Oblast.[8] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian Shahed drones targeted the Chornomorsk and Kiliya ports in Odesa Oblast.[9] The milblogger added that Russian forces also conducted missile strikes, including at least one Iskander ballistic missile strike, in Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia oblasts. ISW cannot verify the milblogger's claims.

Ukrainian and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials reported that the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) completely disconnected from all external power sources for five and a half hours on the night of December 1 to 2, marking the plant's eighth complete black out — all under Russian occupation. The Ukrainian Energy Ministry and the IAEA reported on December 2 that the ZNPP lost connection with both of its operable external power lines from 0230 to around 0800 local time on December 2. The ZNPP, during the black out, automatically switched to diesel generators to cool its reactors and power essential functions.[10] The IAEA reported that the power loss disrupted the coolant pumps of reactor no. 4 and that the ZNPP is currently bringing the reactor back to a hot shutdown state to continue generating steam for ZNPP operations and provide heat for Enerhodar. Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom President Petro Kotin stated that Russia is not interested in the safety of the ZNPP, as evidenced by Russian authorities' failure to follow the norms and rules of nuclear and radiation safety.[11] The IAEA stated that an external grid failure far away from the ZNPP caused the power failure.[12] IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated that this most recent power outage is "yet another reminder" about the plant's precarious nuclear safety and security situation.[13]

The ZNPP's complete power outage occurred as Russia continued longstanding efforts to compel the IAEA and the international community to normalize Russia's occupation of the ZNPP.[14] Russian state nuclear energy company Rosatom claimed on December 2 that Rosatom Head Alexey Likhachev and Grossi agreed on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) Climate Conference to hold full-scale consultations about the safety and security of the ZNPP in early 2024.[15] Neither the IAEA nor Grossi have confirmed Rosatom's claim of future consultations as of this publication.

The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned three third party entities involved in the transport of Russian crude oil above the G7 price cap. OFAC announced on December 1 that it imposed sanctions on two United Arab Emirates-based and one Liberian-based shipping companies that own vessels that carried Russian crude oil above \$70 barrel after the G7's \$60 price cap took effect in December 2022.[16] Russia relies on a "shadow fleet" of oil tankers without insurance from Western countries to skirt the G7's price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products.[17]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) signaled that it likely intends to continue relying on crypto-mobilization recruitment schemes for any potential increase in the size of the Russian military. The Russian MoD responded to Russian President Vladimir Putin's December 1 decree increasing the size of the Russian military and stated that the Russian military is implementing the increase in stages "on account of citizens who express a desire to perform military service under a contract."[18] This language may refer to volunteers, whom the MoD has courted through a widespread crypto-mobilization effort in Russia, and suggests that the MoD may use volunteer recruitment for long-term force generation.[19] The MoD clarified that Putin's decree does not portend a significant increase in the number of conscripted Russians nor a second wave of mobilization.[20] Putin's decree, which formally increased the size of the Russian military from 2.039 million personnel to 2.209 million personnel and total Russian combat personnel from 1.15 million to 1.32 million, is likely an official acknowledgment of the actual end strength of the Russian military and not an order for an immediate increase.[21] Partial mobilization, ongoing widespread crypto-mobilization efforts, the number of Russian personnel concluding military service, and Russian casualties in Ukraine can plausibly account for the net gain of 170,000 Russian combat personnel between the August 22 decree on the size of the Russian military and the December 1 decree.

The Kremlin's policy towards the role of migrants in bolstering Russia's industrial capacity continues to be inconsistent. Kremlin newswire TASS reported on December 2 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) is preparing a bill that will require Russian authorities to fingerprint and identify foreigners immediately upon entry to Russia and again upon exit.[22] Russian MVD Migration Affairs Head Valentina Kazakova previously stated that Russian officials will begin a trial run of fingerprinting and photographing migrants arriving at Moscow airports.[23] Russia already fingerprints and photographs migrants, although not immediately upon entry. [24] These new measures are not unusual immigration and travel policies but are notable in this case because they are likely a part of a wider set of anti-migration policies.[25] A Russian economic news aggregator claimed on December 2 that the Russian government has set a quota of 155,900 visa permits for skilled migrant

workers in 2024, a 32,000 increase from 2023.[26] The economic news aggregator claimed that the Russian government is sending invitations and work permits to migrant workers, primarily those working in mining and construction.[27] This reported increase in migrant workers is at odds with a series of federal and regional policies in Russia that restrict migrants' prospects for work.[28] The Kremlin increasingly appears to be pursuing mutually exclusive goals of relying on migrants to strengthen Russia's strained industrial capacity while also pursuing force generation efforts and politically motivated anti-migration policies that reduce migrants' ability to augment Russia's labor force.[29]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's November 30 threat against Moldova may have emboldened certain pro-Russian actors to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova.[30] The pro-Russian head of Moldova's Gagauzia region, Yevgenia Gutsul, claimed on December 1 that Moldovan state energy company Moldovagaz blocked Gagauzia from receiving gas from a Turkish supplier that the pro-Russian Gagauzia regional government had negotiated outside of state contracts.[31] Gutsul claimed that Moldovagaz sells gas at a higher price per cubic meter than the Turkish partner and accused Moldova of ignoring Gagauzia's calls to provide its residents with cheap gas for the upcoming winter. Moldovan President Maia Sandu notably denied Gutsul's request for a spot in her cabinet on November 13 because Gutsul is a member of the banned Shor political party, which Russia used to promote pro-Russian interests and political instability in Moldova until the Moldovan Constitutional Court banned the party in June 2023.[32] Shor Party head Ilhan Shor used the party to spark protests in September 2022-June 2023 ultimately aimed at toppling the current Moldovan government.[33] Moldovagaz Head Vadim Ceban stated that Moldovagaz does not have the physical or legal ability to block gas supplies at the Gagauzia border and that Moldovagaz has not received the necessary documentation to switch Gagauzia's natural gas suppliers.[34] Sandu stripped Moldovan Party of Regions head Alexander Kalinin of his Moldovan citizenship on November 27 due to his extensive support of the Russian war in Ukraine, and Kalinin announced efforts on December 1 to recruit Moldovan volunteers to fight alongside the Russian military in Ukraine.[35] Russia conducted a likely campaign to destabilize Moldova in early 2023, and Russia may seek to revamp these efforts to distract international attention from the war in Ukraine.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Poor weather conditions continue to slow the pace of Ukrainian and Russian combat operations across the entire frontline but have not completely halted them.
- Russian forces launched another series of Shahed 136/131 drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine overnight on December 1-2.
- Ukrainian and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials reported that the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) completely disconnected from all external power sources for five and a half hours on the night of December 1 to 2, marking the plant's eighth complete black out - all under Russian occupation.
- The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned three third party entities involved in the transport of Russian crude oil above the G7 price cap.
- The Russia Ministry of Defense (MoD) signaled that it likely intends to continue relying on crypto-mobilization recruitment schemes for any potential increase in the size of the Russian military.
- The Kremlin's policy towards the role of migrants in bolstering Russia's industrial capacity continues to be inconsistent.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's November 30 threat against Moldova may have emboldened certain pro-Russian actors to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.
- Radio Svoboda's "Schemes" and "Systems" investigative projects published a joint investigation on December 1 detailing how the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) created the "Redut" private military company (PMC) to recruit thousands of Russians for irregular combat service in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian partisans reportedly conducted a partisan attack against Russian military personnel in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, on December 1.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 1, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 1, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on December 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi signaled intent to increase Ukrainian defenses and fortifications around the Ukrainian theater, but notably did not include Zaporizhzhia Oblast in discussions of ongoing and future defensive measures. Zelensky stated on November 30 that Ukrainian forces will strengthen their fortifications in all critical directions of the front, including the Kupyansk-Lyman line, oblasts in northern and western Ukraine, and Kherson Oblast, but particularly emphasized the Avdiivka and Marinka directions and other areas of Donetsk Oblast. [1] Zelensky additionally met with various Ukrainian operational group commanders and discussed Ukrainian defensive operations in the Avdiivka and Marinka directions. [2] Zaluzhnyi spoke with Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown to discuss Russian offensive operations in the Kupyansk, Lyman, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka directions. [3] Zelensky's and Zaluzhnyi's statements notably identified the areas of the front where Ukrainian forces are chiefly

focusing on defensive operations such as the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border line (between Kupyansk and Lyman), most of Donetsk Oblast (likely in reference to Bakhmut and the Avdiivka-Donetsk City axis) and Kherson Oblast, but notably did not mention the Zaporizhia Oblast axis—suggesting that Ukrainian forces have not gone over to the defensive in this area. These statements generally accord with ISW's assessment that Russian forces have been trying to regain the theater-level initiative in Ukraine since at least mid-November by conducting several simultaneous offensive operations in the areas where Ukrainian forces have transitioned to chiefly defensive actions.[4] In a separate interview with AP on December 1, Zelensky warned that in addition to the impacts that winter weather conditions are likely to have on the frontline, Russia will likely resume an intense air campaign against critical Ukrainian infrastructure.[5]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu continues to falsely characterize Russian offensive efforts in Ukraine as part of an “active defense” in an effort to temper expectations about the Russian military’s ability to achieve operationally significant objectives. Shoigu stated on December 1 during a conference call with Russian military leadership that Russian forces are conducting an “active defense” in Ukraine and are capturing more advantageous positions in every operational direction.[6] Shoigu distinguished the 15th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army, Central Military District), 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk Peoples Republic [DNR] Army Corps), and the 4th and 123rd Motorized Rifle Brigades (both of the 2nd Luhansk People’s Republic [LNR] Army Corps) for their service. [7] All of these elements are reportedly or likely operating in areas where Russian forces are conducting offensive operations in eastern Ukraine and not defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.[8] Shoigu and Putin both previously called Russian offensive operations to capture Avdiivka an “active defense” following the failure of the first Russian mechanized push to achieve significant tactical gains in early October 2023.[9] Russian forces launched two subsequent large-scale pushes to capture Avdiivka since early October 2023 and continue a high tempo of attritional infantry assaults around the settlement. [10] Russian officials’ characterization of these offensives as being part of an “active defense” are intentionally misleading. Ukrainian forces have never conducted offensive operations at scale in the Avdiivka area since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Avdiivka has been a famously static Ukrainian defensive position since 2014. Russian leadership has nevertheless continued to falsely frame operations around Avdiivka as an “active defense” likely to recontextualize the lack of any major Russian progress around Avdiivka despite over two months of large-scale Russian attacks there.[11]

The Russian military command would have to pursue an identifiable operational objective if it acknowledged the operations to capture Avdiivka as an offensive effort. The “active defense” framing, therefore, allows the Russian military leadership to declare success as long as Russian forces prevent Ukrainian forces from making any significant gains, an entirely achievable objective considering that Ukrainian forces are not conducting and never have conducted counteroffensive operations in the area. The Russian command’s “defensive” framing of the offensive effort around Avdiivka as well as localized offensive operations elsewhere in eastern Ukraine suggests that it lacks confidence in the Russian military’s ability to translate tactical gains into operationally significant advances.[12] Russian President Vladimir Putin, apparently concerned about decreasing Russian support for the war ahead of the 2024 Russian Presidential elections, has likely chosen to downplay the scale of Russian operations to the Russian public.[13] The increasing disconnect between heavy Russian losses in these offensive efforts and the Russian command’s framing of these operations may nevertheless fuel discontent in the wider Russian information space.

Ukrainian intelligence reportedly damaged another train along a section of the Baikal-Amur Railway on December 1 in an apparent effort to degrade Russian logistics in the Russian Far East. Ukrainian media reported that Ukrainian intelligence sources stated that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) conducted a special operation that damaged another train carrying fuel as it passed over a bridge along an unspecified part of the northern bypass of the Baikal-Amur Railway. [14] The SBU reportedly planned the operation to coincide with the expected rerouting of train traffic following the November 30 explosions in the Severomuysky Tunnel that disrupted a section of the East Siberian Railway in the Republic of Buryatia and damaged a fuel train, which Ukrainian media also connected to the SBU. [15] Russian sources claimed that the explosions on December 1 also occurred in the Republic of Buryatia and that six fuel tanks were completely or partially damaged.[16] Russian outlet Baza reported that travel is still blocked through the Severomuysky tunnel.[17] Ukrainian media reported that Ukrainian intelligence observed the Russian military using the railway to transfer equipment and supplies, although there are no indications that the December 1 explosions damaged the bridge along the Baikal-Amur Railway and will cause long-term disruptions.[18] The Baikal-Amur Railway and the Eastern Siberian Railway are the two major railways in the Russian Far East and connect Russia to China and North Korea, both countries on which Russia is increasingly relying for economic and military support to sustain its war effort in Ukraine.[19]

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially changed the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on December 1, removing several members and appointing a prominent anti-opposition media figure. Putin signed a decree on December 1 that officially removed Russian lawyers Genri Reznik and Shota Gorgadze, Novaya Gazeta journalist Leonid Nikitinsky, North Caucasus-based missing person’s peacekeeping mission head Alexander Mukomolov, and Independent Expert Legal Counsel head Mara Polyakov.[20] Neither the text of the decree nor Russian media offered explanations for the removal of the aforementioned HRC members. The decree also notably nominates “public figure” Alexander Ionov to the HRC, along with several other Russian civil society figures.[21] Russian opposition media noted that Ionov has been a member of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service since 2021 and that Ionov lodged successful appeals against Russian opposition outlets Meduza and The Bell, after which the Russian Ministry of Justice designated the outlets as “foreign agents.” [22] The US Treasury has sanctioned Ionov since July 2022 for his role in supporting “the Kremlin’s global negative influence operations and election interference efforts.”[23] Putin last changed the composition of the HRC in November 2022, which ISW assessed was an effort to stifle domestic opposition and give prominence to figures who propagate the Kremlin’s major informational lines.[24]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that a second group of Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip arrived in Chechnya on December 1, possibly partially funded by his daughter’s “Children of Chechnya - Children of Palestine” organization. NOTE: A version of this text appears in ISW-CTP’s December 1 Iran Update. Kadyrov published footage claiming to show 116 Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip, including 60 children, arriving in Chechnya and claimed that it is Chechnya’s “moral duty” to help the civilians of the Gaza Strip.[25] Kadyrov claimed that his daughter and head of the Grozny City Hall Preschool Education Department, Khadizhat Kadyrova, provided the children gifts through the “Children of Chechnya - Children of Palestine” organization. Kadyrov announced Kadyrova’s patronage of the organization in a Telegram post on November 11, encouraging his followers to purchase crafts made by Chechen preschoolers to fund humanitarian aid for Palestinian Muslims.[26] Regional outlet Caucasian Knot reported on November 15 that the organization raised more than 68 million rubles to purchase aid for Palestinians.[27] Caucasian Knot reported on November 16, citing unnamed Chechen government officials, that Kadyrov pressured Chechen officials to spend up to a third of their monthly salaries buying crafts from the “Children of Chechnya - Children of Palestine” organization.[28] Chechnya’s Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Development stated on November 18 that fundraisers for the organization are taking place “in all corners” of Chechnya.[29] ISW cannot independently verify this footage or any of Kadyrov’s claims, however. But if true, Kadyrov may be using the funds from this organization to at least partially finance the relocation of Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip, an effort that could help Kadyrov in his quest to balance his desire to curry favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin with the need to appeal to his own Chechen constituency.[30] Kadyrov posted footage on November 29 purportedly showing an initial group of 50

Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip arriving in Chechnya.[31] Kadyrov's claims and the alleged work of the "Children of Chechnya-Children of Palestine" organization reflect the Kremlin's shift to a much more anti-Israel positions in the Israel-Hamas war.[32]

Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s disproportionate allocation of drones among frontline units and poorly-executed grassroots drone production campaigns are impacting frontline unit effectiveness. Russian milbloggers complained on December 1 that some decentralized grassroots campaigns aimed at arming Russian frontline units with new drones are failing to design battlefield-effective drones, sometimes developing "toys" instead of weapons.[33] The milbloggers complained that Russian drone manufacturers base the development of new drones on stylized and cinematic battlefield footage of Russian kamikaze drones striking Ukrainian equipment, resulting in these ineffective "toy" drones that can produce cinematic effects but struggle to further tactical objectives. The milbloggers claimed that the strikes that such footage depict are often "pretty" but ineffective, and claimed that Russian frontline units must conduct such strikes and produce such footage for the Russian MoD and grassroots drone manufacturers to continue allocating drones to those units.[34] These complaints are indicative of the struggles that the Russian MoD and other states with a highly centralized system face when implementing and integrating technological advances onto the battlefield. ISW has observed no indications that these frontline drone struggles have significantly impacted Russian military capabilities in Ukraine. The Russian milbloggers largely appear to focus on reiterating common complaints about the MoD prioritizing idealized lies that obfuscate harsh battlefield realities at the expense of Russian military personnel.[35] One milblogger claimed that the worst impact of these ineffective drones was that their ineffectiveness threatens frontline Russian soldiers.[36]

Russian sources complained that Russian soldiers' continued use of personal electronics and messaging apps in frontline areas is jeopardizing Russian operational security (OPSEC). A prominent pro-Russian "hacktivist" released an alleged Ukrainian intelligence report on November 30 that shows Ukrainian intercepts of Russian personal communications from one day on one sector of the front.[37] The Russian source complained that this alleged report is relatively small compared to other such reports the source has obtained and complained that all WhatsApp and other messages that Russian military personnel send end up in Ukrainian interceptions, including documents, conversation screenshots, and media files.[38] One Russian milblogger responded to this post and claimed that neither warnings nor "detailed lectures" on the dangers of using WhatsApp and SMS systems in combat areas appear to affect Russian soldiers' communication habits. The source concluded that "WhatsApp is killing" Russian personnel and that commanders need to crack down on Russian personnel's use of these applications.[39] Another milblogger responded that Russian soldiers' use of WhatsApp informs Ukraine where Russian forces are going to attack.[40] Russian units have continually struggled with proper adherence to OPSEC principles in key frontline and rear areas throughout the war thus far, particularly pertaining to personal cellphone use in combat areas.[41] The Russian military command largely blamed Russian cellphone use for a devastating Ukrainian strike on a concentration area in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on New Years Eve 2022, and it appears as though Russian command has largely failed to remedy such issues over the course of the past year.[42]

Russian forces conducted another missile and drone strike against Ukraine on the night of November 30-December 1. The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Russian forces launched 25 Shahed 131/136 drones and two Kh-59 missiles primarily targeting areas in eastern and southern Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces downed 18 of the drones and one of the missiles.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi signaled intent to increase Ukrainian defenses and fortifications around the Ukrainian theater, but notably did not include Zaporizhia Oblast in discussions of ongoing and future defensive measures.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu continues to falsely characterize Russian offensive efforts in Ukraine as part of an "active defense" in an effort to temper expectations about the Russian military's ability to achieve operationally significant objectives.
- Ukrainian intelligence reportedly damaged another train along a section of the Baikal-Amur Railway on December 1 in an apparent effort to degrade Russian logistics in the Russian Far East.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin officially changed the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on December 1, removing several members and appointing a prominent anti-opposition media figure.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that a second group of Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip arrived in Chechnya on December 1, possibly partially funded by his daughter's "Children of Chechnya - Children of Palestine" organization.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s disproportionate allocation of drones among frontline units and poorly-executed grassroots drone production campaigns are impacting frontline unit effectiveness.
- Russian sources complained that Russian soldiers' continued use of personal electronics and messaging apps in frontline areas is jeopardizing Russian operational security (OPSEC).
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed on December 1 that the Russian military has recruited over 452,000 personnel between January 1 and December 1, 2023.
- Russian occupation officials continue to set conditions for the deportation of Ukrainians to Russia under various vacation schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 30, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W Kagan

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:40pm ET on November 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A recent Russian opinion poll indicates that the number of Russians who fully support the war in Ukraine has almost halved since February 2023 and that more Russians support a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine than do not. Independent Russian opposition polling organization Chronicles stated that data from its October 17-22, 2023, telephone survey indicates that respondents who are "consistent" supporters of the war - those who expressed support for the war, do not support a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine without Russia having achieved its war aims, and think that Russia should prioritize military spending - decreased from 22 percent to 12 percent between February 2023 and October 2023.[1] Chronicles stated that 40 percent of respondents supported a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine without Russia having achieved its war aims, and that this number has remained consistent at about 39 to 40 percent throughout 2023. Chronicles stated that 33 percent of respondents did not support a Russian withdrawal and favored a continuation of the war and noted that this number has been consistently decreasing from 47 percent in February 2023 and 39 percent in July 2023. Recent polling by the independent Russian polling organization Levada Center published on October 31 indicated that 55 percent of respondents believed that Russia should begin peace negotiations whereas 38 percent favored continuing the war.[2]

The Russian war in Ukraine has created new social tensions and exacerbated existing ones within Russia, which remain highly visible in the Russian information space despite ongoing Kremlin censorship efforts. Relatives of mobilized personnel continue making widespread complaints and appeals for aid for mobilized personnel despite reported Russian efforts to censor such complaints.[3] Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istory* reported on November 29 that Russians have sent over 180,000 complaints about issues concerning the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to the Russian Presidential Office for Working with Citizens' Appeals since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[4] The majority of these complaints reportedly concern payments to soldiers, mobilization status, missing persons, and poor medical care.[5] The Kremlin has also been capitalizing on recent ethnic tensions in Russia to support ongoing force generation measures and appeal to Russian ultranationalists, establishing a cycle that keeps these tensions at the forefront of ultranationalist dialogue.[6] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that protest activity and social tension are increasing in Russia, particularly in western Russia, due to the war in Ukraine and that the top echelons of Russian leadership are discussing these tensions.[7] The GUR noted that increasing crime, alcohol abuse, inflation, and high consumer goods prices also contribute to rising social tensions, and many of these factors are likely exacerbated by the continued Russian war in Ukraine.[8] The Kremlin has consistently failed to place Russian society on a wartime footing to support the Russian war effort, and the shifting poll numbers and exacerbated social tensions indicate that this failure is having a tangible effect on Russian society ahead of the 2024 Russian presidential elections.[9]

The Kremlin is likely concerned about how changing Russian perceptions of the Russian war in Ukraine will affect the outcome of the March 2024 Russian presidential election and is implementing measures to ensure that Russian President Vladimir Putin's actual electoral support does not rest on Russian battlefield successes. Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly center his presidential campaign on Russia's alleged domestic stability and increased criticism of the West instead of focusing on the war.[10] Putin and other Russian government officials have already signaled their intention to intensify censorship efforts by claiming that some Russian citizens who left Russia and others still in Russia have begun efforts to discredit the upcoming Russian presidential elections and that Russia will do "everything necessary" to prevent election meddling.[11] Russian authorities have also attempted to consolidate control over the Russian information space and have intensified measures encouraging self-censorship.[12] Russian milbloggers suggested that Russian political officials financing Telegram channels ordered milbloggers to cease debates and criticisms about the Russian military prior to the Russian presidential elections.[13] The Kremlin has likely attempted to shore up popular support for Putin throughout Russia by establishing a network of "proxies" to campaign on Putin's behalf.[14]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov confirmed on November 30 that Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold his annual live "Direct Line" forum and annual press conference in tandem on December 14.[15] Putin will likely use the tandem event to roll out his still unannounced presidential campaign following the official start of the Russian presidential campaign season on December 13.[16]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov notably did not promote Kremlin information operations feigning interest in negotiations during his speech at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in North Macedonia on November 30, and instead promoted escalatory rhetoric about Moldova. Lavrov claimed that the OSCE is turning into an appendage of NATO and the European Union (EU) and said that the organization is "on the brink of an abyss."[17] Lavrov's speech notably did not include a long-standing Russian information operation aimed at portraying Russia as willing to negotiate with Ukraine.[18] Lavrov previously claimed on November 27 that the West is currently trying to "freeze" the war to gain time and rearm Ukraine for future attacks on Russia.[19] The OSCE is meant to serve as a neutral platform in negotiations, among other functions, and would have provided an appropriate diplomatic forum for Lavrov to promote negotiations with the West, but Lavrov notably made no such overture. Russia previously weaponized the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine to support Russian information operations to obfuscate Russia's participation in its initial hybrid war against Ukraine, which Russia began in 2014, and to support Russian operations.[20] Russian forces reportedly commandeered OSCE off-road vehicles to support Russian combat operations in Luhansk Oblast in January 2023.[21] Lavrov's criticism of the OSCE reflects Russia's continuing unwillingness to engage in serious cooperation with the OSCE that would be necessary to start meaningful negotiations. Lavrov used his speech to threaten Moldova by claiming that it would become the "next victim in the West's hybrid war against Russia."[22]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov also argued that negotiations with Ukraine would be disadvantageous to Russia on November 29 due to Russia's more "strategically and economically advantageous position."[23] Kadyrov claimed that Russia must make Ukraine's leadership surrender. Kadyrov does not speak for the Kremlin, but his statement reflects a wider shift in Russian rhetoric portraying a pause in Russian offensive operations as detrimental to the prospects for a Russian victory in Ukraine.

Russian forces conducted multiple series of missile and drone strikes on Ukraine that struck civilian infrastructure on November 29 and 30. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched eight S-300 missiles and 20 Shahed-131/136 drones on the night of November 29-30.[24] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces downed 14 of the drones.[25] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed the first wave of Shahed drones over Odesa Oblast and that Russian forces then launched drones in several directions towards northern and western Ukraine, including Khmelnytskyi Oblast.[26] Ihnat continued to praise the work of Ukrainian mobile fire groups in shooting down Russian drones.[27] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that a Russian drone damaged a historic preserved building in Odesa Oblast.[28] Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko stated that S-300 missiles struck residential buildings and police departments in Pokrovska, Novohrodivka, and Myrnohrad in Donetsk Oblast.[29] The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported on November 29 that there were several explosions near the Khmelnytskyi Nuclear Power Plant within a 20-minute period and warned that several nuclear sites in Ukraine are exposed to Russian strikes.[30] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched seven Shahed drones during the day on November 30 and that Ukrainian forces shot down five of the drones.[31]

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian military bureaucracy is impeding Russian drone usage and acquisition among Russian forces operating on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities on the east bank. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) warehouses storing various types of drones and electronic warfare (EW) equipment are full despite drone shortages among Russian forces operating on the left bank of Kherson Oblast.[32] The milblogger claimed that Russian authorities are not interested in reading through applications and filling out the paperwork associated with sending new drones to the frontline.[33] The milblogger also complained that Russian personnel have to "go through seven circles of hell" in order to request a replacement drone.[34] Another prominent milblogger outlined the seven pieces of information that Russian units need to submit to the Russian military to record the destruction of a drone and request a replacement, which include proving that the drone had been destroyed during normal weather conditions and that Russian forces were not using electronic warfare systems at the time of the drone's destruction.[35] Other Russian milbloggers recently complained on November 25 that military bureaucracy at the brigade and division level is preventing Russian frontline soldiers from applying for drones directly from the MoD.[36] ISW has previously reported that Russian milbloggers have complained about various problems among Russian forces operating on the east bank of Kherson Oblast but has observed that these alleged problems do not necessarily translate into significant battlefield effects.[37] The founder of a Ukrainian drone company, Maksym Sheremet, told *Forbes Ukraine* in an article published on November 29 that Russian companies manufacture approximately 300,000 first-person viewer (FPV) drones per month. [38]

The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) was reportedly involved in an explosion that caused disruptions on a section of the East Siberian Railway connecting Russia and China on the night of November 29. Russian Railways and the East Siberian Transport Prosecutor's Office stated that a freight train caught fire in the Severomuysky Tunnel on the Itykit-Okusikan section of the East Siberian Railway in the Republic of Buryatia on the night of November 29.[39] Russian Railways stated that the fire did not interrupt train traffic, but Russian opposition outlet *Baza* stated that 10 trains were delayed.[40] *Baza* reported that two railway cars carrying diesel fuel detonated, igniting six total railway cars.[41] Several Ukrainian outlets reported that Ukrainian intelligence sources stated that four explosive devices detonated on the railway as part of an SBU operation and that the railway line, which is one of the two major railway lines between Russia and China and is used to transport military supplies, is "paralyzed." [42] Russian opposition outlet *Astra* stated that Russia uses the railway to transport weapons from North Korea.[43] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that disruptions in railway lines in Russia are becoming more frequent and are causing serious logistics complications due to the resulting delays.[44]

The Kremlin continues to advance its strategic slow-burn effort to absorb Belarus through the Union State structure. The Russian Ministry of Economic Development and Belarusian Ministry of Economy agreed to a new package of Union State integration measures for 2024-2026 to advance the Kremlin's effort to absorb Belarus through the Union State on November 29.[45] Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will likely sign the integration package during an upcoming Union State Supreme State Council meeting, possibly in 2024.[46] Lukashenko has previously resisted the Kremlin's efforts to further integrate Belarus into the Union State, although recent events, including the death of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the collapse of the June 24, 2023 agreement between Putin, Prigozhin, and Lukashenko that gave Wagner sanctuary in Belarus, have likely degraded Lukashenko's ability to resist further Union State integration efforts.[47] Lukashenko recently portrayed himself as the guarantor of Belarusian statehood ahead of Belarusian parliamentary elections in 2024 and presidential elections in 2025, stating on November 10 that incoming young Belarusian leaders should ascend to office with the goal of "saving the country [Belarus]."[48]

Key Takeaways:

- A recent Russian opinion poll indicates that the number of Russians who fully support the war in Ukraine has almost halved since February 2023 and that more Russians support a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine than do not.
- The Russian war in Ukraine has created new social tensions and exacerbated existing ones within Russia, which remain highly visible in the Russian information space despite ongoing Kremlin censorship efforts.
- The Kremlin is likely concerned about how changing Russian perceptions of the Russian war in Ukraine will affect the outcome of the March 2024 Russian presidential election and is implementing measures to ensure that Russian President Vladimir Putin's actual electoral support does not rest on Russian battlefield successes.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov confirmed on November 30 that Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold his annual live "Direct Line" forum and annual press conference in tandem on December 14.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov notably did not promote Kremlin information operations feigning interest in negotiations during his speech at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in North Macedonia on November 30, and instead promoted escalatory rhetoric about Moldova.
- Russian forces conducted multiple series of missile and drone strikes on Ukraine that struck civilian infrastructure on November 29 and 30.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian military bureaucracy is impeding Russian drone usage and acquisition among Russian forces operating on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities on the east bank.
- The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) was reportedly involved in an explosion that caused disruptions on a section of the East Siberian Railway connecting Russia and China on the night of November 29.
- The Kremlin continues to advance its strategic slow-burn effort to absorb Belarus through the Union State structure.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances.
- A Ukrainian military observer stated that Russian authorities' plan to form two tank battalions in about four months using equipment from two long-term weapons and equipment stores indicates a lack of combat-ready weapons and military equipment.
- Occupation and Russian government officials continue efforts to militarize Ukrainian youth in occupied Ukraine.

November 29, 2023, 7pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The apparent Russian failure to establish a cohesive command structure among forces defending on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast continues to degrade Russian morale and combat capabilities. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 29 that elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) operating near Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) are refusing to conduct assaults on Ukrainian positions due to a lack of artillery coordination, tactical intelligence transmission, and proper communication about the location of Russian minefields.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that maps of the Russian minefields are classified and that Russian commanders have not properly coordinated with assault units about the locations of these minefields, leading to 50 casualties among elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade in the last month.^[2] Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry brigade arrived in the Krynyk area in early October 2023 and appear to have taken over responsibility for the immediate Krynyk area from elements of the newly created 18th Combined Arms Army (CAA) following the start of Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank of the Dnipro in mid-October 2023.^[3] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the 18th CAA's 28th Motorized Rifle Regiment is currently operating in Pishchanivka (14km east of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River).^[4] Additional elements of the 18th CAA and the 7th Airborne (VDV) Division reportedly hold positions in near rear areas on the east bank, and the joint command of these formations is likely overseeing much of the current Russian response to the Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank.^[5] The reported minefield incident suggests that the command of the 18th CAA did not share relevant tactical details with the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade's command, suggesting that higher-level Russian commanders responsible for the defense of the east bank have yet to remedy this failure in coordination.

The Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces is increasingly comprised of disparate elements of recently transferred and degraded units and new formations, which may be contributing to this apparent lack of cohesive command structure. Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade and 177th Naval Infantry Brigade (Caspian Flotilla) transferred to the Kherson direction likely after sustaining heavy casualties defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast in the summer of 2023.^[6] The majority of the 7th VDV Division's combat elements are currently still defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast, although the 7th VDV's 171st Air Assault Battalion (97th VDV Regiment) and 104th Separate Tank Battalion are reportedly operating on the east bank of Kherson Oblast.^[7] Elements of the 49th CAA (Southern Military District) have reportedly been operating in the Kherson direction since the Ukrainian liberation of Kherson City in November 2022, but some Russian and Ukrainian sources claim that the Russian command has since redeployed elements of at least one of its brigades to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.^[8] The newly created 18th CAA's 70th Motorized Rifle Division and 22nd Army Corps (formerly of the Black Sea Fleet) are operating on the east bank.^[9] Elements of the newly created 104th VDV Division's 328th VDV Regiment are reportedly defending in the Krynyk area, and Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that additional elements of the 104th VDV Division are currently deploying to the Kherson direction.^[10] ISW previously observed elements of the 80th Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) operating on the left bank in July 2023, and November 28 reports of 14th Army Corps Deputy Commander Major General Vladimir Zavadsky's death in the Kherson direction suggests that these elements may still be in the area.^[11] Elements of the 41st CAA (Central Military District) reportedly transferred from the Kupyansk direction to Kherson Oblast in early October and may be defending on the east bank.^[12]

The Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces, therefore, appears to be comprised of elements of the Black Sea Fleet, the Caspian Flotilla, the Southern Military District, the Central Military District, the Northern Fleet, and the VDV. Russia's other grouping of forces in Ukraine largely correspond with Russia's military districts reinforced in some cases with VDV units, making the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces a notable aberration. The unnamed force grouping in charge of the Russian defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast is primarily comprised of elements of the 58th CAA (Southern Military District) reinforced with elements of several VDV regiments but has not suffered any of the apparent coordination issues that the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces has faced. The Russian military command should be able to form groupings of forces interchangeably between formations from different military districts and combined arms armies. Persistent Russian issues with sharing situational awareness between units and creating common operating pictures and coherent command structures throughout Ukraine have likely incentivized the creation of groupings of forces comprised of formations and units largely from the same military districts as mitigations.^[13] The recent arrival of likely degraded, understaffed, and undertrained Russian elements to the Kherson direction and their immediate commitment to defensive operations has likely further complicated Russian efforts to create a coherent command structure for the disparate elements of the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces.^[14] The Russian military command appointed VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky as Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces Commander on October 29, 2023, and one of Teplinsky's main objectives is likely to establish a more unified command for the grouping.^[15] The Russian military command is unlikely to remedy the “Dnepr” Grouping of Force's command issues in the short term, however, and the continuation of Ukrainian ground operations on the left bank will likely only complicate these efforts. It is not yet clear if the command-and-control challenges facing Russian forces in Kherson will generate notable battlefield effects.

Russian forces launched a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 28 to 29. Ukrainian military sources reported on November 29 that Russian forces launched three Kh-59 missiles, primarily targeting Khmelnytskyi City, and 21 Shahed-131/-136 drones at targets in Ukraine.^[16] Ukrainian air defenses destroyed two of the three Kh-59s and all of the Shahed drones over Odesa, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts. The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that the third Kh-59 missile did not reach its target.^[17] The Ukrainian General Staff later reported that Russian forces also launched a Kh-31 missile and two S-300 missiles targeting civilian infrastructure in an unspecified location.^[18] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Russian forces are flying drones over riverbeds and highways to avoid Ukrainian mobile fire groups that have deployed throughout Ukraine.^[19]

Russian authorities plan to extend criminal liability for crimes against the law on military service to participants in volunteer formations, a measure that would impact many irregular military formations and personnel on which the Russian military relies for manpower in Ukraine. Russian media reported on November 29 that the Russian State Duma adopted a bill in its first reading extending criminal liability for crimes against regular military service to volunteer servicemen.^[20] Russian volunteer servicemen are currently exempt from existing legislation that holds Russian conscripts, contract servicemen, and reservists liable for crimes committed while performing combat missions. The new bill empowers Russian military courts to try volunteer servicemen for select crimes including desertion, failure to comply with an order, resistance to or violent actions against a superior, unauthorized leaving of a place of service, evasion of duties by feigning illness, and intentional or accidental destruction, damage, or loss of military property. Russian senators previously called for the introduction of criminal penalties for

volunteer servicemen for "improper performance of their contractual duties" and desertion.[21] This legislation may impact the Kremlin's ongoing volunteer recruitment efforts if the threat of criminal liabilities outweighs incentives for volunteer service such as high salaries and additional social benefits.[22]

Russian officials proposed laws that would restrict the actions of foreign citizens in Russia, likely to support continued efforts to coerce migrants into Russian military service. Russian Duma deputies Alexei Zhuravlev, Mikhail Matveev, and Dmitri Kuznetsov proposed a bill that would consider migration violations an aggravating circumstance in a criminal offense.[23] Zhuravlev, Matveev and Kuznetsov cited figures that Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin released on September 25 claiming that the number of serious crimes that foreign citizens committed in Russia increased by 32 percent from 2022 to 2023. [24] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on November 28 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) proposed a bill that would require all foreigners entering Russia to sign a "loyalty agreement" banning them from discrediting Russian domestic and foreign policy, denying Russian family values, or "disrespecting the diversity of regional and ethnocultural ways of life" in Russia among other restrictions.[25] The proposed measures likely seek to increase Russian law enforcement's ability to investigate and arrest migrants with foreign citizenship as part of an effort to coerce them into Russian military service. Russian authorities are also continuing efforts to coerce migrants with Russian citizenship into the Russian military by threatening to revoke their citizenship and forcibly issuing them military summonses.[26]

The NATO–Ukraine Council (NUC) met at the foreign minister-level for the first time on November 29 and discussed steps to increase weapons and ammunition production. NATO reported that it is developing a roadmap for full Ukrainian interoperability with NATO and reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's democratic and security sector reforms "on its path toward future membership in NATO." [27] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that the NUC discussed increasing the production of weapons and ammunition and noted on the sidelines of the NUC that the European Union (EU) has provided Ukraine with 300,000 rounds of ammunition of the promised 1 million.[28]

Poland is reportedly considering sending military advisors to Finland in response to Russia's ongoing attempts to artificially create a migrant crisis on the Finnish-Russian border as part of a known Russian hybrid warfare tactic meant to destabilize NATO and the EU. Polish Secretary of State and Head of the Polish National Security Bureau Jacek Siewiera stated on November 28 that during Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's official visit to Poland, Niinistö requested "allied support" against the hybrid Russian attack on the Finnish border.[29] Siewiera reported that Poland intends to respond to the request by sending a team of military advisors to Finland to provide "on-site knowledge on border security" and other unspecified operational support.[30] Finnish authorities announced on November 28 that Finland will close the last open border checkpoint at midnight on November 30 until at least December 13, following Russia's artificial creation of a migrant crisis on the Finnish border that started on November 18.[31] Russian sources, including Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, responded negatively to Siewiera's announcement and claimed that it is "excessive" and meant to prepare Finland for a confrontation against Russia in the Arctic. [32] Poland has experienced the impacts of Russian hybrid warfare firsthand on its borders from a Russian-orchestrated migrant crisis on the Poland-Belarus border in fall of 2021, and Finland likely seeks to leverage Poland's knowledge of such crises to address the current situation on the Finnish border.[33] Poland and Finland both belong to a number of military, political, economic, and diplomatic organizations, including NATO, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) formally announced Russia's termination of a nuclear reduction pact with Japan on November 28.[34] The Russian MFA stated that the bilateral agreement with Japan on cooperation in nuclear weapons reduction, initially signed in 1993, will terminate on May 21, 2024, six months after Russia's formal notification of termination.[35] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on November 9 that Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order approving Russia's termination of the bilateral agreement with Japan.[36] Japanese news outlet the *Japan Times* reported that the agreement allowed Japan to support the decommissioning of weapons, including Russian nuclear submarines.[37] The Russian MFA claimed that Russia is withdrawing from the agreement against the backdrop of "the openly anti-Russian policy of [Japanese Prime Minister Fumio] Kishida's administration" including Japanese sanctions against Russia and alleged increasing Japanese military activity near the Japanese-Russian border.[38] The *Japan Times* also noted that Russia has withdrawn from several other bilateral negotiations and initiatives following the imposition of Japanese sanctions against Russia after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[39]

Russia's efforts to generate combat power via recruitment from Central Asian countries may become a source of tension in Russia's relationship with its Central Asian neighbors. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)'s Central Asian service *Radio Azattyk* reported on November 28 that a Kazakh court sentenced Kazakh citizen Alexei Shompolov to six years and eight months in prison on charges of mercenarism.[40] Shompolov reportedly fought in a Wagner Group artillery unit near Bakhmut.[41] Shompolov's case represents the second charge of mercenarism pursued by a Central Asian country against a combatant who fought for Russia in Ukraine—an Uzbek court similarly sentenced an Uzbek man who fought with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) troops in Ukraine in 2014–2015 on October 31. [42] Russian milbloggers responded to Shompolov's sentencing by criticizing Kazakh leadership for taking an "anti-Russian" stance and questioned if Kazakh authorities would similarly charge Kazakh citizens who fought in the Ukrainian army.[43] Russia's continued insistence on leveraging Central Asian populations for force-generation purposes, both within Central Asian countries and in Central Asian migrant communities in Russia itself, is likely to create friction between Russia and its neighbors as Central Asian countries use mercenarism laws to punish residents who fought for Russia.[44]

Adam Kadyrov, younger son of Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov, will reportedly "oversee" the newly formed "Sheikh Mansur" volunteer battalion in a new unspecified position, possibly further indicating Ramzan Kadyrov's desire for Adam to succeed him as head of Chechnya. Chechen Republic Parliament Deputy Magomed Daudov claimed on November 29 that Adam will "oversee" the battalion but did not provide additional information regarding Adam's official title, although the role may be more ceremonial than combat- or command-oriented given Adam's age.[45] Daudov stated that Adam also received the star of the "Sheikh Mansur" Battalion award. Ramzan Kadyrov has previously appeared increasingly favorable to Adam in recent months, including appointing Adam to a prominent yet unspecified "important position" in the Chechen secret service.[46]

Key Takeaways:

- The apparent Russian failure to establish a cohesive command structure among forces defending on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast continues to degrade Russian morale and combat capabilities.
- The Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces is increasingly comprised of disparate elements of recently transferred and degraded units and new formations, which may be contributing to this apparent lack of cohesive command structure.
- Russian authorities plan to extend criminal liability for crimes against the law on military service to participants in volunteer formations, a measure that would impact many irregular military formations and personnel on which the Russian military relies for manpower in Ukraine.

- Russian officials proposed laws that would restrict the actions of foreign citizens in Russia, likely to support continued efforts to coerce migrants into Russian military service.
- The NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) met at the foreign minister-level for the first time on November 29 and discussed steps to increase weapons and ammunition production.
- Poland is reportedly considering sending military advisors to Finland in response to Russia's ongoing attempts to artificially create a migrant crisis on the Finnish-Russian border as part of a known Russian hybrid warfare tactic meant to destabilize NATO and the EU.
- The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) formally announced Russia's termination of a nuclear reduction pact with Japan on November 28.
- Russia's efforts to generate combat power via recruitment from Central Asian countries may become a source of tension in Russia's relationship with its Central Asian neighbors.
- Adam Kadyrov, younger son of Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov, will reportedly "oversee" the newly formed "Sheikh Mansur" volunteer battalion in a new unspecified position, possibly further indicating Ramzan Kadyrov's desire for Adam to succeed him as head of Chechnya.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatov-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances.
- Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Head and Duma Deputy Leonid Slutsky proposed a bill on November 28 that would grant war correspondents "combat veteran" status and associated social support benefits.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to erase Ukrainian culture and identity in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 28, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark

November 28, 2023, 7:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated a two-part conception of Russian identity in a speech on November 28: a "Russian nation" – claimed to include Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians – at the center of Russian identity; and a wider "Russian world" including other non-East Slavic ethnicities in both modern Russia and the former territory of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. Putin made a lengthy speech on Russian identity at the World Russian People's Council on November 28. Putin reiterated his previous false claims that the "Russian nation" and people are composed of ethnic Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians who were artificially and violently divided via policy miscalculations during and after the fall of the Soviet Union, arguing Russia (the state) should unify this "Russian nation."^[1] Putin defined the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* as a union of people who feel a spiritual connection to the "Motherland," consider themselves to be native Russian speakers, and are carriers of Russian history and culture regardless of their national or religious affiliation. Putin, however, pointed out that there cannot be Russia (as a state) or the *Russkiy Mir* without ethnic Russians and implied that current Russian citizens and "all other peoples who have lived and are living in [Russia]" make up Russia. Putin geographically defined the *Russkiy Mir* as the Ancient Rus' (Kyivan Rus), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation, indicating that the Kremlin's concept likely also includes "Russian compatriots" in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Putin also expanded his definition of "Western Russophobia" to include claimed aggression against other ethnicities such as Tatars, Chechens, Yakuts, and Buryats, in addition to ethnic Russians. Putin also called on Russian federal subjects to strengthen and protect Russia's cultural and religious diversity. Putin previously outlined similar definitions of "ethnically Russian people" in his "Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" essay in July 2021.^[2] Putin's November 28 speech draws a clear distinction between Putin's vision of the Russian *nation* as a "triune people" composed of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, while other regional identities in Russia make up Russia as a *country* and shared "Russian world." **Putin's articulation of a Russian nation (including Ukrainians and dominated by Moscow) reiterates longstanding Kremlin justifications for its invasion of Ukraine and aggression toward its neighbors, and Putin's claim that "western Russophobia" affects all the ethnicities in the Russian state is likely intended to rally support among Russian citizens who are not ethnically Russian for Putin's war.**

Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow stated that Russia needs to "significantly adjust" its migration policies for the "preservation of Russian culture," highlighting the perceived superiority of ethnic Russians to other regional ethnicities. Kirill argued during a speech at the World Russian People's Council on November 28 that Russia's current migration policies allow self-segregated migrant communities in Russia to create "closed ethnic enclaves" that "are a breeding ground for corruption, organized ethnic crime, illegal migration, terrorism, extremism, and tension within Russian society."^[3] Kirill stated that a migrant's economic productivity or Russian citizenship does not free them from the requirement to respect Russian society, people, and traditions. Kirill warned that migrants are "changing the appearance of Russian cities" and "deforming" Russia's singular linguistic, cultural, and legal traditions. Kirill added that Russian companies' profits cannot be more important than the values of the Russian state. Kirill's remarks follow several weeks of increasingly frequent anti-migrant rhetoric within Russian society and presentations of anti-migrant legislation by Russian officials.^[4] **Patriarch Kirill's anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric is more closely aligned with Russian government policies towards migrants and non-Russian ethnicities in Russia than Putin's claimed inclusivity under the "Russian world."**

Russian officials appear to be attempting to further disenfranchise migrants living in Russia, likely to support ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into military service while also appeasing increasingly xenophobic Russian ultranationalists. Kremlin news wire TASS reported on November 28 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) drafted a proposed bill that would create a "controlled stay" regime in Russia for migrants who do not have legal grounds for staying in the country, including those with expired or nullified migration documents and those who have illegally entered Russia.^[5] The bill will reportedly propose the following restrictions on migrants in Russia on the controlled stay regime: a ban on the migrants' ability to register legal entities and as individual entrepreneurs, engage in real estate transactions, purchase and sell vehicles, drive a car, obtain a driver's license, open a bank account, transfer money, or get married.^[6] The draft bill will reportedly require migrants living under the regime to notify authorities about their residence and travel from Russia and will subject migrants who violate the restrictions to deportation or detention in a special facility.^[7]

The restrictions of the proposed migration status likely aim to further alienate large numbers of migrants from economic and social life in Russia and make military service one of the few avenues for remaining in the country. Russian authorities are engaged in an ongoing widespread effort to coerce both migrants and naturalized Russian citizens into signing military contracts by threatening deportation and loss of citizenship.^[8] Russian authorities are also engaged in a parallel effort to compel migrants to fight in Ukraine in exchange for Russian citizenship.^[9] The proposed bill also likely aims to appease Russian ultranationalists who have increasingly called for harsh crackdowns on migrant communities and have bemoaned Russian migration policies.^[10] One Russian ultranationalist called the restrictions half-measures and urged Russian authorities to enact even more restrictive policies on migrants.^[11] The Kremlin appears to be continuing to struggle to reconcile efforts to increase Russian industrial capacity while also coercing migrants into military service and disincentivizing them from working in Russia.^[12] Efforts to appease Russian ultranationalists may explain the increasingly inconsistent and contradictory Kremlin policies concerning the coercion of migrants into military service and the growing strains on the Russian domestic labor force.^[13]

The Kremlin continues to focus heavily on setting informational conditions for the upcoming 2024 Russian presidential elections and will likely formally commence Putin's "campaign" on December 14. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 28 that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko held a closed meeting in November 2023 with the heads of occupation administrations and unspecified Russian federal subjects during which he delivered directives for strengthening preparations for elections.^[14] These directives reportedly include allocating social assistance to voters from regional budgets and the intensifying rhetoric about supposed positive trends in the Russian economy.^[15] This reported focus on economic well-being is consistent with previous reports that the Kremlin intends to downplay the Russian war in Ukraine ahead of the elections.^[16] Kiriyenko reportedly ordered occupation heads to issue Russian passports to 85 percent of residents in occupied Ukraine before the presidential elections in March 2024, likely to support efforts to falsely claim large voter turnout and legitimize the Kremlin's control of occupied territories.^[17] Russian Communist Party Head Gennady Zyuganov stated on November 28 that the Russian Federation Council will officially announce the start of the Russian presidential campaign on December 13, 2023.^[18] Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly hold his annual live "Direct Line" forum and annual press conference in tandem on December 14, and the official start of the campaign on December 13 further suggests that the Kremlin plans to use the tandem event as the rollout for Putin's presidential campaign.^[19]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on November 28 that unspecified actors poisoned GUR Head Kyrylo Budanov's wife Marianna Budanova.^[20] Yusov stated that Budanova is currently undergoing treatment and could not confirm or deny reports of the poisoning of GUR employees.^[21] Ukrainian outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported, citing unspecified sources, that unspecified actors also poisoned other GUR employees who are now undergoing treatment.^[22] An unspecified Ukrainian special services official told Ukrainian outlet *RBK-Ukraine* that Budanov had not been poisoned.^[23]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law significantly increasing Russian federal expenditures in 2024, reportedly including a record level of defense spending. Putin signed the law on the 2024 federal budget and the planned budgets for 2025 and 2026 on November 27.^[24] The 2024 federal budget accounts for 36.66 trillion rubles (\$412.5 billion) in state expenses and a budget deficit of 1.6 trillion rubles (\$9.5 billion).^[25] The Russian Finance Ministry estimated in October 2023 that 2023 budget expenditures amounted to 32.5 trillion rubles (\$365.7 billion), suggesting that the 2024 budget will account for a roughly 13 percent increase in overall expenditures.^[26] Russian business journalists Farida Rustamova and Maksim Tovkalyo stated on November 15 that Russian authorities plan to spend 14 trillion rubles (\$157.5 billion) on defense and law enforcement, representing 39 percent of all federal government spending.^[27] *Reuters* reported on October 2 that the 2024 budget would allocate 10.78 trillion rubles (\$121.3 billion) to national defense, representing 29.4 percent of the national budget.^[28] The Russian Finance Ministry reportedly allocated 6.41 trillion rubles (\$72.1 billion) to defense in 2023, although this number is likely higher given that a substantial portion of the Russian federal budget is still classified.^[29] The roughly third or more of the federal budget going to defense spending, if true, will represent a record level of Russian defense spending.^[30] The federal budget does not amount to the entirety of Russian spending on defense, however, as the Kremlin has relied on regional budgets and private business entities to augment funding for the ongoing war effort.^[31] The draft budgets for 2025 and 2026 have roughly just as large expenditures as the 2024 budget, 34.38 trillion rubles (\$387.9 billion) and 35.59 trillion rubles (\$400.4 billion) respectively, and suggests that the Kremlin is planning to allocate large portions of its expenditures to support a long war effort in Ukraine.^[32]

A prominent Russian milblogger continued to highlight mid-level command problems among Russian forces operating on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities and the vulnerability of Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) on the east bank. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian personnel in smaller units such as the 1822nd Battalion did not know their commanding officers or details about their supervisory structure "for a long time."^[33] The Russian milblogger claimed that unspecified company commanders in the 1822nd Battalion continually ordered units to capture islands in the Dnipro River Delta despite suffering heavy losses and conducting minimal casualty evacuations and that the 1822nd Battalion's personnel could not contact a higher-level commander to address their complaints.^[34] The milblogger noted that the Russian military command ordered elements of the 1822nd Battalion to capture islands in the Dnipro River as a punishment while contract soldiers remain on the east bank, suggesting that the 1822nd is mainly staffed with mobilized personnel.^[35] The milblogger claimed that "respected authorities" are investigating problems in the 1822nd Battalion and that mid-level Russian commanders are attempting to identify the personnel who originally voiced their complaints.^[36] The milblogger concluded that Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky "inherited a difficult legacy" in reference to persistent problems among Russian forces operating in the east bank of Kherson Oblast.^[37]

A Russian insider source claimed on November 28 that Russian authorities detained at least three additional Moscow-based Federal Security Service (FSB) employees in connection with a 5-billion-ruble (\$55.6 million) bribery case. The insider source claimed that Russian authorities detained "Ushakov" and two unnamed "Directorate M" employees.^[38] The source claimed that Russian authorities are also holding two of the FSB's "Directorate T" employees in a pre-trial detention center and are investigating other senior FSB employees as part of the same investigation. ISW reported on November 17 that Russian authorities detained several FSB employees on November 10 and 16 for accepting a bribe to dismiss a corruption case against the Merlion Group of Companies, a Russian IT company and technology distributor.^[39] ISW cannot confirm the most recent detentions, but they are consistent with the previously reported detentions.

Iranian Deputy Defense Minister Brigadier General Mehdi Farhi announced on November 28 that Russia and Iran finalized the purchase of Russian aircraft.^[40] Iranian news agency *Tasnim*, citing Farhi, reported that Russia will provide Iran with an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets, Mi-28 attack helicopters, and Yak-130 combat training aircraft. Iranian media and the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technology reported in early September that the Iranian Air Force had received Russian Yak-130s based on social media footage.^[41] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* observed that Iran last bought foreign aircraft from the Soviet Union in 1990.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated a two-part conception of Russian identity in a speech on November 28: a “Russian nation” – claimed to include Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians – at the center of Russian identity; and a wider ‘Russian world’ including other non-East Slavic ethnicities in both modern Russia and the former territory of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire.
- Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow stated that Russia needs to “significantly adjust” its migration policies for the “preservation of Russian culture,” highlighting the perceived superiority of ethnic Russians to other regional ethnicities.
- Russian officials appear to be attempting to further disenfranchise migrants living in Russia, likely to support ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into military service while also appeasing increasingly xenophobic Russian ultranationalists.
- The Kremlin continues to focus heavily on setting informational conditions for the upcoming 2024 Russian presidential elections and will likely formally commence Putin’s “campaign” on December 14.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on November 28 that unspecified actors poisoned GUR Head Kyrylo Budanov’s wife Marianna Budanova.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law significantly increasing Russian federal expenditures in 2024, reportedly including a record level of defense spending.
- A prominent Russian milblogger continued to highlight mid-level command problems among Russian forces operating on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities and the vulnerability of Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) on the east bank.
- A Russian insider source claimed on November 28 that Russian authorities detained at least three additional Moscow-based Federal Security Service (FSB) employees in connection with a 5-billion-ruble (\$55.6 million) bribery case.
- Iranian Deputy Defense Minister Brigadier General Mehdi Farhi announced on November 28 that Russia and Iran finalized the purchase of Russian aircraft.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Kupyansk and Avdiivka.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov announced on November 27 that Chechnya formed two new regiments and one battalion subordinated under the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and an operational battalion subordinated under Rosgvardia.
- Occupation administrations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts signed an agreement to develop closer economic ties with Rostov and Voronezh oblasts on November 28.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 27, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark

November 27, 2023, 6:00pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A cyclone in the Black Sea and southern Ukraine caused infrastructure damage in many areas of coastal southern Russia and occupied Ukraine and is impacting the tempo of military operations along the frontline in Ukraine, but has notably not stopped military activity entirely. Russian sources posted images and footage of the impact of the cyclone on civilian and transportation infrastructure in coastal areas of Krasnodar Krai, including near Sochi, Anapa, Gelendzhik, Novorossiysk, and Taupse.^[1] Ukrainian and Russian sources also noted that coastal areas of occupied Crimea, occupied Kherson Oblast, and much of Odesa Oblast were heavily impacted by heavy snow and high winds, leaving large swaths of the population without electricity.^[2] The Ukrainian Navy and Ukraine's Southern Operational Command notably reported that dangerous weather in the Black Sea forced Russia to return all of its naval vessels and missile carriers to their base points.^[3] A prominent Russian milblogger warned that the threat of mines in the Black Sea will increase for both military and civilian vessels in the coming days because the storm has broken boom nets and dispersed minefields, causing mines to drift throughout the northwestern Black Sea.^[4] Several sources also reported that the storm damaged rail lines in coastal areas, which may have logistical ramifications for Russian forces in occupied Crimea and southern Ukraine.^[5]

Despite the challenging weather conditions, both Russian and Ukrainian forces are continuing ground attacks throughout Ukraine, albeit at a slightly slower pace due to snow and resulting poor visibility. Russian milbloggers noted that heavy snow and winds have reduced visibility and complicated aerial reconnaissance and artillery correction in the Kherson direction, but noted that Ukrainian forces have taken advantage of low visibility conditions to consolidate positions on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.^[6] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Russian forces in the Tavriisk direction (ranging from Avdiivka all the way through western Zaporizhia Oblast) have reduced artillery use by one and a half times and drone use six times due to the weather but emphasized that Russian forces continue to heavily use aviation in the Avdiivka direction.^[7] Challenging winter conditions will force both sides to rely more heavily on infantry-led ground attacks in the absence of aerial reconnaissance and artillery correction capabilities.^[8]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and several Russian milbloggers stated that Russia must maintain active operations in Ukraine and expressed worry over the prospect of further Western military support to Ukraine, though some milbloggers additionally expressed increased discontent with the perceived lack of articulated Russian war aims and stated Russia must clarify its war aims before discussing any pause or end to the war. Lavrov claimed on November 27 that the West is currently trying to “freeze” the war to gain time and rearm Ukraine for future attacks on Russia.^[9] Several Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that any “truce” or pause in the war will only benefit Ukraine and allow Ukrainian forces to rest, refit, and relaunch offensive operations.^[10] One prominent critical milblogger claimed that a pause in the war will allow Ukraine to conduct a “Minsk-3,” alluding to the previous Minsk agreements that temporarily paused large-scale combat operations in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 but ultimately allowed Russia to prepare for the full-scale invasion in 2022.^[11] The critical milblogger also observed that any discussions regarding pauses or negotiations in the war will be particularly harmful to Russia because Russia has failed to clearly

define war aims or conditions necessary for a Russian victory.[12] The milblogger noted that the lack of a clear definition for victory has caused internal destabilization within Russia.[13] Other Russian milbloggers noted that Ukraine still controls several territories that Russia has claimed to have (illegally) annexed, arguing that Russia should not see any negotiations until or unless Russia can capture the rest of the four occupied oblasts (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts), as well as Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts.[14]

Renewed discussion of hypothetical negotiations underlined Russia's lack of clearly articulated war aims and are causing significant anxiety in the pro-war Russian information space. Some milbloggers claimed that Russia cannot even consider the possibility of pausing the war until they have fully captured the four occupied Ukrainian oblasts, while other milbloggers advocated for more maximalist aims such as the capture of Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts, in which Russia currently has no presence (with the exception of a small Russian presence on the Mykolaiv Oblast side of the Kinburn Peninsula).[15] The apparent lack of consensus as to what exactly would constitute a Russian victory is compounding anxieties over the perceived pace of the war in the Russian information space —an anxiety that is increasingly reflected in the highest levels of the Russian government. ISW has previously reported that select voices in the Russian information space, namely deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, advocated for freezing the lines in Ukraine to afford Russian troops the ability to rest and reconstitute, but Lavrov's statement against any sort of pause in Ukraine is an explicit rejection of this argument, as well as a tacit acceptance of a protracted war in Ukraine.[16] Clear Russian concern about Ukraine's ability to rearm and relaunch offensives in the case of the pause highlights Russia's concern over continued NATO and Western support for Ukraine. Russia is rapidly replacing losses and belatedly moving its economy to a war footing, and ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin would leverage any pause or ceasefire to prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine.[17] Ukraine's partners have the capability to sustain and accelerate aid to Ukraine and enable Ukraine to restore maneuver to the battlefield.[18]

Ukrainian National Defense and Security Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that the Kremlin has activated a network of sleeper agents in Ukraine in the past few months to destabilize Ukrainian society. Danilov stated in an interview with the *Times* published on November 27 that these sleeper agents are embedded in public institutions and threaten Ukrainian security agencies, including the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU).[19] Danilov stated that these sleeper agents aim to undermine Ukrainian unity by causing fractures between Ukrainian political and military leadership, as well as between Ukrainian civilians and the government. Danilov warned that these sleeper agents are specifically exploiting alleged tensions between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi and are additionally targeting female relatives of Ukrainian soldiers to foment anti-government sentiments as part of these efforts to fracture Ukrainian society.

Russia's attempt to artificially create a migrant crisis at the Finnish border appears to be failing due to Finnish authorities' swift response. Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo stated on November 27 that the Finnish government will close the last border crossing with Russia "if necessary" and reported that the Finnish government is ready to take unspecified additional measures in response to Russia's artificially generated migrant crisis.[20] Finland previously closed three checkpoints on the Finnish-Russian border on November 23, leaving only its northernmost border crossing open.[21] Several other Finnish government officials also signaled their support for closing the entire border with Russia.[22] A Russian insider source claimed that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko instructed Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Head Vladimir Kolokoltsev to gather migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and other regions to send them to the Finnish border.[23] The insider source complained that Finnish border authorities stopped most migrants from crossing into Finland and that Russian authorities must now settle the migrants in Russia.[24]

The Kremlin appears to be shifting responsibility for potential future austerity measures onto Russian occupation heads and the heads of four select Russian republics. Russian state news outlet *Kommersant* reported on November 27 that the Russian Ministry of Finance's 2024 subsidy provision agreements will directly assign budget deficit responsibilities to the heads of the republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Tuva and the heads of the four Russian occupation administrations in Ukraine.[25] The Russian Ministry of Finance reportedly plans to add additional obligations to the subsidy agreements with the four Russian republics and the four occupation administrations in order to reduce gaps between regional income and expenses and will withdraw federal subsidies if these regional and occupation administrations fail to lower budget deficits.[26] These additional obligations will ask republic and occupation heads to sign promises levels of targeted spending of federal money on social programs; increase the efficiency of their respective budgetary institutions; refuse to expand the number of state employees; and not increase state salaries above the inflation level.[27] The additional obligations will also reportedly require that the heads of these administrations increase state revenue collection and agree with the Ministry of Finance's 2025 draft budget.[28] The heads of the republic and occupation administrations reportedly have until December 18, 2023, to sign the 2024 subsidy provision agreements with the new obligations or refuse subsidies for the upcoming year.[29] These obligations appear to amount to an austerity package as increases to state revenue collection will likely require tax hikes, while targeted spending for social programs may portend cuts to existing regional and occupation programs.

The Russian Ministry of Finance reportedly selected the occupation administrations and the four republics because of their high ratio of federal subsidies to regional income.[30] The Russian government has heavily subsidized regions in the North Caucasus since the Chechen wars and has almost completely subsidized occupied territories in Ukraine following their illegal annexation into Russia.[31] Federal subsidies reportedly accounted for 54 percent of the Republic of Tuva's budget revenue in 2020, making it the most subsidized Russian federal subject, followed by the republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.[32] Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov stated on September 11 that Russia has a plan to reduce its overall budget deficit in the coming years amid continued significant spending on the war in Ukraine.[33] The potential austerity measures in the most subsidized Russian federal subjects and the almost entirely subsidized occupation administrations may represent the beginning of a wider set of measures to cut budget deficits while maintaining defense spending. The Kremlin may have instructed the Russian Ministry of Finance to shift responsibility for the measures directly onto the republic and occupation administrations to prevent the Kremlin from bearing the expected discontent for austerity. The Kremlin may have also chosen the occupied territories and four non-ethnic Russian republics to contain social discontent in non-ethnic Russian areas and existing areas of concern ahead of the 2024 Russian presidential elections.

The Kremlin may risk undermining Russian integration efforts in occupied territories and prompt discontent in federal subjects if it pursues significant austerity measures. Large-scale federal spending on infrastructure and social programs, as well as preferential tax codes and benefits, have been a central component of the Russian effort to establish economic and social control over occupied territories in Ukraine, and potential austerity measures may complicate these efforts. Concerns about domestic discontent in the North Caucasus have recently intensified alongside heightened ethnoreligious tensions in Russia, and economic strains may make this discontent more pronounced.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- A cyclone in the Black Sea and southern Ukraine caused infrastructure damage in many areas of coastal southern Russia and occupied Ukraine and is impacting the tempo of military operations along the frontline in Ukraine, but has notably not stopped military activity entirely.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and several Russian milbloggers stated that Russia must maintain active operations in Ukraine and expressed worry over the prospect of further Western military support to Ukraine.
- Some milbloggers additionally expressed increased discontent with the perceived lack of articulated Russian war aims and stated Russia must clarify its war aims before discussing any pause or end to the war.
- Ukrainian National Defense and Security Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that the Kremlin has activated a network of sleeper agents in Ukraine in the past few months to destabilize Ukrainian society.
- Russia's attempt to artificially create a migrant crisis at the Finnish border appears to be failing due to Finnish authorities' swift response.
- The Kremlin appears to be shifting responsibility for potential future austerity measures onto Russian occupation heads and the heads of four select Russian republics.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and did not make confirmed advances.
- Deputy Commander of the Russian Navy Lieutenant General Viktor Astapov confirmed on November 27 that the Russian navy is reorganizing naval infantry brigades into divisions in order to increase their combat capabilities.
- Likely Ukrainian partisans continue to target Russian occupation elements throughout occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 26, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 26, 2023, 6:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:15pm ET on November 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed drone strikes on Ukraine on the night of November 25-26. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched nine Shahed-136/131 from Primorsko-Akhtarsk direction and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down eight drones.^[1] Ukrainian Joint Forces Commander Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev, like other Ukrainian officials on November 25, continued to praise the actions of Ukrainian mobile fire groups in intercepting Russian drones.^[2] Nayev stated that mobile fire groups will receive foreign-made man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) in the near future.^[3]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a large-scale drone strike on Russian territory, and Russian occupation officials accused Ukrainian forces of launching a strike on occupied Donetsk Oblast that resulted in widespread power outages. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down 24 Ukrainian drones over Moscow, Tula, Kaluga, Bryansk, and Smolensk oblasts on the night of November 25-26 and on the morning of November 26.^[4] Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin stated that one drone crashed into an apartment building in Tula City after Russian air defenses shot it down.^[5] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne*, citing its own unnamed sources, reported that the overnight Ukrainian drone strike on Russia was a GUR special operation.^[6] Russian sources, including Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin, also claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a large artillery and HIMARS strike on power distribution substations in occupied Donetsk Oblast overnight, causing electricity outages in many settlements and cities, including Donetsk City, Mariupol, and Manhush.^[7]

Russian forces reportedly complained about the vulnerability of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities on the east bank. A Russian milblogger claimed on November 26 that personnel of the Russian 70th Motorized Rifle Division (of the newly formed 18th Combined Arms Army) often write to him complaining about the vulnerability of Russian logistics in the east bank of Kherson Oblast near Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson Oblast and 2km from the Dnipro River) to Ukrainian drone strikes.^[8] The milblogger also agreed with another Russian milblogger's previous claims that Russian forces in this area struggle with unit coordination as well as commanders' negligence at the company and battalion levels.^[9] The milblogger suggested that Russian forces near Krynyk should create a separate anti-drone company staffed by personnel of the separate reconnaissance battalion of the 70th Motorized Rifle Division to protect Russian GLOCs.^[10] Russian GLOCs on left bank Kherson Oblast, such as the E58 Antonivka-Sahy highway (about 5-8km away from the Dnipro River), are located close to the Dnipro River shoreline, making them vulnerable to Ukrainian interdiction. ISW previously reported that Russian milbloggers have repeatedly complained about Russian forces near Krynyk suffering from problems, such as insufficient fire support, unit coordination, electronic warfare (EW), counterbattery, and air defense, but has observed that these reported problems do not always translate into significant battlefield effects.^[11] Russian sources have continually claimed that Russian forces are unable to push Ukrainian forces out of Krynyk and that Ukrainian forces are currently unable to make operationally significant advances in the east bank area.^[12]

Russia continues to face skilled and unskilled labor shortages amid inconsistent and contradictory Kremlin policies that disincentivize Russians who fled Russia and migrant workers from working in Russia while simultaneously trying to increase Russian industrial capacity and force generation. Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin claimed on November 25 that many Russians who left Russia because of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are returning to Russia because they could not find work abroad.^[13] Volodin warned that Russia is not "waiting with open arms" to accept returning Russians and claimed that they "committed treason against Russia, relatives, and friends."^[14] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger agreed with Volodin's statements on November 26 but noted that Russia continues to face severe skilled labor shortages and characterized the number of returning Russians as "catastrophically small."^[15] The milblogger added that the labor shortages have increased the number of migrants seeking jobs in Russia and criticized Russian authorities for their "open door policy" on migration.^[16] The Russian government appears to be struggling to reconcile incoherent and competing objectives by prioritizing crypto-mobilization efforts to send manpower to the frontline at the expense of Russia's national labor force while simultaneously enforcing policies that restrict migrants' prospects to work in Russia.

[17] Russian law enforcement agencies are also coercing migrants both with and without Russian citizenship into Russian military service, further reducing the migrants' ability to augment Russia's labor force.[18] The Kremlin's incoherent and contradictory policies seek to achieve mutually exclusive objectives of reducing negative shocks to Russia's domestic labor force, while disincentivizing migrants from working in Russia and enticing Russians to return from abroad while not providing them opportunities to work and trying to recruit them into a war they fled. The poor implementation of these policies has not generated any apparent or imminent threats to the Russian economy or war effort at this time, however.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed drone strikes on Ukraine on the night of November 25-26.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a large-scale drone strike on Russian territory, and Russian occupation officials accused Ukrainian forces of launching a strike on occupied Donetsk Oblast that resulted in widespread power outages.
- Russian forces reportedly complained about the vulnerability of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast amid continued complaints about weak Russian capabilities on the east bank.
- Russia continues to face skilled and unskilled labor shortages amid inconsistent and contradictory Kremlin policies that disincentivize Russians who fled Russia and migrant workers from working in Russia while simultaneously trying to increase Russian industrial capacity and force generation.
- Russian forces continued attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- The Russian Supreme Court ruled that certain Russian mobilized individuals have the right to serve in the Russian Alternative Civil Service (AKS) rather than on the front lines.
- Russian occupation officials continue to establish programs aimed at indoctrinating Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine into Russian national and cultural identities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 25, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 25, 2023, 6:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:45pm ET on November 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces launched the largest drone strike against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion overnight on November 24 to 25 using a new modification of the Iranian Shahed 131/136 drones.[1] Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 75 Shahed drones that mainly targeted Kyiv City from the southeast (Primorsko-Akhtarsk) and northeast (Kursk Oblast) and that Ukrainian forces shot down 74 drones.[2] Ukrainian military officials also reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Russian Kh-59 cruise missile over Dnipropetrovsk Oblast and that air defenses activated in at least six regions, including Kyiv, Sumy, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, and Kirovohrad oblasts.[3] Ukrainian Air Force officials stated that mobile fire groups enabled Ukrainian forces to shoot down a significant number of drones.[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky observed that Russian forces launched the drone attack on the Ukrainian remembrance day of the 1932-1933 Holodomor man-made famine.[5]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Russian forces attacked Kyiv with a new modification of Shahed drones and noted that these drones were black in color and contained a material that absorbs radar signals, making them more difficult to detect.[6] Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that Russian forces used "black Geran" or "Feran" (the Russian name for Shaheds) drones for the first time and claimed that these drones are more challenging to detect in the night sky.[7] Iranian media published footage on November 19 showing the Iranian Ashura Aerospace University of Science and Technology presenting the new Shahed-238 jet-powered modification of the Shahed-136 drone.[8] The presented Shahed-238 appeared to be black in color, but it is unknown if Russian forces used the Shahed-238 modification during the November 25 strike.

Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to grapple with the challenges electronic warfare (EW) systems pose on the front. The *Economist* reported on November 23 that superior Russian EW systems are impeding Ukrainian reconnaissance, communication, and strike capabilities.[9] The *Economist*, citing Western experts, stated that Russia has placed a "huge focus" on producing and developing superior EW capabilities and that Ukraine is struggling to produce equivalent EW systems and EW-resistant weapons domestically. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi assessed in his essay "Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It" that Ukrainian forces need to introduce necessary command and control (C2) processes for EW complexes, increase EW production capabilities, streamline engagements with volunteer organizations that provide smaller EW complexes to Ukrainian forces, improve Ukraine's counter-EW measures, and develop new drones with EW in mind.[10] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 25 that it is working to develop drone variants more resistant to Russian EW systems and produce successful variants at scale.[11] Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Deputy Director of Analysis Margarita Konaev and CSET Fellow Owen Daniels reported on September 6, 2023, that Russian adaptations to the deployment of EW systems continue to present challenges for Ukrainian drones transmitting targeting information and securing Ukrainian signals.[12] Russian sources previously credited superior Russian EW capabilities for aiding Russian forces' defense against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine in June 2023.[13]

Russian sources have also repeatedly expressed concerns and complaints about perceived inadequacies in Russian EW systems, however.[14] Russian sources credited superior Ukrainian EW and aerial reconnaissance systems for Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut in September 2023 and claimed that Ukrainian EW systems were significantly disrupting Russian communications in western Zaporizhia Oblast in August 2023.[15] ISW reported on November 25 that the effectiveness of Russian EW systems is inconsistent across the front, allowing the Ukrainians to continue to use drone-based reconnaissance-strike complexes to disrupt Russian offensive operations.[16] Russian milbloggers have been inconsistent in their assessments of which side has "superior" EW systems, indicating that neither Russia nor

Ukraine currently has a decisive advantage over the other.[17] Western aid in support of Ukrainian efforts to destroy, disrupt, or bypass Russian EW systems would increase Ukraine's ability to strike targets near the front precisely, disrupting Russian advances, and setting conditions for further Ukrainian offensive operations.[18]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on November 25 that Ukraine's Western partners agreed to transfer warships to Ukraine to protect Ukraine's grain corridor in the Black Sea.[19] Zelensky stated during a speech at the "Grain from Ukraine" conference in Kyiv that Ukraine and unspecified international partners reached an agreement to enable Ukraine to provide sea escorts for merchant ships transporting grain from Ukrainian ports in the near future. Zelensky added that Ukraine's partners also agreed to provide "very powerful" air defense systems to defend Odesa Oblast. Zelensky noted that the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative has delivered more than 170,000 tons of grain to Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Yemen in the past year.[20] Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics, Swiss President Alain Berset, and Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte also attended the conference and expressed their support for the initiative.[21]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Russia has not fulfilled arms export deals to Armenia and offered an alternative arrangement that would allow Russia to keep the weapons against the backdrop of recent deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations. Pashinyan stated on November 24 that Armenia has paid Russia for arms shipments but that Russia has not delivered the weapons or returned the money to Armenia.[22] Pashinyan offered the reduction of Armenia's outstanding debt to Russia in the amount of the arms purchase as a solution, possibly as a means to decrease Armenia's economic ties to Russia. The Defense Ministry of India similarly reported a delay in Russia's delivery of an S-400 missile system due to the war in Ukraine in 2022.[23] The head of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, Dmitry Shugaev, stated on August 14 that Russia will deliver the S-400 system to India on time by the end of 2024, however.[24]

Infighting among Russian ultranationalist milbloggers, likely exacerbated by ethnic tensions, has compelled a prominent milblogger to close his Telegram channel. The milblogger announced on November 25 that he is temporarily closing his Telegram channel on November 25, and another milblogger claimed that supporters of Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces subordinate to Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov threatened the first milblogger's parents and admonished the "full-time military bloggers and journalists" for making the threats.[25] The second milblogger later claimed that readers began threatening him to avoid repeating the "fate" of the first milblogger and that he will apologize "sooner or later," and the milblogger also claimed that he is confident that Akhmat commanders are not behind the attacks but mid-level "sheep."[26] A third milblogger responded in support of the other two milbloggers, claiming that another user offered him money to take down his post in support of the first milblogger but to "think hard" because he is a "good person." The milblogger disdained the request as "dishonorable."[27] The first milblogger first drew the wrath of the "public relations people of Akhmat and Kadyrov" in early November when he criticized rumors that Wagner Group personnel were transferring to Akhmat units, drawing some support from other milbloggers when the Akhmat-affiliates targeted this milblogger in a defamation campaign.[28] These attacks allegedly from supporters of Kadyrov come during a period of especially high ethnoreligious tensions in Russia and as Kadyrov is increasingly attempting to curry and display Russian Vladimir Putin's favor.[29]

Other milbloggers attributed increased infighting among ultranationalist voices about the war in Ukraine to Russian politics and the coming 2024 Russian presidential elections. One milblogger claimed that the "war" on Telegram and in the Russian media will temporarily end as Russian political "towers" - or political officials financing Telegram channels to advance their political goals - temporarily stop feuding until after the Russian presidential elections in March 2024.[30] The milblogger claimed that the "towers" may sacrifice some overzealous "pawns" as bargaining chips and noted that milbloggers and other prominent voices will either need to stop fighting or move to the sidelines.[31] Another milblogger claimed that this infighting is the result of Russian leadership playing politics and that Russia is fighting an enemy that wants to win the war at any cost.[32]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched the largest drone strike against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion overnight on November 24 to 25 using a new modification of the Iranian Shahed 131/136 drones.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to grapple with the challenges electronic warfare (EW) systems pose on the front.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on November 25 that Ukraine's Western partners agreed to transfer warships to Ukraine to protect Ukraine's grain corridor in the Black Sea.
- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Russia has not fulfilled arms export deals to Armenia and offered an alternative arrangement that would allow Russia to keep the weapons against the backdrop of recent deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.
- Infighting among Russian ultranationalist milbloggers, likely exacerbated by ethnic tensions, has compelled a prominent milblogger to close his Telegram channel.
- Other milbloggers attributed increased infighting among ultranationalist voices about the war in Ukraine to Russian politics and the coming 2024 Russian presidential elections.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 25 and advanced in some areas.
- Russian military commanders are reportedly ignoring frontline units' requests for drones.
- Ukraine's Ministry of Reintegration reported on November 24 that over 13,500 Ukrainians returned to Ukraine from Russia via a humanitarian corridor in Sumy Oblast since its establishment in July 2023.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 24, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 24, 2023, 7:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on November 24, and covers both November 23 and November 24 due to the fact that ISW did not publish a Campaign Assessment on November 23 in observance of the Thanksgiving Day holiday. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces began a renewed offensive effort towards Avdiivka on November 22, although likely with weaker mechanized capabilities than in the previous offensive waves that occurred in October. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi reported on November 23 that Russian forces launched a “third wave” of assaults as part of the Russia offensive operation in the Avdiivka direction, and Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that this “third wave” began on November 22.[1] Shtupun reported a 25 to 30 percent increase in Russian ground attacks near Avdiivka on November 22 and stated that Ukrainian forces repelled several Russian columns of roughly a dozen armored vehicles in total during assaults.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 50 Russian assaults in the Avdiivka direction on November 23 and 24.[3] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continued offensive operations on Avdiivka’s northern and southern flanks but did not characterize any Russian assaults as heavily mechanized.[4] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continued to advance north of Avdiivka and made further gains in the industrial zone southeast of Avdiivka but did not make any territorial claims consistent with a successful renewed large-scale Russian offensive push.[5]

Shtupun stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed three Russian tanks and seven armored fighting vehicles on November 22, suggesting that Russian forces are currently conducting a smaller set of mechanized assaults than in October.[6] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces lost 50 tanks and 100 armored vehicles in renewed assaults on Avdiivka on October 19 and 15 tanks and 33 armored vehicles during the initial large, mechanized assaults on October 10.[7] Russian forces have lost a confirmed 197 damaged and destroyed vehicles in offensive operations near Avdiivka since October 9, and the Russian military appeared to spend the end of October and all of November preparing for a wave of highly attritional infantry-led ground assaults to compensate for these heavy-equipment losses.[8] Large infantry-led ground assaults will likely pose a significant threat to Ukrainian forces defending in the Avdiivka direction but will not lead to a rapid Russian advance in the area.

High-ranking Russian officials may be engaged in a wider scheme of forcibly adopting deported Ukrainian children. BBC Panorama and Russian opposition outlet Vazhnye Istorii published investigations on November 23 detailing how Just Russia Party leader Sergei Mironov adopted a 10-month-old Ukrainian girl whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from a Kherson City orphanage in autumn of 2022 alongside over 40 other children.[9] The investigations found that Mironov’s new wife, Inna Varlamova, traveled to occupied Kherson Oblast, where occupation authorities issued her a power of attorney to deport two children—a 10-month-old girl and a two-year-old boy.[10] Both BBC and Vazhnye Istorii noted that Varlamova falsely introduced herself to the leadership of the children’s home as the “head of children’s affairs from Moscow,” a position which she does not hold and that still would not legitimize the deportations of the children under international law. [11] Russian court documents show that Mironov and Varlamova then adopted the girl in November 2022, changed her name from her Ukrainian birth name to a new Russian name and the surname Mironova, and officially changed her place of birth from Kherson City to Podolsk, Russia.[12] Neither investigation could confirm the whereabouts of the two-year-old boy. Mironov notably responded to the investigation and called it a “fake from Ukrainian special services and their Western curators” meant to discredit him.[13]

Mironov and his wife, who reportedly holds a low-level unspecified position in the Russian Duma, follow in the footsteps of Russian Commissioner on Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova, who has also adopted at least one Ukrainian child from occupied Mariupol.[14] While ISW can only confirm that these two Russian officials have forcibly adopted deported Ukrainian children at this time, the adoptions may be indicative of a wider pattern in which Russian officials adopt deported children in order to legitimize the practice in the eyes of the Russian public. Russian politicians may be adopting deported Ukrainian children to set administrative and cultural precedents for wider adoptions of Ukrainian children to further escalate Russia’s campaign to deport Ukrainians to Russia. ISW continues to assess that the forced deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children likely amounts to a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[15]

Ukraine’s Western allies declared their commitment to further develop Ukrainian air defense capabilities during the 17th Ramstein Group virtual meeting on November 22. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Germany and France will lead a coalition of 20 countries to further develop Ukraine’s air defenses, and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov added that the coalition will help Ukraine further develop its ground-based air defense systems. [16] Zelensky noted on November 23 that improved Ukrainian air defenses will save lives and resources, allow Ukrainian citizens to return from abroad, and deprive Russia of the ability to terrorize Ukraine.[17] Ramstein Group members also agreed on issues such as additional equipment and weapons for Ukraine during the winter of 2023–24, mine trawling and other security measures in the Black Sea, Ukraine’s NATO Interoperability Roadmap, and additional security assistance packages from the US, Germany, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Finland, the Netherlands, and Estonia.[18]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s (CSTO) Collective Security Council session in Minsk, Belarus on November 23 against the background of Armenia’s continued absence from recent CSTO events and exercises. Putin attended the session alongside Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, and the CSTO’s Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov.[19] The summit marked the end of Belarus’ chairmanship of the CSTO, and Lukashenko stated that Kazakhstan will hold the chairmanship beginning December 31, 2023. Putin thanked the session’s attendees for contributing to the regional defense structure and highlighted expanding military-technical cooperation between CSTO member states. Putin stated during his bilateral meeting with Rahmon that Russia will deliver two air defense divisions equipped with S-300 air defense systems to Tajikistan as part of the CSTO’s unified air defense system.[20] [Correction Note: The previous sentence incorrectly referenced two air defense divisions equipped with S-300s. It has been corrected to read two air defense “battalions.”]

Russian sources widely noted Armenia’s absence from the CSTO summit on November 23.[21] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also did not attend the CSTO’s summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on October 13 after Armenian forces refrained from participating in the CSTO “Indestructible Brotherhood-2023” exercises in early October.[22] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated on November 23 that the Kremlin regretted Armenia’s absence in Minsk but stated that Armenia remains “an ally and strategic partner” to Russia.[23] The Kremlin has previously attempted to dispel concerns about the deterioration of Russian-Armenian relations. [24] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Mnatsakan Safaryan reiterated that Armenia is not considering leaving the CSTO or asking Russia to withdraw its forces from Russia’s 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia.[25]

Chinese businesses, including a prominent state-owned Chinese construction firm, are reportedly working with Russian businessmen to plan the construction of an underwater tunnel that would connect Russia with occupied Crimea. The Washington Post reported on November 24 that it corroborated

information in emails provided by Ukrainian intelligence services that detail the formation of a Russian-Chinese business consortium that aims to build an underwater tunnel along the Kerch Strait connecting Russia to occupied Crimea.[26] Vladimir Kalyuzhny, identified by the emails as the general director of the consortium, reportedly messaged the Crimean occupation representative to the Russian President, Georgy Muradov, and stated that he has a letter from Chinese business partners attesting to the Chinese Railway Construction Corporation's (CRCC) readiness to participate as a general contractor for the tunnel project.[27] The CRCC is under the supervision of China's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission and is one of China's largest construction firms.[28] The emails reportedly indicate that the CRCC stipulated that its involvement would occur through an unaffiliated legal entity and that an unnamed Chinese bank was willing to convert dollar funds into rubles to fund the consortium's projects.[29] Kalyuzhny, Crimean occupation head Sergei Aksyonov, and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov denied the *Washington Post*'s reporting.[30] The reported Russian interest in the tunnel project, which would likely take years to complete, is an additional indicator of deep Russian concern about the vulnerability of ground lines of communication (GLOCs) between Russia and occupied Crimea along the Kerch Strait Bridge.

European states are responding to Russia's continued orchestration of an artificially created migrant crisis on its northwestern borders. The Finnish government announced on November 22 that Finland will close three more checkpoints on the Finnish-Russian border from November 23 to December 23, leaving only the northernmost checkpoint open.[31] Norwegian Prime Minister Johan Gahr Store stated on November 22 that Norway would also close its border to Russia "if necessary."^[32] Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur stated on November 23 that an increased number of migrants have also arrived at the Estonian-Russian border and that Russia is organizing the arrivals as part of an effort to "weaponize illegal immigration."^[33] *Reuters* reported on November 23 that the Estonian Interior Ministry stated that Estonia has undertaken preparations to close its border crossings with Russia if "the migration pressure from Russia escalates."^[34] Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina stated on November 24 that Latvia has experienced a similar influx of migrants on its border with Russia, and Silina and Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo stated that these are Russian and Belarusian "hybrid attacks."^[35] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Finland on November 22 of "stirring up Russophobic sentiments" and interrupting border services that were an integral part of Russian–Finnish cooperation.^[36] ISW previously assessed that Russia is employing a known hybrid warfare tactic similar to Russia's and Belarus's creation of a migrant crisis on the Polish border in 2021 that is likely similarly aimed at destabilizing NATO.^[37]

The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS) called prior Russian regional elections and the upcoming Russian presidential election illegitimate, likely in an effort to establish Girkin's inevitable presidential election loss as a long-standing grievance.^[38] The RDS Congress issued a resolution on November 24 in which it claimed that unspecified actors are doing everything possible to preserve the existing system of power in Russia regardless of the political situation or Russian citizens' will.^[39] The RDS Congressional resolution issued a list of demands for Russian election reform and claimed that the RDS would not recognize any future elections as legitimate if the Russian government does not meet these demands.^[40]

Russian law enforcement reportedly detained about 700 migrants at a warehouse in Moscow Oblast and issued some military summonses, likely as part of an ongoing effort to coerce migrants into Russian military service.^[41] Russian sources reported on November 24 that Russian police and Rosgvardia raided a Wildberries (Russia's largest online retailer) warehouse in Elektrostal, Moscow Oblast looking for migrants who had recently acquired Russian citizenship.^[42] Russian law enforcement reportedly took about 135 detained migrants with Russian citizenship and transferred them to military registration and enlistment offices.^[43] An unspecified Russian law enforcement official told Russian news outlet *Interfax* that Russian law enforcement conducted the raid as part of "Operation Migrant," which aims to ensure that all naturalized citizens are registered for military service and issue them military summonses.^[44] A Russian source claimed that Russian law enforcement also conducted a raid near the Wildberries warehouse on November 23, fined 16 migrants for violating migration protocols, and deported three.^[45] The Wildberries press service stated this mass detention of migrants interrupted company's shipments and put billions of dollars at risk.^[46]

The Kremlin is reportedly renewing attempts to control all video surveillance systems in Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to intensify its tools of digital authoritarianism to increase domestic repressions. The Russian Ministry of Digital Development proposed an initiative to create a unified platform for storing and processing footage from all video surveillance systems in Russia, which would reportedly cost 12 billion rubles (about \$134 million).^[47] *Kommersant* reported that there are about 1.2 million surveillance cameras in Russia, about half of which are currently accessible to the Russian government.^[48] The Russian Ministry of Digital Development reportedly plans to increase the number of surveillance cameras across Russia to five million by 2030 and integrate all of them with facial and image recognition software.^[49] *Kommersant* also noted that the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations attempted a similar initiative in 2020 to 2022 as part of the Hardware and Software Complex "Safe City" project aimed at standardizing and installing surveillance systems with artificial intelligence software in Russian regions but faced criticism from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Russian Ministry of Economy.^[50]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces began a renewed offensive effort towards Avdiivka on November 22, although likely with weaker mechanized capabilities than in the previous offensive waves that occurred in October.
- High-ranking Russian officials may be engaged in a wider scheme of forcibly adopting deported Ukrainian children.
- Ukraine's Western allies declared their commitment to further develop Ukrainian air defense capabilities during the 17th Ramstein Group virtual meeting on November 22.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) Collective Security Council session in Minsk, Belarus on November 23 against the background of Armenia's continued absence from recent CSTO events and exercises.
- Chinese businesses, including a prominent state-owned Chinese construction firm, are reportedly working with Russian businessmen to plan the construction of an underwater tunnel that would connect Russia with occupied Crimea.
- European states are responding to Russia's continued orchestration of an artificially created migrant crisis on its northwestern borders.
- The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS) called prior Russian regional elections and the upcoming Russian presidential election illegitimate, likely in an effort to establish Girkin's inevitable presidential election loss as a long-standing grievance.
- Russian law enforcement reportedly detained about 700 migrants at a warehouse in Moscow Oblast and issued some military summonses, likely as part of an ongoing effort to coerce migrants into Russian military service.
- The Kremlin is reportedly renewing attempts to control all video surveillance systems in Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to intensify its tools of digital authoritarianism to increase domestic repressions.

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and marginally advanced in some areas.
- The Russian aviation industry is likely under significant constraints due to international sanctions and demands from the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).
- The Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine into Russian national and cultural identities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 22, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 22, 2023, 7:30pm ET

Note: ISW and CTP will not publish a campaign assessment (or maps) tomorrow, November 23, in observance of the Thanksgiving holiday. Coverage will resume Friday, November 24.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reframed the Kremlin's stance on the Israeli-Hamas war to a much more anti-Israel position in an attempt to demonstrate the supposed hypocrisy of Western condemnations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin stated that attendees of the G20 summit who expressed shock at the continued Russian war in Ukraine should instead be "shocked" by the "bloody" 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent war that the "Kyiv regime waged against its own people" in Donbas and by the "extermination of the civilian population in Palestine, in the Gaza sector."^[1] Putin's November 22 statement on the Israel-Hamas war referring to the "extermination of the civilian population of Palestine" was a departure from previous Kremlin framing that largely focused on calling for peace and claiming that the Israel-Hamas war will distract from the provision of Western military aid to Ukraine.^[2] Putin's November 22 framing of the Israeli-Hamas war continues to exploit that war to undermine Western support for Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed, and also signals potentially increasing support for Iranian interests in the region and an increased willingness to antagonize Israel.^[3]

Putin also reiterated boilerplate rhetoric falsely portraying Russia as willing to engage in meaningful negotiations, likely to pressure the West into prematurely pushing Ukraine to negotiate with Russia. Putin stated that the world must "think about how to stop this tragedy [the Russian-initiated war in Ukraine]," falsely signaling a willingness to engage in meaningful peace negotiations in Ukraine.^[4] Putin and other Russian officials have routinely falsely claimed that the Kremlin is ready to negotiate to end the war while signaling that the Kremlin maintains its maximalist objectives, including territorial claims and regime change.^[5] Kremlin officials have pushed this narrative while claiming that Ukraine is unwilling to negotiate with Russia, likely to coerce Western officials into prematurely offering concessions favorable to Russia rather than engage in meaningful, good faith negotiations.^[6] Ukrainian officials have routinely expressed their willingness to negotiate with Russia as soon as Russia removes its forces from Ukraine's internationally-recognized territory, including Donbas and Crimea.^[7] ISW has observed no indications that Putin does not retain his maximalist objectives and continues to assess that a premature cessation of hostilities in Ukraine greatly increases the likelihood of renewed Russian aggression on terms far more favorable to the Kremlin in the near future.^[8]

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on November 21 that Iran is supplying Russia with glide bombs and that Iran may be preparing to transfer short-range ballistic missiles to Russia.^[9] ISW has observed Russian forces increasingly using glide bombs, particularly modified FAB-500, KAB-500, and RPK-500 aerial bombs equipped with glide bomb structures, in the Lyman and Kherson directions.^[10] It is unclear whether Kirby meant that Iran is supplying Russia with glide bomb components or with fully constructed glide bombs. The Critical Threats Project (CTP)-ISW's Iran Update reported on August 14 that Iran produces a variety of glide bombs domestically, such as the Ghaem glide bombs, Yasin long-range glide bombs, Sadid glide bombs, and Balaban glide bombs.^[11] Iran commonly uses these bombs with its various drone platforms, likely including the Shahed-131/136 drones that Iran supplies to Russia. A Russian milblogger previously amplified claims that Russian Su-25 aircraft may be compatible with Iranian glide bombs.^[12] Iran presented several glide bomb variants at the Russian Army-2023 Forum in Moscow in August 2023 and possibly during Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Tehran in September 2023.^[13] Kirby added that Iran also continues to supply Russia with drones and artillery ammunition.^[14] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on November 6 that Iran may continue to send small batches of Shahed-131/136 drones to Russia despite increased Russian efforts to produce Shahed drones domestically and Iran's fulfillment of its first Shahed supply contracts with Russia.^[15] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran and Russia may conclude a drone and missile sale agreement following the expiration of UN missile restrictions against Iranian missile and missile-related technology exports on October 18, 2023.^[16]

The Kremlin appears to be inexplicably concerned about the outcome of the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential elections, despite apparent widespread Russian approval of Putin. Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova stated on November 21 that some Russian citizens who left Russia and others still in Russia have already begun efforts to discredit the upcoming Russian presidential elections.^[17] Pamfilova's statement suggests that the Russian government will continue to intensify censorship efforts under the guise of fighting attempted internal election meddling ahead of the presidential elections. Putin also stated on November 15 that the Russian government will suppress any foreign or domestic election interference at a meeting with Russian election commission representatives.^[18] Two unnamed sources from Russian federal and regional authorities told Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* in an article published on November 22 that the Kremlin instructed Russian regional authorities to stop relatives of mobilized personnel from protesting by paying them.^[19] The sources added that the Kremlin advised Russian regional governments to "make every effort" to ensure that the governments issue payments to the relatives of mobilized personnel and address other complaints about poor treatment of mobilized personnel in response to rising dissatisfaction among the relatives.^[20] The sources also told *Verstka* that the Kremlin considers the relatives of mobilized personnel a social group that may pose one of the greatest threats to the beginning of Putin's still unannounced presidential campaign.^[21]

The Kremlin may also be concerned about a perceived lack of support for Putin from the Russian veteran community.[22] This veteran community is a subsection of the Russian ultranationalist community and has routinely argued in favor of full mobilization and continued Russian offensive operations in Ukraine, as opposed to freezing the current frontlines.[23] The Kremlin's apparent concern about Putin's support is odd given that the Levada Center - an independent Russian polling organization - found that 82 percent of Russians approve of Putin's performance as of October 2023.[24] The Kremlin may also want Putin to receive an even higher percentage of the vote and may be attempting to placate specific groups that vocally express dissatisfaction with Putin's decisions.

Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin called for Russia to codify an unspecified state ideology in the Russian constitution, suggesting that some Russian officials may want to explicitly end nominal constitutional protections for civil rights, democratic pluralism, and ethnic equality. Bastrykin made the call on November 22 during a conference about the Russian constitution at the Russian Ministry of Justice in Moscow and argued that dismissing his call would not work.[25] Bastrykin previously called on Russian Constitutional Court Chairperson Valery Zorkin to look into ways of establishing an unspecified state ideology in May 2023, although Zorkin rebuffed Bastrykin by noting that the current constitution contains a set of values that protect civil society.[26] The Russian constitution declares that Russia is a democratic state in which Russia's multinational people should exercise power directly and that the "supreme direct expression" of that power are referendums and free elections.[27] The constitution establishes that the Russian state's obligation is to recognize, observe, and protect human and civil rights.[28] Article 13 of the Russian constitution notably forbids Russia from proclaiming a state ideology and commits the Russian state to recognize ideological diversity, political diversity, and a multi-party system.[29] Bastrykin's calls would require Russian officials to amend or even repeal Article 13 of the Russian constitution, and possibly would require more extensive amendments depending on the potential new state ideology. Russia adopted its current constitution in 1993 and laid out codified state protections for multiethnic democratic pluralism and human and civil rights to mark a definitive break with the Soviet system of autocratic one-party ideological rule. Bastrykin, who has previously advocated for Stalinist-era domestic policies, may hope that a new ideology enshrined in the Russian constitution would further weaken or outright cancel Russia's existing constitutional commitment to democratic pluralism and human and civil rights.[30] Bastrykin may be voicing this position on behalf of a wider group of Russian officials wishing to end these nominal constitutional protections, but the Kremlin has shown no indication that it wishes to do away with the veneer of legitimacy that these nominal constitutional protections offer.[31]

Bastrykin has yet to detail what a potential Russian state ideology should be, although the Kremlin's support for Russian ultranationalism would likely heavily influence any potential Russian state ideology. The Kremlin has heavily courted the Russian ultranationalist community against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, a community that supports Russian imperial goals, efforts to Russify and ethnically cleanse occupied territories, and nationalist demands to protect ethnic Russian communities.[32] The focus on protecting and enforcing the Russian ethnic identity would likely be a key component of any state ideology should the Kremlin entertain Bastrykin's calls. Bastrykin himself may have had this Russian ultranationalism in mind when he called for a state ideology given that he has heavily sought to capitalize on heightened ethnic tensions in Russia and is increasingly casting himself as a prominent anti-migration figure.[33] Bastrykin and the Russian Investigative Committee have reportedly directly engaged in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia and the forced placement of Ukrainian children into Russian military training programs — parts of a campaign to destroy Ukrainian ethnic identity and Russify Ukraine.[34] The Kremlin's support for Russian ultranationalism is also heavily focused on promoting Russian Orthodoxy and appeals to "traditional" social values. Putin most recently signed a decree on November 22 declaring 2024 the "Year of the Family" to focus on preserving traditional family values.[35] ISW has previously assessed that the war in Ukraine is likely exacerbating an emerging identity crisis within Russian society resulting from tensions between Russian identity and Russian nationalism.[36] This crisis as well as pronounced ethnoreligious tensions will likely worsen if the ultranationalist Kremlin decides to pursue codifying a state ideology. **Putin and elements of the Kremlin, highly aware of the potential for these ethnic, religious, and national tensions to prompt instability and discontent, are unlikely to support Bastrykin's calls to codify an explicit state ideology in the short term.**

Bloomberg reported on November 21 that the European Union (EU) proposed a plan to strengthen security commitments from EU member states to Ukraine.[37] Bloomberg reported, citing a draft proposal, that the EU's proposal would build on existing bilateral agreements established within the framework of the Group of Seven's (G7) declaration on security guarantees for Ukraine. The proposal reportedly includes mechanisms for: long-term military aid; training of Ukrainian forces; cooperation with Ukraine's domestic defense industrial base (DIB); strengthening Ukraine's ability to counter cyber and hybrid threats; demining assistance; support for Ukraine's reform agenda as part of the EU accession process; assistance for Ukraine's energy transition and nuclear safety efforts; and the sharing of intelligence and satellite imagery. EU Foreign Affairs Representative Josep Borrell stated on November 13 that Ukraine is the EU's top priority and that the EU's commitment to Ukraine will not waiver.[38] Bloomberg reported that EU member states are expected to consider the EU's draft proposal in December 2023.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 21 to 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all 14 Shahed-131/136 drones that Russia launched at Ukraine.[39] Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces also launched two missiles, of which one Kh-22 cruise missile fell in an unpopulated area in Zaporizhia Oblast.[40] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on November 21 that Russian forces have paused their use of cruise and ballistic missiles and began using KAB glide bombs and Kh-59 and Kh-31 missiles to conduct strikes against Ukraine.[41]

Russian milbloggers appear to be focusing renewed complaints against the Russian military command for what milbloggers perceive as poor choices that contribute to Russian casualties. Russian milbloggers expressed anger on November 21 and 22 after a Ukrainian HIMARS strike on Kumachove, Donetsk Oblast (37km southeast of Donetsk City and 61km from the frontline) allegedly killed over 25 and injured over 100 personnel of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) who were attending a concert for a Russian military holiday on November 19.[42] The milbloggers largely focused on poor security measures, criticizing the Russian command for allowing a large gathering of people within HIMARS range of the frontline in violation of operational security principles.[43] The milbloggers largely called for the Russian military to ban such events and expressed frustration that the Russian military command has not learned this lesson despite nearly two years of war and multiple instances in which publicly available information facilitated Ukrainian strikes.[44]

Though this strike does not affect the battlefield situation in Ukraine, the Russian milbloggers' reaction to this strike reflects the Russian ultranationalist community's continued frustration with the Russian military command's management of the war. Russian milbloggers have recently begun to complain about the Russian military command following a period of self-censorship likely prompted by the death of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the arrests of highly critical Russian ultranationalist milbloggers in summer 2023.[45] The milbloggers' complaints have largely focused on how the Russian military command's poor conduct of the war and poor discipline have led to poor treatment of Russian military personnel and casualties instead of focusing on the success or failure of Russian military operations. Russian milbloggers have routinely complained that the Russian military command's orders to use "meat assaults" to push Ukrainian forces from positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast have led to extensive Russian casualties, for example.[46]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin reframed the Kremlin's stance on the Israeli-Hamas war to a much more anti-Israel position in an attempt to demonstrate the supposed hypocrisy of Western condemnations of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Putin also reiterated boilerplate rhetoric falsely portraying Russia as willing to engage in meaningful negotiations, likely to pressure the West into prematurely pushing Ukraine to negotiate with Russia.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on November 21 that Iran is supplying Russia with glide bombs and that Iran may be preparing to transfer short-range ballistic missiles to Russia.
- The Kremlin appears to be inexplicably concerned about the outcome of the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential elections, despite apparent widespread Russian approval of Putin.
- Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin called for Russia to codify an unspecified state ideology in the Russian constitution, suggesting that some Russian officials may want to explicitly end nominal constitutional protections for civil rights, democratic pluralism, and ethnic equality.
- Bastrykin has yet to detail what a potential Russian state ideology should be, although the Kremlin's support for Russian ultranationalism would likely heavily influence any potential Russian state ideology.
- Bloomberg reported on November 21 that the European Union (EU) proposed a plan to strengthen security commitments from EU member states to Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 21 to 22.
- Russian milbloggers appear to be focusing renewed complaints against the Russian military command for what milbloggers perceive as poor choices that contribute to Russian casualties.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, near Bakhmut, northwest of Horlivka, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and advanced east of Synkivka.
- The Russian Federation Council approved the Russian 2024-2026 federal budget on November 22, and Russian officials continue to emphasize social spending over defense expenditures.
- The Russian government and occupation authorities continue to forcibly deport children in occupied Ukraine to Russia under medical treatment schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 21, 2023

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Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 21, 2023, 7:15pm ET

Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to conduct offensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine despite rainy and snowy weather conditions. Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlian stated on November 20 that Russian shelling of the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast had decreased due to poor weather conditions.^[1] Ukrainian 14th Mechanized Brigade Spokesperson Nadiya Zamryha stated on November 21 that Russian forces continue to conduct assaults in the Kupyansk direction despite the snow and frost.^[2] Zamryha added that the number of Russian attacks will likely decrease due to weather conditions but that Russian forces will not stop offensive operations completely. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized the need to strengthen Ukrainian capabilities before the winter period during a meeting with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on November 20.^[3] Russian milbloggers claimed on November 20 and 21 that both Russian and Ukrainian forces are struggling to operate drones, including for artillery fire adjustment, in the poor weather conditions throughout the front.^[4] Russian milbloggers also claimed that muddy conditions are complicating vehicle movements but that both Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to maneuver and operate in all directions.^[5] ISW continues to assess that freezing weather conditions during the winter will likely prompt the resumption of more active combat operations, and ongoing rainy weather is unlikely to halt Ukrainian or Russian attacks.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Russian officials are struggling to subdue Russian hysteria around Ukrainian operations in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu addressed the Russian MoD Collegium on November 21 and claimed that Russian forces prevented all Ukrainian attempts to conduct successful "amphibious operations in the Kherson direction."^[6] Shoigu further claimed that Russian forces are inflicting "colossal" losses on Ukrainian forces.^[7] Shoigu's statement is likely an attempt to downplay some Russian milbloggers' concerns over Russia's inability to decisively repel Ukrainian attacks on the east bank of the Dnipro River but is unlikely to calm the ever-growing complaints in the Russian information space.

Russian milbloggers continue to acknowledge a Ukrainian presence in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and complain that Russian forces are unable to suppress Ukrainian operations in the area.^[8] A Russian millogger claimed on November 21 that Ukrainian forces killed an entire Russian assault group near Krynky (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).^[9] A Russian insider source claimed on November 17 that a Ukrainian strike killed 76 Russian personnel in the 1st Battalion of the 35th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) attempting to conduct a "distraction maneuver" in Skadovskyi Raion, east bank Kherson Oblast on November 10.^[10] A Russian soldier reportedly in the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) operating near Krynky claimed in a video amplified on November 21 that the Russian military is forcing personnel who are still recovering from wounds to conduct assaults and that there are three Ukrainian drones for each Russian soldier operating in the Krynky area.^[11] A Russian millogger published a letter purportedly from a Russian soldier operating near Krynky on November 21 who claimed that Russian forces in the Krynky area lack reconnaissance drones, slowing their movements and putting them at risk of Ukrainian attacks.^[12] The purported Russian soldier claimed that Russian forces in the Krynky area also lacked fire support because artillery and mortar units quickly changed locations after firing "a few shots" in order to evade counterbattery fire.^[13] The Russian soldier claimed that his unit has practically no interaction with other Russian units operating nearby and that the Russian command headquarters in the Kherson direction devises unsuccessful plans because the headquarters receives

incorrect and delayed information.[14] The Russian soldier also claimed that the Russian command in the Kherson direction had failed to implement changes resulting in increased Ukrainian attacks.[15] A milblogger claimed that some Russian Telegram channels are unsuccessfully attempting to focus criticism of Russian operations in the Kherson direction toward Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky.[16] The milbloggers do not appear to be responding to Shoigu’s claims nor has ISW observed any significant changes in Kherson Oblast that would prompt these milblogger complaints.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes overnight on November 20-21 and on November 21 targeting port and civilian infrastructure, including a hospital in Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 10 Shahed-131/136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk; one Iskander-K ballistic missile from Dzhankoi, occupied Crimea; and four S-300 missiles in the Donetsk direction on the night of November 20-21. [17] Ukrainian forces shot down nine Shahed drones and the Iskander missile.[18] Ukrainian officials reported that the overnight Russian strike hit the civilian Central City Hospital in Selydove, Donetsk Oblast; the Kotlyarevska mine in Novohrodivka, Donetsk Oblast; and other civil infrastructure.[19] Ukrainian military officials also reported that Russian forces also launched an unspecified number of Kh-31P medium-range supersonic anti-radiation missiles on November 21, which struck port infrastructure and administrative buildings in Odesa City and Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi Raion, Odesa Oblast.[20]

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on November 21 that the Wagner Group is preparing to provide an air defense system to either Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah or Iran.[21] Kirby stated that the Wagner Group would provide the system to either Lebanese Hezbollah or Iran under the Russian government’s direction but did not specify the origin or type of system.[22] ISW previously observed Russian claims that the Russian MoD is using the Syrian government’s agreements to supply weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah to subsume the remnants of the Wagner Group in Syria and seize their air defense systems.[23]

Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin’s presidential campaign announcement has generated some discourse in the Russian information space, but most Russian milbloggers refrained from discussing Girkin’s campaign likely due to self-censorship. A Russian milblogger who previously amplified praise of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Head Alexander Bortnikov and Foreign Intelligence Service (FSB) Head Alexander Bastrykin praised Girkin’s decision to run in the 2024 Russian presidential campaign.[24] The milblogger claimed that Girkin will not become president but that he may become a “[bright energetic figure] in the Russian political arena” who at best could galvanize a new healthy political opposition within Russia, but that Girkin’s decision to run is at minimum interesting.[25] Another milblogger who has been critical of the Russian conduct of the war amplified Girkin’s campaign announcement.[26] Mainstream Russian milbloggers have largely not acknowledged Girkin since the arrest of Girkin and Andrei Kurshin, the “Moscow Calling” Telegram channel administrator who frequently amplified Girkin’s complaints, on July 21 and August 31 respectively, and are likely self-censoring to avoid a similar fate.[27] Girkin’s presidential platform may provide him a chance to reenter the broader Russian information space. Girkin’s wife, Miroslava Reginskaya, also acknowledged Girkin’s presidential campaign announcement on November 21 and stated that she supports Girkin as his wife but that she has her own goals, including freeing Girkin from prison and supporting Russian frontline soldiers in Donbas.[28] Reginskaya’s response likely reflects the risk associated with opposing Russian President Vladimir Putin and danger to her ability to secure Girkin’s release if she maintains a strong association with this opposition.

Washington, D.C.-based analytics company Gallup found that Russian society’s confidence in the Russian military has marginally decreased in 2023. Gallup observed that 75 percent of Russians interviewed in the summer of 2023 expressed confidence in the Russian military compared to 80 percent of Russians who expressed a similar opinion in the early months of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[29] Gallup added that Russians’ confidence in the police, financial institutions, and the judicial system has increased, however – making confidence in the Russian military the only observed decline in public trust among all surveyed age, gender, and financial status groups. Gallup concluded that the root of Russians’ waning faith may be a result of the growing disconnect between the perception of the Russian military and the political leadership, noting that confidence in the Russian military remained at around 90 percent among Russians who approve of their political leadership but decreased to 40 percent among Russians who disapprove of the Russian political leadership – the lowest approval rate since 2006. Gallup noted that overall approval of leadership in Russia remained high and stable at 68 percent, which is on par with the 66 percent approval rate in 2022. Gallup stated that the survey indicates that support for the Russian military is still high despite the five percent decline. ISW has observed some Russian milbloggers and ultranationalists express low confidence in Russian military leadership throughout the full-scale invasion, which may have impacted how certain Russians who closely monitor the progress of the war feel about trusting the Russian military.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced a new military aid package to Ukraine during a visit to Kyiv on November 21. Pistorius announced that the package valued at 1.3 billion euros includes four IRIS-T SLM air defense systems; 20,000 155mm artillery shells, and anti-tank mines.[30]

The Armenian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied Russian allegations that Armenia is planning to supply Ukraine with weapons. Russian sources have recently alleged that Armenia is planning to provide Ukraine with missiles and missile launchers, and Armenian MoD Spokesperson Aram Torosyan officially denied these claims on November 21.[31]

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev accused the West of destabilizing the South Caucasus region by supplying weapons to Armenia. Aliyev claimed at the “Decolonization: Women’s Empowerment and Development” international conference in Baku on November 21 that France is arming Armenia and that this is destabilizing the South Caucasus, “encourag[ing] revanchist forces in Armenia,” and “prepar[ing] the ground for the start of new wars in [the] region.”[32] Russian sources have also recently alleged that France supplied Armenia with ACMAT Bastion armored personnel carriers, which Ukraine had rejected due to the vehicles’ deficiencies.[33] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan previously stated on November 18 that he believes that Azerbaijan’s rhetoric indicates that Azerbaijan is organizing a new round of military activity against Armenia.[34]

A former Russian Investigative Committee departmental head who was serving sentences for accepting bribes from the Russian mafia died in prison on the night of November 20-21, allegedly by suicide. BBC Russia reported on November 21 that Russian authorities found the former head of the Department of Interdepartmental Cooperation and Internal Security of the Russian Investigative Committee, Mikhail Maksimenko, dead in a prison colony.[35] A Russian law enforcement source told Russian state outlet TASS that authorities found Maksimenko’s body in a storage room in Correctional Colony 11 in Bor, Nizhny Novgorod Oblast.[36] Russian state outlet RBK reported that a source close to the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service stated that Maksimenko committed suicide on the night of November 20-21 in the psychiatric hospital in which he was receiving treatment following a previous suicide attempt.[37] Russian authorities sentenced Maksimenko to 13 years in prison in April 2018 for accepting a \$500,000 bribe in return for his assistance in the release of Andrei Kochuykov, an assistant to Russian mafia boss Zakhary Kalashov.[38] Russian authorities also sentenced Maksimenko to 14 years in prison in March 2020 for accepting a one million dollar bribe from Russian businessman Dmitry Smychkovsky, who was also working to release Kochuykov.[39] A member of Russia’s Presidential Human Rights Council, Yeva Merkachyova,

stated that Maksimenko's death was "strange" and that Maksimenko had previously told her that he would not commit suicide under any circumstances.[40] A Russian insider source claimed that Maksimenko had recently filed a petition to serve the remainder of his sentence in a correctional labor camp but that the decision-making commission instead issued a penalty on November 20 that would deny his request.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to conduct offensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine despite rainy and snowy weather conditions.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Russian officials are struggling to subdue Russian hysteria around Ukrainian operations in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes overnight on November 20-21 and on November 21 targeting port and civilian infrastructure, including a hospital in Donetsk Oblast.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on November 21 that the Wagner Group is preparing to provide an air defense system to either Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah or Iran.
- Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin's presidential campaign announcement has generated some discourse in the Russian information space, but most Russian milbloggers refrained from discussing Girkin's campaign likely due to self-censorship.
- Washington, D.C.-based analytics company Gallup found that Russian society's confidence in the Russian military has marginally decreased in 2023.
- German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced a new military aid package to Ukraine during a visit to Kyiv on November 21.
- The Armenian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied Russian allegations that Armenia is planning to supply Ukraine with weapons.
- Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev accused the West of destabilizing the South Caucasus region by supplying weapons to Armenia.
- A former Russian Investigative Committee departmental head who was serving sentences for accepting bribes from the Russian mafia died in prison on the night of November 20-21, allegedly by suicide.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 21 and advanced in some areas.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu addressed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium on November 21 and announced the that the Russian MoD is increasing its military training efforts across Russia.
- US Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller commented on November 20 about a report that found that Russian officials in collaborations with Belarusian officials transported more than 2,400 Ukrainian children between ages six and 17 to Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 20, 2023

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Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 20, 2023, 5:30pm ET

Russia appears to be employing a known hybrid warfare tactic to artificially create a migrant crisis on the Finnish border. Finnish authorities closed four border checkpoints on Finland's southeastern border with Russia on November 18 after the Finnish Border Guard reported that an influx of about 300 asylum seekers, mostly from Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, had arrived at the Finnish border from Russia since September 2023.[1] Finnish Border Guards recorded 89 migrant crossings during a two-day period between November 7 and 14 — a sharp increase from the 91 crossings recorded from mid-July to November 12.[2] Four checkpoints currently remain open on Finland's northeastern border with Russia with only two open for asylum applicants.[3] *Reuters* reported on November 19 that dozens of migrants arrived at the closed Finnish Nuijamaa and Vaalimaa crossings on November 18 and gathered around a campfire in sub-zero temperatures. [4] Finnish outlet *Iltalehти* reported on November 20 that Finnish authorities are considering closing the entire border with Russia on the night of November 21. [5] Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo stated on November 14 that Russian border guards are escorting or transporting migrants to the Finnish border, and the Finnish government stated on November 16 that there are indications that "foreign authorities or other actors" have played a role in helping people illegally cross the border. [6] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* reported on November 19 that Jouko Kinnunen, head of the Finnish Vartius checkpoint that currently remains open, stated that Russian border guards pushed migrants to the Finnish side of the barrier and then closed the Russian border barriers behind them.[7] It is unlikely that these migrants would continue to remain at the Finnish border in sub-zero temperatures of their own volition after Finnish border authorities denied their entrance into Finland, suggesting that Russia is likely involved in the situation in some way.

The Kremlin has denied Finland's accusations about Russia's involvement in creating an artificial influx of migrants. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov responded on November 17 to the announcement of the closure of the four checkpoints, stating that Finland had chosen a path of confrontation, which Peskov labeled as a "big mistake." [8] Peskov also stated on November 20 that Finland's possible decision to close the entire border "causes nothing but deep regret" and claimed that Finland's "Russophobic" position has harmed Finnish-Russian relations of the past.[9]

Russia's apparent hybrid warfare tactic on the Russian-Finnish border is similar to Russia's and Belarus' creation of a migrant crisis on the Polish border in 2021 and is likely similarly aimed at destabilizing NATO. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin enabled, or possibly directly controlled, Belarus' artificial creation of a migrant crisis on its border with Poland in 2021, when Belarusian security personnel aided thousands of Middle Eastern migrants in crossing the Belarusian border to Poland.[10] The Kremlin exploited the manufactured crisis in 2021 to falsely accuse NATO of aggression against Belarus.[11] Peskov responded to Finland's accession into NATO on April 4, threatening that Russia would take any "countermeasures [deemed necessary] to ensure [Russia's] own security." [12] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs similarly stated on April 4 that Russia will be "forced to take retaliatory measures" and that Finland's accession to NATO "cannot but have a negative impact on Russian-Finnish bilateral relations." [13] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin may be attempting to set information space conditions to destabilize the NATO states on Russian borders and distract from the war in Ukraine.[14] ISW has also consistently assessed that one of Putin's goals in launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to break up NATO – a goal he continues to pursue.[15]

Russian milbloggers expressed continued anger at deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations as Armenia appears to distance itself further from Russia while entering further agreements with Western governments. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary General Imanali Tasmagambetov claimed in Minsk on November 20 that Armenia asked to remove provisions on assistance to Armenia from the agenda of the upcoming CSTO Summit's agenda. [16] Russian media also reported that Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Paruyr Hovhannisyan and the European Union (EU) Ambassador to Armenia Vassilis Maragos signed an agreement that increases "legal certainty" surrounding the EU Mission to Armenia (EUMA)'s "rights and obligations" within Armenia, and creates easier conditions for EUMA observers to operate in the country.[17] Russian milbloggers latched onto Tasmagambetov's claim and the Armenia-EU agreement, reamplifying a thus-far unsubstantiated claim from November 19 that Armenia is preparing to leave the CSTO and provide missiles and missile launchers to Ukraine. [18] The milbloggers accused Armenia of "betrayal" for growing closer to the West and distancing itself from Russia and expressed bitterness at Armenia's alleged provision of weapons to Ukraine while doing nothing "besides throwing mud" at Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh.[19] ISW has observed no indications to substantiate the milblogger claim of Armenia providing missiles and missile launchers to Ukraine.[20]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly started public recruitment for the Russian "Africa Corps" aimed at subsuming Wagner Group operations in Africa after alleged failed MoD attempts to directly recruit former Wagner personnel. A Russian milblogger posted an advertisement for contract service in the Russian "Africa Corps" on November 20.[21] The milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD decided to form the Russian "Africa Corps" in Libya after Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov met with Libyan National Army Commander Marshal Khalifa Haftar, likely referencing their August 22 meeting. [22] The milblogger claimed that the formation of the Russian "Africa Corps" in Libya is part of wider Russian-Libyan agreements established at the Moscow International Security Conference and Army-2023 Forum.[23] The milblogger claimed that the starting salary for "Africa Corps" personnel is 280,000 rubles (about \$3,160), significantly higher than the salaries that the Russian MoD reportedly offered former Wagner fighters and that the Wagner Group offered recruits for its operations in Africa in 2023.[24] ISW previously observed a Russian insider source's claim that the Russian MoD unsuccessfully attempted to recruit former Wagner Group personnel to Russian MoD operations in Africa.[25] The need to publicly advertise recruitment into the Russian "Africa Corps" supports the insider source's claim that the MoD's attempt to directly recruit former Wagner personnel for operations in Africa were largely unsuccessful.

The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS) predictably backed Girkin's November 19 formal announcement of his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential election. The RDS stated on November 20 that its first congress as an official political movement began in Moscow on November 18 and reiterated that its current main priority is to secure Girkin's release from prison and the dismissal of all charges against him. The RDS also emphasized that the RDS Congress fully supports Girkin's nomination and is creating an organizing committee to support Girkin's campaign.[26] The RDS reiterated its main political tenets that it first announced on June 26, which center around supporting the Russian military and veterans and pursuing military and governmental reforms.[27] Girkin's wife, Miroslava Reginskaya, has not yet acknowledged Girkin's presidential campaign or the RDS' support of the campaign as of this publication.[28]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to distinguish himself in the Russian information space, infringing on the generally accepted boundaries between Russian federal subject (region) heads and Russian President Vladimir Putin. During a video conference on the renewal of the Russian public transport fleet in the Russian regions, Kadyrov publicly invited Putin, who was also on the call, to visit Chechnya.[29] Kadyrov told Putin that Chechen elders had "scolded" Kadyrov because Putin has not visited Chechnya in a long time.[30] Putin did not directly respond to the invitation and instead thanked Kadyrov and the Chechen people for their hard work in restoring the republic. Kadyrov's public invitation to Putin, who has notably not visited Chechnya since 2011, places Putin in a difficult position, as he either ignores the invitation and risks snubbing Kadyrov, or he accepts the invitation and risks looking as though he is amenable to Kadyrov's pressure.[31] This implicit veiled challenge to Putin in a public forum is unusual and represents a clear attempt at informational posturing on the part of Kadyrov, who has recently tried to balance an apparent desire to curry favor with Putin while also appealing to his own Chechen constituency.[32]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package to Ukraine during US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Kyiv on November 20. Austin met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov and reiterated long-term US support for Ukraine.[33] The new DoD package contains military equipment valued at up to \$100 million, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles; one HIMARS system and additional ammunition; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; and artillery and small arms rounds.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Russia appears to be employing a known hybrid warfare tactic to artificially create a migrant crisis on the Finnish border.
- Russia's apparent hybrid warfare tactic on the Russian-Finnish border is similar to Russia's and Belarus' creation of a migrant crisis on the Polish border in 2021 and is likely similarly aimed at destabilizing NATO.
- Russian milbloggers expressed continued anger at deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations as Armenia appears to distance itself further from Russia while entering further agreements with Western governments.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly started public recruitment for the Russian "Africa Corps" aimed at subsuming Wagner Group operations in Africa after alleged failed MoD attempts to directly recruit former Wagner personnel.
- The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS) predictably backed Girkin's November 19 formal announcement of his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential election.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to distinguish himself in the Russian information space, infringing on the generally accepted boundaries between Russian federal subject (region) heads and Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package to Ukraine during US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Kyiv on November 20.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and marginally advanced in some areas.
- A Russian federal subject (region) and occupation officials are reportedly planning to work together to provide drones to Russian forces.
- A Ukrainian official reported that Ukraine successfully returned 45 Ukrainian children whom Russian authorities forcibly deported to Russia in the past six months.

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 19, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00 pm ET on November 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian and Russian forces are continuing combat operations in eastern and southern Ukraine, although the rainy weather will likely continue to slow the pace of combat operations until winter conditions fully set in. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to defend against a strong group of Russian forces attacking near Avdiivka and that Ukrainian forces maintain the initiative in southern Ukraine.^[1] The milblogger added that it is premature to declare any Russian victories to avoid creating any false impressions about the situation on the battlefield. Another Russian milblogger observed that poor weather is impeding the use of armored vehicles in western Zaporizhia Oblast but that Ukrainian forces are still attacking Russian positions with infantry units.^[2] The United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed on November 18 that neither side has achieved any substantial progress in the Kupyansk and Avdiivka directions, or in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast — where the most intense battles are ongoing.^[3] The UK MoD added that there are fewer immediate prospects of major changes on the frontlines as colder winter weather begins to set in. Ukrainian military officials anticipate that Russia will launch a third wave of assaults on Avdiivka.^[4] Freezing weather conditions during the winter will likely prompt the resumption of more active combat operations, and ongoing rainy weather is unlikely to halt Ukrainian or Russian attacks.

Russian forces conducted another series of drone strikes primarily targeting Kyiv, Poltava, and Cherkasy oblasts on the night of November 18 to 19. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on November 19 that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 15 of the 20 Russian Shahed-131/-136 drones.^[5] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated the strike series did not result in any casualties or critical damages and that this was an "excellent result."^[6] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian ammunition depots in Kirovohrad City, Kirovohrad Oblast and Olshanytsya, Kyiv Oblast and a fuel storage facility at the Kanatove airfield, Kirovohrad Oblast.^[7]

Ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin formally announced his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential elections despite his imprisonment. Girkin acknowledged that his August 30 post claiming that he is better than Russian President Vladimir Putin aimed to attract attention before formally announcing his intent to run for president as an independent candidate.^[8] Girkin claimed that the current Russian government fears his nomination because it would disrupt the Kremlin's plans to have sham candidates run against Putin, as Putin is the "only winner [of the presidential election] already known in advance." Girkin acknowledged that running in the Russian presidential election is "like sitting down at a table to play with cheaters" but that bringing like-minded "patriots" together through the election is a defeat for the Russian officials living on the delusional "planet of the pink ponies." Girkin appealed to the Russian Strelkov (Girkin) Movement (RDS), which has supported Girkin's defense against his criminal case for allegedly discrediting the Russian military, to help canvas to receive the necessary number of signatures to run as an independent candidate.

Girkin's presidential announcement indicates a possible rift between the RDS and his wife, Miroslava Reginskaya. Reginskaya has been the first to transcribe Girkin's prior letters from prison to post on Telegram but did not claim to post Girkin's presidential campaign announcement on November 19 and has not yet acknowledged Girkin's presidential announcement on her own Telegram channel.^[9] Reginskaya has been a staunch advocate for Girkin's release since the first day of his imprisonment in July 2023 and appears to maintain ties with Russian veterans who support Girkin's release, so her silence regarding Girkin's most recent announcement is notable.^[10] Reginskaya and the RDS contradicted each other on November 8 when the RDS called for character witnesses to speak for Girkin at his trial, but Reginskaya stated that witness recruitment on "other channels and by other persons is not coordinated with the general defense and can be dangerous for Igor [Girkin]."^[11] The RDS announced on November 15 that it had found several such witnesses for Girkin, despite Reginskaya's November 8 statement.^[12]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be censoring irregular Russian armed formations as part of its ongoing efforts to formalize Russia's irregular forces and establish greater control over the Russian information space. The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion claimed on November 19 that the DNR's Internal Affairs Ministry issued a censorship order, prohibiting the battalion from "showing its life and work."^[13] The "Vostok" Battalion is currently serving in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and provides near-daily updates on the situation in their sector of the front.^[14] The DNR Internal Ministry may be administering the censorship order as part of the Russian MoD's ongoing efforts to formalize the DNR/Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) People's Militias into the Russian armed forces, which has previously triggered backlash within the Russian information space.^[15] ISW has extensively reported on the Kremlin's ongoing censorship efforts targeting Russian milbloggers and state media.^[16]

Ukrainian officials announced on November 19 that Bohdan Yermokhin, a teenage Ukrainian whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from occupied Mariupol to Russia and attempted to conscript, returned to Ukraine.^[17] Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak stated that Yermokhin's return occurred within the framework of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's "Bring Kids Back UA" program.^[18] Yermak and Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmitry Lubinets stated that Qatar and UNICEF mediated the return, and Lubinets noted that this was the first time UNICEF was involved in efforts to return Ukrainian children back from Russia.^[19] Russia dictated that Yermokhin travel to a third country to meet a relative once he turned 18 years old, and Yermokhin turned 18 on November 19 and met his sister in Belarus before returning to Ukraine.^[20] Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continued attempts to dispute

Russia's practice of illegally deporting Ukrainian children to Russia and claimed on November 19 that the Russian military found Yermokhin "neglected" in Mariupol in 2022 and took him to "safety" with a Russian foster family.[21]

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger expressed anger on November 19 about Armenia's decisions to distance itself from Russia against the backdrop of recent deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces used a Tochka-U missile to strike Belgorod Oblast on November 19, and a prominent Russian milblogger used the opportunity to allege that Armenia, possibly with assistance from the US, agreed to give Tochka-U launchers and missiles to Ukraine.[22] The milblogger offered no evidence in support of this allegation, and ISW has not observed anything to substantiate it. The milblogger speculated about the number of weapons Armenia could possibly transfer to Ukraine but did not offer any specifics or the sourcing of his information. The milblogger also claimed that the Armenian government has begun to prepare to withdraw from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). ISW has not observed any confirmation of the milblogger's claim that Armenia is planning to leave the CSTO, and Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Vahan Kostanyan told journalists on November 9 that Armenia is not discussing the legal process of leaving the CSTO.[23] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated on November 18 that Armenia and Azerbaijan were able to agree on the basic principles for a peace treaty but that the two countries are speaking "different diplomatic languages" and that there is an atmosphere of mistrust.[24]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian and Russian forces are continuing combat operations in eastern and southern Ukraine, although the rainy weather will likely continue to slow the pace of combat operations until winter conditions fully set in.
- Russian forces conducted another series of drone strikes primarily targeting Kyiv, Poltava, and Cherkasy oblasts on the night of November 18 to 19.
- Ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin formally announced his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential elections despite his imprisonment.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be censoring irregular Russian armed formations as part of its ongoing efforts to formalize Russia's irregular forces and establish greater control over the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian officials announced on November 19 that Bohdan Yermokhin, a teenage Ukrainian whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from occupied Mariupol to Russia and attempted to conscript, returned to Ukraine.
- A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger expressed anger on November 19 about Armenia's decisions to distance itself from Russia against the backdrop of recent deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in some areas on November 19.
- Regional Russian officials continue to fear the emergence of localized protests in response to the Russian military's refusal to return some mobilized personnel from the frontlines.
- Occupation authorities continue efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine into Russian national and cultural identities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 18, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on November 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 17 to 18. Ukrainian military sources reported on November 18 that Ukrainian air defenses downed 29 of 38 Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones over multiple unspecified oblasts.[1] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian Shaheds struck an energy infrastructure facility and administrative building in Odesa Oblast.[2] The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command reported that Russian Shaheds also damaged infrastructure facilities in Chernihiv Oblast.[3] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck an oil depot in Altestove, Odesa Oblast, the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast, and Kyiv City, Kyiv Oblast.[4]

A Kyrgyzstan government official called on the Russian government to help Kyrgyz migrants in Russia against the backdrop of recent proposals from Russian government officials to decrease migrant work opportunities in Russia. Deputy Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Edil Baisalov met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Social Policy, Labor, Health, and Pension Provision Tatyana Golikova on November 17 and reiterated the importance of Russia providing families of Kyrgyz citizens working in Russia with compulsory health insurance in accordance with Eurasian Economic Union standards.[5] Baisalov stated that this would help create favorable conditions for Kyrgyz citizens in Russia. Prominent voices in the Russian ultranationalist information space responded to Baisalov's statements by complaining that the Russian government's migrant policy is too lenient and that Russian government officials either are not aware of the problem or do not want to fix it.[6]

Russian federal subjects and government officials have been increasingly introducing and proposing bills restricting migrants' rights in the fall of 2023. Deputy Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Pyotr Tolstoy proposed a measure on November 14 that would restrict work opportunities for migrants from countries that have not designated Russian as a state language.[7] Russian political party A Just Russia-For Truth introduced three bills to the Duma on November 15 that would abolish work certificates for foreign workers, require Russian organizations to obtain permission from the Russian government to hire foreign workers, and require foreign workers to acquire a separate Russian work permit.[8] A Just Russia head Sergei Mironov stated that these measures will create order and ensure that the government "clearly understand[s] who is on the territory of the Russian Federation and why they are there."^[9] Several Russian federal subjects have banned migrants from driving minibuses and taxis, offering catering services, and selling alcohol and tobacco in Russia.[10]

Courts in the Republic of Dagestan reportedly continue to charge participants of the October 29 antisemitic riots with minor administrative crimes, while select Russian ultranationalists call for increased government control in order to curb the alleged spread of Islamic extremism in Dagestan. Russian authorities have reportedly charged 412 people for violating various articles of the Russian Administrative Code, including 394 people charged with violating procedures on holding assemblies and 18 people charged with organizing a mass gathering in public places.[11] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on November 17 that a radical Salafi preacher spoke about the unrest in Dagestan and alleged that there are over 100,000 supporters of Salafism in Dagestan – an allegation that the milblogger rejected.[12] The milblogger also claimed that radical ideologues have become more active on the internet following the riots in Dagestan and that extremists are attempting to take advantage of the confusion caused by the spontaneity of the unrest.[13] Another Russian milblogger added that the Russian government needs to establish strict control over Dagestan in order to curb future unrest.[14] ISW previously assessed that the Russian leadership is likely avoiding more serious punishments for antisemitism in the North Caucasus out of concerns that they will inflame discontent towards the Kremlin.[15] Russian authorities also recently detained a Dagestani government official on corruption charges, likely in an effort to placate those calling for an increased federal government response to the unrest.[16]

The Russian government continues efforts to restrict citizens' access to the internet and to strengthen its control over the Russian information space. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree on November 17 allowing the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) to block sites that publish information about methods to bypass sites blocked by the Russian government. [17] The Russian State Duma previously adopted a bill on October 17 that stipulates that presidential election campaign materials cannot be shown on sites restricted by Roskomnadzor, and the November 17 decree is likely in part related to controlling the Russian information space before the 2024 presidential elections.[18]

The European Commission will reportedly include sanctions on the sale of petroleum tankers to Russia in an upcoming sanctions package in an effort to curb Russian schemes to skirt the G7 price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products. Reuters reported on November 17 that the European Union's upcoming sanctions package against Russia will ban the sale to Russia of tankers for crude oil and other petroleum products and will stipulate contractual clauses in the sale of tankers to third countries prohibiting the re-sale of tankers to Russia and the transfer of Russian crude oil and petroleum products that violate the G7's price cap.[19] The *Financial Times* reported on November 14 that Western officials stated that Russia is likely currently selling almost all of its crude oil at or above the G7's \$60 per barrel price cap.[20] The *Financial Times* added that Russian export data for crude oil suggests that Russia sold crude oil at an average of roughly \$80 a barrel in October.[21] Only 37 of the 134 vessels that reportedly ship Russian oil held insurance from Western countries, and Russia has reportedly increasingly relied on aging oil tankers with obscure ownership to build a "shadow fleet" to sell crude oil and petroleum products above the G7 price cap.[22] European economic think tank Bruegel reported on October 11 that by July 2023 over 60 percent of tankers carrying Russian crude oil were covered by insurance from an unknown country of origin, whereas less than 20 percent of the tankers carrying Russian crude oil had been covered by unknown insurance at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 17 to 18.
- A Kyrgyzstan government official called on the Russian government to help Kyrgyz migrants in Russia against the backdrop of recent proposals from Russian government officials to decrease migrant work opportunities in Russia.
- Courts in the Republic of Dagestan reportedly continue to charge participants of the October 29 antisemitic riots with minor administrative crimes, while select Russian ultranationalists call for increased government control in order to curb the alleged spread of Islamic extremism in Dagestan.
- The Russian government continues efforts to restrict citizens' access to the internet and to strengthen its control over the Russian information space.
- The European Commission will reportedly include sanctions on the sale of petroleum tankers to Russia in an upcoming sanctions package in an effort to curb Russian schemes to skirt the G7 price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Russia has reportedly frozen prisoner of war (POW) exchanges with Ukraine since the summer of 2023.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 17, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 17, 2023, 7:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian forces have established bridgeheads on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and are conducting ground operations aimed at pushing Russian forces out of artillery range of the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River. The Ukrainian Marine Corps Command and the Ukrainian General Staff stated on November 17 that Ukrainian marines have secured several "bridgeheads" on the east bank following successful actions and are conducting actions to expand these positions.[1] US military doctrine defines a bridgehead as "an area on the enemy's side of the water obstacle that is large enough to accommodate the majority of the crossing force, has adequate terrain to permit defense of the crossing sites, provides security to crossing forces from enemy direct fire, and provides a base for continuing the attack."<[2] The doctrinal definition of a bridgehead does not stipulate a certain size for the crossing force, the extent of the secured positions, or the ability to transfer and operate heavy military equipment from those positions. The necessary size of a bridgehead depends on the operations it is meant to support, and the official Ukrainian acknowledgment of these positions as bridgeheads indicates that the Ukrainian command assesses that these positions are sufficient for continuing ground operations on the east bank.

The Ukrainian General Staff stated that one of the main operational objectives for Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank is to prevent Russian shelling of Ukrainian civilians on the west bank of Kherson Oblast, particularly near Kherson City. The 152mm tube artillery systems that Russian forces widely operate in Ukraine

have an approximate range of 25km, although Russian forces are unlikely to deploy these systems to immediate frontline areas due to the threat of Ukrainian counterbattery fire. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces on the east bank are conducting diversionary actions, raids, and reconnaissance and are particularly surveilling Russian positions for intelligence on Russian logistics and ammunition concentrations.[3]

Russian forces appear to be applying lessons learned from attempts to man Russian multilayered defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive to current Russian defensive operations in Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff acknowledged that Russian forces have a "fairly serious" line of fortifications in Kherson Oblast.[4] A Ukrainian soldier operating on the left (east) bank of Kherson Oblast characterized Russian defensive positions as "elaborate dugouts that [Russian forces] constructed over months" in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published on November 15. [5] The WSJ also reported that Russian forces heavily mined the area around Kryvyy Rih (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River), where Ukrainian forces currently maintain positions.[6] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets noted that Russian forces are not deploying their forces in a "pillar formation" at the immediate frontline on the east bank, likely in an effort to protect concentrations of Russian forces from Ukrainian artillery fire and drone strikes. [7] Mashovets claimed on November 12 that the Russian command in the Kherson direction has refused to commit additional forces of the 70th Motorized Rifle Division (of the newly formed 18th Combined Arms Army) and 7th Air Assault (VDV) Division beyond elements of single regiments and battalions to the frontline, opting instead to maintain the remainder of these formations in near rear areas and secondary echelons of defense.[8]

This tactical deployment of forces in Kherson is reminiscent of changes that Russian forces made to Russian tactical defensive deployments in western Zaporizhia Oblast. ISW observed Russian forces concentrating personnel along the defensive layer closest to Ukrainian offensive operations at the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[9] ISW observed a shift in Russian defensive operations as Ukrainian forces began penetrating Russian defensive layers in mid-September, wherein Russian forces shifted personnel away from manning immediate frontline defensive positions in order to man defensive layers further from the frontline from which more combat effective forces would counterattack.[10] Russian forces have not constructed extensive visible defensive fortifications similar to those that Russian forces established in western Zaporizhia Oblast prior to the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and appear to have opted for more discrete fortifications set further from the frontline. The discrete fortifications located away from the frontline in Kherson Oblast will likely only be fully effective if they remain concealed, however. Fall and winter weather conditions may reveal some concealed positions as foliage and natural ground cover die.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces have suffered roughly a brigade's worth of casualties since Ukrainian forces started ground operations on the east bank of Kherson Oblast on October 17, reportedly forcing Russian forces to transfer combat power from elsewhere in Ukraine to Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces have killed 1,216 Russian personnel and wounded 2,217 since starting "measures" on the east bank.[11] These manpower losses are roughly equivalent to a brigade's worth of personnel, although these losses are likely spread out across the Russian formations and units operating in the Kherson direction. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 24 Russian tanks, 48 armored combat vehicles, 89 artillery systems, 29 ammunition warehouses, and 14 aircraft since starting "measures" on the east bank.[12] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have transferred unspecified units from other unspecified sectors of the front to Kherson Oblast due to these losses.[13] ISW previously assessed that the Russian military command will likely struggle to redeploy combat-effective reinforcements at scale to respond to ongoing Ukrainian operations in Kherson Oblast while conducting defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and sustaining other offensive efforts in eastern Ukraine.[14] The scale of Russian reinforcements required, however, depends heavily on how much effort Ukrainian forces put into the Kherson direction and how much progress they make.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 16 to 17. Ukrainian military sources reported on November 17 that Russian forces launched 10 Shahed-131/136 drones primarily targeting Khmelnytskyi Oblast and several S-300 missiles in the Donetsk direction. [15] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed nine Shahed drones over Mykolaiv, Odesa, Zhytomyr, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts. [16] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck targets in Khmelnytskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, and Kharkiv oblasts.[17]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Israel-Hamas war has negatively affected Ukraine's shell supplies. Zelensky stated during an interview with Bloomberg on November 16 that Israel has sought large quantities of the global supply of 155mm artillery shells and that this has slowed deliveries of artillery shells to Ukraine at a critical moment.[18]

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov attempted to dismiss criticisms of the Russian government and the war in Ukraine as inevitable yet unfounded and urged Russian citizens to self-censor. Putin stated at the International Cultural Forum in St. Petersburg on November 17 that people who are critical of the war have the right to their own point of view.[19] Putin added that "the head is not only a tool for speaking but is also for thinking before you say something." [20] Putin commented that many educated, knowledgeable, and talented adults do not follow or understand what is happening, presumably in Ukraine, but acknowledged that "the mood in society and the opinion of a country's people...is an objective factor that no one can escape." [21] Peskov similarly stated in a video interview published on November 17 that there should be a level of censorship during wartime that would be unacceptable during peacetime. [22] Peskov stated that the line between criticizing the Russian military and discrediting the Russian forces is very thin and advised those who want to "indiscriminately" speculate about and criticize the Russian military to "think ten times" before doing so.[23]

Peskov also stated that he believes Putin will announce his presidential campaign and that he "does not doubt" that Putin will win the 2024 presidential elections. [24] Peskov also responded to a question about Russian leadership after Putin and the characteristics that Putin's eventual successor should have, stating that Putin's successor should be someone exactly like Putin.[25]

Russian authorities detained several Federal Security Service (FSB) employees on November 16 for accepting a five-billion-ruble (\$55.6 million) bribe in connection with the dismissal of a corruption case. Russian outlet RBC reported that the FSB employees were involved in the dismissed investigation into the Merlion Group of Companies, a Russian IT company and technology distributor that the FSB previously investigated for corruption.[26] Russian authorities also arrested former head of the Russian Investigative Committee for the North-Western District of Moscow Sergei Romodanovsky, current head of the Russian Investigative Committee's Khoroshevsky Investigative Department Rustam Yusupov, and former investigator Andrei Zhiryutin in connection to the case's dismissal on November 10.[27] RBC reported that Russian authorities suspect that additional FSB employees, Romodanovsky, Yusupov, and Zhiryutin accepted a five-billion-ruble bribe to dismiss the case against the Merlion Group. A Russian insider source claimed on November 17 that Russian authorities are also investigating former Director of Russia's Federal Migration Service Konstantin Romodanovsky (father of Sergei Romodanovsky), who has connections to Russian President Vladimir Putin, and suggested that Russian authorities may intend to blame Konstantin Romodanovsky for Russia's migration issues to appease Putin's ultranationalist base.[28]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian forces have established bridgeheads on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and are conducting ground operations aimed at pushing Russian forces out of artillery range of the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces appear to be applying lessons learned from attempts to man Russian multilayered defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive to current Russian defensive operations in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces have suffered roughly a brigade's worth of casualties since Ukrainian forces started ground operations on the east bank of Kherson Oblast on October 17, reportedly forcing Russian forces to transfer combat power from elsewhere in Ukraine to Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 16 to 17.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Israel-Hamas war has negatively affected Ukraine's shell supplies.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov attempted to dismiss criticisms of the Russian government and the war in Ukraine as inevitable yet unfounded and urged Russian citizens to self-censor.
- Russian authorities detained several Federal Security Service (FSB) employees on November 16 for accepting a five-billion-ruble (\$55.6 million) bribe in connection with the dismissal of a corruption case.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in several sectors of the front.
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on November 17 that the Russian military is likely using updated surveillance aircraft due to concerns over Ukraine deploying Western-provided combat aircraft.
- Yale School of Public Health's *Humanitarian Research Lab* (Yale HRL) reported on November 16 that Russian and Belarusian authorities have forcibly deported at least 2,442 Ukrainian children between the ages of six and 17 to Belarus via Russia since February 24, 2022.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 16, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 16, 2023, 8:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of November 15 to 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 18 Shahed-131/136 drones of which Ukrainian forces destroyed 16.[1] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched S-300 missiles targeting Kharkiv Oblast and that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Kh-59 cruise missile over Poltava Oblast on the evening of November 15.[2] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported on November 16 that Russian forces changed the timing of the November 16 drone attack from their normal strike pattern by conducting the drone strikes until around 9:30am local time, as opposed to conducting the attacks at their usual time from around 10:00pm to 3:00-4:00am.[3] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the Russian military has concentrated over 800 missiles, including Kalibr and Onyx missiles, in occupied Crimea and intends to use all of them against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in winter 2023.[4]

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev announced on November 16 that Russian authorities are strengthening Russian air defense over Russia's Central Federal Okrug, likely in response to Ukraine's recently implied intent to conduct an interdiction campaign against Russian supply routes in rear areas during the winter. Patrushev also announced that Russian authorities have organized patrols to protect critical infrastructure facilities to prevent attacks and that the Russian government is funding the creation of "territorial defense lines" for oblasts bordering Ukraine.[5] Patrushev added that Russian authorities are updating a list of all critical infrastructure facilities – including fuel and energy facilities and important transportation objects – that require protection from unspecified threats.[6] The Central Federal Okrug consists of 18 federal subjects including Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts, which border Ukraine.[7] Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk stated on November 13 that Ukraine needs additional air defense systems and long-range missiles to strike Russian rear areas.[8] Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on November 12 that Ukrainian forces' current main task is to disrupt Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs).[9]

Russian milbloggers continued to criticize actors in the Russian information space for distorting the reality of the Russian war effort, highlighting an emerging cyclical dynamic in the Russian information space in which the majority of Russian sources coalesce around a particular predominant narrative and, in turn, a subset of different sources coalesce to criticize the majority's prevailing opinion. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on November 16 that Russian state media may have falsely convinced the Russian people that "everything is fine" in Russia's war in Ukraine.[10] The milblogger claimed that he does not understand why Russian state media devotes so much time to promoting narratives about the "imminent collapse of Ukraine" and portrays the Russian war effort so positively that Russian viewers think that signing a military service contract is unnecessary. Another Russian milblogger who previously served throughout the front in Ukraine and correctly assessed Russia's foundational problems in Kharkiv Oblast in spring 2022 criticized several unnamed Russian milbloggers for their recent overly positive reporting about Russian counterattacks on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[11] The milblogger claimed that the other milbloggers preemptively claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks on the east bank and criticized them for setting unrealistic expectations for Russian forces. The milblogger noted that such overoptimistic claims are forcing Russian servicemen to "catch up" to these Russian politicians' and commanders' unrealistic expectations of Russian battlefield successes. The milblogger's complaint suggests that the situation in Kherson Oblast remains very ambiguous and is dynamic. The milblogger's complaint mirrors recent reports that the Russian General Staff uses battlefield maps that differ from tactical reality and that local Russian commanders order Russian forces to conduct routine assaults to make gains that align with the Russian General Staff's inaccurate maps.[12] Disjointed Kremlin efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space and report overly optimistic news are likely creating these cycles of coalescence and backlash among Russian sources. The Russian information space may grow increasingly volatile as the rift between the Kremlin optimists and their critics expands.

Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded a prominent Russian milblogger who was previously critical of Russia's military performance during its full-scale invasion with a prestigious state honor, continuing the Kremlin's long-standing effort to coopt milbloggers and make them loyal to the Kremlin. Putin awarded founder of *Rybar* Telegram channel, Mikhail Zvinchuk, the Russian Order of Merit of the Fatherland Second Class for his efforts supporting the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on November 16.[13] Other Russian milbloggers congratulated Zvinchuk and praised him for launching the first awarded Telegram channel in Russia.[14] Putin had previously engaged Zvinchuk by recruiting him to join the Kremlin working group on mobilization problems on December 20, 2022, which ISW assessed was Putin's first concerted attempt to regain control over the segment of Russia's domestic audience that turned to the Telegram information space for war coverage independent of Russian state media.[15]

Zvinchuk's *Rybar* project amassed an audience of over 1.2 million followers by covering Russian military operations in Ukraine and is frequently cited by Russian and Western media alike (including ISW). Russian investigative outlet *The Bell* reported that *Rybar* was originally a personal blog from its creation in 2018 until Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly began sponsoring the channel from 2019 to 2021.[16] *The Bell* observed that *Rybar* frequently published posts that may have advanced Prigozhin's business interests in Syria during their partnership. *Rybar* frequently published contradictory posts since the start of the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. *Rybar*'s posts and tone used to loudly criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) only to then defend disgraced Russian Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin against attacks on his command from Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov and Prigozhin.[17] *The Bell* also found that *Rybar* amplified numerous videos that supported the Russian MoD's information operation efforts to present partial mobilization in Russia in a more favorable light. *Rybar* claims to sustain its four million ruble (\$44,800) monthly production cost via donations, although the channel also profits from showing advertisements for companies associated with First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko and Russian state media.[18]

ISW had observed a significant shift in the style and focus of *Rybar*'s war coverage since the Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts in fall 2022 during which Russian state propagandists were unable to explain away Russia's military failures and a deeply unpopular mobilization of 300,000 reservists.[19] Zvinchuk began appearing on Russian state television and the Russian state media began heavily relying on Zvinchuk's content at this time. *Rybar*'s coverage since fall 2020 has significantly reduced its criticism of the Russian MoD. This observed content and tonal shift is significant and is likely the result of Putin's efforts to coopt prominent Russian milbloggers to reestablish Kremlin dominance over the Russian language online information space, carry out information operations against Western audiences, and prevent other influential Russian officials from buying milbloggers' loyalties. Zvinchuk's award also likely serves as an effort to incentivize other milbloggers to offer their loyalty to the regime in exchange for accolades and Kremlin recognition.

Ukraine stated that the continued Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) has resulted in equipment and maintenance failures that threaten the plant's security. Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom reported on November 16 that Russian ZNPP authorities transferred reactor no. 5 to a hot shutdown state from a cold shutdown state in violation of Ukraine's nuclear regulatory orders, resulting in a leak of a boric acid solution that entered all the reactor's steam generators.[20] Energoatom reported that Russian ZNPP authorities' "incompetence" in bringing reactors from cold shutdowns to hot shutdowns has resulted in a radioactive coolant leak from the first to second circuit of reactor no. 4 and a similar situation involving reactor no. 6.[21] Energoatom also reported that unspecified "incompetent" Russian actions resulted in reactor no. 6 experiencing a temporary blackout on November 14, forcing the reactor to rely on emergency diesel generators.[22] Energoatom stated that equipment at the ZNPP is constantly degrading and that the frequency of such dangerous instances are increasing.[23]

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has not yet commented on these incidents but expressed concern on November 13 over the extent and effectiveness of maintenance on ZNPP safety systems and its own ability to monitor ZNPP operations.[24] The IAEA reported that these maintenance issues became apparent in July and August 2023 when the steam generator of reactor no. 4 experienced a leak that contaminated the reactor's safety systems that had to be recleaned. The IAEA reported that ZNPP operators have not granted its contingent at the ZNPP access to all six reactor turbine halls to assess their safety and that operators restricted IAEA access during recent walkthroughs of the halls in October and on November 10. The IAEA reported that the ZNPP planned maintenance of transformers of reactors no. 4, 5, and 6 after recently completing maintenance of transformers of reactors no. 1, 2, and 3 and noted that reactors no. 4 and 5 are in hot shutdown mode in violation of the Ukrainian regulatory agency's orders.

The Ukrainian and IAEA reports indicate that Russia's presence and exclusive control over the ZNPP is increasing, suggesting that similar failures may escalate under continued Russian occupation. The IAEA announced on November 13 that its staff visited a Russian training center for the ZNPP on November 7 and that Russian nuclear regulatory agency Rostekhnadzor is establishing a permanent presence at the ZNPP.[25] This announcement indicates the normalization of the Russian occupation of the ZNPP despite Russian forces' documented reckless conduct near the plant.[26] In addition to the recent equipment and mechanical failures, Russian forces deployed military equipment on and inside ZNPP facilities in summer-fall 2022 to protect these assets from Ukrainian strikes, while setting conditions to blame Ukrainian forces for any incidents at the ZNPP.[27] The ZNPP has completely lost access to external power sources seven times during its service history – all seven incidents occurring while under Russian occupation.[28]

Cyprus has reportedly been complicit in helping Russian elites, sanctioned for supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, launder money. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) reported on November 14 that Russians who have been under Western sanctions since 2014 owned or controlled almost 800 companies and trusts secretly registered in various countries and territories including Cyprus, Lichtenstein, the British Virgin Islands, and Hong Kong.[29] The ICIJ also stated that Cypriot professional services firms have worked on behalf of 25 Russians sanctioned after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and on behalf of an additional 71 Russians sanctioned after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[30] The ICIJ found that the Cypriot branch of an international professional service firm helped a Russian billionaire transfer a \$1.4 billion in investments out of his name to evade European Union (EU) sanctions.[31] The ICIJ cited figures from the Center for the Study of Democracy in Sofia, Bulgaria, reporting that Russian businessmen have "invested" over \$200 million in Cyprus as of 2020, comprising half of all Russian investments in Europe, and that about 300 Russian-owned companies constituted 80 percent of Cyprus' wealth at one point in time.[32]

Gazprom Media Holdings, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom, announced on November 16 that it acquired the majority share of a large Russian blogger agency, likely in an effort to expand its already extensive control over the Russian media space. Gazprom Media Holdings announced that it bought 51 percent of shares in Insight People, reportedly the largest blogging agency in Russia.[33] Gazprom Media Holdings already owns Russian video streaming platform RuTube, Russian social media network VKontakte, and several prominent Russian TV channels and radio stations.[34] Gazprom Media is headed by Alexander Zharov who previously served as the head of Russian state censor Roskomnadzor from 2012 to 2020.[35] Long-time Gazprom Head Alexei Miller notably has associates throughout various power structures, and Gazprom Media's recent media acquisitions indicates a possible rise in Miller's influence. Miller

is a long-time associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin and likely has ties to former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Head and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, as Patrushev's sons previously held senior positions at Gazprom.[36]

Russian authorities discovered former Russian 6th Air Force and Air Defense Army Commander Lieutenant General Vladimir Sviridov dead in his home in Stavropol Krai on November 15. Russian sources reported that authorities found Sviridov dead with a woman, likely his wife, and suggested that the couple likely died around November 9. Russian sources reported that Russian authorities have not yet determined Sviridov's and the woman's cause of death but have ruled out carbon monoxide poisoning and "violent" deaths.[37] Sviridov reportedly resigned from his position as commander of the 6th Air Force and Air Defense Army in 2009. [38]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 15 to 16.
- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev announced on November 16 that Russian authorities are strengthening Russian air defense over Russia's Central Federal Okrug, likely in response to Ukraine's recently implied intent to conduct an interdiction campaign against Russian supply routes in rear areas during the winter.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize actors in the Russian information space for distorting the reality of the Russian war effort, highlighting an emerging cyclical dynamic in the Russian information space in which the majority of Russian sources coalesce around a particular predominant narrative and, in turn, a subset of different sources coalesces to criticize the majority's prevailing opinion.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded a prominent Russian milblogger who was previously critical of Russia's military performance during its full-scale invasion with a prestigious state honor, continuing the Kremlin's long-standing effort to coopt milbloggers and make them loyal to the Kremlin.
- Ukraine stated that the continued Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) has resulted in equipment and maintenance failures that threaten the plant's security.
- The Ukrainian and IAEA reports indicate that Russia's presence and exclusive control over the ZNPP is increasing, suggesting that similar failures may escalate under continued Russian occupation.
- Cyprus has reportedly been complicit in helping Russian elites, sanctioned for supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, launder money.
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- Russian authorities discovered former Russian 6th Air Force and Air Defense Army Commander Lieutenant General Vladimir Sviridov dead in his home in Stavropol Krai on November 15.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area, near Robotyne, and northeast of Vasylivka and advanced near Avdiivka.
- The Russian Ministry of Education issued a draft order establishing a course called "Fundamentals of Security and Defense of the Motherland" for Russian middle and high school students starting in September 2024.
- The Russian government and Russian occupation authorities continue to forcibly deport children in occupied Ukraine to Russia under the rubric of educational programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 15, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 15, 2023, 7:45pm ET

The European Union (EU) appears poised to ban the export of precision machine tools and key weapons manufacturing equipment components to Russia. The ban, if enacted and effectively enforced, could deal a significant blow to Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) given precision machine tools' importance in industrial manufacturing. *Bloomberg* reported on November 15 that the EU's 12th sanctions package proposes a ban on the export of precision machine tools and machinery parts that Russia uses to make weapons and ammunition, such as welding machines, lithium batteries, thermostats, motors, and drone motors. [1] *Bloomberg* reported that Russia has been importing precision machines and precision machine tools from Europe to sustain its ammunition production and other DIB production efforts. *Bne Intellinews* reported in June 2021 that Russia's near total reliance on European- and US-produced precision machine tools makes Russia particularly vulnerable to such sanctions and noted that at the time Russia imported almost all of the precision machines it required.[2]

Russia has been increasingly attempting to develop import substitution solutions for sourcing Western-made precision machine tools in 2023, likely in preparation for Western sanctions targeting this vulnerability. The Russian government approved in May 2023 the "Concept of Technological Development until 2030," which encourages domestic production of high-tech products such as precision machine tools and mandates that domestic enterprises produce at least 75 percent of Russia's high-tech products by 2030.[3] Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec reported in August 2023 that Russia's STAN group, the country's largest domestic precision machine manufacturer, which Rostec purchased in 2019, is a major element of Russia's import substitution program.[4] Rostec subsidiary RT-Capital's head, Semyon Yakubov, told *Kommersant* on October 26 that Rostec hopes to use the STAN Group to meet Russia's "great need" for modern precision machines in the absence of Western imports.[5] Yakubov stated that Western sanctions and the war in Ukraine have sharply increased Russia's military and civilian demand for domestically produced machine tools. Yakubov noted that STAN was unable to meet even a third of the total volume of Russia's orders for precision machines in 2023, worth around six billion rubles (approximately \$67.1 million). Yakubov stated that Russia's demand for precision machines is "much greater" than its current production abilities.

Denmark will reportedly start inspecting and potentially blocking Russian oil tankers in an effort to enforce a price cap on Russian oil and the European Union's (EU) insurance regulations. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on November 15 that the EU proposed measures that would allow Denmark to inspect and block Russian oil tankers traveling through the Danish straits. These measures are part of an EU effort to enforce a G7 cap demanding that Western insurers only provide coverage to Russian shipments where oil is sold for less than \$60 per barrel.[6] An unnamed senior European government official told *FT* that "almost none" of the Russian maritime oil shipments in October 2023 were below the \$60 barrel price cap.[7] *FT* also reported that the EU is concerned that Russian tankers are violating EU regulations by frequently traveling with falsified financial statements or non-Western insurance.[8]

The Ukrainian government reached a deal with international insurers that will provide affordable coverage to vessels carrying grain and other critical food supplies through the Black Sea corridor for civilian vessels, amid continued Russian efforts to deny navigation through the corridor. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on November 15 that the Ukrainian government reached a deal with insurance broker giant Marsh McLennan to provide up to \$50 million in hull and liability insurance from Lloyd's of London firms for each vessel carrying agricultural goods.[9] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated that this agreement would allow Ukraine to "provide vital food supplies to the world at the same time as supporting the Ukrainian economy and keeping the Black Sea open for international trade."[10] Russian forces have continually conducted strikes on Ukrainian port infrastructure and mined areas in the Black Sea to deny freedom of navigation in the corridor.[11]

Russian President Vladimir Putin stated during a meeting with Russian election commission representatives on November 15 that the Russian government will suppress any foreign or domestic election interference. Putin stated that the Russian government will "continue to do everything necessary to prevent any illegal intrusion into electoral processes."[12] Putin notably did not specifically reference the March 2024 presidential elections, nor did he announce his presidential campaign.

Recent Russian opinion polls indicate that roughly half of Russians maintain support for the war in Ukraine and for Russia to engage in peace negotiations. The Levada Center – an independent Russian polling organization – reported on October 31 that 55 percent of respondents to a recent poll believe that Russia should begin peace negotiations while 38 percent favor continuing to conduct the war.[13] The Levada Center observed that while these numbers slightly increased between September and October by four percent, they have largely remained consistent since July 2023.[14] The Levada Center added that support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine remained high with 76 percent of respondents stating that they support Russian military operations in Ukraine. The Levada Center reported that 62 percent of surveyed Russians believe that the full-scale invasion is progressing well, while 21 percent of respondents believe that the war is going reasonably or very poorly for Russia.[15] The Levada Center reported on November 14 that two-thirds of respondents believe that Russia is headed in the right direction and of those who believe the opposite, 45 percent cited the war in Ukraine.[16] Opposition-leaning Russian research organization Russian Field reported similar numbers supporting negotiations on November 15, noting that 48 percent of respondents said that Russia should engage in peace negotiations and that 74 percent would support Russian President Vladimir Putin if he signed a peace agreement "tomorrow." [17] Russian Field stated that 36 percent of respondents believe that the war is going well for Russia whereas 25 percent believe that the war is going poorly for Russia and that respondents who trust Telegram channels are twice as likely to believe that the war is going poorly for Russia as those who rely on Russian television.[18]

Yandex NV - the Dutch holding company of Russian internet technology company Yandex - reportedly aims to sell all its Russian assets by the end of 2023, allowing the Russian government to further increase its hold over the Russian information space. *Reuters* and *Bloomberg* reported on November 14, citing sources familiar with the matter, that Yandex NV likely aims to sell all its Russian assets, not just a controlling stake, by the end of 2023.[19] One of *Reuters'* sources claimed that Yandex NV seeks a complete break from Russia while another source stated that a complete exit is likely but undecided. *Reuters* and *Bloomberg* reported that Yandex NV will host a board meeting on the deal in late November and hopes to finalize a deal by December 2023.[20] The Kremlin has been attempting to crypto-nationalize Yandex through coercive measures since at least the summer of 2023 and reportedly approved a prior deal to sell Russian Yandex holdings to an affiliate of Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergey Kiriyenko.[21] The Yandex crypto-nationalization effort likely supports the Kremlin's preparations for the 2024 Russian presidential elections.

Key Takeaways:

- The European Union (EU) appears poised to ban the export of precision machine tools and key weapons manufacturing equipment components to Russia.
- Denmark will reportedly start inspecting and potentially blocking Russian oil tankers in an effort to enforce a price cap on Russian oil and the European Union's (EU) insurance regulations.
- The Ukrainian government reached a deal with international insurers that will provide affordable coverage to vessels carrying grain and other critical food supplies through the Black Sea corridor for civilian vessels, amid continued Russian efforts to deny navigation through the corridor.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin stated during a meeting with Russian election commission representatives on November 15 that the Russian government will suppress any foreign or domestic election interference.
- Recent Russian opinion polls indicate that roughly half of Russians maintain support for the war in Ukraine and for Russia to engage in peace negotiations.
- Yandex NV - the Dutch holding company of Russian internet technology company Yandex - reportedly aims to sell all its Russian assets by the end of 2023, allowing the Russian government to further increase its hold over the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- A Russian insider source claimed that Kremlin-created Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, which presented a limited number of former Wagner fighters with the certificates of their combat veteran status, is coercing former Wagner fighters into signing contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Russian and occupation authorities continue efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian students in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 14, 2023

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

November 14, 2023, 6:20pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces are likely trying to regain the theater-level initiative in Ukraine by conducting several simultaneous offensive operations in eastern Ukraine, although it remains unclear if Russian forces will be able to fully regain the initiative as Ukrainian forces maintain pressure on critical areas of the front. Several Ukrainian officials noted that the situation along the frontline is complex but that Ukrainian forces maintain control of the battlespace.^[1] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on November 13 during a conversation with US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown that the Avdiivka, Kupyansk, and Marinka directions are the most intense but noted that Ukrainian forces are continuing offensive actions in unspecified sectors of the front. ^[2] Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi emphasized that Russian forces are pursuing simultaneous offensive actions in several directions and trying particularly to regain the initiative north and south of Bakhmut.^[3] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are reporting an increase of Russian assaults in the Kupyansk, Avdiivka, and Donetsk directions.^[4]

Ukrainian officials' statements about the current tempo of Russian operations along the frontline are consistent with ISW's assessment about ongoing Russian offensive operations, particularly in the Kupyansk, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka directions.^[5] Russian forces will likely struggle to fully regain the initiative across the theater, however, and Ukrainian forces are continuing their own offensive operations and making tactical-level gains along the front, particularly in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.^[6] The Russian military command will likely have to decide whether to keep certain Russian elements on certain sectors of the front to defend against ongoing Ukrainian offensive operations or to redeploy them to support offensive operations elsewhere that will likely culminate without reinforcements. These choices will likely hinder Russia's ability to fully regain the initiative in the coming weeks.

Ukrainian President's Office Head Andriy Yermak stated on November 13 that Ukrainian forces have established a "foothold" on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.^[7] In a speech at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, Yermak emphasized that despite the challenging battlefield situation, Ukrainian forces have "gained a foothold on the left bank of the Dnipro" and continue counteroffensive operations in unspecified sectors of the front.^[8] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian forces have been conducting larger-than-usual ground operations on the east bank of Kherson Oblast since mid-October 2023 and that Ukrainian forces appear to be able to maintain and supply their current positions on the Russian-controlled side of Kherson Oblast.^[9] Geolocated footage published on November 13 shows that Ukrainian forces recently advanced in Kryny (30km northeast of Kherson Oblast and 2km from the Dnipro River).^[10]

Russian President Vladimir Putin approved amendments to the Russian federal election law on November 14 that increase the Kremlin's control over the conduct of elections and reduce election transparency ahead of the 2024 presidential elections.^[11] The amendments allow the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) to control the specifics and conduct of elections in areas under martial law, which notably includes occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts, and stipulates that voting in these areas will only occur following coordination among the regional occupation administrations, the CEC, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), and Federal Security Service (FSB). The amendments also restrict media access to polling places and election commission meetings exclusively to Russian-accredited journalists and media organizations. Russian-accredited journalists who seek access to polling areas in the jurisdiction of Russian military units require the approval of the unit's commander to visit the areas. The amendments also necessitate that any actor legally designated as a "foreign agent" who speaks during a campaign event must announce that designation at the start of the speech and further prohibits presidential campaigning on blocked online platforms, such as opposition outlets *Meduza* and *Vazhnye Istorii*. These amendments allow the Russian federal government to increasingly control election campaigning and coverage of polling in Russian media to set conditions for additional Kremlin controls over Russian elections to help re-elect Putin in 2024. The Russian government may also postpone or cancel presidential elections in occupied Ukraine depending on the frontline situation and their ability to convincingly portray Putin as the winning candidate in these areas.

Russian forces conducted another wave of missile, air, and drone strikes against Ukrainian rear areas on the night of November 13–14. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on November 14 that overnight Russian forces launched nine Shahed-131/-136 drones from the direction of Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai; an Iskander-M ballistic missile from the direction of Dzhankoi, occupied Crimea; and Kh-35 cruise missiles from the direction of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.^[12] Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down seven of the nine Shaheds.^[13] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command clarified that a ballistic missile, presumably the Iskander-M, struck an open area near Chornobaiivka, Kherson Oblast, and Russian forces launched Kh-59s at Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts.^[14] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces are using ballistic missiles more frequently because they are more challenging for Ukrainian air defenses to intercept.^[15] Russian sources claimed that Russian strikes hit military assets and critical infrastructure in Cherkasy, Vinnytsia, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Kirovohrad oblasts, as well as the Shebelinsky gas processing plant in Kharkiv Oblast, although ISW has not observed visual evidence for all of these strikes.^[16]

Ukraine's Western partners announced new efforts to continue providing Ukraine with military and financial aid. Germany announced a new aid package to Ukraine on November 13 that includes 10 Leopard tanks, 14 Bandvagn 206 tracked all-terrain vehicles, and 1,020 155-mm shells, and *Reuters* reported on November 12 that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's governing coalition has agreed in principle to double Germany's military aid to Ukraine next year to €8 billion.^[17] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on November 13 that Ukrainian pilots began training at the F-16 training center in Romania.^[18] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized on November 14 that sustained NATO support for Ukraine is important as the current situation on the battlefield is difficult.^[19] EU Foreign Affairs Representative Josep Borrell stated on November 13 that Ukraine is the EU's top priority and that the EU's commitment will not waver.^[20] Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba highlighted the importance of speeding up the EU's plan to supply Ukraine with one million shells by March 2024 during a meeting with the EU Council of Foreign Ministers on November 13, but *Politico* reported on November 14 that German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius expressed doubt that the EU would be able to meet this target.^[21] *Politico* also reported that Borrell stated that the European defense industry is exporting about 40 percent of its current production to third countries and urged European countries to shift exports to Ukraine as "priority one."^[22] Borrell stated that the EU's ability to supply Ukraine with one million shells "will depend on how quickly orders come to the industry and how quickly the industry reacts."^[23] Stoltenberg also reiterated on November 14 that NATO has put in place framework contracts worth €2.4 billion, including €1 billion worth of firm orders, and stated that NATO countries are increasing production in order to reach the target of one million shells by March 2024.^[24] *Politico* reported that Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur also announced that Estonia offered five European companies a procurement offer for €280 million worth of 155-mm artillery ammunition.^[25]

The Russian government is likely attempting to force Google to cease operations in Russia. The Moscow Magistrate's Court fined Google 15 million rubles (roughly \$165,745) on November 14 for the repeated failure to localize the personal data of Russian citizens in Russia.^[26] Russian state censor Roskomnadzor requires foreign internet-based services to localize databases of Russian users as of July 1, 2021, and Russian courts previously fined Google 15 million rubles in June 2022 for failing to adhere to this law.^[27] The Russian government has previously fined Russian internet giant Yandex for also failing to adhere to Russian laws regarding disclosing users' personal data to the government, likely forcing Yandex to split its Russian entity from its international entity to adhere to Russian laws and allowing the Russian government to exercise increased control and surveillance over Russians' usage of Yandex.^[28] The Russian government previously banned certain Western social media sites and demanded that Google remove "false information" about the Russian war in Ukraine in early 2022.^[29] The Russian government likely aims to force Russians to utilize search engines and other internet services of Russian companies that the government can control better than international entities like Google.

Armenia continues to distance itself from Russia amid deteriorating Russian–Armenian relations. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan informed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on November 14 that he would not participate in the Russian-led Collective Treaty Security Organization (CSTO) meeting in Minsk on November 23.^[30] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov responded to Pashinyan's announcement, stating that the Kremlin understands that heads of state have their own events in their work schedules but that this is regrettable as meetings like the CSTO meeting are a "very good occasion for exchanging opinions" and coordinating ideas.^[31] Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Vahan Kostanyan told journalists on November 9 that Armenia is currently not discussing the legal process of leaving the CSTO.^[32]

Deputy Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Pyotr Tolstoy suggested a measure that would restrict work opportunities for migrants from countries that have not designated Russian as a state language, likely as part of an ongoing effort to coerce migrants into Russian military service. Tolstoy proposed restricting migrants from working in service sector jobs if they are not citizens from a country that designates Russian as a state language at a Federation Council meeting on state policy in the field of preservation, protection, and development of Russian language on November 14.^[33] Tolstoy claimed that post-Soviet countries are teaching English and "trying to supplant Russian with their national language."^[34] If Tolstoy's measure is officially proposed and passed, it would allow Russian authorities to limit work opportunities for migrants from Central Asia and the south Caucasus, potentially making it easier for Russian authorities to coerce migrants into serving in the Russian military due to a lack of other labor alternatives. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan designate Russian a state language while the titular languages are their state languages.^[35] Tajik law designates Russian as a language of "interethnic communication."^[36] The Russian language does not have a legally designated status in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, or Armenia.^[37] Russian authorities may also be attempting to pass laws restricting migrant work in Russia in an effort to placate Russian ultranationalists who are often critical of migrants working in Russia ahead of the Russian presidential elections in 2024.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are likely trying to regain the theater-level initiative in Ukraine by conducting several simultaneous offensive operations in eastern Ukraine, although it remains unclear if Russian forces will be able to fully regain the initiative as Ukrainian forces maintain pressure on critical areas of the front.
- Ukrainian President's Office Head Andriy Yermak stated on November 13 that Ukrainian forces have established a "foothold" on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin approved amendments to the Russian federal election law on November 14 that increase the Kremlin's control over the conduct of elections and reduce election transparency ahead of the 2024 presidential elections.
- Russian forces conducted another wave of missile, air, and drone strikes against Ukrainian rear areas on the night of November 13–14.
- Ukraine's western partners announced new efforts to continue providing Ukraine with military and financial aid.
- The Russian government is likely attempting to force Google to cease operations in Russia.
- Armenia continues to distance itself from Russia amid deteriorating Russian–Armenian relations.
- Deputy Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Pyotr Tolstoy suggested a measure that would restrict work opportunities for migrants from countries that have not designated Russian as a state language, likely as part of an ongoing effort to coerce migrants into Russian military service.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 14 and advanced in some areas.
- The Russian government discussed amendments that would more strictly penalize those who evade mobilization as well as volunteer servicemen who "improperly" perform their duties.
- Russian occupation officials are beginning to announce that occupied areas of Ukraine will not hold significant public Christmas and New Years' celebrations due to security concerns.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 13, 2023

Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 13, 2023, 6:55pm ET

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

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian state media released and later retracted reports about the "regrouping" of Russian forces on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast to positions further east of the Dnipro River, suggesting that the Russian command and/or Russian state media apparatus has failed to establish a coordinated information line for the Russian response to ongoing Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank. Kremlin press wire TASS and Russian state media

outlet *RIA Novosti* published reports claiming that the command of the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces (currently active in east bank Kherson Oblast) decided to transfer troops to unspecified "more advantageous positions" east of the Dnipro River and that the Russian military command would transfer elements from the "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces to other directions for offensive operations following the regrouping.^[1] *TASS* and *RIA Novosti* withdrew the reports within minutes and *TASS* later issued an apology wherein it claimed that it had "erroneously" released its report.^[2] Russian state-affiliated outlet *RBK* reported that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) called the reports of a regrouping on the east bank of Kherson Oblast "false" and a "provocation."^[3] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to a question about the situation in Kherson Oblast by stating that only the Russian military can and should comment on the situation.^[4]

The Russian MoD has not acknowledged persisting Ukrainian positions on the east bank or ongoing larger-than-usual Ukrainian ground operations in recent weeks. Russian milbloggers have increasingly reported on Ukrainian activity on the left bank, however, sharply contrasting with the continued lack of acknowledgement from Russian state media and Russian officials.^[5] The Russian command has previously struggled to establish a coordinated informational approach to developments in Ukraine, particularly when the Russian command failed to set informational conditions for defeats during the Kharkiv 2022 counteroffensive.^[6] Previous failures to set coordinated informational approaches have led to chaotic fractures and pronounced discontent in the Russian information space, and the Russian command risks repeating these incidents with the situation on the east bank, which has drawn notable concern from Russian ultranationalists.^[7] The reports' references to Russian "offensives" elsewhere on the front suggests that the uncoordinated informational approach may be more widespread than the east bank, since the Russian command has not explicitly recognized any current Russian operations in Ukraine as an offensive effort.^[8]

The now-retracted reports of a Russian regrouping on the east bank of Kherson Oblast may be indicative of actual discussions taking place in the high echelons of Russian military command that may have prematurely entered the information space before being officially released by the Russian military. Russian media outlet *RBK* reported that the original *TASS* and *RIA Novosti* reports stated that the commander of the joint Russian group of forces in Ukraine (unnamed in the article, but in reference to Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov) heard and agreed with arguments from the "Dnepr" group command (also unnamed in the article, but known to be Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky) and ordered the "Dnepr" group to redeploy and free up forces for offensive operations in other unspecified directions.^[9] The suggestion that two high-ranking military commanders would have a discussion on reallocating Russian forces away from a certain sector of the front to another is not outlandish or improbable. *RBK*'s report further suggests that the Russian military command has assessed that the situation in Kherson Oblast is not overtly threatening to Russian forces. Despite near-constant anxiety about the Kherson direction on the part of milbloggers, the Russian military command itself seems to be preoccupied with other sectors of the front, namely the Avdiivka direction, where Russian forces are pursuing renewed offensive operations.^[10] Gerasimov and Teplinsky may have weighed the costs of maintaining frontline units in Kherson Oblast with the benefits of redeploying these units to other areas of the front and decided that the current Russian grouping in rear areas of Kherson is sufficient to defend against Ukrainian operations on the east bank. Ukrainian military observer Konstantyn Mashovets remarked on November 12 that the Russian command in the Kherson direction has refused to commit to the front lines additional forces of the 70th Motorized Rifle Division (of the newly formed 18th Combined Arms Army) and 7th Air Assault (VDV) Division beyond the elements of single regiments and battalions, opting instead to maintain the remainder of these formations in near rear areas and secondary echelons of defense.^[11] Mashovets noted that the Russian presence in frontline areas of Kherson Oblast is "limited."^[12] The suggestion that Russian forces have a stronger rear-area presence in Kherson Oblast largely tracks with purported discussions between Gerasimov and Teplinsky to free up these frontline elements and commit them to other areas of the front.

Alternatively, the Russian military command may have instructed state media to release and then retract these reports as part of an information operation that aims to have Ukrainian forces underestimate available Russian manpower on the east bank of Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated on November 13 that Ukrainian officials have not observed any Russian forces withdrawing from positions on the east bank and that the *TASS* and *RIA Novosti* reports are a part of a Russian information operation to distract Ukrainian forces.^[13] Ukrainian forces are very unlikely to make any operational-level decisions based on limited media reports of a Russian regrouping, however, and if the reports are a part of an information operation, they will likely fail to deceive the Ukrainian command.

It is unlikely that an outside source posing as the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) provided information about the reported "regrouping" of Russian forces on the left bank of Kherson Oblast to Russian state media outlets. Several Russian sources suggested that an unspecified actor posing as the Russian MoD from a fake account could have provided the information to Russian state news outlet *RIA Novosti*.^[14] It is very unlikely that an outside actor posing as the Russian MoD could deceive Russian state media outlets as Russian state media is closely connected to Russian government bodies including the Russian MoD.

Regardless of the causes and circumstances of the *TASS* and *RIA Novosti* reports, the reaction to them suggests that events in Kherson Oblast continue to be highly neuralgic in the pro-war information space and emphasizes that the Russian media space still has not coalesced around a singular rhetorical line about what is happening on the east bank of the Dnipro. The published reports use relatively neutral language and notably do not announce a "retreat" or "withdrawal," instead discussing a "transfer" and "regrouping."^[15] The Russian media frenzy that followed, including the immediate retraction of the statements, a direct response from the Kremlin, and emphatic milblogger refutations, reflects the fact that any mention of the Russian grouping in Kherson Oblast generates near-immediate information space neuralgia.^[16] It also appears that the Russian information space has not yet determined how to discuss the operational situation on the east bank of the Dnipro, and that any inflection in the situation there can generate an informational shock. The Russian MoD falsely framed the Russian retreat from Kharkiv Oblast in early September of 2022 as a "regrouping," and that word and general concept apparently remains highly neuralgic for the Russian information space.

Ukrainian and Russian sources noted that weather conditions are impacting the battlespace but not halting operations. Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo noted on November 13 that rain and mud in Donbas impede the speed of ground maneuver advances.^[17] Ukrainian 14th Mechanized Brigade Spokesperson Nadiya Zamryha stated on November 12 that fog and rain complicate both Russian and Ukrainian aerial reconnaissance efforts and lead to reduced numbers of attacks.^[18] Zamryha added that the falling leaves complicate efforts to hide equipment and personnel. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian aviation has been less active in southern Ukraine due to weather conditions and that Russian forces are attempting to launch as many glide bombs as possible with each sortie.^[19] A Ukrainian reserve officer assessed that mud will make many roads near Avdiivka impassable, complicating logistics for both sides.^[20] Russian milbloggers claimed that recent heavy rains led to reduced shelling and that strong winds and rain interfere with Russian drone operations and complicate offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[21] Russian sources also circulated footage purporting to show mud and rain filled Ukrainian trenches.^[22] ISW continues to assess that fall weather conditions will decrease the tempo of Russian and Ukrainian operations but not halt them entirely, and that fighting will continue on both sides throughout the winter months as it did in the winter of 2022-2023 and in the years between 2014-2022.^[23]

Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukraine will likely conduct an interdiction campaign against Russian supply routes in the upcoming winter. Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk responded on November 13 to the forecasted large-scale Russian strike series against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the upcoming winter and stated that Ukraine is preparing air defense capabilities and needs additional air defense systems and long-range missiles, such as ATACMS, to hit Russian rear areas.[24] Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on November 12 that Ukrainian forces' current main task is to disrupt Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) and that these disruptions, coupled with the onset of inclement weather, will "freeze" Russian offensive operations.[25] Fityo also stated on November 13 that Ukrainian disruptions of Russian GLOCs will create issues for the supply of food, water, ammunition, and winter materials to Russian forces.[26] Ukrainian forces have been conducting an interdiction campaign against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea, primarily Black Sea Fleet assets, since June 2023 to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine, and Ukraine may intend to intensify and widen this interdiction campaign in the coming months.[27]

A Russian milblogger called on actors in the Russian information space to more widely amplify Russian strikes on Ukrainian military assets as opposed to Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas, indirectly highlighting a unique dynamic wherein the majority of reported Russian strikes seem to affect Ukrainian civilian objects, whereas the majority of reported Ukrainian strikes affect Russian military assets. A Russian milblogger claimed that all types of Russian units work together to identify, record, direct, and confirm Russian strikes on Ukrainian targets.[28] The milblogger complained that the Russian information space barely covers these events, which creates a "false impression of [Russian forces'] inaction." The milblogger claimed that the Russian information space instead devotes more coverage to Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory and that Russian milbloggers have to search for information about the alleged Russian strikes on their own. The milblogger urged other milbloggers and "ordinary pro-Russian residents of Ukraine" to offer "brighter" coverage of Russian strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and military targets in order to "create the spirit of victory in the media space." The milblogger offered an example of the alleged insufficient coverage, claiming that Russian forces struck five unspecified Ukrainian railway junctions on an unspecified date in response to the Ukrainian operation that derailed a Russian freight train in Ryazan Oblast on November 11. The milblogger did not report on these five alleged Russian strikes previously but did report on the Ukrainian operation in Ryazan Oblast.[29] The wider Russian information space has also not reported on these alleged five retaliatory strikes, and the Russian milblogger did not specify where they got this information.[30]

Russian forces have used many of their long-range weapons to target Ukrainian critical and civilian infrastructure and have recently increased glide bomb strikes against populated areas of the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast.[31] One critical Russian milblogger, whom Russian authorities later arrested, complained in July 2023 that the Russian strike campaign was more "retaliatory" than "operationally sound" and blamed the Russian General Staff for wasting Russian efforts on striking Ukrainian civilian infrastructure rather than military infrastructure.[32] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on November 12 that Ukraine will focus on responding to the large-scale Russian series of strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure that are likely to occur in the winter, and Ukrainian officials have signaled their intent to strike military and energy targets within Russia and Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.[33]

US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink stated that the 100th civilian ship departed the Black Sea corridor for civilian vessels on November 13, amid continued Russian efforts to deter usage of the corridor. Brink also stated that Ukraine has used the corridor to export 3.7 million tons of food and other goods, presumably since the first civilian vessel successfully departed from a Ukrainian port through the corridor on August 15.[34] Russian forces have continually conducted strikes on Ukrainian port infrastructure and mined water areas to disrupt and discourage civilian maritime traffic through the corridor.[35]

Former Wagner Group personnel are reportedly rejecting Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) recruitment attempts aimed at subsuming Wagner operations in Africa. A Russian insider source claimed on November 13 that the Russian MoD, led by Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and members of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU), has been attempting to recruit former Wagner personnel at the former Wagner base in Molkino, Krasnodar Krai, to Russian MoD operations in Africa since September 2023.[36] The insider source claimed that the Russian MoD is offering former Wagner personnel 110,000-ruble (about \$1,200) salaries, "promising" positions and ranks, and the formation of a separate unit capable of operating in Libya, Syria, Mali, and Burkina Faso.[37] The insider source also claimed that the reported leader of Redut private military company (PMC), Konstantin Mirzoyants, denied the MoD's offers on November 8 and claimed that the Russian MoD would not form a separate unit and that all personnel would go to Burkina Faso, which caused over 120 former Wagner personnel to reject contracts with the Russian MoD and leave Molkino.[38] ISW cannot confirm any of the insider source's claims.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian state media released and later retracted reports about the "regrouping" of Russian forces on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast to positions further east of the Dnipro River, suggesting that the Russian command and/or Russian state media apparatus has failed to establish a coordinated information line for the Russian response to ongoing Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank.
- There are three hypotheses of varying likelihood for the release of the now-retracted reports of a Russian regrouping on the east bank of Kherson Oblast: They may be indicative of actual discussions taking place in the high echelons of Russian military command that may have prematurely entered the information space before being officially released by the Russian military; the Russian military command alternatively may have instructed state media to release and then retract these reports as part of an information operation that aims to have Ukrainian forces underestimate available Russian manpower on the east bank of Kherson Oblast; or an outside source posing as the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) provided information about the reported "regrouping" of Russian forces on the left bank of Kherson Oblast to Russian state media outlets.
- Regardless of the causes and circumstances of the TASS and RIA Novosti reports, the reaction to them suggests that events in Kherson Oblast continue to be highly neuralgic in the pro-war information space and emphasizes that the Russian media space still has not coalesced around a singular rhetorical line about what is happening on the east bank of the Dnipro.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources noted that weather conditions are impacting the battlespace but not halting operations.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukraine will likely conduct an interdiction campaign against Russian supply routes in the upcoming winter.
- A Russian milblogger called on actors in the Russian information space to more widely amplify Russian strikes on Ukrainian military assets as opposed to Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas, indirectly highlighting a unique dynamic wherein the majority of reported Russian strikes seem to affect Ukrainian civilian objects, whereas the majority of reported Ukrainian strikes affect Russian military assets.
- US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink stated that the 100th civilian ship departed the Black Sea corridor for civilian vessels on November 13, amid continued Russian efforts to deter usage of the corridor.

- Former Wagner Group personnel are reportedly rejecting Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) recruitment attempts aimed at subsuming Wagner operations in Africa.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas of the frontline.
- Ukrainian officials continued to discuss Russian forced mobilization of Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials continued to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under vacation schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 12, 2023

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

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 12, 2023

Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 12, 2023, 3:55pm ET

Ukraine appears to be intensifying attacks against Russian military, logistics, and other high-profile assets in rear areas in occupied Ukraine and Russia. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 12 that Ukrainian partisans attacked a Russian military headquarters in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast on November 11, killing at least three Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Rosgvardia officers.^[1] The GUR's November 12 announcement follows a Ukrainian partisan attack against a former Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) People's Militia head on November 8; strikes against a Russian military base in occupied Skadovsk, Kherson Oblast and Black Sea Fleet assets in Crimea on November 9; and three rear-area strikes and partisan attacks in Russia on November 11.^[2] Ukrainian forces have conducted a strike campaign specifically targeting occupied Crimea since summer 2023.^[3]

The Russian government is attempting to downplay the extent of its efforts to strengthen control over the Russian information space. The Russian Ministry of Digital Development claimed on November 12 that it will only block specific virtual private network (VPN) services that an "expert commission" identifies as threats, likely aiming to prevent Russians from bypassing Russian censorship efforts and anonymizing themselves online.^[4] The Ministry of Digital Development had responded to an inquiry from the "Novyi Lyudi" faction expressing concern over the Russian government's efforts to restrict access to information on the internet and fears that the Russian government will simply identify all VPN services as threats and block them.^[5] The Russian government recently announced a ban on services that provide virtual and temporary mobile numbers starting on September 1, 2024, and Russians can use these mobile numbers in conjunction with VPN services to form anonymous online personas to evade Russian censorship efforts.^[6] The Russian government is very unlikely to allow any VPNs to operate within Russia that would allow Russians to bypass censorship efforts and remain anonymous from the Russian government.

Russia continues to posture itself as a prominent security guarantor for authoritarian countries in Africa. Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin stated during a television interview with the "Voyennaya Priemka" program on November 12 that Russia will sign military cooperation agreements with six additional African countries in the near future.^[7] Fomin stated that Russia currently has military agreements with 30 of the 54 African countries and added that Russia is "very active" on the African continent. Fomin did not specify which African countries Russia will sign agreements with, although Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov have met with delegations from Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Libya in recent months.^[8] French-language outlet *Jeune Afrique* reported on November 11 that a group of Russian servicemen arrived in Burkina Faso to protect President Ibrahim Traore from future coup attempts, which Russian sources credited as an outcome of Shoigu's November 7 meeting with Burkinabe Minister of Defense and Veteran Affairs Brigadier General Kassoum Coulibaly.^[9] The Kremlin appears to be using military agreements with Sahelian juntas to insert itself into the power vacuums created by the withdrawal of Western actors from the region, such as the UN's withdrawal from Mali.^[10]

Russian forces conducted a limited series of missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine on November 12. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched two Kh-59 cruise missiles and an Iskander ballistic missile at targets in southern Ukraine.^[11] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian air defenses intercepted a Kh-59 cruise missile over Mykolaiv Oblast and that the second Kh-59 missile and the Iskander missile struck unpopulated areas.^[12]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine appears to be intensifying attacks against Russian military, logistics, and other high-profile assets in rear areas in occupied Ukraine and Russia.
- The Russian government is attempting to downplay the extent of its efforts to strengthen control over the Russian information space.
- Russia continues to posture itself as a prominent security guarantor for authoritarian countries in Africa.
- Russian forces conducted a limited series of missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine on November 12.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces made a marginal gain on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on November 12 amid ongoing ground operations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 11, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

Russian forces launched a large-scale missile and drone strike series against Ukraine on the night of November 10 to 11, targeting Kyiv Oblast for the first time in 52 days. Ukrainian military sources reported on November 11 that Russian forces launched 31 Shahed 131/136 drones, two Kh-59 missiles, one Kh-31 missile, one P-800 Onyx anti-ship missile, and an S-300 missile against various targets in Ukraine, and specifically targeted Kyiv Oblast with either an Iskander-M or an S-400 missile.^[1] Ukrainian air defenses downed 19 Shaheds (primarily targeting front line areas), one Kh-59 missile, and used a Patriot air defense system to destroy the ballistic missile targeting Kyiv Oblast.^[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces were targeting an air defense system at the Boryspil Airport near Kyiv City.^[3] The Kyiv City Administration stated that it has been 52 days since Russian forces last launched a missile strike against Kyiv Oblast.^[4]

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) was reportedly involved in at least one of three strikes on Russian territory on November 10-11.

Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne Crimea* reported that sources in the GUR stated that the GUR orchestrated an explosion of railway tracks in Ryazan Oblast that caused 19 railroad cars of a freight train to derail on the morning of November 11.^[5] The GUR source stated that the explosion will complicate Russian military logistics for the near future. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that the train was carrying mineral fertilizer.^[6] Moscow Railways stated that the situation did not affect passenger and commuter trains and that Russian Railways created a headquarters to coordinate any disruptions caused by the derailment.^[7] Russian state news outlet *RIA Novosti* stated that the derailment was due to an "intervention of unauthorized persons."^[8] The Main Directorate of the Ministry of Emergency Situations for Tambov Oblast also stated that a fire covering 300 square meters broke out in a gunpowder factory near Kotovsk on the night of November 11.^[9] Eyewitnesses reportedly heard explosions before the fire ignited.^[10] *BBC Russia* stated that this is the second such incident at this gunpowder factory after a fire there killed five people in June 2023.^[11] GUR spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on November 11 that he cannot officially confirm or deny information about events in Russia, such as the explosion at the gunpowder plant near Tambov or the train derailment but that such strikes will continue.^[12] Geolocated footage published on November 10 also shows smoke coming from a building in Kolomna, Moscow Oblast.^[13] Russian sources claimed that locals heard explosions near the Machine-Building Design Bureau, a Rostec state corporation in Kolomna that specializes in missile systems.^[14] Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces downed one or more drones over the Machine-Building Design Bureau, and a Russian insider source claimed that a drone crashed into the building.^[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down two Ukrainian drones over Smolensk and Moscow oblasts on the night of November 10, and a prominent Russian milblogger similarly claimed that Russian air defenses intercepted several air targets over Smolensk Oblast and Kolomna, Moscow Oblast in the night.^[16] Ukrainian officials have not commented on the Kolomna strike as of the time of this publication. Ukrainian Minister of Energy Herman Halushchenko notably stated in an interview published on November 11 that Ukraine would answer Russian strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the winter with reciprocal strikes on Russian energy infrastructure, including oil and gas infrastructure.^[17]

Continued Russian milblogger discussion of widespread Russian infantry-led frontal assaults highlights the challenges Russia will face in using massed infantry assaults to offset the problems contributing to the current positional warfare identified by Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi. One milblogger emphasized on November 11 that the Russian practice of conducting tactical assaults intended to storm Ukrainian fortified positions in forest areas of Donbas will not translate into a wider operational breakthrough anywhere on the front.^[18] The milblogger noted that there is no way to train enough Russian personnel for the intensive frontal assaults required for significant advances in Ukraine.^[19] Another milblogger claimed that the Russian military is about to experience a "real renaissance of infantry combat" because there are fewer tanks, infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and armored personnel carriers (APCs) close to the frontline.^[20] A critical milblogger responded to the "infantry renaissance" comment and remarked that the comment is a negative reflection of Russian equipment losses and poor frontline coordination that has created a reliance on assault tactics.^[21] A Russian Spetsnaz-affiliated Telegram channel additionally complained that the reliance on infantry-led frontal assaults is heavily attriting all Spetsnaz elements that have deployed to Ukraine because the Russian command has reportedly been using Spetsnaz forces for frontal assaults since the beginning of the war.^[22] Spetsnaz forces are not meant to conduct such infantry-led assaults like standard Russian motorized rifle infantry, and some Russian sources are clearly frustrated with the ramifications of the misapplication of such Spetsnaz elements.

ISW has previously observed that Russian forces are increasingly relying on such infantry-led frontal assaults, likely to compensate for a lack of adequately trained personnel and due to widespread equipment losses.^[23] The Russian General Staff appears to be relying heavily on frontal assaults as the predominant tactic in Ukraine as an important part of the Russian solution to the problems of "military parity" laid out by Zaluzhnyi's essay on the issue of "positional warfare."^[24]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appears to be increasingly sidelining his eldest son, 18-year-old Akhmat Kadyrov, in favor of his younger son Adam Kadyrov. Ramzan Kadyrov quietly indicated on November 9 that he appointed Akhmat Deputy First Minister of the Chechen Republic for Physical Culture, Sports, and Youth Policy.^[25] This appointment follows Akhmat's 18th birthday on November 8, when Ramzan Kadyrov praised Akhmat for success in his "chosen business" as head of the Chechen "Movement of the First" youth movement.^[26] Ramzan Kadyrov's quiet acknowledgment of Akhmat's new position stands in contrast to the recent praise and appointments of his other children, including his appointment of his younger son, Adam, to the Chechen security service position that Ramzan Kadyrov held prior to succeeding his own father.^[27] The reason for Ramzan Kadyrov's apparent snubbing of his eldest son is unclear. Akhmat Kadyrov notably met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in early March 2023 while rumors about Ramzan Kadyrov's declining health circulated, fueling speculation that Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmat, and Putin may have been preparing for Akhmat to succeed his father.^[28]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian forces launched a large-scale missile and drone strike series against Ukraine on the night of November 10 to 11, targeting Kyiv Oblast for the first time in 52 days.**
- **Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) was reportedly involved in at least one of three strikes on Russian territory on November 10-11.**
- **Continued Russian milblogger discussion of widespread Russian infantry-led frontal assaults highlights the challenges Russia will face in using massed infantry assaults to offset the problems contributing to the current positional warfare identified by Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.**
- **Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appears to be increasingly sidelining his eldest son, 18-year-old Akhmat Kadyrov, in favor of his younger son Adam Kadyrov.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatov-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.**

- Russian authorities have reportedly launched another large-scale crypto-mobilization wave.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to fill out the workforce and artificially alter the demographics of occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 10, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 10, 2023, 8:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:00pm ET on November 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Ukrainian surface attack drones sank two Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) small landing ships in occupied Crimea on November 10. The GUR published satellite imagery and reported that the Ukrainian surface attack drone strike on Uzka Bay near Chornomorsk, occupied Crimea sunk one Project 1176 Akula-class small landing ship and one Project 11770 Serna-class small landing ship.^[1] The GUR reported that the Serna-class ship was carrying a crew and was loaded with armored vehicles, including BTR-82 armored personnel carriers, and that Russian forces previously used Serna-class ships to provide cover for Russian BSF ships during raids when Russian forces lacked naval air-defense equipment.^[2] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted the strike on Uzka Bay with four unmanned boats and that it was one of three series of Ukrainian strikes on occupied Crimea on November 10.^[3] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also attempted to conduct a drone strike on an oil depot in Feodosia and a Neptune cruise missile strike on BSF and Federal Security Service (FSB) bases in Chornomorsk.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down a Neptune missile over the Black Sea off the coast of Crimea and intercepted two drones over Crimea.^[5] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian forces have been conducting an interdiction campaign against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea, primarily BSF assets, since June 2023 to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine.^[6]

Russian milbloggers continue to overreact to the Russian failure to push Ukrainian forces from positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. A prominent Russian milblogger reiterated common complaints about inadequate Russian counterbattery fire, electronic warfare, air defense, and assault operations along the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.^[7] The milblogger especially complained about improper usage of the Russian 10th Spetsnaz Brigade (Main Military Intelligence Directorate [GRU]) to conduct frontal assaults like standard infantry against Ukrainian positions on the east bank even though these frontal assaults are ineffective in this area. The milblogger expressed concerns about possible future Ukrainian operations in the Kherson direction, but other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are currently unable to achieve a breakthrough in this direction.^[8]

Russian milbloggers are likely hyperfocusing on east bank Kherson Oblast due to the significant Russian information space neuralgia about Russian military issues in the area. Some Russian milbloggers appear to be less concerned about the possible near-term threat of Ukrainian operations on the east bank and are more upset about the poor Russian conduct of the war and mistreatment of military personnel.^[9] A Russian milblogger complained that Russian forces struggle with the "ossification" of poor habits and conduct within the Russian military. These habits include poor communications, lack of proper preparations before or support during assault missions, conducting rotations in columns, Russian commanders selling frontline aid, and uninterest in learning from military mistakes and acknowledging poor battlefield realities.^[10] The milblogger specifically emphasized the importance of Russian military professionalism and becoming the best army in the world. Other Russian milbloggers reiterated standard complaints about Russian military capabilities in Kherson Oblast but claimed that Russian forces still inflict high casualties on Ukrainian forces operating on the east bank.^[11] Another prominent milblogger claimed that the situation near Krynky, Kherson Oblast is a "tactical problem" for Russian forces but not a strategic threat.^[12]

Russian forces are launching significantly smaller and less frequent drone strikes against Ukraine in the past month than in previous months ahead of an anticipated large-scale winter strike campaign. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on November 10 that Russian forces attacked Ukraine with 500 Shahed-131/136 drones in September 2023 and several hundred drones in October 2023 but are currently launching drone strikes with fewer Shaheds almost every night.^[13] Russian milbloggers noted on November 9 that Russian forces conducted large-scale Shahed strikes against Ukraine almost every night from the end of summer until mid-October 2023.^[14] The milbloggers claimed that Russia's Shahed strikes have been notably smaller and less frequent in the past month due to Russian forces planning to synchronize a new wave of intense combined strikes with the beginning of future large-scale ground operations. Ukrainian military sources reported on November 10 that Russian forces launched six Shaheds, a Kh-31 missile, and a Kh-59 missile at targets in Ukraine on the night of November 9 to 10.^[15] Ukrainian air defenses downed five of the six Shaheds and the Kh-59 missile. Ihnat reported that the Kh-31 missile did not strike its target.^[16]

Russian President Vladimir Putin again visited the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on November 10, possibly in an effort to portray himself as an involved wartime leader ahead of the upcoming presidential elections in March 2024. Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and other unnamed commanders briefed Putin on the progress of the invasion and presented new models of Russian military equipment.^[17] Russian state outlets published footage of Shoigu and Gerasimov showing Putin the Desertcross 1000-3 all-terrain vehicle.^[18] Russian opposition outlet Meduza observed that an information stand displaying data about the Desertcross 1000-3 in the video claimed that the all-terrain vehicle is intended for patrol, reconnaissance, raid, search, and rescue operations, alongside transporting materiel in difficult road conditions.^[19] The information stand also claimed that Russian forces are already using 537 Desertcross 1000-3 vehicles in combat and that Russia plans to purchase an additional 1,590 Desertcross vehicles in December 2023 and in the first quarter of 2024. Meduza noted that US-registered brand Aodes (which is headquartered in China) manufactures the Desertcross vehicles and advertises them as vehicles for hunters, farmers, and forestry workers.

Russian milbloggers have been consistently complaining about the lack of military equipment and vehicles in the Kherson direction, and it is possible that Putin is trying to appeal to Russian personnel fighting in this direction by providing them with hunting and farming vehicles rather than dedicated military vehicles.^[20] A prominent Russian milblogger, for example, celebrated the news that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would provide Russian servicemen with light frontline vehicles.^[21] Putin's November 10 visit marks his fifth visit to the SMD headquarters since December 2022 after he last visited the headquarters on October 19.^[22]

Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly hold his annual live “Direct Line” forum and annual press conference in tandem on December 14, and the event will likely serve to promote his presidential campaign. Russian news outlet RBK stated on November 10 that sources familiar with the matter indicated that the “Direct Line” forum and annual press conference will likely occur in tandem on December 14.[23] Russian opposition media outlet Verstka stated that sources within the Federation Council indicated that the upper chamber will announce the beginning of the campaign period for the 2024 Russian presidential elections on December 13, as required by Russian law.[24] Verstka stated that presidential candidates have 25 days to complete the nomination procedures after the Federation Council’s announcement.[25] Although it is unclear when Putin will announce his presidential campaign, he will likely use the “Direct Line” forum and press conference to promote his candidacy and platform, which a Russian opposition source has indicated will widely avoid highlighting the war in Ukraine.[26] The Kremlin likely decided to hold the two events at once in order to more tightly control and regulate the questions asked. Putin has consistently run as an independent candidate despite his affiliation with the United Russia party, and Russian law dictates that independent candidates must gather at least 300,000 signatures in order to submit their candidacy.[27] Russian opposition media outlets stated on November 10 that the United Russia party is preparing to collect signatures to demonstrate its support for Putin’s candidacy and asked employees of the Kursk Oblast Multifunctional Service Center, a state and municipal service provider, to fill out a survey with their personal information and up to three suggestions about how to improve IT services in Russia.[28] The employees reportedly received a letter with the survey stating that they could write one suggestion three times but to fill out the form by hand.[29]

Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmitry Lubinets announced on November 10 that Bohdan Yermokhin, a 17-year-old Ukrainian whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from occupied Mariupol to Russia and attempted to conscript, will return to Ukraine.[30] Russian opposition outlet Meduza reported that Russian authorities forcibly deported Yermokhin from Mariupol after Russian forces took occupied the city in May 2022 and placed him with a foster family in Moscow Oblast.[31] Yermokhin’s lawyer published a video on his behalf on November 9 pleading for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s help after Yermokhin received a summons for military service on November 8, weeks ahead of his 18th birthday.[32] Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova claimed that Yermokhin testified in writing in August 2023 that he did not plan to return to Ukraine, but Yermokhin’s lawyer stated that Russian authorities forced the teenager to write the statement.[33] Meduza reported that Yermokhin previously attempted to escape Russia in March 2023, but that Russian border guards detained him.[34] Lubinets stated that Ukrainian authorities will reunite Yermokhin with his sister in Ukraine in the coming days.[35]

The United Kingdom-led Operation Interflex has achieved its goal of training 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers between June 2022 and December 2023. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Operation Interflex, which initially included the United Kingdom but has added Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Romania, and Sweden as partners since its launch in summer 2022, achieved its goal of 30,000 Ukrainian military personnel trained ahead of time on November 10.[36] The Ukrainian General Staff and UK government stated that the UK has trained over 52,000 Ukrainian soldiers since 2014.[37] The UK government stated that Operation Interflex is the largest military training program on UK territory since the Second World War.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Ukrainian surface attack drones sank two Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) small landing ships in occupied Crimea on November 10.
- Russian milbloggers continue to overreact to the Russian failure to push Ukrainian forces from positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are launching significantly smaller and less frequent drone strikes against Ukraine in the past month than in previous months ahead of an anticipated large-scale winter strike campaign.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin again visited the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on November 10, possibly in an effort to portray himself as an involved wartime leader ahead of the upcoming presidential elections in March 2024.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly hold his annual live “Direct Line” forum and annual press conference in tandem on December 14, and the event will likely serve to promote his presidential campaign.
- Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmitry Lubinets announced on November 10 that Bohdan Yermokhin, a 17-year-old Ukrainian whom Russian authorities forcibly deported from occupied Mariupol to Russia and attempted to conscript, will return to Ukraine.
- The United Kingdom-led Operation Interflex has achieved its goal of training 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers between June 2022 and December 2023.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations on November 10 along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Russian forces continue to struggle with low morale and poor discipline.
- Ukrainian Telegram channel *Mariupol Resistance* and Ukrainian Mariupol City Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on November 10 that Ukrainian partisans detonated a police car in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 9, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Amin Soltani, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 9, 2023, 6:55pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian military command will likely struggle to redeploy combat effective reinforcements to respond to ongoing Ukrainian operations in eastern Kherson Oblast while conducting defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and sustaining other offensive efforts in eastern Ukraine. Russian milbloggers claimed on November 9 that Ukrainian forces established control over new positions in Kryny (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) and conducted assaults towards Russian positions south and southwest of the settlement.[1] A Russian milblogger claimed that there are reports that Ukrainian forces advanced to forest areas south of Kryny.[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces also attacked near Poyma (12km east of Kherson City and 4km

from the Dnipro River), Pishchanivka (13km east of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River), and Pidstepne (17km east of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River) and are trying to establish positions between Pidstepne and Kozachi Laheri (23km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).[3] Ukrainian military observer Konstantyn Mashovets stated that Ukrainian forces have established continuous control of positions from the Antonivsky railway bridge north of Poyma to the Antonivsky roadway bridge north of Oleshky (7km south of Kherson and 4km from the Dnipro River) as of November 9 and have cut the Oleshky-Nova Kakhovka (53km northeast of Kherson City) road in at least two areas.[4]

Elements of the Russian 18th Combined Arms Army's (CAA) 22nd Army Corps (formerly of the Black Sea Fleet) and 70th Motorized Rifle Division as well as the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment (Caspian Flotilla) appear to be the main Russian forces responding to Ukrainian ground operations on the east bank of Kherson Oblast.[5] The Russian military reportedly formed the 18th CAA from other units previously operating in the Kherson direction, and it is unlikely that new units of the 18th CAA are comprised of fresh forces or staffed to doctrinal end strength.[6] Elements of the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment previously defended positions in western Zaporizhia Oblast for almost the entirety of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and have likely suffered significant casualties.[7] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on November 5 that unspecified elements of the 7th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division are operating in the Kherson direction, although the bulk of the 7th VDV Division appears to be committed to defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[8] Mashovets claimed on November 2 and 9 that elements of the 7th VDV Division's 171st Air Assault Battalion (97th VDV Regiment) are operating near Pishchanivka and Poyma, but it is unclear if these reported elements have been present in the Kherson direction since the start of the counteroffensive or recently redeployed to the area.[9] Elements of the 49th CAA (Southern Military District) have reportedly been operating in the Kherson direction since the Ukrainian liberation of Kherson City in November 2022, but some Russian and Ukrainian sources claim that the Russian command has since redeployed elements of at least one its brigades to the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area.[10] Mashovets claimed that elements of the 49th CAA still comprise the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces in the Kherson direction, and elements of the 49th CAA's 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade appeared to be operating on the left bank as of late August 2023.[11]

The Russian command will likely face significant challenges in redeploying units from other sectors of the front should relatively combat ineffective Russian formations and currently uncommitted Russian forces in the Kherson direction prove insufficient to respond to the Ukrainian operations on the east bank of the Dnipro. Redeployments of considerable elements of the 7th VDV Division or other VDV formations and units in western Zaporizhia Oblast would likely disrupt Russian defensive operations there. Russian forces reportedly continue to accumulate forces for sustaining the Russian offensive effort near Avdiivka and localized offensive operations in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts.[12] Any potential Russian redeployment to the Kherson direction will likely degrade the Russian ability to sustain these other operations and efforts.

Russian forces have likely launched opportunistic localized offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction and intensified ground attacks near Bakhmut in recent days. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted nearly 30 attacks northwest and southwest of Bakhmut between November 8 and November 9, which is notably a higher number of attacks than the Ukrainian General Staff typically reports for the Bakhmut area.[13] Russian milbloggers widely claimed that Russian forces entered Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and pushed Ukrainian troops back from the railway that runs northeast and east of the settlement.[14] Geolocated footage published on November 9 indicates that Russian forces have advanced towards Klishchiivka and hold positions just east of the settlement and west of the railway line.[15] Some Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also drove Ukrainian forces out of positions in and around Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), but ISW has not observed visual evidence to substantiate these claims.[16] Several Russian milbloggers additionally claimed that Russian forces advanced northwest of Bakhmut in the Berkhivka-Bohdanivka direction (directly northwest of Bakhmut to 5km northwest of Bakhmut) south of the Berkhivka Reservoir towards the Vilyanova plant nursery.[17] Geolocated footage from around November 7 shows that Russian forces have advanced south of the Berkhivka Reservoir, about 3km northwest of Bakhmut.[18]

These localized offensive operations northwest and southwest of Bakhmut are likely opportunistic tactical ground attacks intended to take advantage of the reported reallocation of Ukrainian resources away from Bakhmut. Several milbloggers noted that the pace of Ukrainian artillery fire and ground activity in the Bakhmut direction has decreased in recent days, with some Russian sources remarking that this is partially because Ukrainian forces have redeployed to other areas of the front.[19] Russian forces are likely taking advantage of a decrease in Ukrainian activity on this sector of the front to launch localized and successful attacks. Russian forces are unlikely to be able to translate offensive efforts near Bakhmut into wider and more meaningful offensive operations, as the Russian force grouping around Bakhmut is weak and disorganized because Russian forces have been committing more manpower and materiel to deliberate and larger-scale offensive operations near Avdiivka and on the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.

Russian forces struck a civilian ship near Odesa City on November 8. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that a Russian Kh-31P missile struck a civilian ship flying the flag of Liberia in a port near Odesa City, Odesa Oblast, injuring several people and killing the ship's pilot.[20] Russian milbloggers claimed on November 8 and 9 in an attempt to justify the strike that the ship was carrying military cargo.[21] Russia has continually pursued efforts to disrupt Ukrainian exports and curtail maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports and will likely continue escalatory posturing in the Black Sea meant to undermine confidence in the Ukrainian corridor.[22]

Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual live "Direct Line" forum and annual press conference will occur in tandem on an unspecified date by the end of the year, potentially to set conditions to cancel the events as the Kremlin sees fit.[23] The Kremlin canceled Putin's annual press conference in December 2022, which ISW assessed was likely in order to preempt the informational risks of Putin addressing difficult

questions about the war and international situation live.[24] Similarly, in early June of 2023, Putin postponed the "Direct Line" until November or December 2023.[25] The vagueness with which Peskov announced the two live events suggests that the Kremlin may desire to have the flexibility to cancel them if they deem the informational risks of holding them to be too great. The Kremlin may hope for a wider operational victory in Ukraine to frame both the "Direct Line" and the press conference in a positive light and is likely trying to leave itself room to mitigate if Russian forces cannot secure meaningful battlefield success in Ukraine in the coming month.

Russia may seek to provide gas to Iran through Kazakhstan. Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized during a meeting with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the 19th Russian-Kazakh Regional Cooperation Forum in Ankara that Russia currently transports gas to Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan and seeks to further develop this transport.[26] Russia began exporting natural gas to Uzbekistan for the first time in October 2023, and Uzbekistan notably still exports its own domestically produced natural gas, including to Russia as recently as 2021, despite suffering domestic shortages in recent years.[27] Uzbekistan's continued export of gas while importing Russian gas for the first time suggests that Uzbekistan may not be the final destination for all its Russian gas imports. Uzbekistan is capable of providing Iran with direct access to other Central Asian as well as Russian and Chinese markets, as ISW-CTP previously reported.[28] Senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi, discussed reviving Iranian-Uzbek economic relations and signed agreements to increase bilateral trade with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Tehran on June 18, 2023.[29] Iran has also increased its economic diplomacy efforts, including on gas supplies, with other countries in Central Asia. Raisi discussed increasing the volume of gas swaps with Turkmenistan during a meeting with Turkmenistan People's Council Chairman Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov in Tehran on May 30.[30] Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji separately announced on May 30 that Iran and Turkmenistan will soon sign an agreement for Iran to import 10 million cubic meters of natural gas from Turkmenistan each day, which will allow Iran to use some of the gas it imports from Turkmenistan to supply electricity and heat to its northern provinces.[31] Iran has consistently struggled with natural gas shortages in winter and summer 2023, and Russia may seek to provide gas to Iran through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to secure further military cooperation with Iran.[32]

Unspecified actors appear to be targeting Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov as he continues to heap honors on his children. A Russian insider source claimed that Moscow authorities are investigating and charging members of the inner circle of an unspecified nephew of Kadyrov for various crimes including kidnapping, extortion, and organizing a criminal community in both Moscow and Chechnya.[33] The insider source claimed that two high-ranking Chechen security officials lead this inner circle, and that its other members include Chechen police officers and bureaucratic officials.[34] The source claimed that Russian authorities allowed this circle to commit these crimes for "quite a long time" but that "apparently, something is starting to change."[35] It is possible that Russian authorities are targeting Chechen organized crime activities. This insider source's specific reference to Kadyrov, however, suggests either that some Russian authorities may seek to target Kadyrov's affiliates through criminal charges or that some actors may seek to target Kadyrov informationally by using this insider source to discredit him and his family. Kadyrov has notably awarded his children, many of whom are underage, with prominent Chechen governmental positions and awards in recent weeks following the Kremlin's refusal to become involved when his 15-year-old son Adam was filmed beating a detained man in September 2023, sparking domestic outrage.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military command will likely struggle to redeploy combat effective reinforcements to respond to ongoing Ukrainian operations in eastern Kherson Oblast while conducting defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and sustaining other offensive efforts in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian forces have likely launched opportunistic localized offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction and intensified ground attacks near Bakhmut in recent days.
- Russian forces struck a civilian ship near Odesa City on November 8.
- Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual live "Direct Line" forum and annual press conference will occur in tandem on an unspecified date by the end of the year, potentially to set conditions to cancel the events as the Kremlin sees fit.
- Russia may seek to provide gas to Iran through Kazakhstan.
- Unspecified actors appear to be targeting Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov as he continues to heap honors on his children.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka direction, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Kupyansk.
- Russian authorities appear to be increasingly reliant on private security companies to protect domestic energy infrastructure from Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian far rear areas.
- Occupation authorities reportedly continued efforts to militarize Ukrainian youth.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 7, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 8, 2023, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Bakhmut directions.^[1] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults near Robotyne, Novoprokopivka (just south of Robotyne), and Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).^[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated during a video address to the *Reuters NEXT* conference in New York on November 8 that Ukrainian forces have a battlefield plan for 2024 that he cannot disclose.^[3] Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces have several paths for future advances in southern Ukraine, eastern Ukraine, and Kherson Oblast. There are also plans to advance to specific occupied cities.^[4] Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations without interruption in several sectors of the front, and Ukrainian officials continue to indicate that these operations will continue into this winter.^[5]

Select Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian commanders may be making operational and tactical decisions using maps of the battlefield in Ukraine that differ from tactical reality. A Russian milblogger claimed that the Russian General Staff uses battlefield maps that differ from tactical reality in response to another milblogger who questioned why Russian forces were not striking alleged large Ukrainian force concentrations close to the frontline.^[6] The Russian milblogger claimed that Russian personnel on the front have access to the "real" map and that Russian commanders order Russian forces to conduct routine assaults to make gains that align the "real" map with the Russian General Staff's map.^[7] A separate milblogger claimed that there had been previous individual cases of Russian battalion and regiment-level assault operations aimed at achieving compliance with inaccurate maps of the frontline but that this is the first time that he has heard of a wider operational imperative to make advances that comply with a reported General Staff map.^[8] A milblogger claimed that Russian commanders are incentivized to make the tactical gains depicted in the General Staff's maps because the General Staff increasingly requires positive reports from frontline commanders.^[9] Russian milbloggers have routinely criticized Russian commanders throughout the chain of command for delivering false and overly positive reports to their superiors and have identified the Russian General Staff as fostering this widespread institutional dishonesty.^[10]

Russian President Vladimir Putin promoted 44 Russian military and internal affairs officers, including Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander Andrei Kuzmenko, to general officer rank on November 8.^[11] Putin promoted Kuzmenko to the rank of colonel general following Kuzmenko's meeting with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu during Shoigu's visit to the Eastern Grouping of Forces command post in the south Donetsk direction (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) on October 25.^[12] Shoigu's visit confirmed Kuzmenko's position as the Eastern Grouping of Forces commander and likely the Eastern Military District (EMD) commander. This promotion is likely routine and intended to give Kuzmenko a rank appropriate to his position. Putin also promoted three Russian officers to the rank of lieutenant general, 11 officers to the rank of major general, and 29 internal affairs officers to the rank of major general and lieutenant general.^[13]

Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly avoid centering his 2024 presidential campaign on the war in Ukraine and will rather focus on Russia's alleged stability and criticisms of the West.^[14] Russian opposition media outlet *Meduza* reported on November 8 that two sources close to the Russian Presidential Administration stated that the presidential campaign aims to paint Putin as a leader who made Russia an "island of calm."^[15] *Meduza* sources claimed that Putin's ratings increase after speeches in which he criticizes the West and that Russian state propaganda will encourage this by increasingly publishing stories about "difficulties" in Western countries and the United States' alleged inability to support Ukraine and Israel simultaneously. A *Meduza* source also reportedly stated that the campaign would only discuss the war in Ukraine if there were a "very serious [Russian] success" on the front instead of continued "positional warfare." Putin is reportedly preparing to announce his campaign this month, and Russian sources have consistently indicated that the campaign will not prominently promote the war in Ukraine.^[16] Putin previously downplayed the Russian offensive effort near Avdiivka, referring to it as "active defense," which would be consistent with these reports.^[17] The Kremlin-backed United Russia Party also reportedly realized that using the war in Ukraine in their election campaigns in the run up to the September 2023 State Duma elections was ineffective and counterproductive.^[18] Concerns within the Kremlin and United Russia over domestic support for the war are not indications that United Russia or Putin's dominance of Russian politics faces a legitimate threat in the upcoming presidential election, however. This campaign framing, if it occurs, would double down on Putin's refusal to mobilize Russian society to a wartime footing and may increase the informational cost necessary to support a long-term war effort in Ukraine.

Ukrainian partisans and military intelligence assassinated a prominent Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) official accused of conducting war crimes in occupied Ukraine. Russian and occupation officials reported on November 8 that a car bomb killed LNR People's Council member and the LNR Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Head Colonel Mikhail Filiponenko in occupied Luhansk City.^[19] Filiponenko previously headed the LNR People's Militia and the LNR's Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC).^[20] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that GUR agents and Ukrainian partisans conducted the attack.^[21] GUR stated that Filiponenko organized torture camps for Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war (POWs) and that Filiponenko personally participated in the torture.^[22] These accusations would be an apparent violation of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.^[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 8.
- Select Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian commanders may be making operational and tactical decisions using maps of the battlefield in Ukraine that differ from tactical reality.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin promoted 44 Russian military and internal affairs officers, including Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander Andrei Kuzmenko, to general officer rank on November 8.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly avoid centering his 2024 presidential campaign on the war in Ukraine and will rather focus on Russia's alleged stability and criticisms of the West.
- Ukrainian partisans and military intelligence assassinated a prominent Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) official accused of conducting war crimes in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 8 and advanced in some areas.
- Russia is reportedly attempting to reacquire components for military equipment from states to which it previously sold the equipment, including Egypt, Pakistan, Brazil, and Belarus.
- Russian occupation administrations continue to create new administrative bodies meant to further integrate occupied territories into Russian governance systems.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 7, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 7, 2023, 5:40pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces transferred a limited number of armored vehicles to the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and are continuing larger-than-usual ground operations on the east bank with a light infantry grouping of roughly battalion size. Russian milbloggers amplified a picture on November 6 purporting to show a Ukrainian tracked amphibious transport (PTS) vehicle carrying an infantry fighting vehicle onto the east bank near Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).[1] Other milbloggers claimed on November 7 that a Ukrainian amphibious infantry fighting vehicle crossed the Dnipro River on its own near Krynyk and amplified separate footage on November 7 purporting to show a destroyed Western amphibious armored personnel carrier in an unspecified location on the east bank.[2] Select Russian milbloggers claimed that either one or two Ukrainian PTS vehicles crossed the Dnipro near Krynyk, while other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces transferred several unspecified armored vehicles to the area.[3] Russian milbloggers claimed that more than 300 Ukrainian personnel (about a battalion's worth) are operating on the east bank in the Krynyk area and continue to claim that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in central Krynyk and nearby areas.[4] One milblogger claimed that several hundred Ukrainian personnel are operating throughout east bank Kherson Oblast.[5] Russian milbloggers claimed that combat engagements continued near Krynyk, as well as near Poyma (12km east of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River), Pishchanivka (13km east of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River), and Pidstepne (17km east of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River), but did not claim that Ukrainian attempts to advance on November 6 and 7 were particularly larger than in previous days.[6]

Ukrainian forces likely conducted initial company-sized assaults across the Dnipro River onto the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 17 and 18.[7] The reported battalion-size Ukrainian force grouping on the east bank suggests that heavy Russian interdiction efforts along the Dnipro River have not prevented Ukrainian forces from transferring additional personnel and materiel to positions on the east bank. **ISW will not speculate on the prospects of ongoing Ukrainian activity on the east bank of Kherson Oblast.**

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[8] A Russian milblogger claimed on November 6 that Ukrainian forces crossed the railway near Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[9] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are entrenched in forest areas near Verbove (9km east of Robotyne) and that a lack of Russian control of the airspace in the area is complicating Russian artillery fire on these positions.[10]

A prominent pro-war Russian milblogger who is typically optimistic about Russian capabilities expressed a relatively pessimistic assessment of the war and emphasized the need for the Kremlin to fully mobilize the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to a wartime footing to win. The milblogger claimed on November 7 that Ukraine is committed to an "exhausting war" against Russia and that Russia needs "enormous combat potential" and an "accurate calculation" of its capabilities to beat Ukraine.[11] Another Russian milblogger expressed surprise that a milblogger who was previously so positive in his assessments of the Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine would openly admit to the need for a wider mobilization of the Russian economy in the face of a long war.[12] The Kremlin has largely appeared unwilling to conduct wider economic mobilization, and the milblogger's call to change this line is noteworthy.[13] Yet another Russian milblogger claimed that Russia is "paying terribly" for the Kremlin's unwillingness to fully commit to the war.[14] The milbloggers' suggestion to further mobilize the Russian economy appears to be part of recent discussions in the Russian information space about operational changes that could help Russian forces overcome challenges in Ukraine, likely in response to Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's recent essay on the subject of "positional warfare".[15] Zaluzhnyi's essay appears to have prompted even the most positive Russian milbloggers to make more straight and honest assessments about the Russian war effort.

Russian authorities detained Republic of Dagestan's deputy Minister of Internal Affairs on the pretext of corruption charges, likely in an effort to demonstrate that the federal government is taking action in Dagestan without drawing further attention to the interethnic and interreligious tensions and the propensity for destabilization in the region. Russian state media outlet TASS stated on November 7 that Russian security forces detained Dagestani Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Rufat Ismailov and are currently conducting searches of his home and office.[16] Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti further reported that a source within the Russian security forces stated that Ismailov is preliminarily suspected of bribery.[17] A Russian insider source claimed that Ismailov is believed to have received a 100-million-ruble (about \$1,085,770) bribe from an insurance company.[18] The insider source and a Russian milblogger claimed that Russian authorities transferred Ismailov to Moscow, and the milblogger claimed that this indicates that there are risks of high-level officials at the federal subject level "escaping responsibility."[19] Russian opposition media outlet SOTA reported that Russian authorities, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), are also investigating the deputy head of the investigative department of the Dagestani Ministry of Internal Affairs, Dalgat Abdulgapurov.[20] Russian authorities previously removed multiple ineffective air defense officials in charge of the defense of Moscow on the pretext of corruption charges after increasing drone strikes on rear Russian cities, showing that there is a recent pattern of Russian authorities using corruption charges to circumvent publicly disciplining Russian officials for not performing their duties well and thereby admitting to their ineptitude.[21] Although ISW has no reason to doubt the charges against Ismailov his detention suggests that Russian authorities are attempting to create a semblance of federal government control over the situation in Dagestan while avoiding highlighting the recent antisemitic riots. ISW similarly assessed that the Russian leadership likely avoided meting out more severe punishments for more serious charges for participants of the antisemitic riots out of concerns that they will inflame discontent towards the Kremlin.[22]

The Ukrainian strike on a Russian shipyard in Kerch, occupied Crimea on November 4 significantly damaged a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) naval vessel. Russian and Ukrainian sources posted photos on November 7 showing significant damage to the Askold Project 22800 Karakurt-class Kalibr missile carrier corvette that will likely render it inoperable for the foreseeable future.[23] ISW assesses that Ukrainian forces have conducted an interdiction campaign against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea, primarily BSF assets, since June 2023 to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine.[24]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces transferred a limited number of armored vehicles to the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and are continuing larger-than-usual ground operations on the east bank with a light infantry grouping of roughly battalion size.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 7.
- A prominent pro-war Russian milblogger who is typically optimistic about Russian capabilities expressed a relatively pessimistic assessment of the war and emphasized the need for the Kremlin to fully mobilize the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to a wartime footing to win.
- Russian authorities detained Republic of Dagestan's deputy Minister of Internal Affairs on the pretext of corruption charges, likely in an effort to demonstrate that the federal government is taking action in Dagestan without drawing further attention to the interethnic and interreligious tensions and the propensity for destabilization in the region.
- The Ukrainian strike on a Russian shipyard in Kerch, occupied Crimea on November 4 significantly damaged a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) naval vessel.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in some areas.
- A Russian battalion comprised of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) will likely deploy to Ukraine in the near future in an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.
- Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova advertised several benefit schemes targeting children in occupied Ukraine as part of the "A Country for Children" strategic program.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 6, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 6, 2023, 6:50pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on November 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin argued that Russian forces will be "even less capable of offensive operations than they are now" by spring 2024 given the current nature of Russian offensive operations along the frontline.[1] Girkin's wife, Miroslava Reginskaya, published a hand-written letter from Girkin dated October 26, in which he summarized the frontline situation in Ukraine for the month of October. Girkin claimed that the situation for

Russian forces is “gradually deteriorating” and that Russian forces are showcasing “growing weakness (compared to [Ukraine’s] capabilities,” despite Russia’s “generally successful repulsion” of the Ukrainian offensive over the summer and fall of 2023. Girkin argued that Russian forces were not only unable to start broad offensive operations at the beginning of the fall season but were also unable to complete even limited offensive operations to achieve operationally significant goals – namely around Kupyansk, Lyman, and Avdiivka. Girkin claimed that Russian forces failed to advance in the Kupyansk direction and are now impaled in battles on “the distant approaches to the city,” while also failing to change the situation in the Lyman direction. Girkin added that tactical advances around Avdiivka led to significant losses in Russian manpower and equipment and did not lead to the further development of the Russian offensive. Girkin observed that the Avdiivka offensive demonstrated Russian forces’ inability “to achieve superiority on a very narrow sector of the front” despite Russia’s careful preparations, good coordination of strike forces and means for the initial stage of the offensive, and the abundance of ammunition “unheard of since the assault on Bakhmut.”

Girkin suggested that Russian efforts to repel Ukrainian localized attacks across the frontline and simultaneous fall-winter offensive operations will likely degrade Russian offensive and defensive potential by spring 2024. Girkin noted that Russian forces would need to spend the rest of the fall-winter campaign on the defensive to try to eliminate emerging operational crises – such as the Ukrainian presence in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast. Girkin argued that Russian forces will continue to be “incapable of any broad offensive actions” even if Ukrainian forces are unable to “knock out” Russian frontline units, fail to achieve a breakthrough over the fall-winter season, and are exhausted. Girkin, however, added that such a “positional scenario” is not guaranteed and that he fears that Ukrainian forces may be successful in breaking Russian forces that have already been exhausted by months of combat. Girkin’s suggestion that ongoing Russian offensive operations are harming the prospects for future Russian operations is notable because Russian forces still must repel Ukrainian offensive operations while attempting to initiate their own offensives. The timing of current Russian offensives around Avdiivka was also somewhat odd and suboptimal because the rainy and muddy weather has predictably hindered Russian operations.[2] ISW continues to assess that fall and winter weather conditions are unlikely to preclude Russian or Ukrainian offensives.[3]

Girkin implied that additional Western military aid to Ukraine and the lack of mobilization in Russia could allow Ukraine to end positional warfare and conduct successful offensive operations in 2024. Girkin stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to use Western-provided materiel to target the Russian rear and even destroy the Berdyansk airfield in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast against the backdrop of Russian offensives in Avdiivka. Girkin implied that Ukrainian forces would continue to devastate the Russian rear over the winter as Russian forces continued to push for limited offensive operations. Girkin stated that once Ukraine receives Western-provided F-16 fighter jets, Ukrainian forces could have localized advantages for a short period of time on any section of the frontline. Girkin added that Ukraine could be “seriously strengthened in military-technical terms” with Western military equipment. Girkin also claimed that Ukraine currently has superiority in manpower over Russian forces due to a lack of mobilization in Russia and that the Kremlin is unlikely to call up mobilization before spring 2024 due to upcoming presidential elections. Girkin noted that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is unlikely to recruit “hundreds of thousands” of new contract servicemen because Russia has exhausted the recruitment potential for new contract servicemen and volunteers. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi’s long essay, “Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It,” similarly argues that Western-provided military equipment and air superiority among other things will allow Ukraine to overcome positional warfare.[4]

Russian milbloggers appear to be grappling with how Russian forces can overcome wider operational challenges in Ukraine, likely in response to Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi’s recent essay on the subject of “positional warfare.” Select milbloggers argued that specific changes in battlefield tactics will allow Russian forces to achieve their desired operational objectives in the current difficult operational environment.[5] Another milblogger argued that Russia should not celebrate Zaluzhnyi’s discussion of Ukrainian difficulties with positional warfare and that Russian forces need to prepare for a long, challenging war.[6] The milblogger argued that Russia is currently no closer to victory in Ukraine and expressed concerns that Russian forces will likely face a renewed Ukrainian counteroffensive in the winter.[7] The milblogger’s discussion of a large Ukrainian counteroffensive effort in the winter suggests that he expects that Russian forces will not completely seize the initiative in the coming months and therefore will not be able to launch a larger offensive effort that would preclude Ukrainian forces from committing resources to counteroffensive operations. The wider Russian information space has offered a relatively muted response to Zaluzhnyi’s essay, and Russian ultranationalists appear to be applying Zaluzhnyi’s discussions about the challenges of the operational environment in Ukraine to Russia’s offensive campaign and not coming to very optimistic conclusions.[8]

Select Russian milbloggers specifically argued that the use of small infantry assault groups will allow both Russian and Ukrainian forces to better achieve operational objectives along the front. Russian milbloggers argued on November 3 and 6 that concentrated attacks with large forces attempting to break through a stable defense to full depth is increasingly ineffective and suggested that small infantry groups with comprehensive support may be more effective at achieving significant operational effects in the current operational environment.[9] One of the milbloggers argued that the initial phases of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive and the ongoing Russian offensive effort near Avdiivka are similar in that both operations made some initial advances at the cost of irretrievable manpower and equipment losses.[10] The milblogger argued that throughout the war in Ukraine, heavy losses during such large, mechanized assaults have prompted Russian and Ukrainian forces to increasingly rely on smaller ad-hoc infantry groups in subsequent operations.[11] The Ukrainian command changed tactics to rely more on infantry assaults following early setbacks in the counteroffensive in June 2023, and Ukrainian forces proceeded to make significant advances in the following months.[12] It remains to be seen if Russian forces will show the same adaptability near Avdiivka, especially since repeated offensive failures suggest that the Russian General Staff has failed to internalize and disseminate lessons learned from previous costly large, mechanized assaults.[13] The milblogger argued that it would be more advantageous to prepare specialized small infantry assault groups with sufficient technological capabilities, specifically in reconnaissance and communication, ahead of offensive operations instead of switching to small infantry assault tactics only after larger, mechanized assaults prove too costly to continue.[14]

Russian sources suggested that some Ukrainian forces may already be fielding the small infantry assault groups that these sources are advocating for. A Russian milblogger noted that Ukrainian forces already appear to be employing this adaptation in ongoing ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, where the milblogger claimed that small Ukrainian assault groups operating at the operational-tactical level have been able to divert considerable Russian combat resources and attention from elsewhere along the front.[15] The milblogger argued that lower-level Russian commanders have previously made some progress in preparing such small infantry groups south of Bakhmut but that the Russian command’s insistence on manpower-intensive frontal assaults quickly rendered these groups combat ineffective.[16] The milblogger’s observations suggest that Ukrainian forces may be once again successfully adapting to aspects of the battlefield in Ukraine while Russian forces struggle to do so. Select elements of the Russian military have shown the propensity for successful adaptation, particularly in defensive operations during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast, but the Russian command will likely continue to struggle with instituting any successful change in tactics and capabilities writ-large throughout the theater.[17]

The war in Ukraine is likely exacerbating an emerging identity crisis within Russian society resulting from tensions between Russian identity and Russian nationalism. Russian "Vostok" Battalion Commander and Russian Orthodox ideologue Alexander Khodakovsky wrote two long Telegram posts on November 6 about what it means to be "Russian," acknowledging a schism in Russian national identity that has largely resulted from the ideological arguments advanced to justify and mobilize support for Russia's war in Ukraine.[18] Khodakovsky shared an anecdote of an unidentified Chechen general who, he claimed, conducted a "genetic study" to identify "the ethnic composition" of his Russian friends and found out that "Russian genes" were not dominant.[19] Khodakovsky used this anecdote to offer commentary on what it means to be "Russian," and concluded that it is not "ethnogenetic," but rather a matter of morals and ideologies, observing that *Russian nationalism* is "hysteria" resulting from a lack of consolidated *Russian identity*.[20] Khodakovsky thereby appears to offer the suggestion that when one fixates on a genetic definition of what it means to be Russian, the destructive and toxic ideologies of nationalism appear and erase broader and more socio-cultural and linguistic definitions of identity. Khodakovsky warned that a population that lacks a coherent identity can easily destroy itself from within.[21]

Khodakovsky's musings offer insight into some socio-cultural implications of Russia's pursuit of ideological goals in its war in Ukraine. In several ways, the war has narrowed the conception of what it means to be Russian among Russian ideologues, particularly as concepts of identity are increasingly defined by hyper-nationalist and pro-war information space voices who amplify the Kremlin's ideological line on the war and redirect it at domestic audiences.[22] Whereas Russian identity was largely defined before the war linguistically and culturally as enshrined in the Russian concepts of "compatriots abroad" and "Russkyi Mir," the war has focused Russian identity more narrowly on Russian ethnonationalism that echoes the Kremlin's ideological justifications for the war.[23] Russia's deliberate campaign to "Russify" Ukraine through the invasion has generated clear social impacts within Russia itself, particularly aimed at ethnic minority and migrant communities, which have paradoxically been forced by the Russian government to bear the brunt of force generation efforts for the war.[24] Russian nationalist commentators have increasingly fixated on demographic transitions facing Russia particularly relating to the balance between "Russians" and "minorities" within the Russian population, further reinforcing concepts of what it means for Russia to be a fundamentally "Russian" state.[25] Khodakovsky responded to this apparent schism in Russian society by underlining some of the inherent dangers of defining what it means to be Russian as a matter of genetics and notably drew criticism from some more virulently nationalist commentators for being "Russophobic" in his conclusions.[26] Both Khodakovsky's observations and the immediate response to his conclusions underline a fundamental dilemma facing Russia as it continues its war in Ukraine—the dilemma of how to reconcile the hyper-nationalist ideologies on which the Kremlin increasingly relies to justify the war and demand greater sacrifices from its people with Moscow's desire to continue to increase the burden of mobilization on disenfranchised minority communities, while also maintaining a sense of Russian identity that society can coalesce behind as the war continues.

Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes against rear areas in southern Ukraine on the evening of November 5 and on the night of November 5 to 6 as well as the largest series of glide bomb strikes to date against targets in Kherson Oblast on November 5. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces launched a Kh-59 cruise missile at Dnipro City and a Kh-31P anti-radar missile at Odesa City on November 5.[27] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian air defenses shot down the Kh-59 missile and that the Kh-31P missile struck an infrastructure facility in Odesa City. [28] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces also conducted missile and drone strikes on the night of November 5 to 6 with a Kh-31 anti-radar missile and a Kh-59 cruise missile launched from occupied Kherson Oblast, a P-800 Onyx anti-ship missile and an Iskander-M ballistic missile launched from occupied Crimea, and 22 Shahed-131/136 drones launched from Cape Chauda, occupied Crimea.[29] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed the Kh-59 missile and 15 drones.[30] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian strikes targeted port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast and civilian infrastructure in Kherson City and damaged residential buildings, port infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, and other civil infrastructure.[31] Ukrainian Odesa Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Kiper reported that a Russian strike partially damaged the Odesa National Art Museum.[32] Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko stated that Russian forces launched 87 glide bombs on populated areas in Kherson Oblast on November 5 - the largest number of glide bombs that Russian forces have launched to date since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[33]

The Russian military appears to have increased its stock of high-precision missiles due to reported increases in Russian missile production more rapidly than previous forecasts had suggested. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi stated on November 6 that Russian forces have a total of 870 high-precision operational-strategic and strategic missiles in reserve. Skibitskyi previously stated on August 28 that Russian forces had a total of 585 long-range missiles in reserve, indicating that Russian forces have increased their missile reserves by 285 missiles since August.[34] Skibitskyi added on November 6 that Russian forces produced a total of 115 long-range high-precision missiles in October: 30 Iskander-M cruise missiles, 12 Iskander-K cruise missiles, 20 Kalibr cruise missiles, 40 Kh-101 cruise missiles, 9 Kh-32 cruise missiles, and 4 Kinzhal ballistic missiles.[35] Skibitskyi stated on August 28 that Russian defense enterprises were struggling to produce several dozens of specific types of missiles a month due to foreign component shortages, and the increase of 285 missiles in Russian reserves since late August — with 115 of that total being produced in October alone — indicates that Russia has increased its domestic production of missiles faster than had been forecasted.[36]

Skibitskyi also commented on Russian domestic drone production on November 6, stating that the GUR has not observed the movement of Shahed drones from Iran to Russia as Iran has fulfilled its first Shahed supply contracts with Russia.[37] Skibitskyi stated that Iran may still send small batches of Shaheds to Russia, however. [38] Skibitskyi also stated that Russia has begun to increase the domestic assembly of Shahed drones with components from Iran including at the factory in Alabuga, Tatarstan Republic.[39] Skibitskyi added that predicted Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in the upcoming winter will likely not be as "primitive" as the strike series during the winter of 2022-2023.[40] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has recently commented on Ukraine's urgent need for air defense systems.[41]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[42] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Krasnohorivka (6km northwest of Avdiivka) between November 3 and November 5, thereby forcing Russian troops to withdraw from part of the railway track in the area.[43] The Russian "Russkiy Legion" (BARS-13) irregular armed formation claimed that Ukrainian forces were successfully pressuring Russian forces near Stepove and the "Tsarska Okhota" restaurant south of Avdiivka.[44]

Key Takeaways:

- Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin argued that Russian forces will be "even less capable of offensive operations than they are now" by spring 2024 given the current nature of Russian offensive operations along the frontline.

- Russian milbloggers appear to be grappling with how Russian forces can overcome wider operational challenges in Ukraine, likely in response to Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's recent essay on the subject of "positional warfare," and not coming to optimistic conclusions.
- Select Russian milbloggers specifically argued that the use of small infantry assault groups will allow both Russian and Ukrainian forces to better achieve operational objectives along the front. Russian sources suggested that some Ukrainian forces may already be fielding the small infantry assault groups that these sources are advocating for.
- The war in Ukraine is likely exacerbating an emerging identity crisis within Russian society resulting from tensions between Russian identity and Russian nationalism.
- Russian forces conducted missile and drones strikes against rear areas in southern Ukraine on the evening of November 5 and on the night of November 5 to 6 as well as the largest series of glide bomb strikes to date against targets in Kherson Oblast on November 5.
- The Russian military appears to have increased its stock of high-precision missiles due to reported increases in Russian missile production more rapidly than previous forecasts had suggested.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on November 6.
- Russian occupation officials are expanding military recruitment and registration offices in occupied territories, likely in support of coercive mobilization efforts.
- Russian officials continue to weaponize youth engagement programs to consolidate social control of occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 5, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 5, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on November 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted a successful strike on a Russian shipyard in Kerch, occupied Crimea on November 4, likely damaging a naval vessel. The Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated that Ukrainian forces conducted successful strikes on Russian marine and port infrastructure at the Zalyv Shipyard in Kerch on the evening of November 4.[1] Satellite imagery from November 4 shows that the strike damaged a Project 22800 Karakurt-class Kalibr missile carrier corvette at the shipyard, although the extent of the damage to the ship is currently unclear.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 13 of 15 Ukrainian missiles targeting the shipyard and acknowledged that two missiles damaged an unspecified ship.[3] Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian cruise missiles damaged the *Askold* missile carrier, a Karakurt-class corvette that the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) launched in 2021.[4] The Zalyv shipyard reportedly planned to construct 14 warships intended for the BSF between 2016 and 2021, including eight Project 22800 Karakurt-class corvettes.[5] ISW has only confirmed that three Project 228000 Karakurt-class corvettes have launched from the Zalyv shipyard as of 2023, however.[6] The Zalyv shipyard is the largest shipyard in Eastern Europe and is likely the main repair facility for the BSF in Crimea following a successful Ukraine strike on the Russian state-owned ship repair facility Sevmorazvod in Sevastopol on September 13, 2023.[7] The extent of damage to the repair facilities at the Zalyv Shipyard is unclear, although the available satellite imagery suggests that the Ukrainian strike has likely not caused damage that will disrupt its operations in the medium-to-long term, unlike the previous strike on the Sevmorazvod facility.[8] *Radio Free Europe/Free Liberty (RFE/RL)* has reported that Russian forces have three active shipyards, including the Zalyv facility, in occupied Crimea.[9] ISW assesses that Ukrainian forces have conducted an interdiction campaign against Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea, primarily BSF assets, since June 2023 to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine.[10]

Ukrainian forces reportedly intensified strikes on rear Russian areas in southern Ukraine and occupied Crimea on November 5. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Skadovsk, occupied Kherson Oblast on the night of November 4-5.[11] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also disabled Ukrainian drones targeting a railway at an oil refinery in Dzhankoi, occupied Crimea on November 5.[12] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a Storm Shadow missile strike on Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast on November 5.[13] Ukrainian Berdyansk City Military Administration Head Viktoriya Halitsyna stated that locals reported two explosions in the city but that the Ukrainian General Staff was clarifying information.[14] Ukrainian Chief of the Main Directorate of the Missile Troops and Artillery and Unmanned Systems Brigadier General Serhiy Baranov notably stated in an interview with the *Independent* published on November 4 that Ukrainian forces intend to "capitalize" on their learned experiences and conduct large-scale drone strikes on Russian targets when fighting slows in the winter.[15] The *Independent* reported that Baranov stated that Ukraine intends to build on its "significant successes" with recent drone strikes that targeted critical Russian military assets and naval sites.[16]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave an interview to NBC and repeated that the war is not in a stalemate. Zelensky emphasized that the situation on the battlefield remains very challenging but noted that he does not believe that the war is at a "stalemate." He described it instead as a "check on the part of the Russian army," suggesting that Ukraine can resume making significant advances when it resolves the military parity with Russian forces described by Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.[17] Zelensky noted that Ukraine continues to destroy Russian Black Sea Fleet assets and continued to reiterate Ukraine's urgent need to receive air defense systems from Western partners. Zelensky further noted that Ukraine will not negotiate with Russia until or unless Russia entirely withdraws from Ukrainian territories, concluding that Ukraine is not ready to concede its freedom to the "f###g terrorist Putin."^[18] ISW continues to assess that external pressure to force Ukraine to negotiate with Russia is harmful and counterproductive as long as Putin maintains his maximalist objectives and believes that he can attain them on the battlefield.[19]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and made confirmed gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on November 5. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations south of Bakhmut and in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[20] Geolocated footage indicates that Ukrainian forces have made limited advances west of Verbove (10km east of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast), as well as on the east bank of Kherson Oblast near Pidstepne (12km east of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River) and in Krynyk (30km east of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).[21]

Chechen officials announced that Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appointed his 15-year-old-son Adam to a prominent position in a Chechen security service, though there is confusion over Adam Kadyrov's exact position. Chechen Duma Chairperson Magomed Daudov, Chechen Republic Press Head Akhmed Dudaev, and Russian State Duma Deputy Adam Delimkhanov stated that Adam holds an unspecified "important position" in the security service of the Head of the Chechen Republic.[22] Chechen Ministry of Internal Affairs special regiment commander Zamid Chalaev and Health Minister Adam Alkhanov claimed that Adam Kadyrov was appointed as the head of this security service.[23] Ramzan Kadyrov has not yet commented on his son's appointment. Ramzan Kadyrov notably headed the security service of his father, former Chechen Republic President Akhmat Kadyrov, in the early 2000s until Akhmat Kadyrov's death in 2004.[24] Adam Kadyrov will turn 16-years-old on November 24, 2023.[25]

Courts in the Republic of Dagestan reportedly charged participants in the antisemitic riots on October 29 with minor crimes and issued limited punishments. Russian authorities reportedly charged many of the antisemitic riot participants with using obscene language, disobedience of police orders, petty hooliganism, and violations of procedures for holding a rally.[26] Dagestani courts sentenced rioters to six to 10 days of administrative arrest or compulsory labor. ISW previously assessed that the Russian leadership is likely avoiding wider punishments for antisemitism in the North Caucasus out of concerns that they will inflame discontent towards the Kremlin.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces conducted a successful strike on a Russian shipyard in Kerch, occupied Crimea on November 4, likely damaging a naval vessel.** Ukrainian forces reportedly intensified strikes on rear Russian areas in southern Ukraine and occupied Crimea on November 5.
- **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave an interview to NBC and repeated that the war is not in a stalemate.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and made confirmed gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on November 5.**
- **Chechen officials announced that Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appointed his 15-year-old-son Adam to a prominent position in a Chechen security service, though there is confusion over Adam Kadyrov's exact position.**
- **Courts in the Republic of Dagestan reportedly charged participants in the antisemitic riots on October 29 with minor crimes and issued limited punishments.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.**
- **A Russian milblogger called on Russian "propagandists" to increase the use of Russian propaganda against Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) held in Russia in an effort to increase the number of "volunteers" in the Russian military.**
- **Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continued to promote the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of vacations.**

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 4, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 4, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on November 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized that the war in Ukraine is not a “stalemate” in a comment to the media about Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi’s essay on the positional nature of warfare in Ukraine.[1] Zelensky stated during a joint press conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on November 4 that the current situation on the frontlines is “not a stalemate” even if “time has passed” and “people are tired.” Zelensky emphasized that Ukraine prioritizes the safety of its servicemen and needs US F-16 fighter aircraft and air defenses to gain an advantage over Russian forces. Zelensky recalled that many observers were quick to call the battlefield situation in 2022 “a stalemate,” but that Ukrainian forces with several “tricks, tactics, [and] military operations” were able to liberate Kharkiv Oblast and west (right) bank Kherson Oblast. Zelensky added that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not stop at Russia’s currently occupied lines and noted that Ukraine “has no right to even think about giving up.” Zelensky’s statements largely mirror the main arguments in Zaluzhnyi’s essay entitled, “Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It.”

Zaluzhnyi’s long essay, “Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It,” outlines Zaluzhnyi’s consideration of the changes Ukraine must make to overcome the current “positional” stage of the war more clearly than the shorter op-ed and the *Economist* article it accompanied. Zaluzhnyi wrote that the war “is gradually moving to a positional form” and noted that Ukraine needs to gain air superiority; breach mine barriers in depth; increase the effectiveness of counter-battery; create and train the necessary reserves; and build up electronic warfare (EW) capabilities to overcome positional warfare.[2] Positional warfare refers to military operations that do not result in rapid or dramatic changes to the frontline despite both sides’ continuing efforts to improve their positions. Zaluzhnyi notably did not say that the war was stalemated in his essay or suggest that Ukraine could not succeed. His essay focused, rather, on explaining that the current positional character of the war was a result of technological-tactical parity on the battlefield and the widespread use of mine barriers by Russian and Ukrainian troops. Zaluzhnyi considered the opportunities presented to Ukraine by Russia’s challenges, including the significant losses suffered by Russian aviation; Ukrainian use of Western missile and artillery weapons; and Russia’s failure to take advantage of its human mobilization resources due to political, organizational, and motivational issues. Zaluzhnyi argued that to avoid World War I-style “trench war” and move to maneuver warfare, Ukraine must develop new approaches including technological and other changes, some of which depend on Western support and others require adaptations within the Ukrainian military, state, and society. Zaluzhnyi concluded that positional warfare benefits Russia as it prolongs the war and could allow Russia to achieve superiority in certain areas. Zaluzhnyi argued that Ukraine or Russia could return to rapid maneuver warfare under the right circumstances, which for Ukraine must include Western-provided military resources. **Zaluzhnyi’s essay was all about how to restore maneuver to a positional war, not an argument that the war has reached a stalemate.**

Zelensky also denied Western reports that US and European officials are pressuring Ukrainian officials to discuss the possibility of peace negotiations. NBC, citing current and former US officials, reported on November 3 that US and European officials have been “quietly” discussing the prospects of peace negotiations with Ukrainian officials.[3] NBC’s sources stated that these discussions took place during a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in the past month and were the result of Ukrainian acknowledgment of Western concerns that the war has reached a “stalemate.” Zelensky stated during the press conference on November 4 that, as the leader of Ukraine, he can attest that no one in Europe or the United States is pressuring him to discuss peace negotiations. [4] Von der Leyen also expressed her support for Ukraine’s sovereignty.

NBC added that US officials have no indication that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to negotiate with Ukraine or doubts that Russia can continue its war until Western aid for Ukraine falters.[5] ISW has also not observed any indications that Russia is prepared to enter peace negotiations with Ukraine in good faith. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov expressed the Kremlin’s disagreement with the characterization of the war in Ukraine as a “stalemate” on November 2, stating that the war in Ukraine “has not reached a dead end” and that the Russian military continues to conduct offensive operations.[6] Russia’s offensive operations around Avdiivka indicate that the Kremlin continues to believe that it is possible to achieve its objectives with military force and is unlikely to enter peace negotiations with Ukraine, except to buy time to reconstitute for future offensive operations. **Pressure on Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war will likely remain meaningless if not harmful as long as Putin believes that he can achieve his objectives on the battlefield.**

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) allegedly used claims that the Syrian government agreed to supply weapons to Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah to subsume remnants of the Wagner Group in Syria and seize their air defense systems. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on November 4 that Israel communicated information via diplomatic channels to Russia a few weeks ago about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s alleged agreement to supply Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah with weapons.[7] The milblogger claimed that remnants of the Wagner Group were operating in Syria under an agreement with the Syrian government and that the Russian MoD used this alleged information to pressure the Syrian government to allow the Russian MoD to force Wagner fighters in Syria to transfer their weapons to and sign contracts with the Russian MoD. The milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD seized a Pantsir-S1 air defense system from Wagner personnel near Palmyra, Syria. CNN previously reported that Assad agreed to provide the Russian air defense systems to Hezbollah and tasked Wagner with their delivery.[8] The milblogger did not specify whether the allegations about Assad’s agreement with Hezbollah were true and instead claimed that the truth of that matter is not as important as the fact that the Russian MoD used it as a pretext to make demands of Wagner. The Russian MoD has consistently pursued efforts to subsume Wagner operations abroad recently and is likely concerned about air defense systems in Wagner’s possession because Wagner forces used air defense systems to shoot down multiple Russian aircraft during the June 24 rebellion.[9]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on November 3 and 4. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed two Shahed-131/136 drones targeting Sumy Oblast on the night of November 3 to 4 and three Iskander-K cruise missiles targeting Dnipropetrovsk and Poltava oblasts on the evening of November 4.[10] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian weapons and ammunition arsenal in Pryluky, Chernihiv Oblast.[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also targeted Ukrainian rear areas, including the Kanatove airfield, Kirovohrad Oblast; Myrhorod, Poltava Oblast; Kharkiv City, Kharkiv Oblast; Dnipro City, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast; Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast; Odesa Oblast; and Lviv Oblast.[12]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 4. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Bakhmut directions.[13] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced along the forest line north of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and are gaining a foothold in the area.[14]

English-language Russian outlet the *Moscow Times* reported that the Russian government dismissed TASS General Director Sergei Mikhailov on July 5 due to TASS’s failure to align with Kremlin narratives while reporting on the Wagner Group rebellion. The *Moscow Times* cited anonymous Russian government officials, including from the presidential administration and the State Duma, as stating that the Kremlin dismissed Mikhailov because TASS’s coverage of the Wagner rebellion did not paint Russian authorities in a favorable light and did not include enough pro-Kremlin coverage.[15] Russian government officials stated that Mikhailov was fired because “TASS covered [the Wagner rebellion] in too much detail and promptly” and that “they [TASS employees] had forgotten that their main

task is not to report the news [but] to create an ideologically correct narrative for the Kremlin." A source admitted that the news outlet's "neutrality" is useless with the war in Ukraine ongoing and the upcoming Russian presidential elections, which Putin "must win on record." A TASS source stated that Mikhailov adhered to the "basic rules of journalism" and claimed that Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti, in contrast, is similar to a tabloid. ISW previously assessed that Mikhailov had rebranded TASS into a modern publication since his appointment in 2012 and that his dismissal may indicate that the Kremlin was unhappy with the media coverage of the Wagner rebellion and highlighted the continued importance of loyalty to Putin over professional achievement.[16] Putin previously awarded Mikhailov the Order of Friendship in 2021 for his professional successes and "many years of conscientious work."[17]

The Russian government is testing an electronic voting system ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, likely to further support efforts to manipulate the results in favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russian opposition outlet Meduza reported on November 4 that the Russian government services portal Gosuslugi sent letters inviting Russian citizens, including Meduza employees, to test the remote electronic system on November 15-17. The letters also stated that all adult Russian citizens are eligible to participate in the test.[18] The Russian government officially announced the tests on October 31, and Meduza reported that a government source stated that the Russian government intends to have as many Russian federal subjects utilize electronic voting as possible in the presidential election.[19] These public election preparations are notable as Putin has not announced his official campaign and Russian state media has not yet begun posturing Putin as the only viable candidate.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized that the war in Ukraine is not a "stalemate" in a comment to the media about Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's essay on the positional nature of warfare in Ukraine.
- Zaluzhnyi's long essay, "Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It," outlines Zaluzhnyi's consideration of the changes Ukraine must make to overcome the current "positional" stage of the war more clearly than the shorter op-ed and *Economist* article it accompanied.
- Zelensky also denied Western reports that US and European officials are pressuring Ukrainian officials to discuss the possibility of peace negotiations.
- NBC added that US officials have no indication that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to negotiate with Ukraine or doubts that Russia can continue its war until Western aid for Ukraine falters.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) allegedly used claims that the Syrian government agreed to supply weapons to Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah to subsume remnants of the Wagner Group in Syria and seize their air defense systems.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on November 3 and 4.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 4.
- English-language Russian outlet the *Moscow Times* reported that the Russian government dismissed TASS General Director Sergei Mikhailov on July 5 due to TASS's failure to align with Kremlin narratives while reporting on the Wagner Group rebellion.
- The Russian government is testing an electronic voting system ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, likely to further support efforts to manipulate the results in favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, north and south of Bakhmut, around Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, near Vuhledar, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in eastern and western Zaporizhia Oblast, and advanced in various sectors of the front.
- The BBC and Russian opposition media outlet Mediazona confirmed that at least 35,780 Russian servicemen have died in the war in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, as of November 3, 2023, including 923 deaths in the past two weeks.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to settle Russian citizens in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 3, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 3, 2023, 6:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on November 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted a notably larger series of drone strikes throughout Ukraine on November 3. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched four dozen Shahed-131/-136 drones from Kursk Oblast and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and a Kh-59 cruise missile from occupied Kherson Oblast at targets in Ukraine.[1] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down the Kh-59 cruise missile and 24 of the Shahed drones.[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces intercepted over half of the roughly 40 drones that Russian forces launched at Ukraine.[3] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces struck targets in Kharkiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Odesa oblasts, and Zelensky stated that Ukrainian air defenses activated in Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kyiv, Kirovohrad, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytskyi, and Lviv oblasts.[4] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces primarily struck civil infrastructure, and Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast Military Administration Head Svitlana Onyshchuk stated that Russian forces struck an unspecified military facility in

Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast.[5] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched small groups of Shaheds to identify the locations of Ukrainian air defenses and then launched several waves of drones to complicate the Ukrainian response.[6] Ukrainian officials, including Zelensky, stated that Russian forces plan to launch more damaging strikes throughout Ukraine as winter approaches.[7]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced new military aid packages to Ukraine on November 3, primarily aimed at strengthening Ukraine's air defenses. The US DoD announced an aid package of military materiel support for Ukraine valued at \$125 million, including munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) and HIMARS; 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracker, Wire-Guided (TOW) anti-tank missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; and over three million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenades.[8] The US DoD will also allocate \$300 million to the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAID) to strengthen Ukraine's air defenses over the long term. The US DoD will provide Ukraine laser-guided munitions to counter UAVs under USAID.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[9] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled eight Ukrainian assaults in western Zaporizhia Oblast and several Ukrainian attacks near Bakhmut from October 28 to November 3.[10]

Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the Russian military command for failing to establish long-term training capabilities because it is keeping skilled commanders and soldiers at the front and leaving inexperienced careerists to train new recruits and officers. One Russian milblogger claimed that Russia continues to only learn from its mistakes at the cost of significant losses and that the Russian military command fails to teach effective tactics employed by competent commanders and servicemen to new personnel.[11] The milblogger claimed that the Russian military command commits the most capable commanders and servicemen to the most dangerous frontlines in Ukraine instead of using them to train the incoming class of Russian soldiers. The milblogger added that Russia needs to resolve this problem on a systemic level, otherwise newly formed units will repeat prior Russian mistakes on the frontline. Another Russian milblogger responded to the milblogger's critiques, noting that Russia needs to have experienced servicemen teach graduating classes at Russian military schools since graduates only study theory and do not receive any practice in modern warfare.[12] The milblogger implied that there are problems with Russian military theory and a lack of proper officer training because generals and officers who receive teaching positions do not have combat experience and only care about their own career growth. The milblogger concluded that the poor command of Russian operations in the Avdiivka direction and near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) indicates that Russian generals do not think about the wellbeing of the Russian Armed Forces in the long-term.

Alleged long-time allies of Russian President Vladimir Putin are reportedly financing two Russian Ministry of Defense–subordinated private military companies that have subsumed former Wagner Group operations in Africa. *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on November 3 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), including Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and members of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU), is continuing efforts to subsume Wagner Group activities in Africa under the MoD-subordinated Redut and Convoy private military companies (PMCs). [13] WSJ reported that Arkady Rotenberg and Gennady Timchenko, two Russian billionaires who have known Putin for decades and are in Putin's inner circle, are financing Convoy and Redut, respectively. This decision is likely an attempt to prevent a single PMC and single financier from again gaining the power and influence to potentially threaten Putin and the Russian central leadership. ISW has previously assessed that Putin routinely appoints people to positions such that no one figure amasses too much political influence.[14] WSJ also reported that Konstantin Pikalov leads Convoy PMC and that Konstantin Mirzayants leads Redut PMC. Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartopolov stated on November 3 that Wagner has "completely disbanded" and that some Wagner fighters continue to operate in Africa but under a "different brand" under the Russian MoD.[15]

Wagner elements in Syria will reportedly transfer Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense systems that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has agreed to provide to Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah. (*NOTE: This text also appeared in the Critical Threats Project's (CTP) November 3 Iran Update*) CNN reported on November 3 that two people familiar with US intelligence stated that Assad agreed to provide the Russian air defense systems to Hezbollah and tasked Wagner with their delivery during joint conversations between the three actors.[16] WSJ reported on November 2 that US intelligence indicated that Wagner itself would give the Russian air defense systems to Hezbollah.[17] Israel frequently conducts airstrikes on Iranian weapons shipments into and through Syria, and Assad may have asked Wagner to deliver the air defense systems to Hezbollah to act as a deterrent to potential Israeli interdiction efforts.[18] CTP-ISW has previously assessed that Russia may be able to facilitate weapons shipments in Syria without risking Israeli airstrikes, and the Kremlin may believe that this Israeli reluctance will extend to Wagner. [19] Russia and Israel have a complex relationship in Syria, as Israel has historically relied on Russia to curb Iranian activities in Syria.[20]

Dagestani officials claimed they would punish those who participate in and organize alleged future demonstrations, in contrast to calls for leniency for those participating in the October 29 antisemitic riots. The office of the Mayor of Makhachkala called on local residents to refrain from participating in unauthorized rallies, including one allegedly planned for November 5, and preemptively threatened that participants and "those who provoke the population" will face "serious consequences." [21] Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that Telegram channels continue to call on Dagestani residents to attend a November 5 demonstration to demand the release of those detained for the October 29 antisemitic riots.[22] A Russian milblogger continued to criticize the weak official response to the recent riots, stating that "to have mercy means to show weakness." [23]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's continued appeals to Chechen nationalists likely aim to solidify domestic support without disrupting his appearance as a steadfast supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Kadyrov announced on November 3 that Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree assigning original Chechen names to eight Chechen villages that suffered from Stalin-era deportations and that Soviet authorities disbanded. [24] Russian officials have increasingly suppressed acknowledgements of Stalinist deportations, yet the Kremlin's support for reversing Stalin's 1944 order disbanding these Chechen villages suggests that Kadyrov is coordinating his rhetorical appeals with the Kremlin.[25] This likely rhetorical overture follows similar allusions to Chechen national history from Kadyrov, who recently named two new Chechen volunteer battalions after 18th and 19th Century Chechen fighters who resisted Russian imperial rule.[26] These allusions to Chechen national history are a low stakes approach to currying favor with Chechen nationalists who may have negative attitudes towards the Kremlin and Kadyrov's avowed support of Putin. Kadyrov's rhetorical support for historical Chechen nationalism diverts conversations away from his current support of the increasingly ultranationalist Kremlin, while only drawing temporary ire from select Russian ultranationalists.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted a notably larger series of drone strikes throughout Ukraine on November 3.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced new military aid packages to Ukraine on November 3, primarily aimed at strengthening Ukraine's air defenses.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the Russian military command for failing to establish long-term training capabilities because it is keeping skilled commanders and soldiers at the front and leaving inexperienced careerists to train new recruits and officers.
- Alleged long-time allies of Russian President Vladimir Putin are reportedly financing two Russian Ministry of Defense–subordinated private military companies that have subsumed former Wagner Group operations in Africa.
- Wagner elements in Syria will reportedly transfer Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense systems that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has agreed to provide to Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah.
- Dagestani officials claimed they would punish those who participate in and organize alleged future demonstrations, in contrast to calls for leniency for those participating in the October 29 antisemitic riots.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's continued appeals to Chechen nationalists likely aim to solidify domestic support without disrupting his appearance as a steadfast supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, near Vuhledar, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers began advertising recruitment into an "elite regiment" in Moscow Oblast and offering recruits one-million-ruble (about \$10,900) salaries.
- Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continued attempts to discredit information about Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 2, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 2, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on November 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a missile strike on the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces headquarters in Kherson Oblast on November 1.[1] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched Storm Shadow cruise missiles and Neptune anti-ship missiles targeting Strilkove, Kherson Oblast, on the Arabat Spit and that Russian air defenses only intercepted half of the missiles.[2] Multiple Russian sources claimed that Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, the recently named commander of the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces operating in the Kherson direction, was uninjured.[3] Russian opposition media outlet Astra reported that four Ukrainian missiles struck the "Aura" recreation center near Strilkove that served as the Russian Dnepr Grouping's headquarters.[4]

Ukrainian forces recently advanced near Bakhmut and continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 2. Geolocated footage published on November 1 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced further northeast of the railway line near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[5] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[6]

The Russian information space's reaction to Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's November 1 interview and essay about the current operational environment in Ukraine was relatively muted. Several Russian sources simply summarized Zaluzhnyi's points, while others suggested that Zaluzhnyi was primarily acknowledging the superiority of Soviet-era military strategy over NATO doctrine.[7] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov expressed disagreement with Zaluzhnyi's conclusions and stated that the war has not reached a "dead end." [8]

South Korean officials reported that North Korea is reportedly increasing its weapons and ammunition transfers to Russia and has reportedly delivered more than one million artillery rounds to date.[9] South Korean lawmaker Yoo Sang-bum told reporters that the South Korean National Intelligence Service said that there have been about 10 weapon shipments from North Korea to Russia since August 2023 – totaling about one million rounds of artillery.[10] Yoo added that North Korea also sent advisers to Russia to guide Russians on the use of the munitions. South Korean *Yonhap* news agency reported the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) estimated that North Korea shipped about 2,000 containers of military equipment and munitions from its northeastern port of Rajin to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East.[11] *Yonhap* estimated that these containers can carry 200,000 122mm artillery shells or over one million of 152mm shells. *Yonhap* reported that North Korea may also have supplied other weapons to Russia, including T-series tank ammunition, anti-tank guided missiles, rocket launchers, rifles and machine guns, and possibly short-range ballistic missiles. A senior South Korean military official observed that North Korean maritime trade with Russia increased in August before North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un's trip to Russia in September. The official also noted that Russia may consider providing North Korea with technological support for military satellites, nuclear weapons, fighter jets, and air defense systems. *Yonhap* reported that South Korean officials believe that North Korea is in the final stage of

preparations to launch a surveillance satellite after two previous failed attempts, and it is possible that Pyongyang seeks to expand its military-technological relationship with the Kremlin in exchange for munitions.

The Wagner Group is reportedly planning to provide Hezbollah with Pantsir-S1 air defense systems. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on November 2 that U.S. officials stated that intelligence indicates that Wagner plans to give Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense missile systems.[12] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has reportedly attempted to subsume Wagner operations abroad, including in the Middle East.[13] Russia and Iran have recently increased their military-technical ties; Iran has provided Russia with Shahed 136/131 drones and domestic Shahed production capabilities, and Russia reportedly provided Iran with advanced surveillance software and cyber weapons and promised Iran Su-35 aircraft.[14]

A Russian State Duma official attempted to deny ongoing claims that Rosgvardia will structurally absorb the Wagner Group private military company (PMC), rather than individually recruit former Wagner personnel. The Head of the Russian State Duma Information Policy Committee Alexander Khinshtain denied claims on November 1 that the Wagner private military company (PMC) is structurally integrated into Rosgvardia as a PMC and is recruiting personnel for Rosgvardia. [15] Khinshtain claimed that only former Wagner fighters, not the entire PMC, can sign individual contracts with Rosgvardia and that Rosgvardia cannot structurally absorb PMCs. Khinshtain was likely responding to a claim by a Wagner instructor known under the alias "Brest," who claimed that Wagner PMC would officially become part of Rosgvardia.[16] Khinshtain's denial contradicts prior Russian claims that Rosgvardia allowed Wagner personnel to sign individual and group agreements with Rosgvardia "as a guarantee that [Wagner] will not be 'torn apart.'"[17] Khinshtain's denials also contrast with "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces Commander Apty Alaudinov's claims that former Wagner fighters are joining Rogvardia's Akhmat forces to follow their former commanders.[18] Russian sources reported that former Wagner personnel have created their own "Kamerton" detachment subordinated under Akhmat Spetsnaz forces that will soon deploy to an unspecified frontline in Ukraine.[19]

The fate of the Wagner PMC as an entity, its assets, and its remaining personnel is unclear at this time. A former Wagner fighter also told Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* that former Wagner personnel are currently torn between signing contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or Rosgvardia or returning to civilian life.[20] Russian security structures, namely the Russian MoD and Rosgvardia, are competing for Wagner PMC's assets, likely prompting numerous contradictory statements about the fate of Wagner PMC as an entity.

Select Russian milbloggers accused Chechen officials and Akhmat Spetsnaz of attempting to defame and censor milbloggers who criticized Wagner's integration into Rosgvardia. Some milbloggers claimed that they had a negative opinion about Wagner's transfer to Rosgvardia and that Wagner fighters could have joined other security structures, directly criticizing the character of Rosgvardia's Director Army General Viktor Zolotov.[21] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger amplified claims that a prominent Russian milblogger got into an altercation with Akhmat's and Kadyrov's "public relations people" after the milblogger criticized Wagner's transfer to Akhmat units.[22] Russian milbloggers claimed that Kadyrov's people began to spread rumors about the milblogger and offered money to Telegram channels in return for reposting incriminating evidence against the milblogger.[23]

Russian officials appear to be pursuing limited punishments for the October 29 antisemitic riots in the Republic of Dagestan, which several Russian officials and Russian state media have called "pogroms." Russian authorities have arrested 15 individuals in connection with the riots at the Makhachkala airport as of November 1 and Dagestani Republic Head Sergei Melikov stated on November 1 that he dismissed the administrative head of Batyrkhanov, Dagestan, for participating in the riots.[24] Kremlin press wire TASS paraphrased Melikov as stating that only those who encroached on the lives of police officers and those who initiated the pogrom would face legal punishment.[25] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on November 2 that the Kremlin supports Melikov's approach to punishing only select rioters.[26] The Head of the Spiritual Administration of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kamil Samigullin, had called on Russian authorities earlier on November 1 to show leniency towards those who fell for the "provocation" in Dagestan since outside forces allegedly organized the riots.[27] Samigullin also called the riots "pogroms" and called on Muslims in Russia not to attack Jews.[28] Telegram reportedly blocked an additional two channels on November 1 that also incited antisemitic unrest in Dagestan, following the removal of the Telegram channel that had initially promoted rumors that sparked the riots.[29] Select Russian ultranationalists criticized calls for leniency and warned that Dagestani public opinion leaders would escalate tensions in Dagestan in the absence of Kremlin control over the information space there.[30]

The Russian leadership is likely avoiding wider punishments for antisemitism in the North Caucasus out of concerns that they will inflame discontent towards the Kremlin. Russian officials have rhetorically signaled support for fighting antisemitic actions since the October 29 riots but have likely failed to convince domestic and international constituencies of Russia's ability to protect Jews in Russia. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on November 2 condemned the Israeli travel warnings for the North Caucasus as "anti-Russian" actions and argued that Russian authorities at all levels have sufficiently dealt with the events in Dagestan.[31]

Russian authorities elsewhere in the North Caucasus have indicated concerns about the potential for similar riots. The Sunzhi City Administration in the Republic of Ingushetia announced on November 1 that Russian authorities would strengthen security at the Magas airport following the circulation of rumors about the arrival of a flight, presumably from Israel, on the night of November 1.[32] Russian state-run outlet *Izvestia* reported on November 1 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) detained an unspecified number of men in the Republic of Ingushetia who were organizing a demonstration at the Magas airport for the night of October 30.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a missile strike on the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces headquarters in Kherson Oblast on November 1.
- Ukrainian forces recently advanced near Bakhmut and continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 2.
- The Russian information space's reaction to Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhny's November 1 interview and essay about the current operational environment in Ukraine was relatively muted.
- South Korean officials reported that North Korea is reportedly increasing its weapons and ammunition transfers to Russia and has reportedly delivered more than one million artillery rounds to date.
- The Wagner Group is reportedly planning to provide Hezbollah with Pantsir-S1 air defense systems.

- A Russian State Duma official attempted to deny ongoing claims that Rosgvardia will structurally absorb the Wagner Group private military company (PMC), rather than individually recruit former Wagner personnel.
- Select Russian milbloggers accused Chechen officials and Akhmat Spetsnaz of attempting to defame and censor milbloggers who criticized Wagner's integration into Rosgvardia.
- Russian officials appear to be pursuing limited punishments for the October 29 antisemitic riots in the Republic of Dagestan, which several Russian officials and Russian state media have called "pogroms."
- Russian authorities elsewhere in the North Caucasus have indicated concerns about the potential for similar riots.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatov-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Russian irregular forces are continuing to form new assault detachments and are incentivizing recruitment by offering recruits semi-independence from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Recent Russian border restrictions are reportedly complicating the return of Ukrainian children forcibly deported to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 1, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 1, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. The use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on November 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi assessed on November 1 that the war in Ukraine has taken on a positional nature and offered a series of recommendations for Ukraine to restore maneuver to the battlespace.^[1] In an essay entitled "Modern Positional Warfare and How to Win It" and an interview with *The Economist*, Zaluzhnyi outlined the current operational environment in Ukraine and noted that, despite several previously successful Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2022, the war is now "gradually moving to a positional form."^[2] Zaluzhnyi heavily stressed that the current positional nature of the war is largely a result of *military parity* between Ukrainian and Russian forces, noting that a deep and dramatic Ukrainian penetration of Russian lines will likely not be possible with the relative technological and tactical equilibrium currently between Ukrainian and Russian forces.^[3] In his interview with *The Economist*, Zaluzhnyi acknowledged that technological and tactical parity between opposing forces in Ukraine has resulted in a "stalemate" similar to the case of the First World War.^[4] In the more extensive essay on the subject, Zaluzhnyi notably refrained from classifying the situation as a full stalemate and instead framed it as a "positional" war resulting from aspects of this technological-tactical parity.^[5] According to Zaluzhnyi, Ukraine's ability to overcome this technological-tactical parity will be contingent on Ukraine's ability to secure five main operational components that have become particularly significant since the summer of 2023 — gaining air superiority; breaching Russian mine barriers in depth; increasing the effectiveness of counterbattery combat; creating and training the necessary reserves; and building up electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.

Zaluzhnyi offered a series of specific tactical solutions to the five aforementioned operational components that have created the conditions for positional warfare, which in his view will allow Ukraine to overcome military parity with Russian forces. Regarding the issue of air superiority, Zaluzhnyi argued that Ukrainian forces need to significantly improve drone capabilities to gain air superiority along the frontline.^[6] Zaluzhnyi argued that Ukrainian forces need to overload Russian air defenses, neutralize Russian strike drones, and degrade Russian visibility over the front by deploying cheap drones *en masse*, developing specific drones meant to target Russian strike drones, and employing EW complexes throughout the front.^[7] Zaluzhnyi argued that to overcome the challenges of EW use on the frontline, Ukrainian forces need to introduce necessary command and control (C2) processes for EW complexes, increase EW production capabilities, and streamline engagements with volunteer organizations that provide smaller EW complexes to Ukrainian forces.^[8] Zaluzhnyi also recommended that Ukrainian forces improve counter-EW measures and develop new drones with EWs in mind.^[9] To gain counterbattery superiority, Zaluzhnyi recommended that Ukrainian forces use more reconnaissance and strike drones to improve Ukrainian counterbattery fire and argued that Ukrainian forces need to strengthen GPS support for Ukrainian counterbattery units and increase the number of counterbattery assets.^[10] Zaluzhnyi stated that improved sensors, more widespread and varied mine clearing capabilities, and anti-drone equipment will allow Ukrainian forces to more successfully breach Russian mine barriers in depth while under concealment.^[11]

Zaluzhnyi also highlighted wider administrative adaptations and domestic developments in addition to his specific tactical battlefield solutions. Zaluzhnyi specifically called on Ukraine to introduce a Unified State Register for draftees, reservists, and those liable for military service to prepare a necessary reserve for Ukrainian forces.^[12] Zaluzhnyi more broadly called on Ukrainian officials to incentivize Ukrainian citizens to join the military reserve and expand the number of citizens that Ukrainian forces are allowed to train.^[13] Zaluzhnyi also noted that improving Ukrainian C2 and logistics support will be critical to improving operations writ large.^[14] Zaluzhnyi stated that the formation of a "single information environment" for C2 through the use of modern information technology will allow Ukrainians to get ahead of Russian forces in terms of situational awareness.^[15] Zaluzhnyi particularly highlighted the need for Ukraine to develop its own defense industry to sustain operations, long-range strike capabilities, and an asymmetric munitions arsenal to break out of military parity with Russian forces.^[16]

Russian forces are likely preparing for another wave of highly attritional infantry-led ground assaults on Ukrainian positions in the Avdiivka area. A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces near Avdiivka have largely slowed the pace of ground attacks north and south of Avdiivka in favor of heavy indirect fire against Ukrainian frontline positions and near rear areas. Russian forces may be conducting an interdiction campaign against Ukrainian assets in the Avdiivka area, but this heavy fire is more likely air and artillery preparation for the battlefield ahead of another wave of Russian assaults.[17] Other milbloggers also characterized the current Russian operations as “preparatory support,” presumably for later assaults.[18] Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun also notably stated on October 30 that Russian forces are preparing to conduct “meat assaults” (colloquial jargon for infantry-led frontal assaults) near Avdiivka and are training “Storm-Z” assault units made largely of convict recruits for future assaults without equipment.[19]

Russian forces may be preparing to transition to such infantry-led frontal assaults following heavy artillery preparation to compensate for heavy materiel losses in Avdiivka over the course of October. Open-source geolocation project GeoConfirmed used commercially available satellite imagery to verify that Russian forces have suffered at least 197 damaged and destroyed vehicles since October 9, losing 99 vehicles during the first wave of assaults between October 9 and 13, 94 vehicles during the second wave between October 14 and 23, and four confirmed and 18 potentially lost vehicles between October 24 and 31.[20] GeoConfirmed characterized the Russian effort near Avdiivka as the costliest Russian effort thus far in the war in Ukraine.[21]

The current situation near Avdiivka is a microcosm of the Russian General Staff’s wider failure to internalize and disseminate lessons learned by Russian forces during previous failed offensive efforts in Ukraine to other force groupings throughout the theater. Various Russian elements have engaged in similarly catastrophic mechanized attacks with infantry-led frontal assaults on fortified Ukrainian positions along several different axes over the course of 2022 and 2023, suggesting that the ultimate fault in the lack of strategic adaptation lies with the General Staff. Russian forces previously suffered significant personnel and materiel losses during an unsuccessful offensive against Vuhledar, western Donetsk Oblast in winter 2022-2023, which was characterized by multiple waves of mechanized attacks against fortified Ukrainian positions.[22] These infantry-heavy assaults completely destroyed the Russian units involved in them, including the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet), which reportedly had to reconstitute several times due to losses suffered near Vuhledar.[23] By contrast, elements of the 1st Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Army Corps, operating under the command of the Southern Military District’s 8th Combined Arms Army, and elements of the Central Military District’s 41st Combined Arms Army, have recently conducted analogous costly mechanized assaults near Avdiivka.[24] The fact that two very distinct groupings of forces have engaged in similarly ineffective operations suggests that the Russian military command is struggling to learn and disseminate lessons across the theater or, in the case, even within the same military district.[25] The Russian General Staff is in principle responsible for learning lessons, adapting Russian doctrine, and disseminating lessons and new approaches throughout the force. Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov is ultimately responsible for this failure both in his capacity of chief of the Russian General Staff and as overall theater commander. The contrast between Gerasimov’s failure in this regard and General Zaluzhnyi’s thoughtful and public evaluation of the challenges facing Ukraine and the solutions to them is notable.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[26] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Zelenopillya (12km southwest of Bakhmut) and along a section of the railway line between Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[27] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced from Shcherbak (18km west of Orikhiv) towards Myrne (16km southwest of Orikhiv) and made gains west of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).[28]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated Russian President Vladimir Putin’s framing of ongoing Ukrainian ground activity on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast as part of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Shoigu stated during a conference call on November 1 that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Kherson directions, grouping Ukrainian activity in the Kherson direction with directions recognized as currently part of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts.[29] Putin described Ukrainian activity in Kherson Oblast as the “next [Ukrainian] counteroffensive” and dismissed all Ukrainian offensive operations as failures during a press conference in Beijing on October 18.[30]

Russian forces conducted a relatively large series of drone and missile strikes mainly targeting Poltava Oblast on the night of October 31 to November 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 1 that Russian forces launched three Kh-59 missiles and 20 Shahed 131/136 drones and noted that Ukrainian air defenses downed all three of the Kh-59 missiles and 18 Shahed drones.[31] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones struck an oil refinery in Kremenchuk, Poltava Oblast.[32] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also struck the Myrhorod airfield in Poltava Oblast.[33] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces are targeting “weak points” in Ukrainian air defenses.[34] Ihnat added that Russian forces are looking at several different courses of action to replenish weapons stocks for continued strikes this fall and winter.

The Russian military appears poised to re-establish its military districts as the primary joint headquarters for its ground forces while transferring naval assets back to the command of the Russian Navy. Russian state media outlet TASS reported on November 1 that sources close to the Russian military leadership stated that the Russian Northern, Pacific, Black Sea, and Baltic fleets and Caspian Flotilla will return to direct subordination under Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Nikolai Evmenov on December 1.[35] The Russian Northern Fleet (NF) will also lose its status as a separate military-administrative unit equal to a military district effective December 1, and its ground, aviation, and air defense forces will be transferred to the newly re-created Leningrad Military District. TASS noted that this information has not been officially confirmed. The Russian federal portal of draft regulator legal acts published a presidential decree on October 8, prepared by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), which proposed stripping the NF of its status as a joint “strategic territorial association,” signaling that this change would happen in the future but not specifying a date. [36] It remains unclear how Russia intends to mobilize, train, and organize forces previously under its fleets into new military district-level formations, but this restructuring writ large suggests that Russia intends to reconsolidate control of ground forces under the military district structure, including the newly re-created Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, while separating the naval assets under the Russian Navy.

Russian sources speculated that Pavel Prigozhin, the son of deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, is officially the acting head of Wagner remnants operating under the auspices of Rosgvardia. Russian regional news outlets reported on November 1 that the Wagner Group has resumed recruiting in Perm and Novosibirsk oblasts under Pavel’s leadership.[37] Russian outlet Ngs.ru reported that a Wagner representative in Novosibirsk stated that Wagner is no longer recruiting criminals or people with illnesses.[38] Russian milbloggers also claimed that Pavel is the new leader of the remnants of Wagner and expressed hope that Pavel’s appointment is an indication that Wagner will survive its subordination to Rosgvardia.[39]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi assessed on November 1 that the war in Ukraine has taken on a positional nature and offered a series of recommendations for Ukraine to restore maneuver to the battlespace. Zaluzhnyi offered a series of specific tactical solutions to the five aforementioned operational components that have created the conditions for positional warfare, which in his view will allow Ukraine to overcome military parity with Russian forces.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for another wave of highly attritional infantry-led ground assaults on Ukrainian positions in the Avdiivka area.
- The current situation near Avdiivka is a microcosm of the Russian General Staff's wider failure to internalize and disseminate lessons learned by Russian forces during previous failed offensive efforts in Ukraine to other force groupings throughout the theater.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on November 1.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated Russian President Vladimir Putin's framing of ongoing Ukrainian ground activity on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast as part of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian forces conducted a relatively large series of drone and missile strikes mainly targeting Poltava Oblast on the night of October 31 to November 1.
- The Russian military appears poised to re-establish its military districts as the primary joint headquarters for its ground forces while transferring naval assets back to the command of the Russian Navy.
- Russian sources speculated that Pavel Prigozhin, the son of deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, is officially the acting head of Wagner remnants operating under the auspices of Rosgvardia.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, in the Bakhmut direction, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in various sectors of the front.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 31, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 31, 2023, 4:45pm 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.

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the November 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's response to the October 29 antisemitic riots in the Republic of Dagestan suggests that Russian officials may be increasingly concerned about the weakening of authoritarian control in regions on the periphery of the Russian Federation. Kadyrov responded to the riots in Dagestan by praising Russian President Vladimir Putin's accusation that the West orchestrated the situation to destabilize Russia.^[1] Kadyrov later called on Chechen security forces to immediately detain instigators of any potential riots in Chechnya or to "fire three warning shots in the air and after that, fire the fourth shot in the head."^[2] Kadyrov's reactions to the riots in Dagestan suggest that he is first and foremost concerned with maintaining the perception of his unwavering support of Putin and secondly with demonstrating the strength of his authoritarian rule over Chechnya by threatening a violent response to potential future riots.^[3]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Bakhmut directions.^[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi to discuss the situation on the front in the Kupyansk, Avdiivka, and Kherson directions.^[5]

Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on October 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched four Iskander-M missiles and an S-300 air defense missile at targets in Ukraine.^[6] Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration Head Yurii Malashko reported that Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City with a missile.^[7] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched an unspecified number of Shahed-131/136 drones at targets in Khmelnytskyi and Poltava oblasts and that Ukrainian air defenses activated in these oblasts.^[8]

Russian authorities detained two suspects for the murder of a Ukrainian family in occupied Donetsk Oblast. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on October 30 that Russian authorities detained two Russian military contract servicemen originally from the Russian Far East as suspects for the murder on October 29 in Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast.^[9] The Investigative Committee stated that the preliminary investigation indicates that the motive of the murders was of a "domestic" nature. A Russian insider source claimed on October 31 that the two detainees were a part of the Russian 155th Separate Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet).^[10] Attacks on civilians *hors de combat* (in rear areas far removed from active combat zones) by representatives of an occupying power constitute a clear violation of multiple international legal norms and very likely rise to the level of a war crime or crime against humanity.^[11]

A court in Uzbekistan has reportedly sentenced the first Uzbek citizen to prison for serving as a mercenary for Russian forces in Ukraine. A court in Uzbekistan found an Uzbek man, who reportedly served in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) military from 2014-2015, guilty of violating the Uzbek law against mercenarism.^[12] Relatives of the convicted man claimed that he did not participate in the war in Ukraine and was in Russia during the indicated years.^[13] This

sentencing may heighten tensions between the governments of Russia and Central Asian countries as Russian authorities have increased efforts to coerce Central Asian migrants into Russian military service.[14]

Key Takeaways:

- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's response to the October 29 antisemitic riots in the Republic of Dagestan suggests that Russian officials may be increasingly concerned about the weakening of authoritarian control in regions on the periphery of the Russian Federation.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 31.
- Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on October 31.
- Russian authorities detained two suspects for the murder of a Ukrainian family in occupied Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted combined missile strikes against Sevastopol and elsewhere in occupied Crimea on October 30.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremmin line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Avdiivka.
- Former Wagner Group fighters continue to redeploy to Ukraine as part of other Russian formations.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to eradicate Ukrainian language and culture in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 30, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 30, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:00pm ET on October 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian officials announced that Russian law enforcement suppressed the antisemitic riots in Makhachkala, Republic of Dagestan on October 30. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stated that employees of the MVD and other law enforcement agencies suppressed mass riots in Makhachkala and restored order at the local airport after identifying over 150 participants and detaining 60 rioters.[1] The MVD also claimed that rioters injured at least nine police officers and that searches for other rioters are ongoing. Dagestan Head Sergey Melikov claimed that he personally inspected the Makhachkala airport, which sustained minor damage, and claimed that the MVD and Rosgvardia used physical force as a last resort in hopes of calming the mob with reason.[2] Russian sources claimed that rioters threw stones at law enforcement and that officers responded by firing guns into the air.[3] Melikov stated that unspecified foreign actors, including pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels, are attempting to destabilize the region and claimed that the Telegram channel that published the rumors of the arrival of "Israeli refugees" in Dagestan was managed from Ukrainian territory.[4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to the October 29 antisemitic demonstrations in Dagestan by accusing Ukraine of trying to "instigate pogroms in Russia" under Western guidance.[5] Putin claimed during a meeting with members of the Russian Security Council on October 30 that demonstrations in Makhachkala "were inspired, among other things, through social networks, from Ukraine's territory by Western intelligence services." Putin added that the West is trying to use regional conflicts to break Russia from within, and tasked regional authorities with undertaking "firm, timely and clear actions to protect the constitutional system of Russia, the rights and freedoms of [Russian] citizens, interethnic and interreligious harmony." Putin did not specify which measures Russia will undertake to resolve interreligious conflicts and antisemitism in Russia, however. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov did not comment on the measures that could be taken against the demonstrators.[6] Kremlin officials largely reiterated similar statements prior to Putin's speech and refrained from directly condemning the rioters, and the Kremlin's narrative about foreign involvement in the riots is likely an attempt to deflect from the international criticism of antisemitism and growing animosity towards ethnic and religious minorities in Russia.[7]

A minority of Russian officials directly condemned rioters and regional authorities for ignoring antisemitic attitudes in Dagestan. Melikov stated that rioters betrayed Russian servicemen fighting in Ukraine by "playing for the enemy" and noted that he was ashamed about the riots.[8] Russian State Duma Deputy Vasilii Vlasov criticized Dagestani authorities for ignoring antisemitic attitudes and unrest that lasted for three days.[9] Vlasov added that unnamed regional officials should be dismissed from their positions for failing to preempt the riots in time.

The October 29 riots in Dagestan highlight the growing radicalization and factionalism of Russian society resulting from the hyper-nationalist ideologies that the war in Ukraine has empowered. Director of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Janis Sarts stated that events in Makhachkala represent some of the manifestations of the radicalization of the Russian society resulting from the war in Ukraine and the surrounding media environment.[10] Sarts stated that Russian media has been inciting hatred against Ukrainians, the West, and Israel and observed that many deceased Russian servicemen who had fought in

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine hailed from Dagestan. A Russian milblogger similarly implied that the Kremlin's efforts to blame the riots on foreign psychological and information operations allow Russian officials to avoid responsibility for enabling the strengthening of radical sentiments among Russian Muslim populations. [11] ISW has previously assessed that the hyper-nationalist ideologies espoused by the Kremlin as the justifications for the war are having domestic ramifications for Russia, particularly in ethnic minority communities.[12]

Unidentified Russian soldiers reportedly murdered a Ukrainian family in occupied Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast, further highlighting a threatening environment of violence that is pervasive throughout the occupied areas of Ukraine. Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets stated on October 29 that Russian troops killed nine civilians, including two young children, in their home in Volnovakha overnight and suggested that Chechen units may have committed the murders because the family refused to shelter Chechen forces in their house.[13] Several Ukrainian sources and a prominent Russian insider source reported that forensic evidence indicates that well-prepared and well-equipped military personnel likely perpetrated the attack.[14] Attacks on civilians *hors de combat* (in rear areas far removed from active combat zones) by representatives of an occupying power constitute a clear violation of multiple international legal norms and very likely rise to the level of a war crime or crime against humanity.[15]

Several Russian commentators exploited the circumstances of the tragedy in Volnovakha to accuse Ukraine of trying to stoke interethnic tensions within the Russian information space. One Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian sources first reported that "Kadyrov's men" (in reference to Chechen troops) committed the murders and linked the issue to the October 29 riots in Dagestan.[16] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Chechen forces are not deployed anywhere near Volnovakha and accused the Ukrainian information space of trying to use Chechens as a "trigger" to further destabilize Russia.[17] The fixation on the Ukrainian accusation rather than on the atrocity itself, the need to hold the perpetrators accountable, or the unprofessionalism and indiscipline of soldiers committing such crimes suggests that these Russian commentators are very concerned about inter-ethnic tensions in Russia and the Russian armed forces.

Ukrainian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 30. Geolocated footage posted on October 30 shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced northeast of Kurdyumivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[18] Additional geolocated footage from October 29 indicates that Ukrainian forces have marginally advanced west of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[19] The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that Ukrainian forces are continuing offensive actions near Bakhmut and offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[20]

Russian forces continue to use "Storm-Z" assault units predominantly made up of prisoner recruits in highly attritional infantry-led frontal assaults. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on October 30 that Russian forces are preparing to conduct "meat assaults" (colloquial jargon for infantry-led frontal assaults) near Avdiivka and are training "Storm-Z" assault units for future assaults without equipment.[21] A Russian milblogger reportedly serving in the Avdiivka direction claimed that "meat assaults" are when Russian infantry forces attack without artillery support to suppress Ukrainian firing positions.[22] The milblogger claimed that when two Russian regiments conduct "meat assaults" side by side, the seam between the areas of responsibility of both regiments remains unsecured and vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks. Another Russian milblogger claimed that "Storm-Z" assault detachments in the Avdiivka direction and on Bakhmut's southern flank are often destroyed after a few days of active operations and on average lose between 40-70 percent of their personnel.[23] The milblogger criticized the Russian military's poor training of "Storm-Z" units and the unwillingness of superior officers to consider the proposals of "Storm-Z" commanders when assigning them combat missions. The milblogger stated that "Storm-Z" units are often introduced into battle before conducting reconnaissance or establishing connections with neighboring units and typically struggle to evacuate their wounded without artillery cover, leading to higher losses. Both milbloggers noted the lack of proper artillery support for Russian attacks and counterattacks.[24] One milblogger stated that these factors contribute to "Storm-Z" units being turned into "trash" before achieving any significant results.[25] ISW has frequently reported on the ineffectiveness of "Storm-Z" units.[26]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu highlighted the allegedly cooperative nature of the Russian-Chinese relationship at the 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum on October 30. Shoigu labeled the Russian-Chinese relationship as a "comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction" and stated that Russia and China consider each other "priority partners." [27] Shoigu claimed that the confidential contacts between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping play a "special role" in maintaining the "traditionally friendly relations" between the two states.[28] Shoigu highlighted Russia's cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and noted Russia's desire to increase military and military-technical cooperation with states in the Asian-Pacific region.[29] Despite Shoigu's characterizations of the Russian-Chinese partnership, the majority of his speech focused not on Russia's relationship with China, but rather on the alleged threats of the West, NATO, and the war in Ukraine, likely in an attempt to paint a picture of a world hostile to Moscow and Beijing.[30] ISW continues to assess that China has reservations concerning the Kremlin's desired "no limits partnership" between the two states.[31]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 29 to 30. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 30 that Russian forces launched 12 Shahed 131/136 drones, two Kh-59 missiles, and four Iskander missiles against Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses downed all the Shahed drones and the Kh-59s.[32] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command stated that Russian Iskander missiles struck port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.[33] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are beginning to use several new "smart" glide bombs – the FAB-250, FAB-500, and FAB-1500. [34] The milblogger claimed that the new glide bombs have laser and satellite guidance, making the accuracy of their impact radius as small as 5 meters, compared to conventional air bombs with an accurate impact radius of 50 meters. The bombs reportedly have a strike range of 200 kilometers. The milblogger claimed that Russian FAB-250 bombs weigh 250 kilograms, hold an explosive weight of 99 kilograms, have a damage radius of 120 meters, and can destroy manpower, equipment, and light fortifications. Russian FAB-500 bombs reportedly weigh 500 kilograms, hold an explosive weight of 150 kilograms, have a damage radius of 250 meters, and can destroy headquarters, warehouses, and concrete and reinforced concrete objects. Russian FAB-1500 bombs weigh 1550 kilograms, hold an explosive weight of 675 kilograms, have a damage radius of 500 meters, and can destroy underground bunkers up to 20 meters in depth and penetrate up to 3 meters of reinforced concrete. The milblogger claimed that Russian forces can arm Su-34, Su-30, and Su-35 aircraft with the new glide bombs.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian officials announced that Russian law enforcement suppressed antisemitic riots in Makhachkala, Republic of Dagestan on October 30. Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to the October 29 antisemitic demonstrations in Dagestan by accusing Ukraine of trying to "instigate pogroms in Russia" under Western guidance.
- A minority of Russian officials directly condemned rioters and regional authorities for ignoring antisemitic attitudes in Dagestan.

- The October 29 riots in Dagestan highlight the growing radicalization and factionalism of Russian society resulting from the hyper-nationalist ideologies that the war in Ukraine has empowered.
- Unidentified Russian soldiers reportedly murdered a Ukrainian family in occupied Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast, further highlighting a threatening environment of violence that is pervasive throughout occupied areas of Ukraine. Several Russian commentators exploited the circumstances of the tragedy in Volnovakha to accuse Ukraine of trying to stoke interethnic tensions within the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 30.
- Russian forces continue to use "Storm-Z" assault units predominantly made up of prisoner recruits in highly attritional infantry-led frontal assaults.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu highlighted the allegedly cooperative nature of the Russian-Chinese relationship at the 10th Beijing Xiangshan Forum on October 30.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 30 and advanced in some areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 29, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 29, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control-of-terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:30pm ET on October 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ongoing antisemitic demonstrations in the Republic of Dagestan and elsewhere in the North Caucasus are highlighting heightened interethnic and interreligious tensions in Russia. Hundreds of demonstrators in Dagestan broke into Makhachkala airport, blocked the runway, and attempted to board a plane arriving from Israel on the evening of October 29 following the circulation of rumors that Russian authorities were planning to resettle "Israeli refugees" in Dagestan and elsewhere in the North Caucasus.^[1] Hundreds of demonstrators gathered at a hotel in Khasavyurt, Dagestan on the evening of October 28 to look for suspected "Israeli refugees" based on similar rumors.^[2] Unknown actors reportedly set fire to a Jewish cultural center under construction in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkarian Republic on the night of October 28 to 29.^[3]

The rumors appear to have originated with a local Dagestani Telegram channel, which claimed that "Israeli refugees" were staying at the hotel in Khasavyurt, Dagestan on October 28 and proceeded to announce plans for demonstrations that took place several hours later in the center of Makhachkala.^[4] The Telegram channel called on Makhachkala residents to demonstrate at the airport on the night of October 28 and on October 29 and posted flight tracker data for the plane from Israel ahead of its arrival on the night of October 29.^[5] Demonstrations are currently ongoing at the Makhachkala airport, where demonstrators temporarily blocked all individuals at the airport from leaving. Demonstrators also checked identification documents in search of Israeli citizens, although there are no reports of demonstrators finding any Israeli citizens.^[6] Demonstrators have chanted "death to Jews" and have also occasionally gotten physical with security personnel at the airport.^[7] Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) elements have removed demonstrators from the premises of the airport, but crowds are still present outside of the airport.^[8] The Telegram channel that spread the rumors is currently down, which may be the first indicator that Russian authorities are actively trying to suppress the continuation of the antisemitic demonstrations.

The Kremlin has yet to respond and appears to have left regional authorities to make an official response to the demonstrations. Dagestani Republic Head Sergei Melikov, Karachay Cherkess Republic Head Rashid Temrezov, and Kabardino-Balkarian Republic Head Kazbek Kokov called on residents of the North Caucasus earlier on October 29 to refrain from aggressive actions and to suppress attempts to incite interethnic hatred.^[9] The Coordination Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus specifically denounced antisemitic actions following the initial demonstrations on the evening of October 28.^[10] Dagestani Minister of National Policy Enrik Muslimov and Minister of Youth Kamil Saidov later arrived at the airport on October 29 to speak with demonstrators but appeared unable to dissuade them from breaking into the premises.^[11] Melikov later called the demonstration a violation of the law and the Main Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of the North Caucasus Federal District warned about the illegality of holding demonstrations without prior government approval.^[12]

The Kremlin will likely struggle to reassure constituencies that the situation is under control and convince Jewish audiences that Jewish minorities are safe in Russia despite its efforts to present Russia as a religiously tolerant country. Spokesperson for Russia's Chief Rabbinate in Dagestan Ovadya Isakov stated on October 29 that hundreds of Jewish families in Dagestan should leave Dagestan and Russia altogether because "Russia is not salvation" as "there were pogroms in Russia too."^[13] Russian President Vladimir Putin lauded Russia as a beacon of religious harmony at a meeting with leaders of several Russian religious organizations, including Jewish and Islamic faith leaders, on October 25.^[14] The Kremlin likely aims to present Russia as protecting its religious minorities to curry favor with Muslim and Jewish audiences against the backdrop of the Israeli-Hamas war and to downplay tensions caused by the increasingly ultranationalist Russian Orthodox Church.^[15]

Russian ultranationalists expressed concerns that antisemitic demonstrations will spread from Dagestan and the North Caucasus to elsewhere in Russia. Select Russian ultranationalists blamed the initial rumors on a Ukrainian information operation, but others expressed deep concerns that antisemitic activities may spread and that anti-Russian activities could begin.[16] One Russian milblogger rhetorically asked if there would be “pogroms” in Moscow and claimed that the demonstrations may lead to a situation reminiscent of the murders of ethnic Russians in Tajikistan and the Republic of Chechnya in the 1990s.[17] Russian ultranationalists may also begin to heavily criticize Russian authorities’ response to the demonstrations, as several Russian sources bemoaned what they described as a lax official response so far.[18]

Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Head Alexander Bortnikov and Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin may be attempting to capitalize on heightened ethnoreligious tensions in Russia to regain favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russian milbloggers observed that Russian officials failed to implement Putin’s 2012 policies incentivizing migration to Russia to fix Russia’s demographic issues.[19] The milbloggers complained that Putin’s policies, while well intended and correct, failed to increase the birth rates or reduce mortality rates to necessary levels and failed to properly integrate the migrants into Russian society and identity.[20] The milbloggers claimed that these policies will not change as long as older politicians from Putin’s generation remain in power. One milblogger explicitly named Bortnikov and Bastrykin as “trusted people” who must “fly into [Putin’s] orbit and personally convince him of the need to change [Russia’s] migration policy.”[21] This mention of Bortnikov and Bastrykin implies that they have fallen from Putin’s favor and portrays them as the people whom Putin needs to solve Russia’s recent ethnoreligious tensions involving Central Asian migrants. The Kremlin is typically slow to respond to events highlighting ethnoreligious tensions, including recent complaints of migrants attacking Russian children, often unintentionally fueling a cycle involving Russian ultranationalist anger at the Russian government for inaction that further exacerbates ethnoreligious tensions.[22] Bortnikov and Bastrykin may seek to portray themselves via the Russian information space as capable of breaking this cycle.[23]

Russian milbloggers claimed on October 29 that Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky replaced Colonel General Oleg Makarevich as the commander of the Russian “Dnep” Grouping of Forces operating in the Kherson direction. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not announced or confirmed reports of Makarevich’s dismissal at the time of this publication and is unlikely to do so given its tendency to regularly conceal high-profile military command changes.[24] One Russian blogger claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed Makarevich during his recent visit to the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on October 19.[25] The blogger also claimed that Teplinsky was effectively demoted from his position as deputy overall theater commander, although it is unclear if Teplinsky still held this position.[26] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that rumors about Makarevich’s dismissal emerged over the last week and that his removal was “long overdue” due to his handling of the military situation in the Kherson direction.[27] The milblogger added that Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Colonel General Alexei Kim effectively commands the entire Joint Grouping of Russian Forces in Ukraine.[28] ISW cannot independently verify these claims.

Makarevich’s reported dismissal indicates that the Kremlin or the Russian military command may be sufficiently worried and skeptical of his ability to repel recent larger-than-usual Ukrainian ground operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that a small Ukrainian “bridgehead” in Krynyk (a settlement on east bank Kherson Oblast) likely triggered Makarevich’s removal.[29] Other Russian milbloggers reiterated similar theories, claiming that Makarevich’s negligence and extreme lack of command initiative enabled repeated Ukrainian landings on east bank Kherson Oblast.[30] One milblogger claimed that Ukrainian “bridgeheads” on east bank Kherson Oblast are setting a dangerous precedent and that Russian forces under Makarevich’s command were unable to adequately counter and respond to Ukrainian threats.[31]

Makarevich’s opponents, alternatively, may have been successful in convincing Russian President Vladimir Putin of Makarevich’s failure to command the Kherson direction against the backdrop of intensified Ukrainian ground attacks. A select group of Russian milbloggers previously accused Makarevich of failing to adequately command and equip Russian forces to respond to Ukrainian raids on east bank Kherson Oblast in summer 2023.[32] Some of these milbloggers notably praised Teplinsky and criticized Makarevich after he reportedly replaced Teplinsky as the VDV commander in winter 2023.[33] A Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger claimed that Makarevich was removed from his position after unspecified intelligence officials notified the Russian “high command” - possibly implying Putin - about Makarevich’s failure to provide accurate information about the situation in the area of his responsibility.[34] One Russian blogger also claimed that Russian milbloggers who have been fighting for Makarevich’s removal should rejoice.[35]

Ukrainian forces advanced near Bakhmut amid continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 29. Geolocated footage published on October 29 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced over the railway line south of Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[36] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued assault operations south of Bakhmut and continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[37] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces established control over unspecified positions in the Zaporizhia direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast) over the past week.[38]

The New York Times (NYT) reported that US officials will send Ukraine hybrid air defense systems in fall 2023.[39] The NYT cited US officials talking about the so-called FrankenSAM systems that merge advanced Western air defense missiles with modified Soviet launchers or other missile launchers that Ukraine already possesses.[40] The FrankenSAM combinations include modified Soviet Buk launchers and American Sea Sparrow missiles, Soviet-era radars and American Sidewinder missiles, and Cold War-era Hawk systems.[41] The NYT reported that the US is testing a FrankenSAM combination of a Patriot missile and a Ukrainian domestically produced radar system.[42] US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Policy Laura Cooper stated that the FrankenSAMs contribute to filling critical gaps in Ukrainian air defenses.[43]

Unspecified actors may have purposefully conspired to shut down a prominent Russian Airborne Forces (VDV)-affiliated milblogger. A Russian VDV-affiliated milblogger announced on October 28 that he was forced to shut down his Telegram channel, implying that unspecified actors abducted the raccoon that the milblogger had been using as a mascot to help gain notoriety and fundraise for Russian forces.[44] The milblogger claimed that the channel generated over 20 million rubles (\$212,000) for Russian forces within a year.[45] The raccoon gained fame when Russian forces stole it from a zoo when withdrawing from west (right) bank Kherson Oblast in November 2022.[46] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has increasingly targeted Russian milbloggers in censorship and self-censorship campaigns, and it is possible that MoD-affiliated actors aimed to censor this milblogger.[47] The milblogger claimed that “traitors” abducted the raccoon and left occupied Ukraine and suggested that the milblogger may have personally known who took the animal, however.[48] Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that the raccoon had previously attacked Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo and criticized the Russians for losing the raccoon.[49] ISW is unable independently to confirm reports of the raccoon’s whereabouts or actions.

The Russian information space continues to debate the future of the Wagner Group's remaining personnel. Wagner-affiliated Russian milbloggers claimed on October 28 that the Wagner Group is officially a detachment of Rosgvardia and will retain its structures and commanders.^[50] The milbloggers claimed that Rosgvardia is encouraging active and reserve Wagner personnel to sign contracts with Rosgvardia, including six-month contracts for service in Ukraine or nine-month contracts for service in Belarus, the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America. A smaller group of Wagner-affiliated Russian milbloggers denied recent reports that large groups of former Wagner personnel are joining Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz units in Russia or the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) Expeditionary Force in Syria.^[51] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov posted footage on October 29 claiming to show "Akhmat" Commander Apty Alaudinov and Russian State Duma Deputy Nikolai Brykin welcoming 170 former Wagner fighters to "Akhmat" units.^[52]

Key Takeaways:

- Ongoing antisemitic demonstrations in the Republic of Dagestan and elsewhere in the North Caucasus are highlighting heightened interethnic and interreligious tensions in Russia.
- The Kremlin has yet to respond and appears to have left regional authorities to make an official response to the demonstrations.
- The Kremlin will likely struggle to reassure constituencies that the situation is under control and convince Jewish audiences that Jewish minorities are safe in Russia despite its efforts to present Russia as a religiously tolerant country.
- Russian ultranationalists expressed concerns that antisemitic demonstrations will spread from Dagestan and the North Caucasus elsewhere in Russia.
- Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Head Alexander Bortnikov and Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin may be attempting to capitalize on heightened ethnoreligious tensions in Russia to regain favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Russian milbloggers claimed on October 29 that Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky replaced Colonel General Oleg Makarevich as the commander of the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces operating in the Kherson direction.
- Ukrainian forces advanced near Bakhmut amid continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 29.
- *The New York Times (NYT)* reported that US officials will send Ukraine hybrid air defense systems in fall 2023.
- Unspecified actors may have purposefully conspired to shut down a prominent Russian Airborne Forces (VDV)-affiliated milblogger.
- The Russian information space continues to debate the future of the Wagner Group's remaining personnel.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced west of Donetsk City.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces have begun deploying a new electronic warfare (EW) data station system in Ukraine.
- Russian military personnel continue to commit violent crimes in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 28, 2023

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Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 28, 2023, 7:50pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Remnants of the Wagner Group appear to be fighting in the Avdiivka direction subordinate to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) controlled formations. A Russian military correspondent published an interview on October 25 with the commander of the Russian "Arbat" Separate Guards Special Purpose Battalion that is serving the Avdiivka direction, who claimed that an element of the Arbat Battalion is almost entirely composed of former Wagner personnel.^[1] The commander claimed that the Avdiivka direction is the Arbat Battalion's "main direction" because the unit is part of the "Dikaya Division of Donbas" and the "Pyatnashka" Brigade — a Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) formation that is responsible for the defending Donetsk City.^[2] The commander noted that the Wagner-staffed unit sends drone operators, electronic warfare (EW) specialists, and other fighters to other units in different frontline sectors as needed. The correspondent also indicated that the Arbat Battalion is part of the Russian Armed Forces, and it is likely that the brigade consists of former Wagner personnel who signed military contracts directly with the Russian MoD following Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion and/or his death.

A Ukrainian military observer also stated on October 25 that Wagner Group remnants are fighting near Avdiivka.^[3] Ukrainian and Russian sources have previously stated that small groups of former Wagner personnel, possibly under Russian MoD-controlled formations, are deployed to the Bakhmut area.^[4] It is too early to determine what role former Wagner personnel may play in Russian offensive operations against Avdiivka. The Arbat Battalion's commander noted that the battalion's situation on the front line is "good but not great" due to heavy personnel losses near Avdiivka.^[5] Ukrainian military observers expressed concern about continued Russian operations in the Avdiivka direction, however.^[6]

Commander of the "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces Apty Alaudinov confirmed that Rosgvardia is recruiting former Wagner fighters into Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz units. Alaudinov stated in an interview published on October 28 that a "massive" number of Wagner soldiers have joined various detachments of the

"Akhmat" forces and are operating in several unspecified sectors of the front in Ukraine.^[7] Alaudinov claimed that former Wagner soldiers are following their former commanders to the "Akhmat" units. Alaudinov noted that Wagner fighters have "always spoken very respectfully about ['Akhmat']," likely in an attempt to stifle discussions of possible tension between the Wagner and Chechen forces after the feud between deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov.^[8] ISW continues to assess that former Wagner forces fragmented between the Russian MoD and Rosgvardia Chechen units across various sectors of the front are unlikely to reemerge as an effective military organization as they will lack the strength Wagner had drawn from being a unitary organization under clear and coherent leadership.^[9] They may be tactical combat power multipliers for the units they embed with in some circumstances, however.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 28. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations south of Bakhmut and in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.^[10] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Robotyne, Nesteryanka (12km northwest of Robotyne), Kopani (6km northwest of Robotyne), Rivne (8km west of Robotyne), Novopokrovka (3km south of Robotyne), and Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).^[11] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed on October 27 that Ukrainian forces achieved "minor successes" during attacks near Robotyne.^[12]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes against Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on the night of October 27 to 28. Ukrainian military sources reported on October 28 that Ukrainian air defenses downed three of four Iskander-K cruise missiles that Russian forces launched from Crimea.^[13] The fourth missile reportedly did not reach its target.^[14] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian infrastructure in Kryvyi Rih and Dnipro City, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and Izmail, Odesa Oblast.^[15]

Russian forces are reportedly using a new version of the "Lancet" kamikaze drone that can autonomously identify targets. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces began using the new "Izdeliye-53" kamikaze drone as of October 21.^[16] The sources claimed that the "Izdeliye-53" drone reportedly has an automatic guidance system that can distinguish types of targets and increase strike success rates.^[17] Russian forces are reportedly not using the "Izdeliye-53" drones on a wide scale yet, but Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are currently testing the drones for mass synchronized swarm strikes.^[18] ISW previously reported on October 24 that Russian forces also allegedly recently used the new "Italmas" (also known as "Izdeliye-54") drones during a drone strike on Kyiv Oblast.^[19] ISW also previously assessed that the Russian command may believe that a large number of strike drones will allow Russian forces to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses, although the payload of the "Izdeliye-53" drones, which is reportedly between three and five kilograms, may not be sufficient to significantly damage most critical military targets.^[20]

Russian authorities are capitalizing on domestic ethnic tensions by increasing public coercion of Central Asian migrants into Russian military service, likely to appeal to Russian ultranationalists ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's expected presidential campaign announcement. The Moscow Investigative Committee announced on October 27 that it began 12 criminal investigations against naturalized migrants for evading military service and claimed that this number rose on October 28 to 22 opened investigations with 80 migrants already sent to military service.^[21] Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Rosgvardia agents detained 40 migrant taxi drivers during a raid at the Norilsk airport in Krasnoyarsk Krai on October 27 for allegedly failing to register with Russian military registration and enlistment offices.^[22] These announcements are part of a series of recent measures and statements that highly publicize Russian intent and efforts to mobilize Central Asian migrants likely aimed to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin's ultranationalist constituency, which has long expressed hatred for Central Asian migrants and increasingly called for these migrants to serve in the Russian military.^[23]

The Kremlin maintains a relatively measured stance on alleged migrant crimes against ethnic Russians, likely unintentionally establishing a cycle that keeps these ethnic tensions in frequent Russian ultranationalist dialogue. Russian ultranationalist milbloggers expressed anger on October 28 over criticisms of footage that shows a Russian man insulting migrant children while breaking up an alleged fight between 10 migrant children and an ethnic Russian child in Rostov-on-Don.^[24] The milbloggers insulted the children and the wider migrant community, with some even claiming that the migrant children intended to kill the ethnic Russian child, but largely praised the Russian man for intervening.^[25] The milbloggers claimed that such incidents are commonplace and that no one cares or steps in to mitigate the incidents.^[26] Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin announced an investigation into the Rostov-on-Don incident on October 27 as well as claims of separate incidents in Chelyabinsk Oblast on October 25 and Novosibirsk and Novgorod oblasts on October 28.^[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Remnants of the Wagner Group appear to be fighting in the Avdiivka direction subordinate to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) controlled formations.
- Commander of the "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces Apty Alaudinov confirmed that Rosgvardia is recruiting former Wagner fighters into Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz units.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 28.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes against Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on the night of October 27 to 28.
- Russian authorities are capitalizing on domestic ethnic tensions by increasing public coercion of Central Asian migrants into Russian military service, likely to appeal to Russian ultranationalists ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's expected presidential campaign announcement.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that he personally heard Russian President Vladimir Putin express his decision to send Russian conscripts to serve in the Russian Border Service.
- Pro-Ukrainian actors reportedly conducted a cyber attack against Russian telecom operators in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 27, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Geolocated footage published on October 27 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced further south under the Antonivsky road bridge north of Oleshky (7km south of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River).[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[2]

Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 26 to 27. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched one Iskander-M ballistic missile from Voronezh Oblast and six Shahed-131/136 drones from the near Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and that Ukrainian forces destroyed five Shaheds over Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts.[3] Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported on October 27 that Russian forces launched over 500 Shaheds targeting critical infrastructure and military facilities in Ukraine in September 2023.[4] Ihnat also stated that the composite materials for the fuselage of modernized Shaheds make them harder to detect and that weather conditions do not affect Russian Shahed operations.[5]

Germany and Denmark announced new military aid packages to Ukraine on October 27. The Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced a package of military materiel support for Ukraine valued at 3.7 billion kroner (about \$520 million) that includes T-72 tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, artillery ammunition, and drones. [6] The German government announced a military aid package valued at around 5.4 billion euros (about \$5.7 billion) that includes MARS II anti-aircraft missiles and an additional IRIS-T SLM air defense system.[7]

Unspecified actors attempted to assassinate Russian-backed former separatist Ukrainian politician Oleg Tsaryov on October 27. Tsaryov's Telegram channel reported that unspecified actors shot Tsaryov twice at his home in occupied Yalta, Crimea.[8] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) opened an investigation into the assassination attempt against Tsaryov.[9] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that Tsaryov is in intensive care.[10] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Kremlin did not have information on the assassination attempt against Tsaryov.[11]

Russian authorities reportedly arrested Russian citizens who allegedly used Telegram channels, including some that identify themselves as insider sources, to extort money from Russian officials. Russian state media outlet TASS reported on October 27 that the Tverskoy Court of Moscow arrested Anton Safonov and detained Stanislav Daineko, both of whom work in public relations, for extorting more than 2 million rubles (about \$21,200) from Rostec Director for Special Assignments Vasily Brovko in exchange for not publishing potentially compromising information on the "Nebrekhnya" Telegram channel.[12] The "Provisional Government" Telegram channel, which stated that it has previously published allegations about Brovko's involvement in corruption schemes, claimed that Brovko has close ties to the well-connected Rostec Director, Sergei Chemezov.[13] Another Russian insider source claimed on October 26 and 27 that Brovko initiated searches of the administrators of the "Nebrekhnya" and "Provisional Government" channels, but the "Provisional Government" Telegram channel denied claims on October 27 that authorities searched and detained its own administrators.[14] A Russian insider source claimed that the case concerns events from April to August 2022 that involved more than 20 Telegram channels, including some insider sources and the "Nebrekhnya" and "Provisional Government" channels.[15] Russian authorities have previously detained reported administrators of popular Telegram insider source channels that possibly used secret information to extort Russian officials.[16]

Russian authorities have likely coerced Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) into joining a "volunteer" formation that will fight in Ukraine, which would constitute an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. Russian state media reported on October 27 that the "Bogdan Khmelnytsky" volunteer battalion "recruited" roughly 70 Ukrainian POWs from various Russian penal colonies, has begun training, and will deploy to an unspecified area of the front line upon completion of training.[17] Coercing POWs into combat 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 labor which is of an unhealthy or dangerous nature," as ISW has previously reported.[18]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces marginally advanced on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 27.**
- **Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 26 to 27**
- **Unspecified actors attempted to assassinate Russian-backed former separatist Ukrainian politician Oleg Tsaryov on October 27.**
- **Russian authorities reportedly arrested Russian citizens who allegedly used Telegram channels, including some that identify themselves as insider sources, to extort money from Russian officials.**
- **Russian authorities have likely coerced Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) into joining a "volunteer" formation that will fight in Ukraine, which would constitute an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations near Avdiivka on October 27 but did not make any confirmed advances. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on October 26 that Russian forces have suffered thousands of casualties and have lost at least 125 armored vehicles in recent offensive operations near Avdiivka.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, southwest of Donetsk City, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia and advanced near Bakhmut.**
- **Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov announced the formation of a second Chechen volunteer formation named for a second Chechen figure who fought against imperial Russian rule.**
- **Russian occupation authorities cracked down against pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels operating in occupied Ukraine.**

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 26, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Heavy Russian equipment losses around Avdiivka will likely undermine Russian offensive capabilities over the long term. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on October 26 that Russian forces have suffered 5,000 personnel killed and wounded and 400 armored vehicles losses near Avdiivka and Marinka (southwest of Donetsk City) since October 10.[1] Satellite imagery has confirmed that the Russian military has lost at least 109 military vehicles, primarily armored fighting vehicles and tanks, near Avdiivka between October 10 and 20.[2] A Ukrainian reserve officer stated that Russian forces appear to be using fewer armored vehicles near Avdiivka, although Russian forces may be regrouping for renewed large mechanized assaults as they did between the initial mechanized assaults on October 10 and a second series of large mechanized assaults on October 19 and 20.[3] The Russian command has funneled additional forces to the Avdiivka front to offset heavy manpower losses and maintain the Russian military's ability to sustain its ongoing offensive effort.[4]

The Russian command will likely struggle to offset Russian equipment losses, particularly in armored vehicles, however. Widespread Russian equipment losses and shortages in the first year of the full-scale invasion heavily restricted Russia's ability to conduct effective mechanized maneuver warfare during the Russian military's winter-spring 2023 offensive, contributing to further losses in disorderly mechanized assaults near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast in January and February 2023.[5] Heavy losses around Vuhledar likely prevented the Russian command from committing to sustained mechanized assaults elsewhere in Ukraine later in the winter-spring 2023 offensive.[6] Recent Russian equipment losses around Avdiivka appear to be much larger than earlier equipment losses around Vuhledar. It remains unclear if the prospect of further heavy equipment losses will deter the Russian command from launching another series of large, mechanized assaults near Avdiivka. Russia has gradually mobilized elements of its defense industrial base (DIB) to address equipment shortages but has not done so at a scale remotely sufficient to offset the cumulative Russian equipment losses in Ukraine.[7] Recent Russian equipment losses around Avdiivka will likely lead to even more pronounced Russian equipment shortages and setbacks for any progress that the Russian military has made in addressing degraded mechanized maneuver warfare capabilities.

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Geolocated footage published on October 25 shows that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced north of Pidstepne (15km east of Kherson City). [8] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[9]

Ukrainian officials denied reports that Ukraine suspended a corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea on October 26. Reuters reported that British security firm Ambrey, Ukrainian consulting firm Barva Invest, and specialized Ukrainian news outlet *Ukrainian Ports* stated that Ukraine had temporarily suspended traffic through the corridor on October 26.[10] Barva Invest stated that the Ukrainian Sea Ports Administration announced the suspension on the evening of October 25 and that a *de facto* suspension had already been in place for two days.[11] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that many factors, including threats from Russian forces and weather, affect the Ukrainian military's decisions to allow individual civilian vessels to pass through the corridor.[12] The Ukrainian Ministry of Reconstruction and the Ukrainian Minister for Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Development, Oleksandr Kubrakov, later clarified that reports about the suspension are false and that civilian vessels are using all available routes established by the Ukrainian Navy. [13] Russia has continually pursued efforts to disrupt Ukrainian grain exports and curtail maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports and will likely continue escalatory posturing in the Black Sea meant to undermine confidence in the Ukrainian corridor.[14]

An amendment to the Russian citizenship law allowing for the revocation of naturalized Russian citizenship came into force on October 26, providing the Russian government with a new mechanism to coerce migrants into Russian military service. The amendment most notably allows Russian authorities to revoke Russian citizenship from naturalized citizens who are convicted of discrediting the Russian military and of committing "certain crimes encroaching on public and personal safety" regardless of when the crime was committed, the date of sentencing, or for how long the convicted has held Russian citizenship.[15] Russian authorities have recently increased raids against migrants accused of committing crimes to deliver summonses and impress migrants into signing military contracts. [16] Russian authorities will likely use this new amendment to further recruit naturalized migrants under threat of revoking their Russian citizenship or after having done so.[17] It is unclear what procedure Russian authorities will follow once they deprive someone of their citizenship, and Russian authorities may intend to use deportation procedures to increase the number of migrants in detention centers, where Russian officials regularly try to recruit.[18] Russian authorities will also likely exploit denaturalized migrants whose labor options will become limited upon conviction of a crime and loss of their Russian citizenship and therefore more vulnerable to military recruitment efforts. The new amendment to the citizenship law also streamlines the process for allocating Russian citizenship to certain individuals, including children with at least one Russian parent, migrants currently residing in Russia, and participants in the Russian state resettlement program, by removing certain entrance requirements.[19]

The EU is reportedly behind on its artillery ammunition round provision to Ukraine. Unspecified sources told Bloomberg in an article published on October 25 that the EU has currently delivered only 30 percent of the promised one million shells that are expected by March 2024.[20] Bloomberg also reported that some unspecified countries have asked to extend the provision deadline.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) and the UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) recently announced new military aid packages to Ukraine. The UK MoD announced on October 11 a new package of military material support for Ukraine valued at over 100 million pounds (about \$121 million).[21] The US DoD announced on October 26 a new security assistance package valued at up to \$150 million in materiel.[22]

Armenia continues to distance itself from Russia amid deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published on October 25 that there are no "advantages" to the continued presence of Russian military bases in Armenia. [23] Pashinyan also stated that Armenia is in the process of diversifying its security partnerships.[24] Pashinyan previously stated on October 11 that Russian peacekeepers should return to Russia instead of the Russian bases in Armenia if they leave Nagorno-Karabakh.[25]

A senior Hamas delegation traveled to Moscow and met with Russian and Iranian officials on October 26.[26] (*NOTE: This text also appeared in the Critical Threats Project (CTP)'s October 26 Iran Update*) Hamas' International Relation Office head and political bureau member Musa Abu Marzouk led a delegation, which also included the Health Minister of the Gaza Strip, Basem Naim.[27] The delegation held a joint meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister and Special Representative for the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov and Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani. Hamas leaders issued statements around the visit praising Russia's stance toward the Israel-Hamas war. Russia has framed itself as a possible mediator between Israel and Hamas and submitted a UN resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire on October 16. The UN resolution failed to mention Hamas by name.[28] The Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry condemned Russia's

invitation to Hamas on October 26.[29] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is already exploiting and will likely continue to exploit the Israel-Hamas war to advance several information operations intended to reduce US and Western support for and attention to Ukraine.[30] A senior Hamas delegation most recently visited Moscow in March 2023 amid strained tensions between Russia and Israel over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- Heavy Russian equipment losses around Avdiivka will likely undermine Russian offensive capabilities over the long term.
- Ukrainian forces marginally advanced on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials denied reports that Ukraine suspended a corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea on October 26.
- An amendment to the Russian citizenship law allowing for the revocation of naturalized Russian citizenship came into force on October 26, providing the Russian government with a new mechanism to coerce migrants into Russian military service.
- A senior Hamas delegation traveled to Moscow and met with Russian and Iranian officials on October 26.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Several Russian opposition outlets reported that Russian defense industrial base (DIB) companies continue to use Western components supplied through intermediaries to manufacture missiles to use against Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to forcibly indoctrinate Ukrainian youth into Russian culture and identity through the expansion of military-patriotic educational programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 25, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 25, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut on October 25. Geolocated footage published on October 24 indicates that Ukrainian forces made further marginal advances west of Robotyne.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces also achieved unspecified partial success west of Verbove (9km west of Robotyne).[2] Ukrainian Ground Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on October 24 that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[3]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a fall-winter Russian strike campaign against Ukraine after another series of Russian drone strikes on the night of October 24 to 25. Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed a total of 11 Russian Shahed-131/136 drones over Khmelnytskyi and Mykolaiv oblasts.[4] Zelensky stated that Ukraine is preparing to defend against a Russian fall-winter strike campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure and suggested that Ukraine is planning for its own strikes on Russian military assets in turn.[5] Zelensky stated that the Russian military is aware of Ukraine's intentions to strike Russian military infrastructure in Crimea and Russia and is moving the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) away from Crimea and Russian aircraft further from the Russia-Ukraine border, likely in response to continued Ukrainian strikes against Russian naval and aviation assets.[6]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited an Eastern Grouping of Forces command post in the south Donetsk direction (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) on October 25.[7] Shoigu awarded medals to the commanders of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) and 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) and claimed that these units successfully repelled Ukrainian offensive operations.[8] ISW has observed recent claims that elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade are operating in the Kherson direction, however.[9]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that Lieutenant General Andrei Kuzmenko is the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander on October 25, likely also confirming Kuzmenko's position as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.[10] The Russian MoD published footage on October 25 of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu meeting with Kuzmenko at a command post in the south Donetsk direction.[11] Kuzmenko's likely appointment as EMD commander is consistent with Russian and Ukrainian sources' speculations in March 2023 that Kuzmenko would replace Colonel General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.[12]

The Kremlin's support for ultranationalist Russian Orthodox religion and ideology appears to be complicating Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's ability to balance appealing to his Chechen Muslim constituencies with keeping the Kremlin's favor. Kadyrov delivered inconsistent and potentially inflammatory domestic religious messaging on October 24, suggesting that he is struggling to reconcile his enthusiastic support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has routinely postured himself as the true protector of the Orthodox Christian faith, and Kadyrov's own persona as a staunch representative of Chechnya's Islamic values. Kadyrov's son Adam recently ignited a notable domestic outcry in Russia against his father after Ramzan touted footage of Adam beating a detainee accused of burning the Quran.[13] Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov and Karachay-Cherkess Republic Head Rashid Temrezov awarded Adam Kadyrov for

developing "interethnic and interregional unity" and strengthening traditional Islamic values on October 24, an event that Kadyrov used to praise his son further despite the blowback against Adam's actions.[14] Kadyrov likely tried to balance the potentially inflammatory effects of publicly supporting his son's violence with publicly announcing the opening of an Orthodox Church in Chechnya alongside Rosgvardia Head Viktor Zolotov on October 25.[15]

Kadyrov promptly upset whatever informational effects he may have generated in balancing his response to Adam's awards with his meeting with Zolotov by announcing the creation of the "Sheikh Mansur" volunteer battalion. This announcement generated outrage from Russian ultranationalists because "Sheikh Mansur" is also the name of a volunteer battalion comprised of Chechen and Ichkerian volunteers fighting for Ukraine.[16] Sheikh Mansur was a Chechen fighter from the 18th Century who opposed Russian imperial rule. Kadyrov will likely continue to draw the ire of Russian ultranationalists who are increasingly opposed to migrants who come from predominantly Muslim Central Asian countries and other religious minorities in Russia with his continued efforts to appeal to his core Muslim constituencies. [17]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces marginally advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut on October 25.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Avdiivka on October 25 and made a confirmed advance.
- Russian sources claimed on October 25 that Ukrainian forces resumed larger-than-usual ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and maintain positions in several areas on the east bank. Only a handful of Russian sources are currently claiming that Ukrainian forces have resumed larger-than-usual ground operations on the east bank, however.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a fall-winter Russian strike campaign against Ukraine after another series of Russian drone strikes on the night of October 24 to 25.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited an Eastern Grouping of Forces command post in the south Donetsk direction (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) on October 25.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that Lieutenant General Andrei Kuzmenko is the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander on October 25, likely also confirming Kuzmenko's position as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.
- The Kremlin's support for ultranationalist Russian Orthodox religion and ideology appears to be complicating Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's ability to balance appealing to his Chechen Muslim constituencies with keeping the Kremlin's favor.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia but did not make confirmed advances.
- Russian National Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed that nearly 385,000 people have entered service with the Russian armed forces between January 1 and October 25, 2023.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to use medical infrastructure to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia and to further consolidate control of occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 24, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 24, 2023, 5:00pm ET

[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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on October 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine on October 24 and advanced south of Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Geolocated footage published on October 23 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced east of Andriivka (10 km southwest of Bakhmut), and geolocated footage published on October 24 indicates that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced west of Robotyne.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported on October 24 that Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions south of Bakhmut and achieved partial success near Robotyne.[2]

Russia appears to be increasingly supplementing the use of Shahed-131/136 drones with cheaper and lighter domestically produced drone variants during strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. Russian media speculated on October 23 that Russian forces used new long-range "Italmas" drones and Italmas variants for the first time in Ukraine during a drone attack on Kyiv Oblast.[3] Russian sources noted that Italmas drones are lighter than Shaheds and are harder to detect and shoot down. Russian milbloggers noted that Italmas drones are cheaper than Shaheds, which means that they can be more widely manufactured and used, but that they deliver lighter payloads, which restricts their usefulness in isolation.[4] Russian sources noted, therefore, that Russian forces will likely use the Italmas drones in tandem with Shaheds.[5] ISW previously assessed that Russia is likely trying to expand and diversify its arsenal of drones, missiles, and guided bombs for strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in advance of the fall-winter season, and increased use of Italmas drones is likely part of the wider munitions diversification effort.[6]

Russian authorities are intensifying mobilization efforts targeting Central Asian migrant communities in Russia. Russian Internal Affairs (MVD) Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev met with the MVD board to discuss "migration problems" and "ethnic crime" and insinuated that migrants commit crimes at a higher rate than natural born Russian citizens.^[7] Kolokoltsev defended recent Russian law enforcement mobilization raids on migrant communities and claimed that Russian law enforcement is enforcing standard legal norms.^[8] A Russian insider source claimed that the Russian Investigative Committee is conducting investigations into naturalized migrants with Russian citizenship and is reopening previously terminated and canceled criminal cases in order to mobilize migrants to fight in Ukraine.^[9] The insider source also claimed that the Russian Investigative Committee will now investigate migrants for committing any offense, even minor ones, and will expand that individual's investigation to include their friends and family. The insider source claimed that unspecified actors, possibly the MVD or MVD Head Alexander Bastrykin, ordered Russian state media to increase reporting about ethnic crime in Russia, likely to set informational conditions for further mobilization raids on migrant communities.^[10] Bastrykin has continually advocated for the targeted mobilization of migrants with Russian citizenship, in line with Russian law enforcement's recent expansion of its efforts to detain and forcibly register migrants with Russian citizenship for military service.^[11]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted diminishing Russian control over the Black Sea and Ukraine's temporary grain corridors during a speech at the Crimean Platform summit on October 24. Zelensky stated that Russia attempted to create the illusion that Russian dominance of the Black Sea was insurmountable but said that this illusion is fading as the Russia Black Sea Fleet (BSF) gradually "flees" Crimea and increasingly struggles to operate in the western Black Sea.^[12] Zelensky stated that the Russian authorities recently announced the creation of a new naval base for BSF assets in occupied Ochamchire, Abkhazia, far from the reach of long-range Ukrainian missiles and naval drones. ISW has previously reported on the impact of Ukraine's strike campaign against Crimea and BSF assets and the construction of a permanent Russian naval base in Abkhazia.^[13] Zelensky added that Russian forces no longer have a completely reliable logistical route between Crimea and mainland Russia. Zelensky noted that Ukraine has launched new temporary export routes from the Danube port in Odesa Oblast through the Black Sea and the overland "Solidarity Lanes" through Europe.^[14]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine on October 24 and advanced south of Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russia appears to be increasingly supplementing the use of Shahed-131/136 drones with cheaper and lighter domestically produced drone variants during strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure.
- Russian authorities are intensifying mobilization efforts targeting Central Asian migrant communities in Russia.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted diminishing Russian control over the Black Sea and Ukraine's temporary grain corridors during a speech at the Crimean Platform summit on October 24.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Avdiivka on October 24 and made confirmed advances northeast of Avdiivka.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain some positions in Krynyk (30km east of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) and continued limited attacks on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-affiliated "Redut" private military company (PMC) is reportedly trying to recruit women into combat roles.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to establish programs to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 23, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, and Mason Clark

October 23, 2023, 5:15pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia's domestic production of artillery shells, supplemented by increased ammunition imports from North Korea, will likely allow Russian forces to sustain sufficient rates of artillery fire in Ukraine in 2024, albeit at a relatively lower level than during 2022. Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Head Colonel Ants Kivilselg stated on October 20 that Russia still has around four million artillery shells remaining, which Russian forces can use for "low intensity" warfare for an additional year.^[1] Kivilselg noted that there are reports that North Korea has shipped up to 1,000 containers of ammunition to Russia, each containing between 300-500 pieces of artillery ammunition.^[2] Kivilselg estimated that North Korea may have therefore provided between 300,000-500,000 pieces of ammunition to Russia, which can last up to one month at the current daily rate of consumption of around 10,000 shells a day.^[3] Ukrainian military analyst Colonel Petro Chernykh reported on October 23 that Russian forces are currently firing between 10,000-15,000 shells a day, significantly lower than rates of fire in summer 2022 of 45,000-80,000 shells per day.^[4] However, Western sources and satellite imagery have confirmed that North Korean deliveries, likely mostly comprised of artillery shells, have drastically increased since Russian and North Korean authorities likely began more official military-technical cooperation in September, as ISW previously reported, and North Korea is likely to provide further deliveries.^[5] Based on Western estimates of Russian artillery production capacity and continued North Korean artillery exports, Russia will likely be able to maintain generally sufficient rates of fire in the foreseeable future. While an overall decrease in Russian fire rates could impede the ability of Russian forces to conduct large scale offensive operations, Russian forces are unlikely to face widespread shortages which would chronically undermine defensive operations, and the drop in the rate of fire will not inherently provide Ukrainian forces an advantage. The degree to which Ukraine's international partners sustain Ukraine's ability to sustain an effective weight of fire relative to Russian forces will be a key determiner of respective capabilities in 2024.

Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 22 to 23. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 13 Shahed-131/136 drones, one unspecified drone, and one Kh-59 cruise missile and that Ukrainian forces destroyed all targets.^[6] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces conducted nine airstrikes using an unspecified number of Kh-31 anti-radar air-to-surface missiles.^[7] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command also reported that Ukrainian forces shot down nine Shahed drones that Russian forces aimed at port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.^[8] Russian forces have routinely targeted port and grain infrastructure in Odesa Oblast, and Ukrainian officials reported that Russia will likely renew strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the fall and winter.^[9] Russia will likely continue to target Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure in an attempt to disrupt Ukrainian grain exports as Russia tries to expand its own grain exports, most recently through a 2.7 trillion-ruble (about \$26.5 billion) grain contract with China signed on October 17.^[10]

Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut on October 23 amid continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Geolocated footage published on October 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced across the railway line north of Klishchiiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), confirming prior statements by the Ukrainian General Staff and Russian milbloggers.^[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.^[12]

The Russian government appears to be emphasizing defense spending over social programs in the 2024 federal budget despite contrary messaging intended to reassure the Russian populace. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on October 23 that the Russian government's proposed 2024 budget includes a 68 percent increase in planned defense spending compared to 2023, increasing defense spending to six percent of Russian GDP.^[13] The UK MoD noted that the Russian government will likely spend more money on payments and healthcare costs for wounded servicemen, a large portion of whom will likely require lifelong medical care, and for families of Russian servicemen killed in combat. The UK MoD stated that consistently heightened military spending will likely contribute to greater inflation within Russia. The UK MoD added that the Russian government has not proposed increased civilian education or healthcare spending in the 2024 budget, effectively cutting those budgets considering inflation rates. Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov notably claimed on October 16 that the Russian 2024-2026 draft budget is "not a military budget" during a State Duma Budget and Tax Committee meeting.^[14] Siluanov added that the fulfillment of social obligations is one of the highest priority areas of the Russian federal budget, 30.5 percent of which is allocated to social issues. Siluanov's statement indicates that Russian authorities still feel the need to downplay increased defense spending ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections due to concerns about how the Russian population views this issue and the war in Ukraine as a whole. ISW previously reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly intends to discuss the war in Ukraine as little as possible in political messaging leading up to the presidential election.^[15] Russian authorities may increasingly highlight social spending over defense spending as the presidential election draws closer, despite the reality of increased defense spending.

Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on October 22 that the first group of Ukrainian pilots will begin training with instructors on F-16 fighter jets "in the near future."^[16] The pilots are currently training on F-16 simulators. Politico reported on October 13 that an unnamed US official stated that the pilots' training may be accelerated due to Ukrainian forces' urgent need for fighter jets.^[17]

Key Takeaways:

- Russia's domestic production of artillery shells, supplemented by increased ammunition imports from North Korea, will likely allow Russian forces to sustain sufficient rates of artillery fire in Ukraine in 2024, albeit at a relatively lower level than during 2022.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Avdiivka and made confirmed advances northeast of Avdiivka.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back from some newly captured positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast but noted that Ukrainian forces maintain a presence on the east bank.
- Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 22 to 23.
- Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut on October 23 amid continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian government appears to be emphasizing defense spending over social programs in the 2024 federal budget despite contrary messaging intended to reassure the Russian populace.
- Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on October 22 that the first group of Ukrainian pilots will begin training with instructors on F-16 fighter jets "in the near future."
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, along the Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, south of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed gains in some areas.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matvienko and the Federation Committee on Defense and Security on October 23.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 22, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

October 22, 2023, 4:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces are funneling additional forces to the Avdiivka front despite ongoing challenges with frontal mechanized assaults and the failure of a renewed push on October 19-20. Several Russian milbloggers claimed that there were no significant changes along the front in the Avdiivka direction on October 22. [1] Russian forces are likely once again pausing following a failed major push which suffered heavy losses. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces “unexpectedly” counterattacked in the direction of Pisky (8km southwest of Donetsk City) and pushed Russian forces from positions in the area. Another milblogger stated that claims of Ukrainian advances near Pisky and Opytne (4km south of Avdiivka) are false. [2] Another Russian source allegedly serving in the Avdiivka direction claimed that Ukrainian forces did not conduct counterattacks in his unspecified sector of the front. [3] Geolocated footage published on October 21 indicates that Russian forces recently made marginal advances southeast of Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka). [4] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have not completely cleared the Avdiivka waste heap area and that the area is currently a contested “gray zone.” [5]

A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger discussed difficulties that may be contributing to a “positional deadlock” for Russian offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction as of October 22. [6] The milblogger claimed that it is difficult to conduct maneuver warfare on a static front line with a large number of personnel and fortified areas on both sides. The milblogger noted that Ukrainian drones and other precision weapons have made armored vehicles increasingly vulnerable and have made ground attacks increasingly difficult. The milblogger also noted that Russian forces are facing difficulties in overcoming Ukrainian minefields near Avdiivka and are unable to completely destroy Ukrainian logistics, allowing the Ukrainian command to quickly transfer personnel to critical areas. Russian sources have previously claimed that Ukrainian defensive fortifications pose a significant challenge to Russian advances around Avdiivka. [7] These challenges are highly similar to those faced by Ukrainian forces in southern Ukraine in the initial weeks of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in June 2023. However, it remains to be seen if Russian forces have the capabilities and flexibility to adapt in some manner, as Ukrainian forces did following early setbacks in June 2023.

Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces continue to transfer personnel to the Avdiivka direction to support offensive efforts despite heavy losses. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that the Russian military is deploying personnel from Russian territory directly to the Avdiivka direction to replace personnel losses. [8] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that the Russian military command has recently transferred several Russian regiments comprised of mobilized personnel to the Avdiivka direction, indicating that Russia likely does not plan to abandon operations in this direction. [9] Mashovets noted that the Russian military also transferred elements of the 57th Motorized Rifle Regiment (6th Motorized Rifle Division, 3rd Army Corps, Western Military District) to the Spartak-Yakolivka-Minerale-Kashtanove area (4km south to 5km southeast of Avdiivka).

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops continue offensive actions south of Bakhmut and in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions. [10] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun noted that Ukrainian forces maintained offensive pressure in western Zaporizhia Oblast despite active Russian hostilities in the Avdiivka direction. [11]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on October 22. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched eight S-300 missiles, a Kh-59 missile, three Shahed-131/136 drones, and two drones of an unspecified type at targets in Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed the three Shahed drones and the Kh-59 missile. [12] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces struck the “Nova Poshta” terminal near Kharkiv City as well as Kostyantynivka, Donetsk Oblast with S-300 missiles. [13] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat specified that reports about drones of an unspecified type refer to makeshift Russian drones constructed from simple materials, which include engines acquired from AliExpress. [14]

The nationalist pro-war Russian information space is reckoning with the possibility of a major demographic decline by weaponizing anti-migrant rhetoric. The Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) published a new demographic forecast for the Russian Federation on October 20 that predicts that Russia’s population will decrease to 138.77 million people by January 1, 2046. [15] Rosstat estimated that the rate of natural population decline will exceed 600,000 people per year between 2024-2032 but will slow to 400,000 people per year from 2032-2046. [16] Several Russian commentators seized on these statistics and warned that they portend “demographic catastrophe” if restorative measures are not undertaken immediately. [17] One Russian source blamed Russia’s declining population on migrants and called for ethnic Russians to immediately increase the national birthrate, as well as to automate many production systems to replace migrant labor. [18] ISW has previously reported on instances of vocal Russian nationalist enclaves within the pro-war information space amplifying anti-migrant rhetoric to explain away and try to remedy reports of Russian demographic transitions. [19] Such rhetoric is particularly noteworthy as the Russian force generation apparatus is increasingly exploiting migrant and other ethnic minority communities as a mobilization resource, which ISW outlines in the force generation section of today’s update. [20]

A prominent Russian milblogger and frontline commander criticized Russian top-down censorship campaigns. Russian “Vostok” Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovskiy claimed on October 22 that many Russians are dissatisfied with official reports and summaries about the war in Ukraine and urged Russian officials to report honestly about the frontline to garner wider public support. [21] Khodakovskiy, who has consistently complained about problems affecting Russian combat operations, claimed that all of his statements are “inspected with increased scrutiny” given his official status. [22] Khodakovskiy argued that one can “install filters on the central media” but cannot make people think a certain way. [23] Khodakovskiy claimed that unspecified actors who are “embarrassed” by his statements are pushing Rosgvardia to take action against him for his criticisms. [24] Khodakovskiy was appointed the deputy head of the Main Directorate of Rosgvardia in occupied Donetsk Oblast in February 2023 and commands Rosgvardia’s special rapid response and riot police (OMON and SOBR) in occupied Donetsk Oblast. [25] Khodakovskiy’s claim, if true, indicates that some actors may be trying to leverage Rosgvardia’s likely concern about potential repercussions for Khodakovskiy’s increasingly vocal criticisms, which have become more conspicuous as other Russian milbloggers engage in greater self-censorship over fears of running afoul of Russian authorities. [26]

Deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s ideological and rhetorical campaign against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has largely become decoupled from the issue of the Wagner Group and appears to have outlived Prigozhin himself. Russian lawyer Kirill Kachur, whom the Russian Investigative Committee charged in absentia for embezzlement and bribery in 2022, claimed on October 22 that Prigozhin filed applications to the Russian Investigative Committee to initiate a criminal case against Russian Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov for the “genocide of the Russian people, the murder to tens of thousands of Russian citizens, and the transfer of Russian territories to the enemy” before Wagner’s June 24 armed rebellion. [27] Kachur appealed to Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin to publicly address what has happened to these applications since Prigozhin’s death and concluded that Russians who support Prigozhin and his message should coalesce around the ideological principles Prigozhin espoused and push for the restoration of justice in Russian society. [28] Kachur’s invocation of Prigozhin’s ideological opposition to the Russian MoD suggests that the

intense dislike for and disapproval of the MoD has outlived Prigozhin, even as the Wagner Group has disbanded as a centralized entity. A select camp within the Russian information space that aligns itself with Prigozhin's hyper-nationalist pro-war, yet anti-MoD ideology will likely continue to launch informational critiques on the MoD and the Russian military command as the war continues.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are funneling additional forces to the Avdiivka front despite ongoing challenges with frontal mechanized assaults and the failure of a renewed push on October 19-20.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 22.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on October 22.
- The nationalist pro-war Russian information space is reckoning with the possibility of a major demographic decline by weaponizing anti-migrant rhetoric.
- A prominent Russian milblogger and frontline commander criticized Russian top-down censorship campaigns.
- Deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's ideological and rhetorical campaign against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has largely become decoupled from the issue of the Wagner Group and appears to have outlived Prigozhin himself.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on October 22.
- Russian authorities are intensifying mobilization efforts targeting Central Asian migrant communities.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to use cultural and education programs to forcibly Russify Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 21, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

October 21, 2023, 4:45pm 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.

[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces have likely repelled another intensified Russian offensive effort towards Avdiivka in the past several days and inflicted further heavy personnel and equipment losses on Russian troops in the area. Ukrainian and Russian sources indicated that Russian forces mounted another offensive push on Avdiivka between October 19 and 20, and geolocated footage posted on October 21 confirms that Russian forces did make marginal gains northwest of Avdiivka in the waste heap area.^[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are gradually advancing north of Avdiivka near the waste heap towards Berdychi (5km northwest of Avdiivka).^[2] A Ukrainian military observer noted that Russian forces are attacking towards Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka), towards Novokalyнове (7km north of Avdiivka), and towards the waste heap from the Krasnohorivka-Veselé area.^[3] However, Ukrainian military officials noted that Russian forces have somewhat decreased the pace of offensive operations near Avdiivka on October 21, and reiterated earlier Ukrainian reporting that Russian forces lost 50 tanks, 100 armored vehicles, and 900 personnel during attacks on Avdiivka on October 19.^[4] Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Head Ants Kivilseid notably identified the Avdiivka push as a potential avenue for a new Russian offensive alongside offensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.^[5] The fact that Russian forces continue to recommit waves of personnel and equipment to offensive efforts in the Avdiivka area suggests that Russian command will continue to prioritize this axis, despite high losses and the general low quality of Russian forces on the offensive.^[6] A Ukrainian military official noted that Russia's regular infantry and tactics writ large are "consistently bad" and that Russian forces are relying instead on unmanned aerial systems (such as Lancet drones), artillery, and aviation.^[7] It appears that Russian forces are continuing to use ineffective and costly tactics in offensive efforts near Avdiivka leading to high personnel and vehicle losses, and that they have continuously done so in several waves of attacks over the past week suggests that the Russian military command is prioritizing this axis, despite continued and growing losses.

Russian forces are struggling to interdict Ukrainian efforts to supply and reinforce newly captured positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast. BBC Russia Service reported on October 21 that Ukrainian personnel involved in ground operations on the east bank stated that they are fighting to take full control of Krynyk (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).^[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in Krynyk, but disagreed about the extent of these positions.^[9] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced up to almost two kilometers south of Krynyk.^[10] Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces control all of Krynyk, although a different milblogger directly refuted this claim and claimed that Russian forces pushed a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group out of positions on the southern outskirts of the settlement.^[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are firing on Ukrainian positions near the Antonivsky roadway bridge north of Oleshky (7km south of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River) and the Antonivsky railway bridge north of Pomya (10km southeast of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River).^[12] One milblogger claimed that there were combat engagements near Krynyk and Pishchanivka (12km southeast of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River), although most Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are primarily using aviation and artillery units to try to dislodge Ukrainian forces from positions on the east bank.^[13] Select Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are evacuating wounded personnel and transferring new forces and light equipment across the Dnipro River to support positions on the east bank.^[14] Ukrainian forces have maintained a presence on the east bank since starting larger-than-usual ground operations on the night of October 17–18, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have been able to adequately supply and reinforce the groups conducting these operations despite increased Russian aviation activity along the Dnipro River.^[15]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and Bakhmut direction.[16] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Novofedorivka (21km southeast of Orikhiv) and are 6 kilometers away from the settlement.[17] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults along the Robotyne-Kopani and Robotyne-Novoprokopivka lines.[18]

Russian forces may be diversifying the mix of missiles, guided bombs, and drones used in strikes on Ukrainian rear areas, likely in an attempt to find gaps in Ukrainian air defenses ahead of further strikes over the winter. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces launched unknown air-to-surface missiles at Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Odesa oblasts; Kh-59 missiles at Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts; and Iskander-K cruise missiles and Shahed drones at Kryvyi Rih on the night of October 20–21.[19] The Southern Operational Command noted that three of the unknown missiles detonated mid-air, a Kh-59 struck a residential area in Kryvyi Rih, and the Iskanders and Shaheds hit industrial facilities in Kryvyi Rih.[20] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian tactical aviation simultaneously launched 30 modified KAB guided bombs against frontline areas in Kherson Oblast.[21] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces have never used this combination of weapons in similar strike series before and stated that Russian forces are shifting their main operations to the air.[22] Humenyuk's statement echoes Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat's October 8 warning that Russian forces are increasing their drone strike campaign ahead of winter.[23]

Disgraced Moscow City Duma Deputy Yevgeny Stupin formally requested on October 20 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) investigate Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for “divulging state secrets.” Stupin shared a copy of his official request on his Telegram channel on October 21 and accused Sobyanin of publicizing the location of an air defense production plant in the Rudnevo industrial zone in Nekrasovka, Moscow Oblast during the plant’s opening on October 17, making the facility an easier target for Ukrainian drone strikes.[24] ISW has repeatedly observed Russian sources blame Sobyanin and his administration for the inability of Moscow’s air defenses to stop Ukrainian drone strikes.[25] Russian state news outlet *Kommersant* reported on September 28 that Stupin left Russia several months after the Russian Ministry of Justice declared Stupin a foreign agent in June 2023.[26] Stupin notably supported protesters who called for Sobyanin’s resignation in April 2023 and protested the cutting down of a forest in Kosinsky Park, the logging of which the Russian opposition outlet SOTA reported supported the air defense production plant’s construction effort.[27]

Kremlin newswire TASS reported on October 20 that Russian authorities confirmed Colonel General Viktor Afzalov in his previous acting role as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Aerospace (VKS) Forces.[28] Kremlin newswire *RIA Novosti* reported on August 23 that Putin formally dismissed Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin as commander of the Russian VKS and replaced him with Afzalov.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces have likely repelled another intensified Russian offensive effort towards Avdiivka in the past several days and inflicted further heavy personnel and equipment losses on Russian troops in the area.
- Russian forces are struggling to interdict Ukrainian efforts to supply and reinforce newly captured positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21.
- Russian forces may be diversifying the mix of missiles, guided bombs, and drones used in strikes on Ukrainian rear areas, likely in an attempt to find gaps in Ukrainian air defenses ahead of further strikes over the winter.
- Disgraced Moscow City Duma Deputy Yevgeny Stupin formally requested on October 20 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) investigate Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for “divulging state secrets.”
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in various sectors of the front.
- The Russian federal government is reportedly taking steps to rectify some discrepancies in the treatment of personnel in irregular and regular formations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 20, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

October 20, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30 pm ET on October 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces launched a renewed offensive push near Avdiivka on October 20 and marginally advanced, indicating that the Russian military command remains committed to offensive operations in the area despite heavy materiel and personnel losses. Geolocated footage published on October 20 shows that Russian forces secured minor advances west of Krasnohorivka (5km north of Avdiivka).[1] Russian milbloggers and a Ukrainian military observer claimed that Russian forces captured a Ukrainian stronghold near the waste heap just northeast of Avdiivka, advanced to a rail station north of Avdiivka, and advanced near the “Tsarska Okhota” restaurant south of Avdiivka.[2] One prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), south of Avdiivka, near Stepove (8km northwest of Avdiivka), and near Novokalyнове (11km northwest of Avdiivka), however.[3] Other milbloggers claimed that

Russian forces advanced up to one kilometer on the Stepove-Berdychi line (8-10km northwest of Avdiivka) on October 19 and that fighting is ongoing near Berdychi on October 20.[4] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Avdiivka, Novokalynov, Stepove, Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Sieverne.[5]

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 20 that Ukrainian forces damaged and destroyed almost 50 Russian tanks and over 100 armored vehicles during the past day of fighting near Avdiivka.[6] Ukrainian soldiers operating in the Avdiivka area reported on October 20 that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 200 Russian armored vehicles in the past four days.[7] Avdiivka City Military Administration Head Vitaliy Barabash stated that Russian forces are attempting to repair damaged equipment while still in the field.[8] Footage published on October 20 shows Ukrainian forces striking a Russian TOS-1 thermobaric artillery system near Avdiivka.[9] A Russian milblogger complained that Russian counterbattery fire near Avdiivka is decreasing in effectiveness due to poor communication and the failure to stockpile munitions ahead of the offensive effort, very likely exacerbating material losses in the area.[10] The initial Russian offensive operations in the Avdiivka area on October 10 also resulted in high verified Russian equipment losses, and the fact that Russian forces regrouped and re-launched assaults after the initial attacks suggests that either Russian forces believe they can feasibly take Avdiivka, or that the Russian military command is poorly prioritizing offensive operations regardless of cost.[11]

Ukrainian forces continued larger-than-usual ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 20 and established a confirmed presence in a settlement on the east bank. Geolocated footage published on October 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced into northeastern Krynyk (27km east from Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).[12] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are establishing a foothold near Krynyk and continue to maintain their presence near the Antonivsky roadway and railway bridges.[13] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces temporarily advanced further into Krynyk up to the Kozachi Laheri-Krynyk-Korsunka road before Russian airstrikes pushed Ukrainian troops back to the northern outskirts of the settlement.[14] Another Russian milblogger claimed that fighting is ongoing near Pishchanivka (14km east from Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River) and that a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group is operating on the southern outskirts of the settlement.[15] The prominent Russian milblogger suggested that Russian forces only maintained positions on the southern outskirts of Pishchanivka as of the afternoon of October 18, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 19 that Russian aviation struck Pishchanivka, implying that Ukrainian forces were still operating in the settlement.[16] ISW has not observed any other visual confirmation of Ukrainian forces maintaining positions in east bank settlements other than Krynyk, however.

Russian and Ukrainian sources continue to indicate that the Russian units defending the east bank of Kherson Oblast are relatively less combat effective than other Russian forces elsewhere on the front. A Ukrainian military observer stated that the Russian Dnepr Grouping of Forces is primarily comprised of elements of the 49th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) and likely elements of the newly created 18th Combined Arms Army.[17] The majority of the 49th Combined Arms Army (CAA) has been deployed to east bank Kherson Oblast since Russian forces withdrew from the west (right) bank, and elements of the 49th CAA's 205th Motorized Rifle Regiment have since suffered significant casualties.[18] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on August 21 that the Russian military was likely forming the new 18th CAA from other units currently operating in Kherson Oblast, and it is unlikely that the new units of the 18th CAA are entirely comprised of fresh forces or staffed to doctrinal end strength.[19] The deployment of the 18th CAA to Kherson Oblast is reminiscent of the rushed deployment of the newly created 25th CAA to the Kupyansk and Lyman directions in early September 2023, and the 18th CAA likely faces similar issues with a lack of personnel, equipment, and proper training.[20] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the 26th Motorized Rifle Regiment, reportedly of 70th Motorized Rifle Division of the 18th CAA, are defending against Ukrainian activities near Krynyk.[21] Another Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the 1st Battalion of the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment (Caspian Flotilla) are operating near the Antonivsky railway bridge.[22] Elements of the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment have been defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and have likely suffered significant casualties.[23]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make confirmed advances. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces made marginal advances northwest of Verbove (10km east of Robotyne), though ISW has not observed evidence to confirm this claim.[24] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continue offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[25] Russian sources reported Ukrainian attacks south of Bakhmut on the Klishchiivka-Andriivka-Kurdyumivka line and south of Orikhiv near Robotyne, Novoprokopivka, and Verbove.[26]

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, Rostov Oblast, on October 19 to discuss the battlefield situation in Ukraine. Russian media reported that Putin met with the Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander for Russian forces in Ukraine Army General Valery Gerasimov, who told Putin that Russian troops are "solving problems in accordance with the operation plan."[27] Various elements of the SMD are notably currently deployed in critical areas of the frontline — elements of the SMD's 8th Combined Arms Army are conducting offensive operations near Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast, elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army are defending against ongoing Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and elements of the 49th Combined Arms Army are operating in the Kherson Oblast direction as of late August 2023.[28] Putin's publicized visit with Gerasimov indicates that Gerasimov is still the active figurehead of Russian operations in Ukraine and was likely meant to posture the effectiveness and involvement of the Russian military leadership as Russian forces pursue offensive and defensive operations along multiple sectors of the front. ISW will provide additional updates on Putin's visit to Rostov-on-Don once more readouts become available.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched a renewed offensive push near Avdiivka on October 20 and marginally advanced, indicating that the Russian military command remains committed to offensive operations in the area despite heavy materiel and personnel losses.
- Ukrainian forces continued larger-than-usual ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 20 and established a confirmed presence in a settlement on the east bank.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources continue to indicate that the Russian units defending the east bank of Kherson Oblast are relatively less combat effective than other Russian forces elsewhere on the front.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make confirmed advances.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, Rostov Oblast, on October 19 to discuss the battlefield situation in Ukraine with Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, around Avdiivka, west of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made limited advances in some areas.

- Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin argued on October 20 that Russian authorities should strip migrants of acquired Russian citizenship if they are unwilling to fight in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 19, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, and Mason Clark

October 19, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources continued to discuss larger-than-usual Ukrainian ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 19, and Ukrainian forces likely maintain a limited presence in some east bank areas near the Dnipro River shoreline and the Antonivsky railway bridge. The prominent Russian milblogger who initiated Russian discussion of Ukrainian assaults on the east bank on October 18 claimed on October 19 that two Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups of a Ukrainian naval infantry brigade crossed the Dnipro River, overwhelmed the Russian troops in the area, and gained a foothold in the village of Krynyk (30km east of Kherson City and about 2km inland from the Dnipro River shoreline).^[1] The milblogger claimed that Russian infantry counterattacked and pushed Ukrainian forces back towards the outskirts of the village but noted that Ukrainian troops still control some houses in Krynyk and are waiting for reinforcements to arrive in the area.^[2] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces used more manpower in attacks on Krynyk than in previous attacks.^[3] Several Russian sources, including Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo, claimed that Russian forces managed to push Ukrainian forces back from the Pomya-Pishchanivka-Pidstepne area (15km east of Kherson City) to the Dnipro River shoreline and to positions under the Antonivsky railway bridge, where they claim Ukrainian forces are trying to rest and regroup under constant Russian air and artillery strikes.^[4] The Ukrainian General Staff also notably tacitly acknowledged Ukrainian operations on the east bank and reported on October 19 that Russian airstrikes hit Pishchanivka, implying Ukrainian forces were operating in the town.^[5] While Russian sources continue to offer slightly diverging claims about the scale of the Ukrainian attacks on the east bank, ISW continues to assess that current Ukrainian actions appear to be larger than previously observed tactical raids, and available geolocated footage indicates that Ukrainian forces maintain a presence along the shoreline and near the Antonivsky railway bridge despite Russian counterattacks.^[6]

Satellite imagery published on October 18 suggests that the Ukrainian ATACMS strike on the Luhansk City airfield likely damaged several helicopters on October 17. Ukrainian and Russian sources amplified satellite imagery showing the aftermath of the Ukrainian strike on the Luhansk City airfield.^[7] A Ukrainian reserve officer analyzed the imagery and suggested that the Ukrainian strike damaged at least five Russian helicopters and may have affected other vehicles at the airfield.^[8] The officer stated that scorch marks on the airport apron (ramp) confirmed the Ukrainian strike with cluster munitions and noted that multiple helicopters remained at the Luhansk City airfield, mirroring the pattern at the Berdyansk airfield (the other location struck with ATACMS on October 17). Ukrainian military sources previously reported that the Ukrainian strikes destroyed nine helicopters, one anti-aircraft missile launcher, special equipment, ammunition depots, and runway infrastructure, although ISW cannot fully confirm these Russian losses at this time.^[9]

Ukrainian officials reported on October 19 that Ukrainian forces have downed five Russian fixed wing aircraft within the past 10 days in Donetsk Oblast amid high Russian ground vehicle losses near Avdiivka.^[10] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi reported on October 19 that Ukrainian forces shot down five fixed-wing aircraft, including at least one Su-25 fighter jet, in Donetsk Oblast.^[11] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces primarily use attack aircraft to conduct airstrikes but that the aircraft are ineffective at range, forcing Russian aircraft to fly closer to the front line and resulting in the loss of five aircraft in 10 days.^[12] Shtupun stated that there are unconfirmed reports that Ukrainian forces damaged additional Russian aircraft.^[13] Shtupun reported that Russian forces also operate Su-34 and Su-35 fighters in the Tavriisk direction but that Russian forces do not fly these aircraft close to the front line out of fear of Ukrainian air defenses.^[14] Russian forces notably suffered vehicle losses of likely at least 45 tanks and armored vehicles, at least one battalion tactical group's (BTG) worth, in the initial days of the offensive effort near Avdiivka.^[15] Tarnavskyi's announcement indicates that Russian forces continue to pay a high materiel cost to support the ongoing Avdiivka effort, and continued materiel losses will likely continue to slow down the Russian pace of advance in the area.

Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced south of Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued counteroffensive operations on October 19. A Ukrainian soldier stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut) and advanced into the Russian defensive line towards Opytne (3km south of Bakhmut).^[16] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on October 18 that Ukrainian forces have advanced across the railway line in unspecified areas south of Bakhmut.^[17] Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced across the railway line in Klishchiivka on October 18.^[18] ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of Ukrainian troops operating beyond the rail line east of Klishchiivka. The Ukrainian General Staff and other Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian forces were successful south of Robotyne and southwest of Verbove (10km east of Robotyne).^[19] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces back from positions near Verbove and advanced between 1.5-1.6km into Russian defensive lines in an unspecified part of the Robotyne front.^[20]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of October 18 to 19. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched five Iskander-M ballistic missiles, one S-300 missile, one Kh-59 cruise missile, another unidentified missile, and nine Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine.[21] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces shot down the Kh-59 missile and three drones.[22]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui in Pyongyang, North Korea on October 19, likely part of an ongoing Russian effort to procure additional munitions from North Korea. Lavrov stated that Russian-North Korean relations have reached a “qualitatively new strategic level.”[23] Lavrov also stated that a Russian-North Korean intergovernmental commission will meet at an unspecified date in November to discuss mining/geological, energy, trade, economic, and technical cooperation.[24] ISW previously assessed that Russia may be interested in some forms of technological and defense cooperation with North Korea in exchange for the provision of artillery ammunition as long as such cooperation does not trigger secondary sanctions against Russia.[25]

A Russian milblogger observed that Ukrainian forces are successfully and asymmetrically attriting Russian reserves in ongoing offensive operations. In a series of long Telegram posts on October 19, the milblogger noted that Ukrainian forces are purposefully conducting offensive operations to attrit limited Russian reserves while preserving their own reserves to the utmost possible extent.[26] The milblogger claimed that the state of Russian infantry is at its lowest point in the war and emphasized that Ukrainian forces are exploiting the fact that Ukraine knows Russia will not conduct a general mobilization.[27] These observations are largely consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces largely lack high-quality reserves and are struggling to generate, train, and soundly deploy reserves to effectively plug holes in the frontline and pursue offensive operations, instead relying largely on tactical-level lateral redeployments.[28] ISW has also previously observed that Ukrainian forces have engaged Russian troops in an asymmetrical attrition gradient along many critical sectors of the frontline.[29] Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) analyst Dr Jack Watling similarly observed on October 19 that as long as Ukrainian forces can continue inflicting a high casualty rate on Russian forces, “it becomes possible to suppress Russia's ability to train sufficient new troops to the standard needed to effectively conduct offensive action.”[30]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly continues efforts to push remnants of the Wagner Group out of Syria. A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger amplified claims on October 19 that the Russian MoD and Syrian forces allegedly acting under the Russian MoD's influence are trying to push Wagner forces stationed near Palmyra out of Syria.[31] A Russian insider source claiming to have connections to the Wagner Group claimed that ISIS and other extremist groups will likely take advantage of Wagner's withdrawal from Syria, further destabilizing the region.[32]

A prominent Russian information space voice targeted two members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle with accusations of corruption. Russian lawyer Kirill Kachur, whom the Russian Investigative Committee charged in absentia for embezzlement and bribery in 2022 and who claims to have insider knowledge about internal Kremlin politics, accused Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Head Sergei Naryshkin and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin of causing over one trillion rubles (\$10.3 billion) of damage to the Russian economy through bribes and tax breaks from Russian businessmen since Mishustin's appointment as head of the Russian Federal Tax Service in 2010.[33] Kachur also criticized businessman Alexander Udobov, Federal Security Service (FSB) General Ivan Tkachev, and FSB Colonel Sergei Natarov for enabling and protecting Mishustin.[34] Kachur's complaint notably focuses on the current poor state of the Russian economy and the negative impact of such a high monetary loss amid a broader Russian focus on the federal budget.[35] Kachur claimed that the Russian Investigative Committee and FSB are currently investigating Mishustin and Naryshkin; ISW has observed no corroboration of Kachur's claims from other Russian sources, and Russian officials have not commented on these claims.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources continued to discuss larger-than-usual Ukrainian ground operations on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 19, and Ukrainian forces likely maintain a limited presence in some east bank areas near the Dnipro River shoreline and the Antonivsky railway bridge.
- Satellite imagery published on October 18 suggests that the Ukrainian ATACMS strike on the Luhansk City airfield likely damaged several helicopters on October 17.
- Ukrainian officials reported on October 19 that Ukrainian forces have downed five Russian fixed wing aircraft within the past 10 days in Donetsk Oblast amid high Russian ground vehicle losses near Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced south of Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued counteroffensive operations on October 19.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui in Pyongyang, North Korea on October 19, likely part of an ongoing Russian effort to procure additional munitions from North Korea.
- A Russian milblogger observed that Ukrainian forces are successfully and asymmetrically attriting Russian reserves in ongoing offensive operations.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly continues efforts to push remnants of the Wagner Group out of Syria.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, around Avdiivka, south of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- A Russian federal subject is attempting to compensate for labor shortages in its defense sector by spearheading an initiative to allow some minors to work in hazardous conditions.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 18, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

October 18, 2023, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on October 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources claimed that likely company-sized elements of two Ukrainian naval infantry brigades conducted an assault across the Dnipro River onto the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 17-18. Geolocated footage published on October 18 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Pishchanivka (14km east of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River) and into Poyma (11km east of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River).[1] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that two Ukrainian "assault groups" landed on the east bank of the Dnipro River and broke through initial Russian defenses, temporarily occupying all of Poyma and positions on the northern outskirts of Pishchanivka on the afternoon of October 17.[2] The milblogger later claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back from these positions towards the Dnipro River.[3] The milblogger claimed that a Ukrainian sabotage group is still operating in Pishchanivka as of the afternoon of October 18. The milblogger, however, suggested that Russian forces only maintain positions on the southern outskirts of the settlement. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) also acknowledged the Ukrainian operations, claiming that Russian forces stopped four Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Pidstepne (16km east of Kherson City) and Poyma.[4] Another prominent Russian milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces occupied Poyma on the night of October 17 to 18.[5]

Russian sources expressed pronounced concern about ongoing Ukrainian activity on the east bank of Kherson Oblast and framed these activities as part of a potential larger Ukrainian operation. The majority of Russian claims about developments on the east bank are largely single-sourced to one prominent Russian milblogger who has recently heavily focused his reporting on this section of the front.[6] Russian sources characterized the reported assaults as a Ukrainian effort to expand a "bridgehead" on the east bank and the initial stages of a larger offensive operation across the Dnipro River.[7] Russian President Vladimir Putin similarly described Ukrainian activity in Kherson Oblast as the "next counteroffensive" and continued his typical rhetorical line by painting all Ukrainian offensive operations as a failure.[8] The prominent Russian milblogger who is the basis for many of these claims has expressed concern about a Ukrainian offensive across the Dnipro River on and off throughout 2023 and escalated his warnings in late September 2023. The milblogger reacted to the reported assault on the night of October 17 to 18 by accusing the Russian MoD of not taking the threat of a Ukrainian crossing seriously.[9]

Russian concerns about the ability of Russian forces to repel a potential Ukrainian offensive operation across the Dnipro River may be partially connected to the condition of the Russian grouping of forces on the left bank. The Russian command has drawn relatively more elite units from the Kherson direction to support defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast in recent months due to likely viewing Kherson as a quiet sector, and the current force composition in the area is likely relatively less combat effective.[10] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on October 17 that Russian forces were still redeploying trained units from the Kherson direction to the Zaporizhia and eastern directions.[11] The Russian military may have recently redeployed elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (Central Military District) and the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) to the Kherson direction, however, but it is unclear where in Kherson Oblast elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army are currently deployed.[12] Ukrainian counteroffensive operations reportedly previously rendered the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade combat ineffective as of September 22.[13]

ISW will not speculate on the scope and prospects of ongoing Ukrainian activity on the east bank of Kherson Oblast but does not assess that Ukrainian forces have created a bridgehead on the east bank of Kherson Oblast suitable for the further maneuver of sizeable mechanized forces at this time. However, it is noteworthy that prominent and generally reliable Russian sources are discussing Ukrainian activities on the east bank as occurring at a larger scale than previously documented tactical cross-river raids by Ukrainian forces. ISW will continue to monitor the area closely and assess control of terrain changes and Russian responses, in line with its standing policy of not forecasting Ukrainian actions.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions south of Bakhmut and had partial success south of Robotyne. [14] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Klishchiivka, 5km southwest of Bakhmut.[15]

Western media reported that the United States has thus far provided Ukraine with a limited number of ATACMS missiles. The Associated Press reported on October 17 that an unnamed US official stated that the United States provided Ukraine with "fewer than a dozen" missiles "within the last few days." [16] The New York Times (NYT) reported on October 18 that two unspecified Western officials stated that the United States sent "about 20" ATACMS to Ukraine.[17] Russian President Vladimir Putin stated at a press conference in Beijing on October 18 that the ATACMS are "fundamentally incapable of changing the situation on the frontline." [18] The Kremlin does not view the provision of ATACMS to Ukraine as an escalatory step, and the United States has not crossed a Russian "red line" by providing Ukraine with these missiles. Ukraine will need additional ATACMS to sustain the operational effects of their use on the arrayment of Russian aviation assets and logistics.[19]

Satellite imagery from October 17 suggests that the Ukrainian ATACMS strike on the Berdyansk airfield likely substantially damaged Russian aircraft and airfield infrastructure, but ISW cannot yet confirm the extent of the damage. Several open-source intelligence analysts amplified satellite imagery of the Berdyansk airfield and suggested that it shows at least seven burned-out areas where satellite imagery previously showed various Russian helicopters, and additionally noted that many helicopters have since moved.[20] A Ukrainian reserve officer stated that prior to the strike, Russian forces had Mi-28, Mi-24, and Ka-52 helicopters at the airfield, and suggested that the extent of the damage is likely more widespread than depicted in preliminary satellite imagery.[21] Ukrainian military sources previously reported that the Ukrainian strike destroyed nine helicopters, one anti-aircraft missile launcher, special equipment, ammunition depots, and runway infrastructure, but ISW cannot fully confirm these Russian losses with available imagery at this time.[22]

Russian President Vladimir Putin indicated his desire to deepen Russian-Chinese economic and political ties but did not announce any practical changes at the One Belt One Road International Forum in Beijing, China on October 18. Putin stated that close Russian and Chinese foreign policy coordination is especially necessary in "current difficult conditions" and emphasized Russian and Chinese cooperation through multilateral formats including the One Belt One Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAU). [23] Putin claimed that economic cooperation between Russia and China is integral to strengthening Russian economic, technological, and financial sovereignty.[24] Putin notably did not emphasize Russian-Chinese security cooperation, possibly due to China's reticence at the no-limits partnership that Russia wants to establish, as ISW has previously

reported.[25] Putin also held bilateral talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and available Kremlin readouts of the meeting similarly stressed economic ties between Russia and China.[26] Putin's visit to China and meeting with Xi does not appear to have resulted in any substantial change in the Chinese reticence to establish the Kremlin's desired level of bilateral relationship or any breakthroughs in the degree of Chinese military support to Russia. Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov notably claimed on October 18 that almost all of Russia's dual-use civilian drones come from China and stated that the Russian government aims to increase domestic civilian drone production to 41 percent by 2025.[27] ISW has previously observed reports that China often exports dual-use equipment to Russia, including civilian drones, which Russian forces can employ on the battlefield in Ukraine.[28]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources claimed that likely company-sized elements of two Ukrainian naval infantry brigades conducted an assault across the Dnipro River onto the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on October 17-18.
- Russian sources expressed pronounced concern about ongoing Ukrainian activity on the east bank of Kherson Oblast and framed these activities as part of a potential larger Ukrainian operation.
- ISW will not speculate on the scope and prospects of ongoing Ukrainian activity on the east bank of Kherson Oblast but does not assess that Ukrainian forces have created a bridgehead on the east bank of Kherson Oblast suitable for the further maneuver of sizeable mechanized forces at this time.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Western media reported that the US has thus far provided Ukraine with a limited number of ATACMS missiles, and the Kremlin issued a muted response to the provision of these systems
- Satellite imagery from October 17 suggests that the Ukrainian ATACMS strike on the Berdyansk airfield likely substantially damaged Russian aircraft and airfield infrastructure, but ISW cannot yet confirm the extent of the damage.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin indicated his desire to deepen Russian-Chinese economic and political ties but did not announce any practical changes at the One Belt One Road International Forum in Beijing, China on October 18.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka direction, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced south of Avdiivka.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 17, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

October 17, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on October 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine used US-provided ATACMS long-range missiles to strike Russian targets in occupied Ukraine for the first time on October 17. *The Wall Street Journal* and other Western media outlets confirmed on October 17 that the US "secretly" provided Ukraine with ATACMS with a range of 165km in recent days and reported that Ukrainian forces already used ATACMS to strike Russian-controlled airfields in occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast and Luhansk City, Luhansk Oblast.[1] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also stated in his nightly address on October 17 that ATACMS "have proven themselves" but did not directly confirm ATACMS were used in these strikes, and multiple Russian sources claimed Ukrainian forces used ATACMS in the Berdyansk strike.[2] Various Russian sources amplified images reportedly of ATACMS M74 cluster submunitions found at the site of the strike in Berdyansk.[3] The US likely transferred the ATACMS systems in secret to provide Ukrainian forces operational surprise, and the overall shock in the Russian information space suggests that Ukraine achieved the desired effect. Ukrainian Special Operations Forces Command did not specify that Ukrainian forces used ATACMS in the strikes but stated that the strikes destroyed nine Russian helicopters of various models, other unspecified special equipment, an anti-aircraft missile launcher, an ammunition warehouse, and damaged runway infrastructure. [4] Footage reportedly from the Berdyansk airfield shows heavy fires and explosions due to the continued detonation of ammunition in an ammunition depot.[5] NASA Fire Information for Resource Management (FIRMS) data from October 17 also confirms heat signatures following explosions in Berdyansk but has not yet confirmed heat signatures at the Luhansk airfield.[6]

The Ukrainian ATACMS strikes on operationally significant Russian airfields in Ukraine will likely prompt the Russian command to disperse aviation assets and withdraw some aircraft to airfields further from the frontline. Russian forces notably operated rotary-wing aircraft from the Berdyansk airfield in the early months of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast to great effect against large mechanized Ukrainian assaults.[7] Previous satellite imagery of the Berdyansk airfield showed that Russian forces dispersed aircraft across the airfield, and Ukrainian forces were likely only able to conduct strikes on individual aircraft with previously available long-range missiles.[8] The cluster munition-armed version of the ATACMS long range missiles will allow Ukrainian forces to conduct strikes on Russian airfields that can more widely destroy Russian aircraft and other assets. Russian milbloggers immediately drew parallels between the Ukrainian strikes on the Berdyansk and Luhansk City airfields and a series of Ukrainian HIMARS strikes on the Chornobaivka airfield in Kherson Oblast during the 2022 Kherson counteroffensive.[9] The arrival of Western-provided HIMARS allowed Ukrainian forces to conduct repeated strikes on the Chornobaivka airfield, which caused significant Russian aviation losses, and Russian command withdrew military equipment and aviation from the airfield due to their inability to combat Ukrainian HIMARS strikes.[10] Russian milbloggers noted that Russian forces adapted their airfields to Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities but that ATACMS are a new

missile threat which will similarly force the Russian command to adapt once again.[11] **The Russian military has consistently shown it can adapt to new Ukrainian strike capabilities — but only after suffering initial and pronounced losses from Ukrainian capabilities Russian commanders realistically should have prepared for.**

The likely dispersal of Russian aircraft at airfields throughout occupied Ukraine and the relocation of aviation assets further away from the frontline will likely disrupt Russian aviation support for defensive efforts and localized offensive operations. The relocation of aircraft to airfields further in the rear will likely impact the loitering time that Russian aviation will have to support operations. This will likely be particularly significant for Russian rotary-wing aircraft, which operated in relatively small sections of the frontline for long periods of time to degrade advancing mechanized Ukrainian forces at the beginning of the counteroffensive in June and July of 2023. [12] The dispersal of aviation assets at a larger number of airfields will also likely present the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) greater coordination and sustainment challenges.

The arrival of ATACMS long-range missiles also poses a significant threat to Russian ammunition depots in rear areas and will likely force the Russian command to choose between fortifying existing depots or further dispersing depots throughout occupied Ukraine. The arrival of HIMARS to Ukraine in June 2022 allowed Ukrainian forces to conduct an operationally significant interdiction campaign in support of counteroffensive operations in Kherson and Kharkiv oblasts, part of which targeted overly concentrated Russian ammunition depots.[13] The Russian command reluctantly moved away from using highly concentrated ammunition depots, extending Russian logistics along longer ground lines of communications (GLOCs), which ultimately complicated the provision of ammunition and supplies to the frontline to a certain degree.[14] ATACMS will likely present Russian forces with a similar challenge, and Russian forces can either focus on fortifying existing depots or create an even more dispersed and therefore over-extended logistics system for ammunition.

The Russian information space expressed widespread fear over the use of ATACMS, and Russian concerns over the possibility of future strikes will likely impact Russian decision-making beyond the current Ukrainian ability to sustain regular ATACMS strikes. Russian sources bemoaned the strikes on the Berdyansk and Luhansk City airfields as one of the most devastating Ukrainian strikes on a Russian target since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [15] Russian sources particularly credited the use of ATACMS for the severity of the strike and expressed fears that the Russian command would not adapt quickly enough to the new missile threat.[16] The Russian command will likely have to consider the potential Ukrainian use of ATACMS when making operational and tactical decisions about the placement of military assets regardless of the frequency of such strikes, and the current level of Russian concern suggests that this calculation may be particularly pronounced in the coming weeks. Ukraine has likely only received a limited number of ATACMS, however, and will need more if it is to sustain and amplify these initial effects.[17]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions south of Bakhmut and had partial success west of Verbove (10km east of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast).[18] Geolocated footage posted on October 16 also indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced northwest of Zaliznyanske (9km northwest of Bakhmut).[19]

The US confirmed on October 17 that all 31 previously pledged American M1 Abrams main battle tanks have arrived in Ukraine.[20] US Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) Spokesperson Colonel Martin O'Donnell reported that all of the Ukrainian servicemembers who trained on the tanks alongside US forces in Germany have also returned to Ukraine.[21] US military officials noted that it will likely take some time for Ukraine to deploy the Abrams to the frontline.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on October 17 of Russian forces operating the new TOS-2 "Tosochka" thermobaric artillery system in Ukraine.[22] The Russian MoD claimed that Central Military District (CMD) Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Defense Troops used the TOS-2 system to strike a Ukrainian fortified area in an unspecified area of the front, potentially in reference to Avdiivka, where some CMD elements have recently deployed to support offensive operations north of Donetsk City.[23] Russian media responded to the MoD's footage and noted that the TOS-2 is a modernized and improved version of the TOS-1A "Solntsepek" system that Russian forces have heavily employed across the theater in Ukraine.[24] Thermobaric artillery systems such as the TOS-1A and TOS-2 are military district-level assets, and their commitment to certain sectors of the front may be indicative of Russian operational prioritization of certain areas.[25]

The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) reportedly issued an informal warning to a prominent Russian milblogger who is often critical of the Ministry of Defense's conduct of the war on October 16 for discrediting the Russian military, the latest in a series of government efforts to gain further control over the Russian information space. The milblogger claimed on October 17 that he writes candidly about the situation on the front to better inform Russian military leadership about the issues on the front that local commanders are unwilling to report.[26] The milblogger claimed that MVD is targeting Russian milbloggers who helped publicize the mistreatment of elements of the Russian 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) in the Kherson direction in late August 2023, which ultimately resulted in the removal of the brigade's commander.[27] The milblogger articulated a list of 14 other channels that "speak the truth and are not afraid," some of which ISW has observed be critical of the Russian military.[28] The milblogger likely shared this list of channels to coalesce support for targeted milbloggers, and the list does not indicate that these channels are part of an organized group.

Russia continues to set various legislative conditions to prepare the information space for the March 2024 presidential elections. The Russian State Duma adopted a bill in its first reading on October 17 that clarifies provisions on the Russian law on presidential elections and stipulates that campaign materials cannot be shown on sites restricted by the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).[29] The bill will also ban people from taking photographs and videos at polling stations, require registered candidates to submit information to their electoral commission if they have a criminal record, and establish a cost limit for the production of campaign materials.[30] Several of these provisions already exist in laws governing basic electoral rights, but these provisions will clarify the specific law on presidential elections in advance of the March 2024 election cycle.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine used US-provided ATACMS long-range missiles to strike Russian targets in occupied Ukraine for the first time on October 17.
- The Ukrainian ATACMS strikes on operationally significant Russian airfields in Ukraine will likely prompt the Russian command to disperse aviation assets and withdraw some aircraft to airfields further from the frontline.
- The Russian military has consistently shown it can adapt to new Ukrainian strike capabilities — but only after suffering initial and pronounced losses from Ukrainian capabilities Russian commanders realistically should have prepared for.

- The arrival of ATACMS long-range missiles also presents a significant threat to Russian ammunition depots in rear areas and will likely force the Russian command to choose between fortifying existing depots or further dispersing depots throughout occupied Ukraine.
- The Russian information space expressed widespread fear over the use of ATACMS, and Russian concerns over the possibility of future strikes will likely impact Russian decision-making beyond the current Ukrainian ability to sustain regular ATACMS strikes.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) reportedly issued an informal warning to a prominent Russian milblogger who is often critical of the Ministry of Defense's conduct of the war on October 16 for discrediting the Russian military.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatov-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and advanced in certain areas of the front.
- Russia continues to take steps to codify the inclusion of volunteer formations within Rosgvardia.
- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) continues efforts to consolidate control of orthodox diocese in occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin held bilateral negotiations with Hungarian President Viktor Orban and Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh in Beijing on October 17.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 16, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

October 16, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia likely deployed elements of at least two Central Military District (CMD) brigades to reinforce offensive operations by Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces on the Avdiivka front. A Ukrainian military observer reported on October 16 that three Russian brigades — the DNR's 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (MRB) and the CMD's 15th and 21st MRBs (both of the 2nd Combined Arms Army [2nd CAA]) — have been involved in recent attacks on Avdiivka alongside various scattered DNR elements, while Russian forces are holding the CMD's 30th MRB in tactical reserve.^[1] Elements of the CMD, particularly of the 2nd CAA, have been active along the Svatov-Kremenna line until recently, and the newly formed 25th CAA likely relieved them along the Svatov-Kremenna line.^[2] 2nd CAA elements have primarily conducted defensive operations along the Svatov-Kremenna line for the last several months and have therefore likely had more time to rest and reconstitute before deploying to a more challenging sector of the frontline, which accounts in part for recent Russian advances in the previously stagnant Avdiivka sector of the front.

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction on October 16 and recently made some gains, albeit at a relatively slower pace than in the initial attacks. Geolocated footage posted on October 16 shows that Russian forces have marginally advanced past the E50 road about 3km south of Avdiivka.^[3] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a total of 22 Russian attacks in the Avdiivka direction in the past day, notably fewer than the 30 reported attacks on October 15.^[4] Russian sources noted that Russian forces have increased the intensity of air and artillery strikes on the settlement in order to compensate for slow ground maneuvers, which are complicated by heavy Ukrainian fortifications surrounding Avdiivka.^[5] During a meeting on the operational situation in Ukraine on October 16, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have improved their tactical positions in unspecified areas and that the Russian "active defense" along the front, including near Avdiivka, is prohibiting Ukrainian advances.^[6]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Bakhmut directions.^[7] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults near Avdiivka and on Verbove's western and northwestern outskirts (10km east of Robotyne or 18km southwest of Orikhiv).^[8] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces are within 200 to 300 meters of Russian positions west of Verbove.^[9]

Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova reiterated statements admitting that Russia deported millions of Ukrainians — including 700,000 children — to Russia since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as a Qatari-mediated deal returned four children from Russia to Ukraine. Lvova-Belova claimed in a report published on October 15 that Russia has "accepted" about 4.8 million Ukrainians, including 700,000 children, since February 2022 and that Russian authorities have placed 380 Ukrainian orphans into foster care in Russia between April and October 2022.^[10] Lvova-Belova also attempted to discredit information about Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children and claimed instead that Ukrainian authorities act "against the interests of children."^[11] *The Washington Post* reported on October 16 that four children ranging from two to seventeen years old have returned or will return to Ukraine from Russia after Ukraine asked Qatar to mediate negotiations on the matter.^[12] An official source told *The Washington Post* that more Ukrainian children may be returned in the future as part of the Qatari-mediated negotiations but that the process has been complicated by Russia providing a list of only hundreds of Ukrainian children currently in Russia while Ukraine has identified thousands of deported children. International humanitarian law defines the forced transfer of civilians to the territory of an occupying power as "deportation," and ISW continues to assess that Russian authorities are conducting a large-scale campaign to deport Ukrainians to Russia.^[13]

Some Russian milbloggers continue to complain about the alleged restriction of information about Russian military failures. A Russian milblogger criticized an unspecified associate of Russian Lieutenant General Andrey Sychev, who was reportedly recently dismissed from a command position for military failures near

Bakhmut, for causing Russian forces (presumably near Bakhmut) to suffer 1,500 casualties in September 2023.[14] The milblogger also criticized the broader Russian military command for communication failures and forcing injured personnel back into combat.[15] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have crossed the railway line south of Bakhmut in some places and complained that only one major milblogger has discussed this issue, underlining the fact that many milbloggers restrict their presentation of negative information about Russian capabilities.[16] Another milblogger, who previously claimed to censor all but 10-20 percent of the "sad" information they receive, claimed that the first milblogger's complaints provide a glimpse into the 80-90 percent of unreported information, yet criticized other Russian milbloggers for consistently claiming that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed.[17]

Russian forces conducted a drone and missile strike against Ukrainian rear areas on the night of October 15-16. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched five Kh-59 cruise missiles, one Iskander ballistic missile in eastern and southern Ukraine, and 12 Shahed-131/136 drones in western Ukraine. [18] Ukrainian air defense reportedly destroyed two of the Kh-59s and 11 Shahed drones.[19] Ukrainian officials reported explosions near Myrhorod, Poltava Oblast, and in Kirovohrad Oblast.[20] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that one strike destroyed a Ukrainian communication center at the Myrhorod airfield in Poltava Oblast.[21]

A new Russian procedure restricting the border checkpoints that Ukrainians can use to enter Russia from third countries came into force on October 16, effectively only allowing Ukrainians to enter Russia from third countries through the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow. The new procedure only allows Ukrainians aged 14 and older to enter Russia from third countries through the Ludonka automobile checkpoint from Latvia and Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow. [22] Latvia announced on October 12 that it would close its side of the Ludonka checkpoint beginning on October 16.[23] ISW previously assessed that Russia implemented this new border crossing procedure likely in response to continued concern over the security of Russian border regions.[24] The new procedure does not apply to Ukrainians entering Russia from occupied Ukrainian territories or Ukrainians under the age of 14 traveling with a legal guardian.[25]

A group of Russian lawyers appears to be challenging the Kremlin's precariously crafted veneer of legality surrounding the Russian judicial system, calling for a strike three days after Russian authorities arrested four lawyers on extremism charges. A group of Russian lawyers published a petition encouraging members of the Russian Federal and Regional Chambers of Lawyers and other public lawyer associations to strike from all types of legal proceedings from October 25 to 28 in response to commonplace intimidation of lawyers in the Russian judicial system.[26] The petition states that Russian authorities often ignore violations of the professional rights of lawyers and threaten violence against them on "trumped-up administrative and criminal charges."[27] The petition also argues that Russian judges increasingly abuse their powers and accuse Russian law enforcement officers of perpetrating crimes against lawyers. The petition states that "sophisticated methods of prosecuting lawyers for their professional activities on far-fetched administrative and criminal charges" have become established practices by Russian law enforcement agencies and courts. This petition comes three days after Russian authorities arrested four lawyers, including three of imprisoned Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny's lawyers, on extremism charges on October 13.[28] The Russian lawyers calling for a strike appear unwilling to further tolerate the Kremlin's weaponization of the Russian judicial system, challenging the Kremlin's veneer of legality and legitimacy in Russian institutions that are intended to provide cover for Russian President Vladimir Putin's authoritarian and corrupt rule.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- Russia likely deployed elements of at least two Central Military District (CMD) brigades to reinforce offensive operations by Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces on the Avdiivka front.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 16.
- A new Russian procedure restricting the border checkpoints that Ukrainians can use to enter Russia from third countries came into force on October 16, effectively only allowing Ukrainians to enter Russia from third countries through the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow.
- A group of Russian lawyers appears to be challenging the Kremlin's precariously crafted veneer of legality surrounding the Russian judicial system, calling for a strike three days after Russian authorities arrested four lawyers on extremism charges.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in the Bakhmut direction, near Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported further details on ongoing North Korean weapons shipments to Russia on October 16.
- Senior Russian officials reiterated boilerplate narratives about the Ukrainian counteroffensive and the Israel-Hamas war during a Russian Security Council meeting on October 16 likely to deter Western support for Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 15, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and Mason Clark

October 15, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12pm ET on October 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin may be trying to temper expectations of significant Russian advances around Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast. Putin claimed in an interview on Russian state television on October 15 that Russian forces are conducting an "active defense" in the Avdiivka, Kupyansk, and Zaporizhia directions. [1] Putin's characterization of Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka as an "active defense," instead of "active combat operations" as Russian UN Ambassador

Vasily Nebenzya claimed on October 13, or discussing Russian operations as an “offensive” as some milbloggers have, may be an attempt to temper expectations of significant Russian advances.[2] Russian operations including intensive artillery and airstrikes are likely intended to degrade Ukrainian forces around Avdiivka. [3] Russian forces are unlikely to make significant breakthroughs or cut off Ukrainian forces in the settlement in the near term, and potential advances at scale would likely require a significant and protracted commitment of personnel and materiel.[4]

The Russian information space writ large is also metering its initial optimism about the prospects of Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka. Russian milbloggers initially reported maximalist and unverifiable claims of Russian advances over 10km, likely exaggerated the degree of Russian successes near Avdiivka during initial offensive operations, and expressed optimism for rapid Russian advances.[5] Some Russian milbloggers have since acknowledged difficulties in the Russian advance near Avdiivka and noted that Russian forces decreased their pace of offensive operations around the settlement. [6] Russian milbloggers have also begun to claim that intense and attritional fighting is ongoing around Avdiivka.[7] Many Russian milbloggers also continue to self-censor by limiting reports of Russian tactical actions and problems specific to individual sectors of the frontline.[8] A Russian milblogger claimed that unspecified actors, possibly the Russian military leadership and some subset of milbloggers, agreed to stop reporting on the Avdiivka operations, but reiterated complaints about general problems in the Russian military not specific to any sector of the front.[9]

Russian forces continued offensive operations aimed at encircling Avdiivka on October 15 but have yet to make further gains amid a likely decreasing tempo of Russian operations in the area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled more than 15 Russian assaults near Avdiivka, as well as northwest and southwest of the settlement.[10] ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of previous claims of Russian advances in the area or geolocated footage of any other Russian gains. Russian sources claimed notably fewer Russian advances in the area on October 15 compared to previous days and described these new alleged advances as marginal.[11] A Russian milblogger acknowledged that Ukrainian forces still maintain a presence at the Avdiivka Coke Plant following conflicting Russian claims about Russian control of the plant.[12]

Both Ukrainian military observers and Russian sources stated that Russian forces did not achieve their desired immediate breakthrough, and Russian forces faced initial high losses and a likely slower than anticipated rate of advance.[13] Avdiivka City Military Administration Head Vitaliy Barabash stated on October 12 that Russian forces conducted assaults with air support in 10 to 12 directions around the settlement, whereas the Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 15 that fighting occurred near only six settlements.[14] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on October 14 that the pace of Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka declined and that Russian forces have lost more than 300 pieces of military equipment and 3000 personnel since intensifying offensive operations in the area on October 9.[15]

Russian forces will likely continue offensive operations at this decreased tempo in the near term, however, and will remain a threat to Ukrainian forces in the area despite being unlikely to achieve a decisive breakthrough or encircle Avdiivka at this time. Any decrease in the tempo of Russian offensive operations may be the result of a temporary adjustment to the tactical situation, and Russian forces may intensify their attempts to encircle Avdiivka in the coming days. A Ukrainian military observer noted that Russian forces have penetrated Ukrainian flanks around Avdiivka and pose a significant threat to Ukrainian positions despite being unlikely to encircle Avdiivka in the near term.[16] Ukrainian military observers indicated that Russian forces had concentrated a significant grouping of forces consisting of elements of 15 motorized rifle regiments and 11 rifle regiments to the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front and have already executed regiment-size offensive operations in the area (meaning three or more battalions conducting cohesive assaults, a scale beyond that of most Russian or Ukrainian attacks at this stage in the war).[17] This reported Russian grouping will likely be able to sustain offensive operations aimed at encircling Avdiivka if Russian commanders are willing to sustain relatively high losses, despite being insufficient for an immediate breakthrough.

A prominent Russian milblogger and frontline unit commander complained that the Russian military leadership is uninterested in battalion level problems, supplementing other Russian milblogger complaints about general problems in the Russian military.[18] Russian “Vostok” Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky, who has previously complained about problems affecting Russian forces’ ability to conduct effective combat operations, claimed on October 15 that Russian infantry on the front in Ukraine face problems with insufficient counterbattery capabilities, commander competency, medical support, rotations, and supplies. [19] Khodakovsky claimed that a lack of communication between Russian battalions and headquarters is common, so much so that (in an undated and unspecific anecdote) when Ukrainian forces struck a Russian headquarters building, a Russian battalion did not realize that the headquarters had been disabled and continued conducting operations independently. Another Russian milblogger, who said on October 14 that he concurred with the “agreement” to stop any commentary about Russian operations in Avdiivka, complained a few hours later that Russian forces, in general, are experiencing ammunition shortages and continued issues combating Ukrainian drones.[20] These complaints indicate that a wider disdain for the Russian military command persists despite likely top-down attempts to censor discussion about certain areas of the front.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 15 and slightly advanced south of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage published on October 15 shows that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced towards the railway line north of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), and Russian sources reported continued Ukrainian ground attacks south of Bakhmut on the Klishchiivka-Kurdyumivka-Andriivka line (7-13km southwest of Bakhmut).[21] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Ukrainian forces took advantage of recent Russian counterattacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast to gradually advance near Kopani (5km northwest of Robotyne), east of Nesteryanka (10km northwest of Robotyne), and near Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[22] Ukrainian officials have not yet commented on any recent Ukrainian advances along the Robotyne-Novoprokopivka-Verbove line (20km southwest to 18km southeast of Orikhiv), however. Russian sources reported continued Ukrainian attacks on the Robotyne-Novoprokopivka-Verbove line on October 15.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin may be trying to temper expectations of significant Russian advances around Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian information space writ large is also metering its initial optimism about the prospects of Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations aimed at encircling Avdiivka on October 15 but have yet to make further gains amid a likely decreasing tempo of Russian operations in the area.
- Russian forces will likely continue offensive operations at this decreased tempo in the near term, however, and will remain a threat to Ukrainian forces in the area despite being unlikely to achieve a decisive breakthrough or encircle Avdiivka at this time.

- A prominent Russian milblogger and frontline unit commander complained that Russian military leadership is uninterested in battalion level problems, supplementing other Russian milblogger complaints about general problems in the Russian military.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 15 and slightly advanced south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 15 and advanced in some areas.
- A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have “significant” reserves comprised of new divisions currently located in rear areas, though these formations are highly unlikely to be fully staffed at this time.
- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is sending a reportedly Kremlin-affiliated priest to Crimea, likely as part of continued Russian efforts to persecute religious communities in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 14, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mapes, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

October 14, 2023, 4:25pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

US and Ukrainian officials reported on October 12 and 13 that they anticipated the Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka and expressed confidence in Ukrainian defenses. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on October 13 that the new Russian offensive operations near Lyman and Avdiivka “did not come as a surprise.”^[1] Kirby stated that the US is confident that Ukrainian forces will repel these Russian attacks.^[2] Kirby also reported that Russian forces appear to be using human wave tactics, wherein the Russian military uses masses of poorly trained and equipped Russian soldiers to attempt to advance - the same practice Russian forces used during their failed winter offensive in winter 2023.^[3] ISW has additionally observed Russian forces using higher than usual numbers of armored vehicles in ongoing operations.^[4] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov similarly reported on October 12 that Ukrainian forces knew about and prepared for the Russian attack near Avdiivka and that Russian forces did not form sufficient reserves to attack along the entire frontline, but only in certain sectors.^[5] Several Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian mines are slowing Russian advances near Avdiivka, indicating Ukrainian prior preparations for the attack.^[6]

The Russian information space remains divided on the prospects of Russian successes near Avdiivka and on current Ukrainian capabilities. Geolocated footage published on October 13 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced north of the waste heap north of Avdiivka.^[7] Additional geolocated footage published on October 14 indicates that Russian forces also advanced south of Avdiivka.^[8] Some Russian sources claimed on October 13 and 14 that Ukrainian defensive fortifications pose a significant challenge to Russian advances around Avdiivka.^[9] Some Russian sources indicated that Russian problems with medical support are also impeding Russian advances in the Avdiivka area. One Russian source claimed on October 12 that there is a shortage of surgeons in occupied Horlivka and Donetsk City near Avdiivka and called on Russian doctors to travel to the front to help treat wounded Russian soldiers.^[10] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun similarly stated on October 14 that the majority of Russian casualties in the Avdiivka direction are due to low-quality medical treatment and local hospitals reaching capacity.^[11]

Other Russian milbloggers continued to praise Russian offensive efforts on October 13 and 14 and reiterated the Kremlin’s desired narrative that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is over.^[12] One Russian milblogger warned that Russian officials and sources have likely dismissed the Ukrainian counteroffensive too quickly and noted that it is too early to determine if the Russian attacks near Avdiivka will develop into an organized offensive operation.^[13]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine on October 14 and advanced west of Donetsk City. Geolocated footage published on October 14 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Marinka (just west of Donetsk City).^[14] Ukrainian and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to attack Russian positions on Bakhmut’s southern flank.^[15] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced west of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) towards Rivne (24km southwest of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[16]

The Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) will maintain some vessels at its main Sevastopol naval base amid Ukrainian strikes on Russian vessels, as the Russian Navy’s main drydock on the Black Sea is in Sevastopol. Ukrainian Naval Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk reported on October 14 that Ukrainian forces struck the Russian *Professor Nikolai Muru* tugboat and the *Pavel Derzhavin* patrol ship on October 13 and stated that the BSF has redeployed vessels from Sevastopol to Kerch, Feodosia, and Novorossiysk (in mainland Russia).^[17] Pletenchuk noted that Russian forces continue to use the Sevastopol base because there are not enough piers to accommodate vessels at other ports, however.^[18] The BSF’s headquarters and main facilities including a dry dock are located in Sevastopol, and the Russian navy therefore must send some vessels for repairs within range of Ukrainian strikes.^[19] The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on October 14 that the BSF has likely increased its defensive and reactive posture after multiple Ukrainian strikes on BSF assets in August and September 2023.^[20]

Armenia ratified the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) Rome Statute on October 14, obliging Armenia to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin if he enters Armenia due to the ICC’s outstanding arrest warrant, directly after Putin’s efforts on October 13 to claim that the Russia-Armenia relationship is not

deteriorating.[21] Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan signed the corresponding decree as well as a statement recognizing the ICC's jurisdiction on October 14 following the Armenian parliament's vote to ratify the statute on October 3.[22] Ratifying the Rome Statute notably legally obliges Armenia to arrest Putin on behalf of the ICC, which issued a warrant for Putin's arrest on March 17, 2023, for illegally deporting Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.[23] Armenia's ratification of the Rome Statute comes one day after Putin boasted about the strength of Russia-Armenia relations during the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Member States.[24]

Ukrainian forces will reportedly begin training on F-16 fighter jets in the US next week. *Politico* reported on October 13 that anonymous US officials stated that a "small number" of Ukrainian pilots will begin F-16 fighter jet training next week at Morris Air National Guard Base in Arizona after having completed English language training at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.[25] One US official reportedly stated that the training may be accelerated due to Ukrainian forces' urgent need for F-16 fighter jets.

Key Takeaways:

- US and Ukrainian officials reported on October 12 and 13 that they anticipated the Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka and expressed confidence in Ukrainian defenses.
- The Russian information space remains divided on the prospects of Russian successes near Avdiivka and on current Ukrainian capabilities.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern and southern Ukraine on October 14 and advanced west of Donetsk City.
- The Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) will maintain some vessels at its main Sevastopol naval base amid Ukrainian strikes on Russian vessels, as the Russian Navy's main dry dock on the Black Sea is in Sevastopol.
- Armenia ratified the International Criminal Court's (ICC) Rome Statute on October 14, obliging Armenia to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin if he enters Armenia due to the ICC's outstanding arrest warrant, directly after Putin's efforts on October 13 to claim that the Russia-Armenia relationship is not deteriorating.
- Ukrainian forces will reportedly begin training on F-16 fighter jets in the US next week.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Relatives of Russian mobilized men and recruited prisoners continue to complain that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian military command are mistreating troops on the frontlines – especially on the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to establish patronage programs between Russian federal subjects and occupied areas in order to integrate occupied territories into Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 13, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

October 13, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

Ongoing Russian offensive operations throughout the Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast area on October 13 reportedly faced setbacks around the city. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continued to attack areas north and south of Avdiivka, and geolocated footage published on October 12 and 13 indicates that Russian forces advanced south of Krasnohorivka (5km north of Avdiivka) and southeast of Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka).[1] Russian sources also published conflicting reports about previous claims by Russian sources of Russian control of the Avdiivka Coke Plant, and ISW has not observed any evidence to confirm that Russian forces control the plant as of publication.[2] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continue to repel Russian attacks around Avdiivka.[3] A Russian milblogger noted that Ukrainian forces are using minefields to slow down Russian advances in the Avdiivka direction.[4] A Russian volunteer in the 4th Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Brigade (2nd Army Corps, Southern Military District) claimed that worn out barrels are reducing the accuracy of Russian artillery near Avdiivka, a complaint about Russian artillery that ISW has previously observed from Russian sources.[5] The volunteer assessed that Russian forces can "compress the [Ukrainian] perimeter" by capturing less fortified Ukrainian-held territory near Avdiivka, but expressed concern that Russian generals will misinterpret these limited advances and try to speed up offensive efforts towards Avdiivka. The volunteer noted that such a misinterpretation may lead Russian forces to "beat on concrete" fortifications until these forces run out.

The Russian military command appears to be restricting discussion of the Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka in the Russian information space, likely in an attempt to adapt to previous information shocks and control any narratives that emerge in the Russian information space around these operations. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on October 12 that the Russian military command was "dispensing information [about Russian offensive operations] in doses," but then claimed on October 13 that the Russian military command was "minimizing the release of information into the public domain" as the Russian military does not want "media hype" surrounding operations near Avdiivka.[6] Another Russian milblogger also claimed on October 13 that unspecified actors,

likely Russian military leadership, instructed milbloggers to not discuss the details of the fighting near Avdiivka.[7] A Russian source stated that he supported the Russian military's decision and urged milbloggers to discuss only information that does not affect Russian military operational security, whereas other Russian milbloggers noted that this is the time to figure out which of the Russian milbloggers are lying about the situation on the frontlines.[8] The Russian military command likely seeks to adjust for previous major offensives in which it lost control of perceptions of Russian actions in the Russian information space. Some milbloggers are following (and will likely continue to follow) the MoD-imposed narrative line, but this attempt at centralized control may provoke a backlash from select milbloggers.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to frame Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka and other localized efforts as Russian forces seizing the operational initiative in Ukraine. Russian UN Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya claimed on October 13 that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations are "formally over" because Russian forces have switched to "active combat operations along almost the entire frontline."[9] The Kremlin is likely attempting to use Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka as well as localized efforts in other areas of the front to shift the Russian and international narratives to focus on Russian offensive operations and military capabilities. Ukraine is highly unlikely to have concluded its ongoing counteroffensive as Nebenzya claims, and as ISW has previously noted Ukrainian counteroffensive operations will likely continue into the winter months, though likely at a reduced pace and scale.[10]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and the Bakhmut direction.[11] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued unsuccessful attacks along the Klishchiivka-Andriivka-Kurdyumivka line (7-13km southwest of Bakhmut) and along the Robotyne-Verbove line (10km south to 18km southeast of Orikhiv).[12]

Russian forces continue to target Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities with drone and missile strikes, as well as localized cross-border raids. Spokesperson of the United Press Center of the Northern Direction Ukrainian Defense Forces, Colonel Yurii Povh, reported on October 12 that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempting to cross into Sumy Oblast and stated that these Russian forces likely aimed to reach a Ukrainian critical infrastructure facility.[13] Povh stated that Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups have unsuccessfully attempted to cross the international border between Russia and Ukraine 10 times in the past two months.[14] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported on October 13 that Russian forces are attempting to increase weapons production during the fall and winter in order to strike Ukrainian energy and other critical infrastructure.[15] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces have decreased their use of air-launched missiles and more frequently use cruise missiles and Iskander ballistic missiles.[16] Skibitskyi also reported that Russia has resumed the production of Kalibr and Kh-101 cruise missiles but faces challenges in increasing the volume of production.[17]

Russian authorities arrested four lawyers who represent prominent opposition figures on extremism charges on October 13, likely to set conditions for the upcoming 2024 Russian presidential elections. Russian authorities arrested three of imprisoned Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny's lawyers – Vadim Kobzev, Igor Sergunin, and Alexei Liptser – for allegedly participating in an extremist community.[18] Russian authorities also charged and fined Alexei Ladin, who represents many Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian citizens accused of terrorism, espionage, and participating in banned groups, for allegedly discrediting the Russian military and distributing extremist symbols.[19] Lawyer Alexander Molokhov, who represents imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin, called on the Russian Federal Chamber of Lawyers to conduct a one-day strike in solidarity with Kobzev, Sergunin, and Liptser and criticized the Russian government for prosecuting these lawyers for "connecting Navalny with the outside world."[20]

Key Takeaways:

- Ongoing Russian offensive operations throughout the Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast area on October 13 reportedly faced setbacks around the city.
- The Russian military command appears to be restricting discussion of the Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka in the Russian information space, likely in an attempt to adapt to previous information shocks and control any narratives that emerge in the Russian information space around these operations.
- The Kremlin is likely attempting to frame Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka and other localized efforts as Russian forces seizing the operational initiative in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 13.
- Russian forces continue to target Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities with drone and missile strikes, as well as localized cross-border raids.
- Russian authorities arrested four lawyers who represent prominent opposition figures on extremism charges on October 13, likely to set conditions for the upcoming 2024 Russian presidential elections.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in various sectors of the front.
- A Ukrainian military intelligence official reported that Russian forces are struggling to equip newly-formed military formations.
- Ukrainian partisans reportedly targeted Russian military assets in rear areas in southern Ukraine on October 12 and 13.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 12, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, and Mason Clark

October 12, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on October 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

Russian forces likely launched a significant and ongoing offensive effort around Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast on October 10. ISW observed Russian forces simultaneously attacking northwest, west, and south of Avdiivka using armored assault groups, rotary wing aircraft, and concentrated artillery starting on October 10. [1] Avdiivka City Military Administration Head Vitaliy Barabash indicated that Russian forces are carrying out assaults with air support in 10 to 12 directions around the settlement.[2] Ukrainian military observers framed Russian offensive operations against Avdiivka as a “major attack” and noted that Russian forces used an unusually high number of armored vehicles in combat.[3] Russian forces’ increased use of armored vehicles and aviation – alongside persistent simultaneous ground attacks – indicates that Russian forces are conducting an offensive effort more significant in scope and intent than ISW previously assessed on October 10 and October 11. [4] **ISW is revising its assessment that Russian attacks around Avdiivka are local efforts intended solely to fix Ukrainian forces but is not prepared to assess the exact objectives and likely outcome of Russian efforts in the Avdiivka direction at this time.**

Russian forces have not secured any major breakthroughs near Avdiivka as of October 12 and are unlikely to immediately cut off Ukrainian forces in the city. ISW estimates that Russian forces have captured 4.52 square kilometers of territory from different directions around Avdiivka since October 10 and that Russian forces are 3.32km away from a Ukrainian ground line of communication (GLOC) along the O0562 highway from the south and 5.25km from the north of Avdiivka, and Russian claims of advances beyond these distances are likely overstated. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are attempting to create a cauldron around Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka, but quickly acknowledged that current advances are slow.[5] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed that it is too early to discuss a “full-scale [Ukrainian] exodus from the city” despite some Russian advances in the area.[6] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have already advanced 12km in the Avdiivka direction despite geolocated footage indicating only that Russian forces made limited advances northwest, south, and west of Avdiivka as of October 12 and did not immediately threaten Ukrainian forces with encirclement.[7] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces gained additional ground on a waste heap on Avdiivka’s northern flank near the Avdiivka Coke Plant; seized a section of a railroad south of Avdiivka; and advanced around the city, but ISW cannot confirm these claims at the time.[8] Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces destroyed the Ocheretyne railway station (13km northwest of Avdiivka), which they claimed supports Ukrainian logistics to Avdiivka.[9]

Geolocated footage indicates that Russian forces have likely lost at least a battalion tactical group’s (BTG’s) worth of armored vehicles in offensive operations around Avdiivka. A reliable X (Twitter) user observed on October 12 that Ukrainian forces destroyed 33 Russian armored vehicles and 15 tanks since October 10 near Avdiivka.[10] A Ukrainian reserve officer stated that conservative estimates suggest Ukrainian forces have destroyed a minimum of 36 Russian armored vehicles including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and transport vehicles.[11] A milblogger also claimed that both sides are suffering “significant losses” in operations around Avdiivka.[12] Footage published on October 11 purportedly shows a Russian armored vehicle in a column near Avdiivka falling into a body of water, and geolocated footage published on October 11 and 12 shows Ukrainian forces striking Russian vehicle columns around Avdiivka.[13] This footage indicates that Russian armored forces may not be applying lessons learned from previous offensive operations near Vuhledar in February 2023 or around Kyiv in March 2022, when Ukrainian forces destroyed a disorderly advancing column of Russian armored vehicles.[14] ISW previously reported that Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces operating around Avdiivka were effectively incorporating lessons learned from Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine.[15] While Russian implementation of lessons learned will vary and Russian forces have achieved some advances in the Avdiivka area which were likely enabled by more effective units, ISW’s October 11 assessment was likely overstated.

Defending Ukrainian forces are inflicting relatively heavy losses and suppressing Russian logistics near Avdiivka, likely slowing down the Russian pace of advance. A Russian milblogger claimed that the pace of Russian advance had slowed down and Russian forces are now focusing on “quality” attacks after Russian forces endured initial high equipment losses.[16] Geolocated footage published on October 12 shows that Ukrainian forces destroyed a bridge northeast of Avdiivka between Yasynuvata and Horlivka.[17] A Russian milblogger claimed that the bridge’s destruction will negatively impact Russian logistics in the Avdiivka area and that Russian forces will likely face difficulties attempting to repair the bridge due to its proximity to the frontline.[18]

The Russian information space is likely exaggerating the degree of Russian successes on the Avdiivka front and will continue to do so despite military failures or a slow pace of advance. Russian sources are celebrating Russian offensive operations but are largely not reacting to the significant vehicle losses sustained in just a few days of fighting. This muted response is largely inconsistent with prior outcry when Russian forces lost a whole armored vehicle column as the Russian offensive against Vuhledar culminated in February 2023.[19] The milbloggers are likely engaging in self-censorship following the recent arrests of prominent critical information space voices. Many prominent Russian milbloggers also have strong connections to formations in the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) People’s Militia, many of which are fighting in the Avdiivka area, further providing incentive for milbloggers to censor defeats and exaggerate claimed victories.[20] One prominent milblogger praised the Russian military command for providing information about claimed successes and noted that “this is the first operation in a long time where the [Russian] command tried to create an information cap.”[21]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front on October 12. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved some unspecified successes east of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and east of Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[22] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing offensives in the Bakhmut direction and have advanced several hundred meters in unspecified areas.[23] The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces improved their tactical positions west of Robotyne.[24]

Russian “Vostok” Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky advocated for Russian forces to freeze the frontlines in Ukraine in order to replace exhausted mobilized personnel with fresh contract servicemen and launch a renewed offensive effort. Khodakovsky stated on October 12 that Russian forces could conduct a “deliberate final phase” to end the war after replacing tired units with contract servicemen, which aligns with ISW’s longstanding assessment that Russian forces will almost certainly take advantage of any short or long-term freeze to refresh their forces and restart fighting at a later date.[25] Khodakovsky also noted that Russian forces will likely face effective Ukrainian defenses and resistance as Russian forces attempt to advance further west into Ukraine. Imprisoned former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin has consistently claimed that a specific faction of the Russian leadership, which Khodakovsky appears to be a

member of, has long advocated for freezing the current frontline in Ukraine.[26] Girkin claimed on October 9 that Russian forces will continue to conduct a strategic defense to freeze the frontlines ahead of the Russian presidential elections in March 2024.[27]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes across Ukraine, targeting port infrastructure in southern Ukraine and critical infrastructure in Kharkiv Oblast on the night of October 11 to 12. Ukrainian official military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 28 of the 33 Shahed-131/136 drones.[28] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that an unspecified number of Russian drones struck the port area in Odesa Oblast.[29] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on October 12 that the Russian military is stockpiling weapons intended for strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities and the oil and gas sector.[30] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Administration Head Oleh Synehubov stated that a Russian drone partially damaged a critical infrastructure facility in Kharkiv Oblast and noted that Russian forces will increasingly target the Ukrainian energy sector in the fall and winter.[31] Ukrainian Minister of Energy Herman Halushchenko reported that Ukrainian power engineers are undergoing training in case of massive power outages but noted that it is difficult to predict the scale and impact of Russian attacks on the power system.[32]

The Russian Presidential Administration continues preparations to manage and falsify the March 2024 presidential elections. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on October 12 that the Russian Presidential Administration may install electronic voting terminals with passport scanners at polling stations in certain regions of Russia ahead of the presidential election in March 2024.[33] The electronic voting terminals will reportedly allow Russian authorities to collect data about Russian citizens in an electronic database, including data regarding mobilization eligibility and voting habits. *Meduza* noted that Russian authorities first used electronic voting terminals during the Moscow mayoral elections in September 2023. ISW has previously observed the Kremlin manipulate national election results using electronic voting after the September 2021 State Duma elections.[34] Ural Regional State newswire *URA.ru* reported that its sources close to the Russian government claimed that the Russian federal government is closely monitoring the social media accounts of almost 90 current and former Kurgan Oblast politicians who expressed support for deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion in June 2023.[35] Russian authorities have reportedly advised politicians to consider their social media posts carefully ahead of the presidential elections, likely an attempt to encourage self-censorship among politicians.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces likely launched a significant and ongoing offensive effort around Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast on October 10, and ISW is revising its initial assessment these attacks are a limited effort to fix Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces have not secured any major breakthroughs near Avdiivka as of October 12 and are unlikely to immediately cut off Ukrainian forces in the city.
- Geolocated footage indicates that Russian forces have likely lost at least a battalion tactical group's (BTG's) worth of armored vehicles in offensive operations around Avdiivka.
- The Russian information space is likely exaggerating the degree of Russian successes on the Avdiivka front and will continue to do so despite military failures or a slow pace of advance.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front on October 12.
- Russian "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky advocated for Russian forces to freeze the frontlines in Ukraine in order to replace exhausted mobilized personnel with fresh contract servicemen and launch a renewed offensive effort.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes across Ukraine, targeting port infrastructure in southern Ukraine and critical infrastructure in Kharkiv Oblast on the night of October 11 to 12.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, along the Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, around Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizha Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev stated on October 12 that the Russian military has recruited more than 357,000 contract, volunteer, and conscripted military personnel since January 1, 2023.
- Russian authorities continue to persecute religious communities in occupied Ukraine as part of ongoing Russian efforts to destroy the Ukrainian identity.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 11, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, and Mason Clark

October 11, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on October 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

Ongoing localized Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka likely demonstrate the ability of Russian forces to learn and apply tactical battlefield lessons in Ukraine. Russian forces launched localized attacks towards Avdiivka after intensive artillery preparation of the battlefield in the early hours of October 10, and

geolocated footage from October 10 and 11 confirms that Russian troops advanced southwest of Avdiivka near Sieverne and northwest of Avdiivka near Stepove and Krasnohorivka.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that a grouping of up to three Russian battalions with tank and armored vehicle support intensified offensive operations near Avdiivka.[2] Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Andrii Kovavlev clarified that these battalions are part of three motorized rifle brigades of the Southern Military District's 8th Combined Arms Army.[3]

Russian sources celebrated Russian advances in this area and outlined several adaptations that suggest that Russian forces are applying lessons learned from operations in southern Ukraine to other sectors of the front.[4] A Russian artillery battalion commander who is reportedly fighting in the area claimed that Russian forces are paying significant attention to counterbattery combat.[5] Another source who also claimed to be fighting in the area reported that Russian forces are using electronic warfare (EW) systems, conducting sound artillery preparation of the battlefield, and are demonstrating "clear interaction" between command headquarters, assault groups, aerial reconnaissance, and artillery elements.[6] The milblogger noted that Russian forces are not employing human wave-style "meat" assaults, and several Russian sources amplified footage of Russian armored vehicles leading a breakthrough along roadways towards Ukrainian positions, followed by infantry columns.[7]

The suggestion that Russian forces are effectively employing EW, counterbattery, artillery preparation, aerial reconnaissance, and inter/intra-unit communication is noteworthy, as Russian sources previously emphasized these tactical adaptations as the strengths of Russia's defense against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine, particularly in June and July.[8] Furthermore, the majority of Russian forces currently fighting in the Avdiivka area are likely elements of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 1st Army Corps, which the Russian 8th Combined Arms Army predominantly controls.[9] ISW has not observed any 8th Combined Arms Army elements not from DNR formations involved in ongoing attacks, and ISW assesses current Russian offensive efforts in the Avdiivka area are likely primarily comprised of DNR forces. DNR elements have suffered from pervasive issues with abusive command culture, poor discipline, and minimal training; all of which have been exacerbated by wider issues with the integration of the DNR's more irregular force structure into Russia's regular military, as ISW has previously reported. [10] Reports by Russian milbloggers that units in this area are displaying effective communication may suggest that DNR forces have somewhat eased their integration into regular Russian forces and have learned lessons from previous ineffective and failed attacks in the Avdiivka area.

These tactical-level adaptations and successes, however, are unlikely to translate into wider operational and strategic gains for Russian forces. Geolocated footage shows that Russian gains around Avdiivka are concentrated to the southwest of Avdiivka, and Russian forces have not completed an operational encirclement of the settlement and will likely struggle to do so if that is their intent. Avdiivka is also a notoriously well-fortified and defended Ukrainian stronghold, which will likely complicate Russian forces' ability to closely approach or fully capture the settlement. Russian forces additionally already control segments of the critical N20 Donetsk City-Kostyantynivka-Kramatorsk-Sloviansk highway and other routes that run near Avdiivka, so the hypothetical capture of Avdiivka will not open new routes of advance to the rest of Donetsk Oblast. As ISW previously assessed, Russian forces likely intend attacks in the Avdiivka area to fix Ukrainian forces and prevent them from redeploying to other areas of the front. However, Ukrainian officials have already identified the Avdiivka push as a Russian fixing operation, and they are unlikely to unduly commit Ukrainian manpower to this axis.[11]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front on October 11. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces were successful east of Klishchiivka and Andriivka near Bakhmut.[12] The Ukrainian General Staff and Tavriisk Group Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi reported that Ukrainian forces improved their tactical positions west of Robotyne.[13]

A large number of NATO member states recently announced aid packages to Ukraine against the backdrop of the 16th Ukraine Defense Group Contact Group meeting in Brussels, Belgium on October 11. Military and government officials from almost 50 countries met in Brussels, Belgium on October 11 for the beginning of the Contact Group on Defense of Ukraine, and multiple NATO states pledged aid and support to Ukraine.[14] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin notably announced a new \$200 million aid package on October 11, which includes AIM-9 missiles for a surface-to-air defense system that the United States will soon deliver to Ukraine. He stated that "the United States will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes." [15] German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius also announced a €20 million aid package on October 10 that includes 10 Leopard tanks.[16]

Russia's Federation Council Defense and Security Committee voted to replace Senator Viktor Bondarev with Senator Vladimir Bulavin as Federation Council Defense and Security Committee Head on October 10. Russian Senator Vyacheslav Timchenko claimed on October 10 that Bondarev is resigning as part of the chairperson's standard rotation and will remain the first deputy chairman of the Defense and Security Committee.[17] Timchenko claimed that he expects the Federation Council to approve Bulavin's new appointment.[18] Russian insider sources noted Bondarev's ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), as he previously served as Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and speculated that his replacement indicates that the Russian MoD is losing influence in the "most important committee." [19] The insider sources noted Bulavin's previous positions in the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and claimed that he has ties to both Russian Security Council Secretary and former FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev and First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko.[20] If the Russian insider sources' claims are true, Bondarev's replacement with Bulavin could suggest that the FSB has increased its influence over the Federation Council Defense and Security Committee compared to the Russian MoD.

Russian military command continues to celebrate the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) for its service in Ukraine, despite claims that the brigade was defeated and reportedly transferred to the Kherson direction. Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ildar Akhmerov presented awards to servicemen of the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade on October 11 for repelling Ukrainian attacks in an unspecified sector of the front a week after Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu partially attributed the successful Russian defensive operations around Robotyne to the brigade.[21] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 22 that Ukrainian forces "completely defeated" the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade and that Russian command withdrew the brigade from western Zaporizhia Oblast.[22] A Russian milblogger claimed on October 5 that elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade were transferred to the Kherson direction, indicating that the brigade may have been reconstituted or is in the process of reconstituting. [23] ISW has not observed the broader Russian information space discuss the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade's combat operations since early to mid-September.[24] The Russian MoD is likely interested in amplifying reports of well-known units to create the image of Russian success in the information space.

Armenia continues to ostensibly distance itself from Russia after a decades-long security relationship. Armenian forces are not participating in the week-long Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) "Indestructible Brotherhood-2023" exercises in Kyrgyzstan that started on October 6.[25] The Kyrgyz Presidential

administration reported on October 10 that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov that he is unable to attend the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on October 13.[26] Pashinyan also stated on October 11 that Russian peacekeepers should return to Russia instead of Russian bases in Armenia if they leave Nagorno-Karabakh.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Ongoing localized Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka likely demonstrate the ability of Russian forces ability to learn and apply tactical battlefield lessons in Ukraine. These tactical-level adaptations and successes, however, are unlikely to necessarily translate into wider operational and strategic gains for Russian forces.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front on October 11.
- A large number of NATO member states recently announced aid packages to Ukraine against the backdrop of the 16th Ukraine Defense Group Contact Group meeting in Brussels, Belgium on October 11.
- Russia's Federation Council Defense and Security Committee voted to replace Senator Viktor Bondarev with Senator Vladimir Bulavin as Federation Council Defense and Security Committee Head on October 10.
- Russian military command continues to celebrate the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) for its service in Ukraine, despite claims that the brigade was defeated and reportedly transferred to the Kherson direction.
- Armenia continues to ostensibly distance itself from Russia after a decades-long security relationship.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on October 11.
- Russian opposition outlet *Sever Reali* reported on October 11 that Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) representatives may have recruited over 1,000 convicts to serve in the Russian MoD-affiliated Redut private military company (PMC).
- Russian occupation authorities are suffering staff shortages at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 10, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, and Mason Clark

October 10, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on October 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

Russian forces launched localized offensive operations in the Avdiivka area of Donetsk Oblast and southwest of Orkhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 9, which are likely intended to fix Ukrainian forces away from the Robotyne area. Russian forces intensified offensive operations northwest of Avdiivka near Ocheretyne, Tetenke, and Berdychi and southwest of Avdiivka on the Vodyane-Opytne line.[1] Russian forces also attacked southwest of Orkhiv on the Pyatychatky-Zherebyanki line, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced up two kilometers in the area.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed up to three Russian battalions conducted an attack in the Avdiivka direction, and ISW has observed footage of fighting in the area, but ISW has not observed any confirmation of these claimed Russian advances as of this writing.[3] Russian milbloggers are largely portraying the Avdiivka-area operations as a significant offensive effort aimed at encircling the Ukrainian force grouping in Avdiivka and capturing the city.[4] A successful encirclement of Avdiivka, one of the most heavily fortified areas of the Donetsk Oblast front line, would very likely require more forces than Russia has currently dedicated to the Avdiivka-Donetsk City effort. Russian forces have largely deployed irregular forces along this frontline, primarily elements of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Army Corps and additional volunteer formations that have largely suffered from poor and abusive command culture and tensions with regular Russian units.[5] ISW has observed no recent Russian deployments to this line. Russian forces have also conducted grinding offensive operations for relatively minimal territorial gains near Avdiivka for the past year and a half of the war, and the Russian military command is likely aware that an effort to capture Avdiivka would require more and higher-quality units than those currently deployed in the area.[6]

The increased Russian offensive operations in the Avdiivka and Zherebyanki areas coincide with other localized offensive efforts in Luhansk Oblast and eastern Zaporizhia Oblast, all likely aimed at fixing Ukrainian forces and preventing Ukrainian command from transferring reserves to critical areas of the front in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[7] Ukrainian officials have made a number of statements within the past few weeks to this effect, particularly noting that Russian attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line are meant to prevent Ukrainians from transferring forces to Zaporizhia Oblast.[8]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area. Geolocated footage published on October 9 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced northeast of Mykilske (3km southeast of Vuhledar and about 30km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[9] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success near Andriivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[10] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Novofedorivka (15km northeast of Robotyne and 6km northeast of Verbove).[11]

Russian military leadership may have once again replaced the commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), suggesting ongoing pervasive Russian command and control issues in western Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian insider source claimed on October 9 that the Russian command removed Lieutenant General Denis Lyamin from command of the 58th CAA, after Lyamin replaced former commander Major General Ivan Popov on July 13.[12] The insider source claimed that during Lyamin's three-month tenure, the Russian General Staff went to great lengths to conceal the true nature of the situation within units of the 58th CAA, which are currently defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and claimed that this is in large part because Lyamin is a close associate of Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov. The insider source suggested that Gerasimov removed Lyamin from command of the 58th CAA and re-assigned him the position of Chief of Staff of the Central Military District to shield him from criticism over Russian operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast. While ISW cannot independently confirm Lyamin's alleged re-appointment, the suggestion that the 58th CAA has undergone two major command changes in a short period possibly indicates command-and-control challenges, and at minimum concern among Russian command over the conduct of operations in this key sector of the front.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes targeting southern Ukraine on the night of October 9 to 10. The Ukrainian General Staff and Air Force reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed 27 of the 36 Shahed-131/-136 launched from occupied Cape Chauda, Crimea towards Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson oblasts.[13] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk reported on October 10 that Russian forces are likely conducting strikes using only Shahed drones because the Russian military is attempting to conserve missiles since Russian missile production has slowed due to sanctions.[14] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat stated that Ukrainian air defense systems will continue to operate as usual during the winter and that Ukrainian forces will strengthen their defense of energy and fuel facilities.[15]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced plans to open a new corridor through Moldova and Romania for the export of Ukrainian grain. [16] Zelensky announced that the overland grain corridor will open soon during a press conference with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in Bucharest on October 10.[17]

NATO adopted several resolutions aimed at increasing aid to Ukraine on October 9. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly adopted six resolutions related to the war in Ukraine and called for NATO countries to increase and expedite political, military, intelligence, financial, training, and humanitarian support to Ukraine and to "sustain this support for as long as it takes for Ukraine to prevail." [18] The resolutions also called for the increased and rapid delivery of military equipment to Ukraine, including air defense systems, missiles, and fighter aircraft.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched localized offensive operations in the Avdiivka area of Donetsk Oblast and southwest of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 9, which are likely intended to fix Ukrainian forces away from the Robotyne area.
- The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed up to three Russian battalions conducted an attack and ISW has observed footage of fighting in the area, but ISW has not observed any confirmation of these claimed Russian advances as of writing.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian military leadership may have once again replaced the commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), suggesting ongoing pervasive Russian command and control issues in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced plans to open a new corridor through Moldova and Romania for the export of Ukrainian grain.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on October 10.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Luhansk Oblast occupation authorities are cracking down against Ukrainian underground communication networks.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 9, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

October 9, 2023, 5:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on October 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

The Kremlin remains focused on promoting the purported legality and legitimacy of Russian internal politics despite Kremlin officials' admissions to the contrary. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded on October 9 to Chechen Head Ramzan Kadyrov's October 7 proposal to cancel the upcoming 2024

presidential election and instead hold a unanimous vote for Russian President Vladimir Putin, remarking that this will not happen because Putin has “emphasized the need to comply with all of the requirements of democracy, the constitution, and accordingly, to hold these elections.”[1] Peskov then claimed that Russian society has consolidated behind Putin with unprecedented unanimity and suggested that Putin is “a politician with whom it is unlikely that anyone, even theoretically, can compete in any way electorally.”[2] Peskov’s statements indicate that while the Kremlin is invested in creating the guise that the 2024 elections will be free and fair by encouraging Russians to at least nominally participate in the practices of democracy, the Russian government does not intend for any alternative political candidate to pose an actual threat to Putin’s re-election. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* similarly noted in July that its internal sources claimed that the Kremlin has already decided that Putin will win over 80 percent of the vote in the upcoming presidential elections.[3]

Peskov’s strong comments also indicate the Kremlin’s desire to posture confidence and steadfastness against the backdrop of Kremlin concerns over Russian opinions on and support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Peskov’s suggestion that Russia intends to hold regular elections has the effect of emphasizing that Russia is still a functioning and confident state despite the war, and the insinuation that Putin will win the elections unanimously also frames him as an effective and capable war-time leader with the total support of his society. ISW has recently reported on several instances of the Kremlin strengthening efforts to control the information space and seeking to dispel concerns over another mobilization wave prior to 2024, enabling the Kremlin to consolidate its narratives within the Russian information space.[4] ISW has also consistently observed several indicators that the Kremlin is concerned about the impact of the war on domestic Russian support for Putin and his regime, including refusing to conduct additional mobilization or otherwise move Russian society to a full wartime footing.[5]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on October 9 amid reports of deteriorating weather conditions in Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv), and near Klishchiivka (5km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[6] Russian milbloggers claimed that rainfall has worsened visibility in southern Ukraine, hindering Russian and Ukrainian reconnaissance drone operations.[7] One Russian milblogger claimed that the ground has become muddy and obstructs tracked vehicle movement, though another milblogger claimed that the ground has not yet become muddy enough to inhibit vehicle movement.[8] Exact conditions likely vary along the frontline, though weather conditions are generally worsening. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash reported that Russian forces are relying less heavily on aviation and drone activity in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction due to heavy rainfall.[9]

Russian forces reportedly launched localized offensive operations south of Hulyaipole and may have reorganized the Southern Grouping of Forces, likely in an attempt to further defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. A Russian milblogger and a Ukrainian military observer both independently reported that elements of the Russian 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade (35th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) advanced several hundred meters in a contested “gray zone” in the Marfopol-Chervone (6km southeast of Hulyaipole) direction on October 9.[10] Russian forces reportedly attacked at the battalion level or less, indicating that these operations are likely tactical and aim to draw and pin Ukrainian forces south of Hulyaipole rather than further west in Zaporizhia Oblast.[11] The Ukrainian military observer reported that the Russian military command recently reorganized the Southern Grouping of Forces to operate in two directions: the Mariupol direction in the western Donetsk Oblast; and the Berdyansk direction in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, where Russian forces have concentrated the most and highest quality forces.[12] The observer reported that this grouping contains mostly motorized rifle units; the Eastern Military District’s (EMD) “most powerful” army, the 5th Combined Arms Army (CAA); the EMD’s two “least powerful” armies, the 29th and 36th CAAs; the Black Sea Fleet’s 40th and 155th Naval Infantry brigades; and the Pacific Fleet’s 336th Naval Infantry Brigade.[13] The military observer reported that the Russian military command has prioritized allocating additional new forces and means to the Southern Grouping of Forces over other force groupings in the theater.[14]

Imprisoned former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin reiterated his previous claims that the Russian military will continue to conduct a strategic defense to freeze the frontlines before the Russian presidential elections in March 2024. Girkin’s wife published a letter on October 9 which Girkin reportedly wrote on September 29 in which Girkin discussed the current state of the war and his forecast of Russian actions. Girkin has continually claimed that a specific faction within the Russian leadership has advocated for freezing the current frontline in Ukraine and has opposed another faction that advocates for continued Russian offensive operations and domestically improving the war effort.[15] Girkin claimed he is “99 percent” certain that the Kremlin will decide to “freeze the frontline” until after the Russian presidential elections in March 2024.[16] Girkin claimed that Russian forces will likely continue conducting a strategic defense on the existing frontlines and focus on preventing Ukrainian breakthroughs or “sensitive operational successes.”[17] Girkin further claimed that any Russian government actions to strengthen the Russian military before the 2024 presidential elections would likely aggravate the Russian social, economic, and internal political situations.[18] Girkin also claimed that the Russian government would likely gradually increase domestic repressions ahead of the elections.[19]

The Russian government is moving toward revoking Russia’s ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Reuters reported on October 9 that Russian State Duma leaders gave the Duma International Affairs Committee until October 18 to discuss the process of revoking Russia’s ratification of the treaty.[20] Russian President Vladimir Putin first commented on the possibility of Russia revoking Russia’s ratification of the treaty on October 5.[21] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin uses nuclear rhetoric to prompt the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to negotiate and that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains unlikely.[22]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin remains focused on promoting the purported legality and legitimacy of Russian internal politics despite Kremlin officials’ admissions to the contrary.
- Peskov’s strong comments also indicate the Kremlin’s desire to posture confidence and steadfastness against the backdrop of Kremlin concerns over Russian opinions on and support for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on October 9 amid reports of deteriorating weather conditions in Ukraine.
- Russian forces reportedly launched localized offensive operations south of Hulyaipole and may have reorganized the Southern Grouping of Forces, likely in an attempt to further defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- Imprisoned former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin reiterated his previous claims that the Russian military will continue to conduct a strategic defense to freeze the frontlines before the Russian presidential elections in March 2024.
- The Russian government is moving toward revoking Russia’s ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on October 9.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut, in western Donetsk Oblast, and western Zaporizhia Oblast, and reportedly advanced in some areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 8, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

October 8, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

NOTE: ISW has added a new section on Russian information operations and narratives to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, found at the end of the update.

Russia advanced legal mechanisms to reform the Leningrad Military District as part of ongoing large-scale military reforms. The Russian federal portal of draft regulatory legal acts published a presidential decree on October 8, prepared by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), which proposes stripping the Northern Fleet (NF) of its status as an “interspecific strategic territorial association.”^[1] Russian state media noted that the proposal indicates that the NF will no longer be a separate military-administrative unit equal to a military district, suggesting that the NF and its four constituent regions (The Komi Republic, Arkhangelsk, and Murmansk oblasts, and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug) will be transferred to the reformed Leningrad Military District.^[2] Russian military analyst Yuri Fedorov noted that the recreation of the Leningrad Military District suggests that Russia is preparing for possible conflicts with Baltic states and NATO.^[3] The Russian military merged the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts into the Western Military District in 2010.^[4] The MoD created the Northern Fleet in 2014 out of territory covered by the Western Military District, and Russian President Vladimir Putin made the NF a military-administrative unit equal to a military district starting January 1, 2021.^[5] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed the recreation of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts on the basis of the Western Military District (reversing the 2010 and 2014 changes) in December of 2022, and confirmed that these military districts were under active formation as of August 2023.^[6] The MoD’s decision to re-divide the WMD indicates Russia sees the need to restructure its forces facing NATO and likely posture on the Finnish border, although it remains unclear how Russia will be able to mobilize, train, and organize these forces into new military district-level formations.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and marginally advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 8. Geolocated footage published on October 8 shows that Ukrainian forces made limited gains north of Novoprokopivka (14km south of Orikhiv), and a Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also advanced near Kopani (10km southwest of Orikhiv).^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success northeast of Andriivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued attacks near Andriivka, and Kurdyumivka (11km southwest of Bakhmut).^[8] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that deteriorating weather conditions are impacting both Russian and Ukrainian operations across the theater. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian drone and aviation activity has decreased in the past few days due to poor weather.^[9] Russian milbloggers claimed that deteriorating weather conditions in the Bakhmut and Zaporizhia directions are impacting Ukrainian offensive operations as well as Russian aerial reconnaissance operations.^[10] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash reiterated that poor weather may impact drone and aviation operations but that the weather will not halt Ukraine’s counteroffensive.^[11]

Russian forces are intensifying mining efforts in the Robotyne-Verbove area and seek to fix Ukrainian forces on areas of the front away from western Zaporizhia Oblast. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces have begun remining previously cleared areas on the Robotyne-Verbove line (10km south to 18km southeast of Orikhiv) to achieve tactical surprise.^[12] The milbloggers claimed that heavy Russian mining and remining efforts have disrupted the movement of heavy Ukrainian cargo and equipment in these areas in recent days. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces intensified tactical offensive operations in several areas of the front beyond Zaporizhia Oblast in order to stretch Ukrainian defenses and divide Ukrainian attention.^[13] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces are trying to fix Ukrainian forces in the Avdiivka and Marinka directions and prevent them from deploying reserves to the Zaporizhia direction.^[14]

Russian sources are highlighting apparent fault lines between regular Russian forces and irregular formations of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR). A Russian milblogger claiming to be a Buryat soldier fighting in the 37th Motorized Rifle Brigade [MRB] (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) responded on October 7 to a post published by another milblogger on August 13 that accused the 37th MRB of abandoning their positions around Novodonetske (in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia border area) during Ukrainian attacks that ultimately liberated the village, leaving only elements of the DNR “Kaskad” operational tactical combat formation to defend the area.^[15] The Buryat milblogger refuted this story and claimed that “Kaskad” conducts a small part of combat activities on the front while regular Russian troops shoulder more of the offensive burden, and derided other DNR units for having positions far behind frontline areas held by regular units.^[16] The milblogger also claimed that DNR units have low skill levels and that regular Russian troops distrust them.^[17] The allegations made by this milblogger against DNR formations suggest that there is continued friction between DNR forces and regular Russian forces, which is likely to further complicate efforts to integrate DNR forces into the regular Russian military as part of ongoing military reforms.^[18]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat expressed concern over an anticipated Russian Shahed 131/136 drone strike campaign against Ukraine this winter. Ihnat stated on October 8 that Russian forces have increased the intensity of Shahed strikes recently, as Ukrainian officials previously warned. [19] Ihnat stated that Russian forces used 1,000 Shahed drones during the 2023-23 heating season but used a record 500 drones during September 2023 alone, indicating that Ukraine needs to prepare seriously for Russia's 2023-24 winter drone strike campaign. Ihnat noted that Ukraine is gradually replacing Soviet air defense systems with Western-provided systems and intends to use these systems to protect Ukrainian energy facilities, port infrastructure, grain silos, and other critical infrastructure against Russian drone strikes this winter. Ihnat added that Russian authorities want to increase the production of Shahed drones domestically but cannot overcome their reliance on Iran for certain technologies and spare parts required for production.[20]

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) observed satellite imagery showing that rail traffic between North Korea and Russia "dramatically" increased since Russian President Vladimir Putin met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un on September 12-17.[21] CSIS' *Beyond Parallel* project found that satellite imagery captured on October 5 showed an "unprecedented" 73 freight railcars at the North Korea's Tumangang Rail Facility. *Beyond Parallel* noted that previous satellite images showed a maximum of approximately 20 railcars at the Tumangang facility at once over the past five years. *Beyond Parallel* also observed shipping crates/containers and equipment laid out in the open at the main warehouse area at the Tumangang facility, although the contents of the transported goods remain unclear. *Beyond Parallel* remarked that the external characteristics of the containers and equipment are different from those observed during the past five years at the facility and assessed that it is "probable that these shipments are, or include, munitions and artillery." Russian milbloggers and sources amplified *Beyond Parallel* findings in the Russian information space without confirming or denying the possibility of North Korean arms supplies to Russia.[22] ISW previously assessed that Putin may be open to some forms of technological and defensive cooperation with North Korea in return for North Korean artillery ammunition as long as such cooperation does not trigger secondary sanctions against Russia.[23]

The Russian federal government continues to disenfranchise certain ethnic minority federal subjects (regions) while selectively empowering others. Radio Liberty's Tatar-Bashkir service *Idel Reali* amplified an opinion piece written by Tatar activist Ruslan Aisin on October 8 which criticizes the implementation of a new Tatarstan state national policy as federally enforced "feudalism." [24] Aisin noted that the new policy dropped a provision on "strengthening Tatarstan identity," which Aisin emphasized is aimed at Russifying ethnically diverse populations living in the Russian Federation, and claimed that the Russian federal government likely prompted the provision's removal.[25] Aisin remarked that the removal of this provision is meant to deprive ethnic minority regions of their ability to empower their own cultures, languages, and traditions but questioned why Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov is allowed to publicly promote Chechen traditions and identity. [26] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin have recently signaled explicit support for Kadyrov and his style of rule in Chechnya despite increased interethnic tensions within Russian society and the military.[27] The suggestion that Russian federal policy is purposefully trying to disenfranchise Tatar identity while simultaneously empowering Kadyrov indicates that the Kremlin is interested in rewarding the ethnic minority regions that are the most overtly loyal to the Kremlin and provide the Kremlin with substantial military manpower for the war in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- Russia advanced legal mechanisms to form the Leningrad Military District as part of ongoing large-scale military reforms.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and marginally advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 8.
- Russian forces are intensifying mining efforts in the Robotyne-Verbove area and seek to fix Ukrainian forces on areas of the front away from western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian sources are highlighting apparent fault lines between regular Russian forces and irregular formations of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR).
- Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat expressed concern over an anticipated Russian Shahed 131/136 drone strike campaign against Ukraine this winter.
- The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) observed satellite imagery showing that rail traffic between North Korea and Russia "dramatically" increased since Russian President Vladimir Putin met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un on September 12-17
- The Russian federal government continues to disenfranchise certain ethnic minority federal subjects (regions) while selectively empowering others.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, western Donetsk Oblast, and on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border on October 8 and reportedly advanced in some areas.
- Prague-based Russian-language outlet *Current Time* reported on October 8 that the number of desertion cases within the Russian military has increased.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, Special Edition: Ukraine's Strike Campaign Against Crimea

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

Ukraine's Strike Campaign Against Crimea Seeks to Degrade Russian Defenses in Southern Ukraine and Supports Ongoing Ukrainian Counteroffensive Operations

Nicole Wolkov and Mason Clark

Note: ISW is publishing this special edition update on Ukraine's strike campaign against Crimea in addition to its regular daily update for October 8.

Key Takeaway: Ukrainian forces have conducted a campaign of strikes against Russian military infrastructure, headquarters, and logistics routes in Crimea since June 2023 in order to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian strikes on logistics routes are disrupting Russian supplies to Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblast. Strikes on Black Sea Fleet assets are degrading its role as a combined arms headquarters but have not defeated it as a naval force. Ukrainian strikes generate outsized morale shocks among Russian commanders and in the Russian information space. Western provision of long-range missiles to Ukraine would amplify this ongoing, essential, and timely campaign to weaken Russia's ability to defend southern Ukraine.

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

October 7, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on October 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin is already and will likely continue to exploit the Hamas attacks in Israel to advance several information operations intended to reduce US and Western support and attention to Ukraine. The Kremlin amplified several information operations following Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, primarily blaming the West for neglecting conflicts in the Middle East in favor of supporting Ukraine and claiming the international community will cease to pay attention to Ukraine by portraying attention to the Middle East or alternatively Ukraine as a zero-sum comparison. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev claimed the United States and its allies should have been "busy with" working on "Palestinian-Israeli settlement" rather than "interfering" with Russia and providing Ukraine with military aid.^[1] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) accused the West of blocking efforts by a necessary "quartet" of Russia, the US, the European Union, and the United Nations, leading to an escalation in violence, implicitly blaming the West for the current fighting.^[2] Prominent Russian propagandist Sergei Mardan directly stated that Russia will benefit from the escalation as the world "will take its mind off Ukraine for a while and get busy once again putting out the eternal fire in the Middle East."^[3] These Kremlin narratives target Western audiences to drive a wedge in military support for Ukraine, seek to demoralize Ukrainian society by claiming Ukraine will lose international support, and intend to reassure Russian domestic audiences that the international society will ignore Ukraine's war effort.

Several key sources within the Russian information space shifted the focus of their daily coverage to the situation in Israel on October 7, which may impact the information environment around the war in Ukraine in the coming days or weeks. Many Russian milbloggers focused largely on the Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, and some promoted Kremlin information operations by claiming that the West's attention has shifted away from Ukraine and towards Israel.^[4] This focus on Israel even prompted one Russian milblogger to urge others to not "forget" about the war in Ukraine.^[5] ISW cannot forecast at this time how the source environment will change as the Hamas attacks in Israel unfold but will provide clear updates on any impact on ISW's ability to collect from Russian milbloggers and geolocation sources, and subsequent effects on the detail available ISW can provide in these daily assessments.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 7 and reportedly advanced in both directions. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces were partially successful east of Andriivka (8km southwest of Bakhmut).^[6] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash noted that Ukrainian forces have advanced from 100 to 300 meters in different directions near Bakhmut over the past day.^[7] Ukrainian military sources additionally stated that Ukrainian forces advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast in the areas north of Kopani (5km northwest of Robotyne) and north of Novoprokopivka (2km south of Robotyne).^[8]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian rear areas and port infrastructure on the night of October 6-7. Ukrainian sources, including the Ukrainian Southern Operational Command, reported that Russian forces launched Onyx cruise missiles from occupied Crimea at Chornomorsk, Odesa Oblast; and Poltava Oblast Head Dmytro Lunin stated that Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Myrhorod, Poltava Oblast.^[9] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian strikes damaged a granary, residential buildings, educational buildings, and other civil infrastructure.^[10]

The Russian government approved legislation temporarily restricting the border checkpoints that Ukrainian citizens can use to enter Russia from third countries, likely focused on Belarus and the Baltic States, likely in response to continued concern over the security of Russian border regions and possible Ukrainian infiltration efforts. Russian media reported on October 6 that the legislation states that Ukrainian citizens 14 years old and above can only enter Russia from third countries through the Ludonka automotive checkpoint in Pskov Oblast (bordering Latvia) and Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow Oblast beginning on October 16.^[11] The legislation does not apply to Ukrainian citizens traveling from occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts or Ukrainian citizens under the age of 14 traveling without a legal guardian. This decision is reportedly aimed at "ensuring the safety" of Russian citizens.

Belarusian officials are leveraging international partnerships in an attempt to legitimize Belarus' role in the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children. Russian and Belarusian media reported on October 4 that a number of diplomats who are accredited in Belarus visited a group of 44 children from Lysychansk and Severodonetsk at an accommodation point in Novopolotsk, Belarus.^[12] The group of diplomats included representatives from Zimbabwe, India, Qatar, China, Cuba, Mongolia, the United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Russia, Syria, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).^[13] Russian and Belarusian media reported that Belarusian officials showed the diplomats the dormitory where the children are located and talked about the educational and medical services provided to the children. ISW has previously reported that Belarus has been closely involved in Russia's efforts to forcibly deport Ukrainian children from their homes, and the European Parliament adopted a resolution reflective of this fact on September 13 that recognizes Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko as complicit in crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus and the Russian Federation.^[14] Belarusian authorities likely hosted the delegation in an effort to portray its actions vis a vis Ukrainian children as somehow legitimate and legal, as many of the diplomats made positive statements about the accommodations and experiences of the children in Belarus.

Russian "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky stated that Russian "patriotic" communities remain vulnerable to division due to Russian officials' failure to consolidate society, particularly after Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion.^[15] Khodakovsky argued that Russia must consolidate its society to achieve a common goal for the war – a goal that he claimed that Russian society does not have a good understanding of. Khodakovsky argued that the fact that Prigozhin remains in people's heads despite his disappearance from the public eye after his rebellion demonstrates that Russian elites do not care much about the need to consolidate society. Khodakovsky concluded that there are and will be "provocative injections" into the Russian ultranationalist space that

aim to break the patriotic environment by stirring up contradictions to slow and complicate the war effort. Khodakovsky added that these provocations also aim to make post-war Russian society unstable. Khodakovsky was likely reacting to discussions in the Russian information space following Russian President Vladimir Putin's mention of Prigozhin at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 5, and his response likely indicates that Russian society continues to be influenced by Prigozhin despite his death on August 23.[16]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov awarded his son, Adam Kadyrov, the title of “Hero of the Chechen Republic” on October 7 despite recent controversy after Ramzan Kadyrov posted footage of Adam beating a detainee.[17] Russian State Duma Deputy Adam Delimhanov, Adam Kadyrov's godfather, praised Adam for being a “shining example” of competence and education and a purposeful young man.[18] Ramzan Kadyrov also notably appointed his daughter, Aishat Kadyrova, Chechen Deputy Prime Minister for Social Issues on October 2.[19] Both instances came after prominent members of the Russian Human Rights Council called for an investigation into Adam Kadyrov for the beating.[20]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) highlighted the production of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on October 7, supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin’s statements about successful tests of the missile on October 5 as part of a continued nuclear brinkmanship information operation. The Russian MoD published footage of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visiting the Krasnoyarsk Machine-Building Plant and inspecting the production process of the Sarmat ICBM.[21] Shoigu claimed that the Russian Strategic Missile Force would be re-equipped with the Sarmat missile system. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin and Russian MoD use nuclear rhetoric to prompt the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to negotiate and that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains unlikely.[22]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin is already and will likely continue to exploit the Hamas attacks in Israel to advance several information operations intended to reduce US and Western support and attention to Ukraine.
- Several key sources within the Russian information space shifted the focus of their daily coverage to the situation in Israel on October 7, which may impact the information environment around the war in Ukraine in the coming days or weeks.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 7 and reportedly advanced in both directions.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian rear areas and port infrastructure on the night of October 6-7.
- The Russian government approved legislation temporarily restricting the border checkpoints that Ukrainian citizens can use to enter Russia from third countries, likely focused on Belarus and the Baltic States, likely in response to continued concern over the security of Russian border regions and possible Ukrainian infiltration efforts.
- Belarusian officials are leveraging international partnerships in an attempt to legitimize Belarus’ role in the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children.
- Russian “Vostok” Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky stated that Russian “patriotic” communities remain vulnerable to division due to Russian officials’ failure to consolidate society, particularly after Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s June 24 rebellion.
- The Russian MoD highlighted the production of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on October 7, supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin’s statements about successful tests of the missile on October 5 as part of a continued nuclear brinkmanship information operation.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in some areas on October 7.
- Ukrainian partisan activity reportedly killed a United Russia official in occupied Kherson Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 6, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, and Mason Clark

October 6, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on October 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 6. Ukrainian military sources noted that Ukrainian forces continued successful offensive actions south of Bakhmut near Andriivka (8km southeast of Bakhmut).[1] Geolocated footage posted on October 5 shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced towards a tree line between Robotyne and Verbove, about 6km southeast of Robotyne.[2] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash noted that Ukrainian forces are preparing for offensive operations throughout the autumn-winter period. Yevlash emphasized that while supply requirements will increase and rainy and foggy conditions may complicate the use of drones and tactical and army aviation, Ukrainian forces will continue to fight through the winter.[3] Yevlash’s statement supports ISW’s longstanding assessment that weather will not prevent either side from conducting offensive operations throughout the winter of 2023-2024 if they are well-supplied and choose to do so, as they did in the winter of 2022, and that the pace of Ukrainian offensives will largely be metered by Western provision of appropriate small-arms and ammunition and non-lethal supplies to Ukraine - not simply winter weather conditions or any specific weapons system.[4]

Russian forces appear to have recently conducted a regimental rotation in the Orikhiv area, demonstrating an ability to sustain their defenses in this critical sector of the frontline. A Ukrainian military observer reported on October 6 that elements of the 291st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District), which were recently "partially restored," withdrew to positions east of Nesteryanka (about 10km northwest of Robotyne) after the Russian command previously committed them to the area.^[5] The Ukrainian observer also suggested that elements of the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (also of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division) are "persistently" counterattacking on the northern outskirts of Novoprokopivka (2km south of Robotyne).^[6] ISW observed in mid-September that critical elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division, particularly its 291st and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments, withdrew behind the Russian defensive line between Verbove and Solodka Balka (about 5km south of Robotyne) due to casualties that may have rendered them combat ineffective.^[7] Following the withdrawal of elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division to rear areas in western Zaporizhia Oblast, elements of the 7th and 76th Airborne (VDV) divisions laterally redeployed to the area from Kherson and Luhansk oblasts to fill in the gaps left by 42nd Motorized Rifle Division elements.^[8] By late September, ISW observed elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division apparently recommitting to the front near Novoprokopivka, suggesting that they rotated back to the front after resting and reconstituting for a short time.^[9] The Ukrainian military source's observations about the 291st and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments, as well as increased recent Russian reporting of these regiments defending against Ukrainian attacks in the areas south and west of Robotyne, suggest that Russian forces have conducted regiment-level rotations in this sector of the front over the past month.^[10] **ISW previously assessed that Russian forces were likely struggling to conduct tactical to operational level rotations along the entire frontline, but is revising this assessment considering the apparent rotation of substantial elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division and two VDV divisions to and from the frontline south of Orikhiv.**

Russian forces reportedly resumed an offensive effort near Kupyansk on October 6, but the majority of the Russian forces reportedly deployed to this sector of the front likely remain combat ineffective. Ukrainian military officials reported a decrease in Russian activity near Kupyansk in recent weeks, but Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on October 6 that Russian forces resumed combat operations in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.^[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces launched an offensive push near Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk) and that Russian forces are heavily shelling the N26 (Shevchenkove-Kupyansk) highway.^[12] One milblogger characterized the renewed Russian offensive push towards Kupyansk as "large-scale" in a now-deleted post.^[13] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov previously reported that the Russian military deployed elements of the newly formed 25th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (reportedly formed under the Eastern Military District) to the Kupyansk direction to replace elements of the 41st CAA (Central Military District).^[14] The resumption of Russian offensive operations near Kupyansk, possibly including elements of the 25th CAA, is likely intended to draw Ukrainian attention away from other sectors of the front in southern Ukraine. ISW previously assessed, however, that the 25th CAA was hurriedly deployed ahead of an intended deployment date of December 2023 and is likely severely understaffed, poorly trained, or both.^[15] ISW has also previously observed the presence of heavily degraded Western Military District (WMD) elements, particularly of the 1st Guards Tank Army and 6th Combined Arms Army, in the Kupyansk area, and ISW does not assess at this time that a grouping comprised of the newly formed 25th Combined Arms Army with degraded WMD elements will be able to sustain meaningful offensives in this area.^[16]

Russian forces may be expanding military training infrastructure in occupied eastern Ukraine as part of ongoing efforts to increase the training and mobilization capacity of the Russian military. A Ukrainian reserve officer published satellite imagery on October 5 showing that Russian forces are expanding multiple training facilities in rear areas in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, including near Novopavlivka in occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[17] The Ukrainian reserve officer stated that Russian forces are likely attempting to alleviate logistical bottlenecks and improve infrastructure to support continued mobilization and training.^[18] Russian forces may be expanding training infrastructure in rear areas of occupied eastern Ukraine as part of the effort to establish nine reserve regiments, as well as "self-sufficient" force groupings, in occupied areas of Ukraine as part of ongoing large-scale military reforms.^[19] ISW assessed with low confidence that the nine reserve regiments undergoing training may be training regiments through which Russian volunteers could flow on their way to the front.^[20] The Russian military may also be expanding bases in occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts as part of ongoing efforts to integrate and formalize Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic forces within the Russian military and to increase the self-sufficiency of Russian groupings in occupied Ukraine by establishing forward training and C2 infrastructure in occupied Ukraine, rather than running operations in Donetsk and Luhansk from the Southern Military District itself.^[21]

The Kremlin's continued attempts to deflect blame for the crash of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane and disgrace Prigozhin are generating continued praise for Prigozhin and efforts to defend his legacy among select information space communities. Pro-Wagner and Wagner-affiliated channels largely lampooned Putin's suggestion on October 5 Prigozhin's plane crashed due to grenades detonating onboard, possibly due to the passengers using alcohol or drugs onboard.^[22] Some channels called Putin's claims "laughable," "a farce," and disrespectful to "heroes" of Russia.^[23] A Russian insider source claimed that members of the Russian Presidential Administration "provoked" Putin to deliver these statements in order to "de-heroize" Prigozhin, since Prigozhin's previous statements questioning the reasons for the start of the war in Ukraine are apparently gaining popularity throughout Russia.^[24] Putin's comments do not appear to have had the intended effect and have instead pushed some elements of the Russian information space to attempt to preserve Prigozhin's reputation and disprove Putin's implication that Prigozhin was to blame for the plane crash by continuing to discuss Prigozhin and criticize the Kremlin's official line on his death. However, the Kremlin's apparent perceived need to continue to discuss Prigozhin's death and denigrate him further is noteworthy regardless of any information space responses, indicating the Kremlin likely perceives some continuing threat from Prigozhin's statements and stance on the war.

Former Russian military commanders who participated in the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reportedly remain in peripheral positions of some influence within the Russian military or defense-industrial base. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger amplified a claim by a Russian insider source on October 6 that listed the current positions of Russian military commanders whom the Russian military leadership replaced after the initial invasion of Ukraine in 2022 failed to achieve its intended goals.^[25] The source claimed that former Western Military District (WMD) Commander Colonel General Alexander Zhuravlev and former Southern Military District (SMD) Commander Army General Alexander Dvornikov are currently advisors to High Precision Complexes (a subsidiary of Rostec, Russia's primary state-owned defense conglomerate) and the Almaz-Antey Aerospace Defense Concern (another state-owned defense enterprise), respectively. The source claimed that Dvornikov is still in "army circles" and hopes to return to the military. The source claimed that former Central Military District Commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin is currently the Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces. The source claimed that former Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Colonel General Alexander Chaiko served in Syria and the Russian General Staff after his dismissal as EMD commander but that his current position is unknown. Former United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace stated on October 1 that the Russian military leadership had removed all commanders who led major Russian units into Ukraine in February 2022.^[26] These insider source claims are largely consistent with ISW's previous observations of a pattern of Russian military leadership shifting disgraced and ineffective commanders to peripheral positions far removed from Ukraine without entirely discharging them from military or security sector government positions, leaving open the option of returning to a command position.^[27]

Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike targeting port, grain, and border infrastructure in southern Ukraine on the night of October 5.

6. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 33 Shahed drones from Cape Chauda, Crimea and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 25 of the drones.[28] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that the Russian strike damaged port infrastructure and a granary along the Danube River in Odesa Oblast, and geolocated footage published on October 6 indicates that the strike hit the Orlivka-Isaccea ferry crossing that connects Odesa Oblast and Romania. [29]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 6.
- Russian forces appear to have recently conducted a regimental rotation in the Orikhiv area, demonstrating an ability to sustain their defenses in this critical sector of the frontline.
- Russian forces reportedly resumed an offensive effort near Kupyansk on October 6, but the majority of the Russian forces reportedly deployed to this sector of the front likely remain combat ineffective.
- Russian forces may be expanding military training infrastructure in occupied eastern Ukraine as part of ongoing efforts to increase the training and mobilization capacity of the Russian military.
- The Kremlin's continued attempts to deflect blame for the crash of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane and disgrace Prigozhin are generating continued praise for Prigozhin and efforts to defend his legacy among select information space communities.
- Former Russian military commanders who participated in the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reportedly remain in peripheral positions of some influence within the Russian military or defense-industrial base.
- Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike targeting port, grain, and border infrastructure in southern Ukraine on the night of October 5-6.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Lyman line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut and advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russia has reportedly recruited up to several hundred Serbian nationals to fight in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 5, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 5, 2023, 9:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on October 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the 20th Valdai Discussion Club on October 5 and promoted multiple long-standing Russian information operations. Putin reiterated the false narrative that the West initiated the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and claimed that NATO expansion threatens Russian security. [1] Putin claimed that the war in Ukraine is not a "territorial conflict" but is about Russia establishing principles for a new multipolar world order, stating that the UN and modern international law are "outdated and subject to demolition." ISW recently evaluated claims that Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 because he feared NATO and instead assessed that Putin's aims were to expand Russia's power, eradicate Ukrainian statehood, and break up NATO – goals he still pursues.[2] Putin's expressed goal of establishing a multipolar world order further supports ISW's assessment that Putin's goals in Ukraine have also exceeded responding to some supposed NATO threat or conquering limited additional territory.

Putin claimed that Russia has successfully completed testing of the nuclear-power Burevestnik cruise missile and the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). [3] Putin spoke about the Russian doctrinal uses of nuclear weapons in either a retaliatory strike or in response to an existential threat to Russia and claimed that there is no modern situation that would threaten Russia's existence and that no aggressor would use nuclear weapons against Russia. ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin uses nuclear rhetoric to prompt the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to negotiate and that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains unlikely. [4] Putin also exaggerated Ukrainian personnel and equipment losses, as Russian officials often do, as part of a continued effort to paint the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failure.[5]

Putin offered a bizarre explanation for Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's death during a press conference at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 5 to deflect blame from the Kremlin. Putin stated that the Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin informed him that the investigation found grenade fragments in the bodies of victims onboard Prigozhin's plane, suggesting that grenades detonated inside the aircraft.[6] The investigative committee has reported publicly only that all 10 people aboard the plane died.[7] Putin also emphasized that the investigation ruled out external factors that may have caused the plane crash and implied that the plane crash victims may have been using alcohol or drugs onboard that could have led to the negligent handling of grenades (that were presumably on board for some unexplained reason). Putin claimed that, while the investigation did not test the bodies for alcohol and narcotics, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) uncovered five kilograms of cocaine during their investigation into Wagner – likely referring to FSB's televised raids into Prigozhin's mansion in June and July 2023. Putin added that in his opinion the investigation needs to test the bodies for substances. Putin's bizarre explanation of the plane crash is likely an attempt to blame Prigozhin for his own and his comrades' deaths and further disgrace him among his remaining supporters.

Putin continued to deny the existence of private military companies (PMC) in Russia, indicating that the future of the Wagner Group still remains unclear. Putin reiterated the absurd claim that PMCs do not exist in Russia because “there are now laws about private military companies [in Russia]” and called the name of Wagner PMC a “journalistic name,” likely meaning that the media incorrectly labeled the Wagner Group a PMC.^[8] Putin claimed that he did not object when the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) suggested that parts of the Wagner Group participate in the war in Ukraine because Wagner personnel acted voluntarily and “fought heroically,” but noted that the experience with Wagner was “clumsy because it was not based on the law.”^[9] Putin also claimed that “several thousand” Wagner personnel signed contracts with the Russian MoD.^[10]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on October 5. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continue to conduct offensive operations in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction.^[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes east of Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success west of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).^[12]

A prominent Russian milblogger justified Russian tactical retreats throughout the Ukrainian counteroffensive as part of an elastic defense. A Russian milblogger amplified a claim reportedly from a Russian frontline soldier that Russian commanders have been choosing to withdraw their forces throughout the counteroffensive period from “broken positions” in order to conduct a “maneuverable and active defense,” likely referring to an elastic defense approach.^[13] Other Russian milbloggers have recently indicated that Russian commanders are increasingly needing to choose between either “wasting” their troops in counterattacks to hold tactical positions or standing up to the Russian military command by retreating to previously prepared positions against orders or pressure, thereby risking their careers.^[14]

The Russian military may have redeployed elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) and elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade to the Kherson direction. A Russian milblogger claimed on October 5 that elements of the 41st CAA (Central Military District) including the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade and the 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade, as well as unspecified Russian naval infantry elements, are regrouping in the Kherson direction.^[15] The milblogger claimed that the Russian naval infantry unit is presumably the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, which Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 22 had been “completely defeated,” now indicating that the brigade may have reconstituted or is in the process of reconstituting.^[16] Budanov stated on August 31 that elements of the newly formed 25th CAA deployed to the Kupyansk direction in order to replace elements of the 41st CAA, which would begin a “slow” deployment to an unspecified area in southern Ukraine.^[17] ISW previously assessed that the Russian military would laterally redeploy elements of the 41st CAA to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[18] The milblogger’s claim, if true, would invalidate that assessment and suggests instead that Russian forces continue to be very concerned about potential future Ukrainian operations on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River.

Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Hroza, Kharkiv Oblast that killed 51 people on October 5 following another series of drone strikes across Ukraine overnight.^[19] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Administration Head Oleh Synehubov reported that all the Hroza strike victims were civilians and that Russian forces likely used an Iskander cruise missile in the strike.^[20] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 29 Shahed-131/136 drones on the night of October 4 to 5, and that Ukrainian forces shot down 24 of the drones.^[21]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu indicated that the Russian MoD may be establishing training regiments that can also serve as in extremis operational or strategic reserves, although this is a low confidence assessment. Shoigu stated that the Russian General Staff has formed “nine reserve regiments that are being trained” and that their “natural, constant replenishment is underway.”^[22] The wording of Shoigu’s statement is somewhat opaque but seems to suggest that these new units are training regiments through which Russian volunteers flow on their way to the front. This approach would be an improvement over previous Russian practice that often sent individuals or small groups from training areas in Russia either directly into frontline units or to more ad hoc training areas in Ukraine before they went to the front.^[23] Sending volunteers to organized training regiments will likely provide them with better preparation to fight before they go to the front. The regiments themselves could presumably also be deployed as combat units in extremis, although at the cost of disrupting part of the training pipeline for the theater as a whole. This assessment is offered with low confidence as it relies on a close reading of a brief and unclear statement. ISW has no independent evidence of this reported change in Russian training.

Shoigu also reasserted the responsibility of Russian federal subjects to form and recruit for Russian volunteer formations. Shoigu thanked Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin, Republic of Buryatia Head Alexey Tsydenov, and Republic of Sakha Aisen Nikolaev for their efforts to recruit for regional volunteer formations.^[24] Shoigu’s praise of Dyumin in particular reasserts Dyumin’s subordinate position; Russian sources previously floated Dyumin as a prospective replacement for Shoigu, and Russian President Vladimir Putin and Shoigu have publicly reasserted Shoigu’s position above Dyumin in the aftermath.^[25]

Russia will reportedly build a permanent naval base in Abkhazia, but it will likely remain small. Russian-backed Abkhazian President Aslan Bzhania announced on October 5 that he had signed an agreement with Russian authorities for the construction of a permanent Russian naval base near occupied Ochamchire, Abkhazia.^[26] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the alleged permanent base in Abkhazia.^[27] Publicly available satellite imagery shows that existing port infrastructure near occupied Ochamchire is limited and that the surrounding coastline consists of sandy beaches — terrain largely unsuitable for the construction of naval infrastructure.^[28] The existing port is unsuitable to become a primary base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, but the Russian military could expand existing naval infrastructure and use the Ochamchire port as a subsidiary base in the future.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the 20th Valdai Discussion Club on October 5 and promoted multiple long-standing Russian information operations.
- Putin offered a bizarre explanation for Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s death during a press conference at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 5 to deflect blame from the Kremlin.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on October 5.
- The Russian military may have redeployed elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) and elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade to the Kherson direction.

- Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Hroza, Kharkiv Oblast that killed 51 people on October 5 following another series of drone strikes across Ukraine overnight.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu indicated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be establishing training regiments that can also serve as in extremis operational or strategic reserves, although this is a low confidence assessment.
- Russia will reportedly build a permanent naval base in Abkhazia, but it will likely remain small.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatovate-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance on October 5.
- Russia continues to use the personal data of Russian citizens for crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continue to advertise programs for the forcible removal and deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 4, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 4, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on October 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian military recently transferred several Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessels from the port in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea to the port in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, likely in an effort to protect them from continued Ukrainian strikes on Russian assets in occupied Crimea. Satellite imagery published on October 1 and 3 shows that Russian forces transferred at least 10 vessels from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk.^[1] The satellite imagery reportedly shows that Russian forces recently moved the *Admiral Makarov* and *Admiral Essen* frigates, three diesel submarines, five landing ships, and several small missile ships.^[2] Satellite imagery taken on October 2 shows four Russian landing ships and one Kilo-class submarine remaining in Sevastopol.^[3] Satellite imagery from October 2 shows a Project 22160 patrol ship reportedly for the first time in the port of Feodosia in eastern Crimea, suggesting that Russian forces may be moving BSF elements away from Sevastopol to bases further in the Russian rear.^[4] A Russian think tank, the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, claimed on October 3 that the BSF vessels' movements from occupied Sevastopol to Novorossiysk were routine, however.^[5] Russian forces may be temporarily moving some vessels to Novorossiysk following multiple strikes on BSF assets in and near Sevastopol but will likely continue to use Sevastopol's port, which remains the BSF's base. Former Norwegian Navy officer and independent OSINT analyst Thord Are Iversen observed on October 4 that Russian vessel deployments have usually intensified following Ukrainian strikes but ultimately returned to normal patterns.^[6] ISW will explore the implications of Ukrainian strikes on the BSF in a forthcoming special edition.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and marginally advanced on October 4. Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks towards the rail line between Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and the Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success near these settlements.^[7] Geolocated footage published on October 4 indicates that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced east of Novopropokopivka (5km southeast of Robotyne) in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and the Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success west of Robotyne.^[8] Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced up to a Russian trench line on the Robotyne-Kopani line (5km northwest of Robotyne).^[9]

Autumn and winter weather conditions will slow but not stop Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on October 3 that good weather will last for another six to eight weeks before weather will impact both Ukrainian and Russian operations.^[10] ISW has previously observed that seasonal heavy rain and resulting mud in the autumn will slow ground movements on both sides, and that the autumn rain and mud are usually less intense than spring conditions.^[11] Hardening ground during the winter freeze will likely enable the tempo of combat operations to increase, however, and Ukrainian officials have expressed their intent to continue counteroffensive operations into late 2023 and exploit cold weather conditions.^[12] ISW has frequently assessed that offensive operations will continue through the winter season and has observed the continuation of combat activities throughout the fall mud season of 2022, winter season of 2022–2023, and spring mud season of 2023.^[13]

The Kremlin is likely intensifying its use of tools of digital authoritarianism to increase domestic repression and tighten control of the information space. Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istoryi* reported on October 4 that the Russian Prosecutor General's Office requested that Russian social media platform VKontakte (VK) begin blocking posts from relatives of mobilized servicemen calling for their loved ones to return home.^[14] *Vazhnye Istoryi* noted that VK is hiding posts with several hashtags pertaining to the treatment or return of mobilized servicemen and that several posts in group chats have reportedly disappeared.^[15] The Prosecutor General is likely able to impose this form of censorship under the existing law that concerns "unreliable" information about Russian operations in Ukraine.^[16] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) additionally proposed a draft resolution on October 3 that would expand the list of personal and geolocation data that "organizers of information dissemination" (ORIs) are required to store and provide to law enforcement bodies upon request.^[17] The FSB's October 3 proposal notably follows its recent backing of amendments that would allow it unrestricted access to user data of Russian internet, banking, and telecom companies.^[18] Some Russian opposition outlets notably suggested that this apparent expansion of digital authoritarianism may be increasingly based on the restrictive Chinese model. One Russian opposition source, later amplified by an insider source, claimed that the Russian State Social University is developing and testing a social rating system for Russians based on the Chinese model and that the intended generated social scores will link to personal data that government entities and banks will have access to.^[19] ISW has recently reported on previous instances of the Kremlin's efforts to expand digital authoritarianism to surveil the Russian information space, likely to consolidate power and increase information space oversight prior to the 2024 presidential elections.^[20]

CNN reported on October 4 that the US will transfer seized Iranian weapons and ammunition rounds to Ukraine.^[21] CNN cited US officials saying that the US intends to transfer “thousands” of such weapons to alleviate some equipment shortages that Ukraine is facing. US Central Command (CENTCOM) noted that the US obtained the weapons through a Department of Justice civil forfeiture claim against the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on July 20, 2023, and that the US has already transferred one million rounds of small-arms ammunition to Ukraine as of Monday, October 2.

Russian sources continue to speculate about the current role of former Aerospace Forces (VKS) Commander and Wagner Group-affiliate Army General Sergei Surovikin after the Wagner rebellion, further highlighting his continued relevance in the Russian information space. Some Russian sources amplified footage on October 3 and 4 allegedly of Surovikin and his family outside a church near Moscow on October 3.^[22] This speculation comes after prior speculation of Surovikin allegedly appearing in various African countries on behalf of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).^[23] Russian news outlet *Novye Izvestia* claimed that Surovikin denied to comment to journalists who approached him near the church.^[24]

The European Union (EU) is reportedly preparing for negotiations on Ukraine’s EU accession that will take place in December. *Politico* reported on October 4, citing three unnamed diplomats, that EU leaders are preparing to begin formal talks with Kyiv on Ukraine’s accession to the EU as early as December of this year.^[25] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba reported on October 4 that he and Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom spoke about Ukraine’s EU integration and are working bilaterally to opening talks about Ukraine’s accession by the end of the year.^[26]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military recently transferred several Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessels from the port in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea to the port in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, likely in an effort to protect them from continued Ukrainian strikes on Russian assets in occupied Crimea.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and marginally advanced on October 4.
- Autumn and winter weather conditions will slow but not stop Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- The Kremlin is likely intensifying its use of tools of digital authoritarianism to increase domestic repression and tighten control of the information space.
- CNN reported on October 4 that the US will transfer seized Iranian weapons and ammunition rounds to Ukraine.
- Russian sources continue to speculate about the current role of former Aerospace Forces (VKS) Commander and Wagner Group-affiliate Army General Sergei Surovikin after the Wagner rebellion, further highlighting his continued relevance in the Russian information space.
- The European Union (EU) is reportedly preparing for negotiations on Ukraine’s EU accession that will take place in December.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made limited gains near Kremenna.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to collect information about Russian citizens for future conscription and enlistment cycles.
- Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Construction and Regional Development Marat Khusnullin is reportedly heavily involved in Russian infrastructure projects in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 3, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

October 3, 2023, 8:40pm 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on October 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

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The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has routinely deliberately snubbed or amplified the achievements of certain commanders in order to achieve Shoigu or the Russian military command’s political objectives.^[3] While it is possible that Shoigu simply wanted to celebrate only a few formations, Shoigu may have highlighted some of these formations for political reasons. Some Russian milbloggers recently indicated that Russian commanders are increasingly facing a choice between either “wasting” their troops in counterattacks to hold tactical positions, or standing up to the Russian military command by retreating to previously prepared positions, thereby risking their careers.^[4] One Russian frontline unit commander also indicated that Commander of Russian VDV Forces Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky previously helped a degraded VDV formation avoid resuming counterattacks in the Bakhmut direction, and Shoigu could be snubbing formations who are advocating for tactical retreats to prepared defensive positions.^[5]

Some of the formations Shoigu highlighted have been consistently counterattacking on the Robotyne-Verbove line to their detriment. ISW observed on September 26 that elements of the 70th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment and other formations of the 58th CAA (likely including the 291st Guards Artillery Brigade) continued to counterattack near Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv) despite their likely degraded state.[6] ISW also assessed that the involvement of the 70th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment in these counterattacks suggests that the combat capabilities of active elements of the 7th VDV Division are significantly degraded and that these VDV elements can no longer conduct all counterattacks along the entire Ukrainian breach in the Orikhiv direction.[7] Military police of the 70th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment were recently involved in an interethnic altercation with personnel of an element of the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division). [8] Ukrainian intelligence reported that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast had "completely defeated" the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade and that the brigade had been withdrawn.[9] ISW has not observed the broader Russian information space discuss the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade's combat operations since early to mid-September.[10] A Russian milblogger that advocates for Teplinsky claimed that elements of the 56th VDV Regiment have been consistently counterattacking from their vulnerable positions in Novofedorivka (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and that the commander of the regiment was facing a decision to either counterattack or withdraw to previously prepared positions.[11]

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 2, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

October 3, 2023, 8:40pm ET

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 2, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 2, 2023, 7:30pm ET

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A prominent Russian milblogger and front-line unit commander claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky “saved” the Russian 31st Guards VDV Brigade, which was fighting south of Bakhmut, mirroring claims made by a much smaller milblogger about VDV units in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Vostok Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky recalled a conversation with then-Commander of the 31st VDV Airborne Brigade Colonel Andrei Kondrashkin prior to Kondrashkin’s death around Bakhmut in mid-September, in which Kondrashkin revealed that his forces suffered personnel losses and that their motivation to fight dropped to a critical level.[1] Kondrashkin reportedly stated that the Russian military command demanded that his forces undertake “decisive actions,” while he knew that his personnel were suffering a critical lack of motivation. Khodakovsky noted that Kondrashkin refrained from raising his concerns to the military command and proceeded to blame his military failures on the lack of cohesion among Russian forces. Khodakovsky, in turn, noted that cohesion was not the problem, but rather that Kondrashkin needed to make a choice to either “waste” his troops in combat or protest the Russian military command’s order at the expense of his career. Khodakovsky observed that Kondrashkin never had a chance to make this choice because he sustained an injury in combat immediately after the conversation, and that Teplinsky “saved” the 31st VDV Brigade by taking the “remnants [of the brigade] under his wing” and giving them the opportunity to take a break from combat.

A Telegram channel that advocates for Teplinsky also amplified Khodakovsky’s account, claiming that Russian VDV forces – namely elements of the Russian 7th and 76th VDV divisions – are facing similar issues in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[2] The milblogger claimed that Teplinsky is no longer able to rescue these divisions, however, as he was quietly stripped of his responsibilities. ISW cannot confirm either Khodakovsky’s or the pro-Teplinsky milblogger’s claims, but both narratives attempt to portray Teplinsky as a commander who values the wellbeing of his forces over his career – likely to advance political goals that could support changes in the Russian military command. Khodakovsky’s account of Kondrashkin’s dilemma prior to his death also supports ISW’s prior assessment that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations south of Bakhmut may be degrading Russian units defending and counterattacking the area.[3]

A Russian “Storm Z” assault unit instructor speculated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) removed Lieutenant General Andrey Sychevoy from commanding in the Bakhmut direction due to his poor performance. The instructor claimed on October 1 that the Russian military command removed Sychevoy from his position for conducting unprepared and unsupported counterattacks south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[4] Sychevoy’s current formal position within the Russian military is unknown. Sychevoy previously commanded the Russian Western Group of Forces in Kharkiv Oblast until his dismissal in early September 2022, and this claim is the first observed speculation that Sychevoy has had a role in military operations in Ukraine since September 2022.[5] Prominent Russian ultranationalist media outlet *Tsargrad* claimed in August 2023 that Sychevoy refuses all journalistic requests for comment, indicating that Sychevoy retained an official position and may have intended to keep this position concealed.[6]

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on October 2. Geolocated footage published on October 2 indicates that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced northwest of Novomayorske (18km southeast of Veylka Novosilka).[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Bakhmut directions.[8] ISW is updating its October 1 assessment that Ukrainian forces lost positions in a trench system southwest of Robotyne (13km south of Orikhiv) to Russian counterattacks between September 13 and 30.[9] Geolocated footage published on October 2 and satellite imagery indicate that Ukrainian forces likely retook these positions sometime between September 12 and 17 and currently hold them.[10]

Prominent actors in the Russian information space continue to speculate about the possible future of the Wagner Group under Rosgvardia. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on October 2 that the Wagner Council of Commanders and Wagner Commander Anton Yelizarov (call sign "Lotos") reached an agreement with Rosgvardia in which Wagner personnel must sign individual and group agreements to join Rosgvardia before January 1, 2024.[11] The milblogger claimed that the group agreements "serve as a guarantee that [Wagner] will not be 'torn apart'" and that Wagner personnel will be able to keep their symbols and callsigns while serving under Rosgvardia. The milblogger claimed that although it is unclear where Rosgvardia will deploy its Wagner personnel in Ukraine, it will likely not be to the Bakhmut area where former Wagner personnel who signed contracts with the Russian MoD under former Wagner representative and current MoD employee Andrey Troshev are reportedly operating. The milblogger stated that the future of Wagner's operations in Africa and the Middle East is also not clear as Rosgvardia has reportedly only approved Wagner's use of aircraft for operations in the war in Ukraine and the new Wagner leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin's son Pavel, is focusing only on Wagner's business in Russia.[12] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's ideas about the relationship(s) between Wagner elements and the Russian government are unclear at this time as Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly embraced Troshev and subordinated some Wagner elements to the Russian MoD on the one hand, while the Russian MoD will need to supply Rosgvardia with the equipment it lacks on the other.[13] Russian milbloggers' continued discussion of the matter recently indicates that the relationship is likely still not fully defined or made public.

Interethnic tensions and claims about the superiority of Chechen "Akhmat" forces over regular Russian forces continue to generate controversy in the Russian information space. Chairman of the "Patriots of Russia" political party and the State Duma Committee on Nationalities Gennady Semigin reportedly published a since-deleted statement on the "Patriots of Russia" website in support of Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's son on September 29 after Kadyrov's son was filmed beating a detainee accused of burning a Quran.[14] The post stated that "if the Russian soldier defended his ideals as uncompromisingly, then the [Chechen] Akhmat battalion would not have to kick the soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces onto the battlefield." [15] Semigin's post generated widespread criticism within the Russian information space on October 2, with one Russian official going so far as to call for Russian authorities to ban Duma members from speaking publicly about the war in Ukraine.[16] One Russian milblogger accused Semigin of attempting to incite ethnic hatred by comparing "brave Chechens with cowardly Russians." [17] Semigin later issued a statement on Telegram claiming that unspecified actors hacked the "Patriots of Russia" website to publish the statement in protest of a bill on interethnic relations that his team was developing.[18] A milblogger also criticized Semigin's claim of a hacker posting the message, asking why Semigin did not take down the statement sooner or how Semigin was able to access the "Patriots of Russia" website if it had been hacked.[19] ISW has long observed tensions between Chechen and non-Chechen officials and military units, and the continued emotional reaction within the Russian information suggests that these tensions are still present.[20]

Russian forces conducted a small-scale Shahed-131/136 drone strike on Ukraine on the night of October 1-2 after Russian forces conducted a record number of drone strikes targeting Ukrainian grain and port infrastructure in September 2023. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched seven drones from the Krasnodar Krai direction and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down four drones.[21] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat stated that even though Russian forces have launched fewer drones in the past days, the Russian strikes still target Ukrainian military and infrastructure areas and are reconnoitering Ukrainian air defenses.[22] Ukrainian military expert Aleksandr Kovalenko stated on October 1 that Russian forces launched a record number of 521 drones that mostly targeted Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure in September 2023.[23] Kovalenko stated that Russia is still dependent on Iran for drone production due to issues with domestic production and that this September increase was due to Iran's possible increased production from 100 Shahed-136 drones per month at the end of 2022 to 150-200 per month by May 2023.

Key Takeaways:

- A prominent Russian milblogger and front-line unit commander claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky "saved" the Russian 31st Guards VDV Brigade, which was fighting south of Bakhmut, mirroring claims made by a much smaller milblogger about VDV units in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- A Russian "Storm Z" assault unit instructor speculated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) removed Lieutenant General Andrey Sychevoy from commanding the Bakhmut direction due to his poor performance.
- Ukrainian forces marginally advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on October 2.
- Prominent actors in the Russian information space continue to speculate about the possible future of the Wagner Group under Rosgvardia.
- Interethnic tensions and claims about the superiority of Chechen "Akhmat" forces over regular Russian forces continue to generate controversy in the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted a small-scale Shahed-131/136 drone strike on Ukraine on the night of October 1-2 after Russian forces conducted a record number of drone strikes targeting Ukrainian grain and port infrastructure in September 2023.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kreminna, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in some areas on October 2.
- The Russian "Vostok" Battalion continued to complain on October 1 that the Russian military command is not fulfilling its promises of having the unit fight as a second-echelon force and is not providing state awards.
- Russian occupation officials continued to transport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of educational trips.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 1, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 1, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on September 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces are conducting tactical counterattacks in the Robotyne area as part of their elastic defense against ongoing Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The situation south of Robotyne is fluid as some tactically significant field fortifications have changed hands several times. Geolocated footage posted on September 30 shows Ukrainian forces striking Russian troops trying to enter a trench system about 1km southwest of Robotyne near the T0408 Robotyne—Tokmak road.[1] Footage posted on September 13 shows that Ukrainian forces had previously occupied segments of this trench and thus appear to have lost it to Russian counterattacks between September 13 and 30.[2] ISW has recoded this area from Ukraine's counteroffensive to Russian advances.

A Ukrainian soldier analyzed the footage of the area and noted that the aforementioned Russian-controlled trench is a strongpoint in an interconnected system of trenches, firing systems, and dugouts that lie between Robotyne and Novoprokopivka.[3] The Ukrainian soldier noted that the trenches are connected by underground tunnel-like structures and that Russian forces are prioritizing the defense of these positions, which have tactical significance in the area between Robotyne and Novoprokopivka.[4] Geolocated footage posted on October 1 shows Russian forces striking a Ukrainian vehicle just south of the middle of the three trenches and about 1km west of the easternmost trench in the system, suggesting that Ukrainian forces control the easternmost trench and are attempting to push westward to recapture the remaining two trenches and connected dugouts and firing positions.[5] Commercially available satellite imagery indicates that Russian forces destroyed this vehicle between September 25 and 28, indicating that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian attack and reconsolidated Russian positions near the trench systems in late September. The reported continued presence of Russian forces in the western and central trenches suggests that Russian forces have been conducting successful limited tactical counterattacks south of Robotyne and that the tactical situation in this area is complex and dynamic.

The Russian information space continues to falsely portray Western aid to Ukraine as escalatory in order to discourage continued Western support for Ukraine. Newly appointed United Kingdom Defense Secretary Grant Shapps stated in an interview with the *Telegraph* published on September 30 that he held talks with unspecified (likely UK) "Army leaders" about moving "more training and production" of military equipment into Ukraine.[6] UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak walked back Shapps' statement on October 1 and stated that the UK has no immediate plans to deploy military instructors to Ukraine.[7] Sunak clarified that it may be possible for the UK to conduct some training in the future in Ukraine but stated that the UK would not send British soldiers to fight in the "current conflict." [8] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev, a notably nationalistic and extreme voice in the Russian government, called Shapps' since-clarified statement a "push" toward a "third world war." [9] Medvedev regularly voices alarmist rhetoric and continues to portray any Western aid to Ukraine as escalatory in an attempt to undermine Western military aid to Ukraine.[10] His comments are part of a long-running Russian information operation along these lines and do not mark any sort of inflection.

Several Russian milbloggers also expressed baseless paranoia in response to UK officials' statements by claiming with no evidence at all that the UK intends to help train Ukrainian forces for future operations in Crimea.[11] The milbloggers' claims are likely also a part of a Russian information operation intended to portray Western military aid and continued support for Ukraine as escalatory. Russian milbloggers have noted broad indicators such as Ukrainian strikes on military targets in Crimea and on Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets to suggest that western forces are currently aiding Ukrainian forces in preparations to launch military operations in Crimea.[12] Ukrainian strikes against Crimea and BSF assets are more likely part of Ukraine's interdiction campaign assisting Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[13]

The status of the Wagner Group remains unclear amid reported negotiations about the Wagner Group's future cooperation with the Russian government. The Wagner Group's main combat elements are split across several countries, including Belarus, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali, and there is no clear unified leader for the Wagner Group.[14] Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly embraced former Wagner Group commander and current Ministry of Defense (MoD) employee Andrey Troshev on September 29 and stated that he and Troshev discussed how Troshev would be involved in the formation of new volunteer detachments that perform combat missions primarily in Ukraine.[15] Some Wagner group elements reacted negatively to Putin's embrace of Troshev and have now put forward an alternative leader. A prominent Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel announced on October 1 that Yevgeny Prigozhin's 25-year-old son Pavel Prigozhin has taken over "command" of the Wagner Group, and that Pavel Prigozhin is negotiating with Rosgvardia about having the Wagner Group rejoin combat operations in Ukraine.[16] The prominent Wagner-affiliated source reported that Wagner fighters would not have to sign contracts with the Russian MoD and that the Wagner Group would retain its name, symbols, ideology, commanders, management, and existing standard operating principles.[17] A Russian insider source claimed that Pavel Prigozhin is not an independent actor and is under the influence of Wagner Security Service head Mikhail Vatani, indicating that some Wagner personnel are interested in rallying around a Prigozhin-linked alternative to the Kremlin- and MoD-aligned Troshev, even if that alternative is not an independent entity.[18] A different pro-Wagner source claimed on September 30 that Rosgvardia Head Viktor Zolotov is considering allowing Wagner Group elements to join Rosgvardia as a separate Wagner unit, though the Pavel Prigozhin camp has not commented specifically on how its branch of the Wagner Group may operate with Rosgvardia.[19] It is unclear what the Kremlin thinks the relationship(s) between Wagner elements and the Russian government are. Rosgvardia is directly subordinate to the Russian Presidential Administration, which makes Putin's public embrace of Troshev and subordinating Wagner elements to the Russian MoD noteworthy. The MoD would have to provide the equipment and supplies for a large, reconstituted force under Rosgvardia in any case, since Rosgvardia does not have the logistical infrastructure to do so on its own.

ISW will revise its assessment about the prospects for the Wagner Group to reemerge as an effective military organization if the Wagner Group successfully reconstitutes as a large, unitary organization under Rosgvardia, the Russian MoD, or a similar organization. ISW previously assessed that disjointed Wagner Group elements were unlikely to pose a serious military threat to Ukraine without bringing the full suite of effectiveness Wagner had as a unitary organization under Yevgeny Prigozhin's and Dmitry Utkin's consolidated leadership. This initial assessment will be invalidated if the Wagner Group reestablishes itself as a coherent and large formation under the Russian government with effective centralized leadership.

Russian forces conducted another series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 30 to October 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 1 that Ukrainian air defenses downed 16 of 30 Shahed 131/136 drones that Russian forces launched.[20] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat stated that Shahed drones have a large power reserve and are highly accurate, which enables them to strike targets far from their launch points.[21] Ihnat stated that unspecified actors, likely Russian authorities and their allies, are working to make Shahed drones and other Russian weapons more resistant to electronic warfare

and more difficult to down.[22] A Russian milblogger noted that Ihnat is likely referring to small noise-resistant Comet satellite signal receivers that Russian drone producers have begun installing on domestically produced Shahed drones.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are conducting tactical counterattacks in the Robotyne area as part of their elastic defense against ongoing Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The situation south of Robotyne is fluid as some tactically significant field fortifications have changed hands several times.
- The Russian information space continues to falsely portray Western aid to Ukraine as escalatory in order to discourage continued Western support for Ukraine.
- The status of the Wagner Group remains unclear amid reported negotiations about the Wagner Group's future cooperation with the Russian government.
- ISW will revise its assessment about the prospects for the Wagner Group to reemerge as an effective military organization if the Wagner Group successfully reconstitutes as a large, unitary organization under Rosgvardia, the Russian MoD, or a similar organization.
- Russian forces conducted another series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 30 to October 1.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Lyman line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and marginally advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officially announced the beginning of its regular fall 2023 conscription cycle on October 1.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 30, 2023

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

Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 30, 2023, 5:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on September 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on September 30. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and near Bakhmut.[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv), and Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[2] A fringe Russian milblogger reportedly affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces implicitly recanted claims from September 24 that Ukrainian forces occupy half of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[3] The fringe milblogger claimed on September 29 that elements of the 7th Guards VDV Division still hold Verbove despite suffering losses.[4]

The Kremlin has seemingly not yet clarified what Ukrainian territories it claims that Russia has annexed, leading to continued confusion among Russian government and occupation officials a year after the illegal annexation of occupied territories. Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech in honor of the so-called "Day of Reunification of the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Zaporizhia, and Kherson Oblasts with Russia" on September 30 in which he reiterated boilerplate rhetoric about the international legitimacy of the illegal Russian annexation referenda, the West's alleged role in starting the war in Ukraine, and the unity between Russia and occupied Ukraine.[5] Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev posted a map on his Telegram channel in honor of the holiday that showed the entirety of Crimea and Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts as Russian territory.[6] The Kherson Oblast occupation administration posted a different map that showed Russian territory roughly extending to the current frontlines in the four most recently annexed territories.[7] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev, a notable nationalistic and extreme voice in the Russian government, ambiguously claimed that the war in Ukraine will continue until "the original Russian territories are liberated."[8] Medvedev's unclear statement and occupation officials' disparate maps indicate that the Kremlin has yet to clarify what territories it claims to have annexed or intends to annex.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes primarily targeting Vinnytsia Oblast on the night of September 29 to 30. Ukrainian military sources reported on September 30 that Ukrainian forces downed 30 out of 40 Shahed-131/136 drones that Russian forces launched from occupied Crimea.[9] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces struck an infrastructure facility in Vinnytsia Oblast.[10] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian drones struck a Ukrainian military arsenal near Kalynivka (22km north of Vinnytsia) in Vinnytsia Oblast.[11] Russian sources also claimed that Russian drones struck Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts on the night of September 29 to 30.[12] The Romanian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that its radar systems indicated a possible unauthorized entry into Romanian airspace during the Russian strike series on the night of September 29 to 30.[13] The Romanian MoD stated that Romanian authorities have not yet identified any objects that may have fallen into Romanian territory.[14]

Russian milbloggers claimed on September 30 that the Russian military command removed the commander of the Russian 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade following recent outrage from milbloggers about the brigade's command.[15] The same group of Russian milbloggers extensively amplified reports about elements of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) suffering significant losses due to inadequate artillery

support and poor leadership in the Kherson direction in late August.[16] One of the Russian milbloggers stated on September 30 that the removal of this commander is a “rare case” in which truth and justice prevailed.[17] The removal of the commander suggests that Russian ultranationalist outrage may still be able to pressure the Russian military command despite the apparent decline in such reactions in the wider Russian information space since the Wagner Group’s June 24 rebellion.

An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko is reportedly categorizing Russian internet user data in an effort to disseminate tailored information to specific domestic populations as part of a wider attempt to control the Russian information space. Independent Belarusian outlet *Vot Tak* reported on September 29 that Russian non-profit organization Dialog is gathering Russian internet user data and information from Russian government agencies in order to categorize Russian media consumers and then feed tailored narratives to specific categories of users.[18] A former employee of Dialog told *Vot Tak* that Dialog’s database categorizes internet users by profession, interests, and political beliefs and specifically orients false news about the war in Ukraine and pro-war narratives toward Russian military personnel, relatives of military personnel, and civil servants.[19] The former Dialog employee also claimed that Dialog categorizes internet users as “loyal” and “disloyal” and shares its information with Russian security services.[20] The former Dialog employee claimed that Dialog has failed to make a significant ideological impact on the Russian information space because Dialog could not produce unified and clear narratives.[21] Dialog’s efforts to promote narratives to specific Russian populations are likely a more subtle part of the Kremlin’s effort to control the Russian information space and commensurate with the Kremlin’s more overt efforts to promote self-censorship.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut on September 30.
- The Kremlin has seemingly not yet clarified what Ukrainian territories it claims that Russia has annexed, leading to continued confusion among Russian government and occupation officials a year after the illegal annexation of occupied territories.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes primarily targeting Vinnytsia Oblast on the night of September 29 to 30.
- Russian milbloggers claimed on September 30 that the Russian military command removed the commander of the Russian 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade following recent outrage from milbloggers about the brigade’s command.
- An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko is reportedly categorizing Russian internet user data in an effort to disseminate tailored information to specific domestic populations as part of a wider attempt to control the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, Kremenna, Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and marginally advanced along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian authorities have started to conscript citizens in occupied Ukraine who have Russian passports.
- Russian authorities continue to forcibly deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia in order to assimilate Ukrainian children into Russian culture.

[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 29, 2023](#)

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

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 29, 2023

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 29, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on September 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and in the Bakhmut area on September 29. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked north of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and near Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv) on September 28 and 29.[1] Russian milbloggers claimed on September 29 that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance east of the railway line south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut) and reported heavy fighting across the Klishchiivka-Andriivka-Kurdyumivka line.[2]

The Russian government announced details about the semi-annual conscription cycle set to begin on October 1 in most of Russia, reportedly including the illegally annexed territories in Ukraine. Russian Deputy Chief of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Rear Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyansky stated on September 29 that the semi-annual conscription cycle will begin on October 1, except in some regions of Russia’s Far North where conscription will begin on November 1 due to poor weather.[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on September 29 stating that the Russian military will conscript 130,000 personnel from October to December 2023, as compared to 147,000 personnel conscripted in the spring conscription cycle according to Tsimlyansky.[4] Tsimlyansky claimed that Russia will not send conscripts to the war in Ukraine and that conscripts will serve for 12 months.[5] Tsimlyansky stated that the fall conscription cycle will take place “in all constituent entities of the Russian Federation,” including in occupied territories in Ukraine according to multiple Russian state media outlets.[6] The Russian laws that illegally incorporated Ukrainian territory in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts into Russia in October 2022 stated that military conscription in these territories would begin in 2023, but Russian government officials announced the day before the beginning of the spring 2023 conscription cycle that conscription in these territories “would not occur until further notice.”[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and former Wagner Group commander and current Ministry of Defense (MoD) employee Andrey Troshev on September 29 signaling that Putin will likely back the MoD in its apparent competing effort with the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to recruit current and former Wagner personnel. Putin stated that at his last meeting with Troshev (call sign "Sedoy") the two discussed that Troshev would be involved in the formation of volunteer detachments that perform combat missions primarily in Ukraine.^[8] Wagner-affiliated sources claimed that Troshev left Wagner following Wagner's June 24 rebellion to work for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-affiliated Redut private military company (PMC), and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov acknowledged on September 29 that Troshev works for the MoD.^[9] Russian sources widely identified the volunteer detachments that Putin tasked Troshev with forming as Redut PMC formations.^[10] Putin also stated during his meeting with Troshev that Troshev maintains relationships with his former comrades, further suggesting that the MoD seeks to leverage Troshev's connections to Wagner.^[11] Yevkurov has been overseeing the MoD's effort to subsume Wagner elements abroad and is likely heavily involved in the MoD's campaign to recruit Wagner personnel for MoD-affiliated PMCs operating in Ukraine.^[12] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on September 29 that several hundred former Wagner fighters have returned to Ukraine in the past weeks either with regular Russian forces or PMCs.^[13]

There are increasing reports that Wagner personnel are operating alongside Rosgvardia and that the State Duma will consider a proposed bill that will allow Rosgvardia to form volunteer formations.^[14] Current Wagner Commander Anton Yelizarov (call sign "Lotos") is reportedly negotiating with Rosgvardia for current Wagner personnel to join volunteer formations under Rosgvardia on terms more favorable to Wagner.^[15] A Russian insider source claimed that elements of the Wagner contingent in Belarus do not want to sign contracts with either the MoD or Rosgvardia and instead plan to join Belarusian President Lukashenko's effort to create a Belarusian-based PMC for Wagner fighters under the command of a Wagner commander with the call sign "Brest."^[16] Putin's backing of the MoD effort is likely significant for factional dynamics among the Russian military leadership and the wider Russian security apparatus, but it does not portend a significant redeployment of Wagner personnel to Ukraine. The piecemeal deployment of former Wagner personnel to any areas of the frontline is unlikely to generate any significant strategic or even localized effects on the battlefield in Ukraine.^[17]

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is likely supporting amendments to a Russian State Duma bill that would expand its tools of digital authoritarianism to surveil users of Russian internet, banking, and telecom companies. Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on September 29 that the bill would allow Russian law enforcement agencies to remotely access, edit, and delete information in Russian private businesses' databases.^[18] The Russian State Duma is reportedly proposing these amendments to protect the personal data of Russian judges, FSB employees, and police from data leaks of personal information.^[19] *Kommersant* reported that the Russian Big Data Association – which includes Russian internet giant Yandex, Russian telecommunications companies, and banks – opposed the amendments and claimed that such access could lead to new data leaks.^[20] The FSB's efforts to gain control over large companies' databases are likely part of an attempt to strengthen surveillance measures over the Russian populace and populations in occupied Ukraine. The FSB also intends to use potential new access to databases to mask its operations more easily. The FSB's potential new access to private companies' databases may affect information security in other countries that use services provided by the Russian Big Data Association. In August, the Kremlin attempted to force Yandex into supplying international user data to the FSB.^[21]

The apparent self-censorship in the wider Russian information space has likely opened the door for some fringe elements to directly criticize and speculate about senior Russian military commanders without pushback. A fringe Russian milblogger reportedly affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces recently claimed that Russian Chief of the General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov removed VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky as deputy commander in Ukraine, and no Russian sources have offered claims consistent with this one until recently.^[22] ISW has no independent way of verifying the channels' claims and speculations and is by no means ready to assess that Teplinsky's role has changed, but the emergence and spread of such claims, though currently limited, in the Russian information space is notable amid this unusual Russian informational environment.

The response of the wider Russian information space to fringe claims about Teplinsky's role in the war in Ukraine may portend an inflection point in discussions about the Russian military command. A Russian insider source who publishes monthly lists purportedly of Russian President Vladimir Putin's so-called "war cabinet" notably excluded Teplinsky from their September list.^[23] The fringe Russian milblogger complained that Teplinsky did not appear on this list for the first time since being added in April 2023.^[24] The exclusion of Teplinsky from the "war cabinet" list is consistent with the fringe Russian milblogger's September 22 claim that Gerasimov removed Teplinsky from his duties as deputy commander in Ukraine.^[25] ISW has observed that this insider source is one of several whose information is often a harbinger of larger conversations in the wider Russian information space, specifically about changes and dynamics within the Russian leadership. **ISW is not assessing at this time that the Russian military command has removed Teplinsky from some of his duties.** These claims may prompt a wider discussion in the Russian information space about changes in command and factional dynamics among the Russian leadership that has been increasingly quiet since Wagner's June 24 rebellion. If the wider Russian information space continues to ignore these fringe conversations about Teplinsky, however, this may further suggest that Russian sources are engaging in self-censorship--or, alternatively, that the claims are so nonsensical as to require no response.

A Russian insider source speculated about Gerasimov's intent for Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine, possibly in an attempt to renew animosity toward Gerasimov. A Russian insider source claimed on September 4 that Gerasimov wants to conserve Russian forces for the defense of Melitopol and Berdyansk, possibly at the expense of defending Tokmak.^[26] Social media sources circulated this rumor on September 27 and 28 after which the Russian insider source claimed that Gerasimov is also willing to withdraw forces from Bakhmut and prefers to defend Melitopol to prevent Ukrainian forces from bringing artillery closer to Crimea.^[27] The claim that Gerasimov intends to withdraw Russian forces to Melitopol to strengthen Russian defenses there is far outside of Gerasimov's pattern of observed behavior.^[28] ISW has no evidence to confirm the insider source's claims, however. If these claims are false, it could indicate that there is a concerted effort in the Russian information space to discredit Gerasimov, possibly in tandem with protecting Teplinsky.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and in the Bakhmut area on September 29.
- The Russian government announced details about the semi-annual conscription cycle set to begin on October 1 in most of Russia, reportedly including the illegally annexed territories in Ukraine.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and former Wagner Group commander and current Ministry of Defense (MoD) employee Andrey Troshev on September 29 signaling that Putin will likely back the MoD in its apparent competing effort with the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to recruit current and former Wagner personnel.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is likely supporting amendments to a Russian State Duma bill that would expand its tools of digital authoritarianism to surveil users of Russian internet, banking, and telecom companies.
- The apparent self-censorship in the wider Russian information space has likely opened the door for some fringe elements to directly criticize and speculate about senior Russian military commanders without pushback.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 29.
- Russia may be continuing attempts to circumvent sanctions through military-technical cooperation with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member countries.
- Russia is relaxing passport controls on Ukrainian citizens leaving and entering Russia likely in an attempt to simplify the movement of Ukrainian citizens to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 28, 2023

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

Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 28, 2023, 7:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on September 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 28. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and in the Bakhmut direction.^[1] The "Storm Ossetia" and "Alania" volunteer battalions claimed that unspecified sources continue to spread false information about a Ukrainian breakthrough in the Robotyne-Verbove area, possibly referring to a fringe Russian milblogger's claims on September 22 and 23 that Ukrainian forces advanced into Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).^[2] ISW has been unable to confirm this report and will not continue to record it in the absence of visual confirmation or similar claims from other Russian sources.

Russian forces have reduced the tempo of their localized offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line in recent days. Russian and Ukrainian officials are increasingly reporting fewer Russian ground attacks in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions, indicating that Ukrainian offensive operations have drawn Russian forces away from the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and significantly degraded the Russian offensive effort on this line.^[3] ISW has previously assessed that Russian offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line aimed to pin Ukrainian forces on this line and away from more critical areas of the front.^[4] Ukrainian Deputy Director of the Department of Application Planning of the Main Directorate of the Ukrainian National Guard Colonel Mykola Urshalovych stated on September 28 that Russian forces conducted defensive operations and reinforced units in the past week while Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations and pushed Russian forces from unspecified positions.^[5] The Ukrainian General Staff's September 28 morning situation report (SITREP) reported no Russian ground attacks in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions while the September 28 evening SITREP only reported one Russian attack south of Kremenna near Bilohorivka.^[6] Russian aviation has become increasingly active on this line as ground attacks have apparently diminished, and Russian sources consistently claim that Russian air strikes hit Ukrainian-controlled bridges across the Oskil River — presumably to stymie the threat of any Ukrainian offensive operations east of the river.^[7]

Russian aviation is increasingly active in the Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Kherson oblasts and apparently less active in areas of western Zaporizhia Oblast where Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations. Russian forces have been increasingly conducting airstrikes against targets in the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast and against rear Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the Kupyansk direction in the past week.^[8] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on September 28 that Russian Su-35 attack aircraft and Ka-52 helicopters are increasingly active in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions and that Russian forces conducted 21 airstrikes in these directions, primarily near the Siversk (19km south of Kremenna) and the Serebryanske forest area (11km south of Kremenna).^[9] Kherson Oblast Military Administration Spokesperson Oleksandr Tolokonnikov stated on September 28 that Russian forces have increased the number of airstrikes on Kherson City and right bank Kherson Oblast by a factor of three or four in the past three days and that Russian forces dropped more than 50 aerial glide bombs against targets in these areas.^[10]

Russian aviation continues to conduct strikes against rear Ukrainian areas in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast, although mentions of Russian aviation repelling Ukrainian assaults in frontline areas have become less routine in Russian reporting than earlier in the counteroffensive. Russian sources noted that Russian aviation, particularly Ka-52 helicopters, played a significant role in disrupting Ukrainian assaults at the start of the counteroffensive.^[11] Ukrainian forces appear to have increased their ability to down Russian Ka-52 helicopters in mid-August 2023, and the Russian command may have decreased aviation use in western Zaporizhia Oblast out of fears of aviation and pilot losses.^[12] **The decreased Russian aviation use in western Zaporizhia Oblast has not seriously undermined the Russian defense, however, as Russian forces appear to have increased their use of strike drones against advancing Ukrainian forces, and Russian artillery units continue to play a significant role in repelling Ukrainian assaults.** It remains unclear what Russian forces intend to achieve with increased aviation activity in Kherson Oblast and whether more airstrikes against Ukrainian targets in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions will be able to offset degraded Russian combat power in the area.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 27 to 28. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 28 that Ukrainian air defenses downed 31 of 39 Russian-launched Shahed drones over Ukraine on the night of September 27 to 28 and three out of five Shahed drones on September 27.[13] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched the drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and occupied Crimea. [14] Ukrainian Center for the Research of Trophy and Prospective Weapons and Military Equipment of the Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Captain Andriy Rudyk stated that Russian companies have modified the Russian-produced Shahed-136 drones to contain more domestically produced parts but have not improved the drone's tactical or technical characteristics.[15] Rudyk stated that the modifications indicate that Russia continues to pursue the domestic mass production of Shahed drones.[16]

Several Russian milbloggers claimed that they self-censor the majority of their reporting amidst an apparent wider self-censorship in Russian reporting about the tactical realities on certain sectors of the front. Some notably critical Russian milbloggers claimed that they only publish five to 15 percent of the amount of information they receive.[17] One milblogger claimed that problems with communications, drones, tires, electronic warfare (EW), personnel payments, and various other issues persist among Russian forces on the frontline but that Russian personnel attempt to mitigate these problems through connections and personal initiatives, likely, according to the milblogger, because Russian commanders routinely silence complaints and ignore efforts to fix problems.[18] The milblogger amplified a statement from a claimed Russian platoon commander who complained about the inefficient flow of information from the Russian frontline to decision makers and who stated that he has had to take unusual measures to mitigate negative battlefield consequences from this poor information flow.[19] Another milblogger noted that certain information should not be shared and that the ability to remain silent at the right moment is an important quality.[20] A Russian milblogger deleted a part of a post on September 25 claiming that Ukrainian forces advanced near Novopropokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv) and controlled the northeastern part of the settlement. [21] The milblogger edited the post and instead claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), just north of Novopropokopivka. [22] Geolocated footage published later in the day showed that Ukrainian forces advanced 1.5km northeast of Novopropokopivka.[23] The milblogger's deletion suggests that Russian sources are intentionally limiting their reporting on tactical actions, especially those with outcomes unfavorable to Russia. Censorship or self-censorship among Russian milbloggers will affect ISW's and the wider Western coverage ability of Russian operations, and ISW will continue to track changes in the Russian information space that could affect open-source reporting on the war in Ukraine.

The Russian State Duma adopted a bill in its first reading that criminalizes promoting and justifying extremism, likely to encourage self-censorship in the Russian information space.[24] The bill amends a current Russian law that punishes inciting extremism with a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (about \$3,100) and up to four years in prison.[25] The amendment would also increase the imprisonment term to five years for calling for, promoting, or justifying extremism online.[26] Russian authorities arrested former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin on July 21 on extremism charges and likely intends to use the proposed expansion of the law on extremism to encourage self-censorship among more figures disseminating criticisms of the Kremlin in the Russian information space.[27]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signaled his support for Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov during a meeting on September 28 amid continued speculations about Kadyrov's health and public backlash against the recent behavior of Kadyrov's son. Putin praised the claimed successes of Chechen forces in Ukraine and Kadyrov's leadership of Chechnya during the meeting.[28] Putin and Kadyrov appeared comfortable during the meeting in stark contrast with the pair's last meeting on March 23 where Kadyrov appeared visibly nervous.[29] Kadyrov's and Putin's September 28 meeting comes amid continued speculations about Kadyrov's health and recent public backlash over footage of Kadyrov's son beating a detainee.[30] Putin's meeting with Kadyrov is likely a reciprocation of Kadyrov's expressions of loyalty to Putin following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24 and signals Putin's willingness to continue supporting Kadyrov despite recent events.[31]

The Russian information space continued to criticize the Armenian leadership and lament Russia's perceived decreased influence in Armenia. Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin called the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh "pathetic" on September 27 for attempting to undertake "imperial functions" without the "ability and willingness" to support peacekeeping operations.[32] Girkin also claimed that Russian peacekeeping forces would have suffered defeat if they had intervened in the recent fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh.[33] A Russian milblogger criticized the Armenian government for not intervening in Nagorno-Karabakh.[34] Another Russian source claimed that Russia has lost a "frozen conflict" that it can leverage and that the disappearance of a breakaway republic in Russia's supposed sphere of influence is directly connected to decreasing Russian international influence.[35]

Senior NATO and Western defense officials met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on September 28 to discuss Ukraine's military needs. [36] NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps, and French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu discussed defensive cooperation and strengthening Ukrainian air defenses with Zelensky.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 28.
- Russian forces have reduced the tempo of their localized offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line in recent days.
- Russian aviation is increasingly active in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Kherson oblasts and apparently less active in areas of western Zaporizhia Oblast where Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 27 to 28.
- Several Russian milbloggers claimed that they self-censor the majority of their reporting amidst an apparent wider self-censorship in Russian reporting about the tactical realities on certain sectors of the front.
- The Russian State Duma adopted a bill in its first reading that criminalizes promoting and justifying extremism, likely to encourage self-censorship in the Russian information space.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signaled his support for Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov during a meeting on September 28 amid continued speculations about Kadyrov's health and public backlash against the recent behavior of Kadyrov's son.
- The Russian information space continued to criticize Armenian leadership and lament Russia's perceived decreased influence in Armenia.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and did not make confirmed gains.
- Russian sources stated that the Russian Aerospace (VKS) Forces received a new batch of fifth-generation Su-57 stealth fighter and fourth-generation Su-35S air defense fighter aircraft on September 28.

- Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko stated on September 28 that Ukrainian partisans set fire to a Russian military facility in occupied Yalta, Donetsk Oblast (21km southwest of Mariupol).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 27, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 27, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on September 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 27. Geolocated footage published on September 26 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut).[1] Additional geolocated footage published on September 26 indicates that Russian forces likely no longer control a roughly one-kilometer-long trench line west of Verbove (16km southeast of Orikhiv).[2] The absence of Russian forces in this trench line could facilitate further Ukrainian advances in this area, as this trench line is no longer a significant obstacle for Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that "there will be good news" in the Zaporizhia operational direction and noted that Ukrainian forces are steadily advancing but did not provide additional information.[3]

The situation near Verbove remains unclear as prominent Russian milbloggers have become noticeably less inclined to report in detail on Russian activity on this frontline or present bad news about Russian failures, while a discussion about reported Russian problems in this area has emerged on the fringes of the Russian information space. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed on September 26 that at least four Ukrainian companies with a significant number of armored vehicles stormed Russian positions along the Robotyne-Verbove line after conducting a massive artillery barrage.[4] A Russian milblogger who avidly supports Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky by criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) responded to Rogov, stating that Ukrainian forces have already passed the minefields and "dragon's teeth" anti-tank fortifications on the Robotyne-Verbove line and that Ukrainian forces would have conducted such attacks sooner or later.[5] Another Russian milblogger claimed on September 26 that there is intense mutual shelling that is making it dangerous to operate above ground near Verbove and Robotyne.[6] Still another milblogger reportedly affiliated with the VDV Forces responded to this claim, stating that a personal source from the Russian 108th VDV Regiment (7th VDV Division) reported that there is intense Ukrainian shelling in the area.[7] The milblogger added that their source provided unclear information about whether the 108th VDV Regiment was moving to Verbove or leaving from Verbove. The milblogger also claimed that the Russian military command in Moscow canceled plans for the redeployment of the Russian 106th VDV Division to the Robotyne area to aid the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions currently operating there and offered an unreasonable explanation for the motivation behind this decision.[8] ISW has observed that this channel has demonstrated a tendency to make exaggerated statements and implausible claims that favor Teplinsky against Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov. ISW has also previously observed elements of the 106th VDV Division in the Bakhmut area.[9] The Russian information space has largely been hesitant recently to discuss Russian forces' operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, as the Russian milblogger community has reduced its criticisms of the Russian conduct of the war on this sector of the front since Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion on June 24. ISW will continue to adapt to this new information space.

Russian media continues to publish inconclusive "proof" that Black Sea Fleet Commander Admiral Viktor Solokov is alive. Zvezda News published an interview with Solokov on September 27, but ISW is unprepared at this time to make an assessment about the authenticity of the footage or the date of its filming. [10] The Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) have been notably silent on the matter and have not directly confirmed that Solokov is alive.

Ukrainian and Russian confirmations of some former Wagner Group personnel deploying to the Bakhmut area indicate that the Wagner Group is struggling to cohesively reform around new leadership. A Russian milblogger claimed on September 26 that the appointment of a new overall Wagner commander triggered an exodus of Wagner personnel to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-related structures.[11] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash confirmed on September 27 the presence of 500 former Wagner personnel operating in MoD-related formations in the Bakhmut area and that these personnel are insufficient to change the situation on the battlefield.[12] A Ukrainian drone operator reportedly operating in the Bakhmut area reported that Wagner personnel changed commanders and returned to the Bakhmut area to compensate for ongoing personnel shortages in the area.[13] The piecemealed deployment of former Wagner personnel to any area of the frontline is unlikely to generate any significant strategic or even localized effects on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces marginally advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 27.
- The situation near Verbove remains unclear as prominent Russian milbloggers have become noticeably less inclined to report in detail on Russian activity on this frontline or present bad news about Russian failures, while a discussion about reported Russian problems in this area has emerged on the fringes of the Russian information space.
- Russian media continues to publish inconclusive "proof" that Black Sea Fleet Commander Admiral Viktor Solokov is alive.

- Ukrainian and Russian confirmations of some former Wagner Group personnel deploying to the Bakhmut area indicate that the Wagner Group is struggling to cohesively reform around new leadership.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, in Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 27 but did not make any confirmed gains.
- The *Guardian* reported on September 27 that Iranian drones that Russian forces operate in Ukraine contain European components despite international sanctions.
- Ukrainian partisans continue to disrupt Russian logistics in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 26, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans and Frederick W. Kagan

September 26, 2023, 8:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on September 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The tactical situation in Verbove remains unclear as Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction.^[1] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces reached the northern outskirts of Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv).^[2] Russian sources have still not directly addressed a claim from a source reportedly affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces that Ukrainian forces control half of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) as of September 24.^[3] ISW has not observed evidence of such a Ukrainian advance, and the source reporting it has a very small following. It is still noteworthy that other VDV-connected sources have not responded to these claims.

Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) the "Guards" honorific on September 26.^[4] The Russian 58th CAA (Southern Military District) has been responsible for the ongoing Russian defense against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.^[5]

Likely degraded elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army's 42nd Motorized Rifle Division are increasingly counterattacking in the Novoprokopivka area, suggesting that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have degraded relatively more elite Russian Airborne (VDV) elements that were responsible for counterattacking in the area. Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division's 70th and 71st Guards Motorized Rifle Regiments have increasingly engaged in limited counterattacks near Novoprokopivka in the past week, and a Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division pushed Ukrainian forces from positions near Novoprokopivka on September 25.^[6] Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division's 70th, 71st, and 291st Motorized Rifle Regiments routinely engaged in combat engagements and counterattacks against Ukrainian forces at the forwardmost Russian defensive positions in the Orikhiv area before withdrawing behind the Russian defensive layer between Verbove and Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv) in mid-to-late August.^[7] Russian forces laterally redeployed elements of the more elite 7th and 76th VDV Divisions to the Orikhiv direction in early-to-mid August to counterattack against a widening Ukrainian breach in the area, which may have provided these elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division respite from hostilities.^[8] Elements of the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment may have conducted one of the few unit rotations that ISW has observed on this sector of the front, possibly allowing these elements to partially reconstitute.^[9]

The 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments' involvement in counterattacks around Novoprokopivka suggests that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have significantly degraded the combat capabilities of elements of the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions and that these VDV elements can no longer conduct all counterattacks along the entire Ukrainian breach in the Orikhiv direction. The Russian command may have committed the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments to defending and counterattacking in the Novoprokopivka area to allow VDV elements to prioritize defensive operations on the western and eastern flanks of the Ukrainian salient in the Orikhiv direction.^[10] It is also possible that elements of the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments have held positions near Novoprokopivka since withdrawing from positions further north and are now engaging Ukrainian forces because the Ukrainian advance has reached the outskirts of Novoprokopivka. Roughly a month of respite and possible reconstitution are unlikely to offset the significant degradation that elements of the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments suffered while defending earlier in the counteroffensive. Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) similarly defended to hold forwardmost defensive positions earlier in the counteroffensive, and Ukrainian counteroffensive operations recently reportedly rendered these elements combat ineffective.^[11] The Russian command risks rendering the already degraded elements of the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments combat ineffective if they heavily commit these elements to counterattacking the Ukrainian advance near Novoprokopivka.

Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division are reportedly deployed as far back as Tokmak, continuing to suggest that the Russian command has not manned the multi-echeloned defense in southern Ukraine in depth. Russian sources reported on September 25 and 26 that elements of the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment's 3rd Battalion were involved in an altercation with military police from the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment in occupied Tokmak.^[12] The presence of elements of the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments in Tokmak suggests that Russian forces have deployed elements of these regiments throughout the multi-echeloned defense between the current frontline and Tokmak. Russian forces, however, appear to be continuing to deploy most of their combat power in western Zaporizhia Oblast to immediate frontline areas.^[13] The deployment of the 70th and 71st Motorized Rifle Regiments as far back as Tokmak suggests that elements of the same Russian formations and units defending at forward positions are holding positions, likely in smaller numbers, in subsequent defensive layers. It is possible that

unobserved elements of other Russian units and formations hold positions at rear defensive positions, although the current Russian manpower commitment to holding positions on the frontline indicates that this is unlikely.

Interethnic tensions appear to be sowing division between elements of the Russian 42nd Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Arsen Temiraev, a mobilized serviceman from the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania serving with the 70th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment, posted a video on September 25 alleging that Russian military police of the 70th Regiment beat Temiraev and two other soldiers of the 71st Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment's 3rd Battalion in Tokmak on September 24.[14] Temiraev claimed that the military police asked about his ethnicity before telling Temiraev that "Russia is for Russians." Temiraev claimed that the military police beat him and the other servicemen because a Tokmak local alleged that the soldiers had sexually assaulted children, a crime that Temiraev denied having committed. Temiraev complained that he thought the "Nazis were on the other [Ukrainian] side, [but] it turns out they [the Nazis] are among us."[15] North Ossetian-Alanian Republic Head Sergey Menyailo responded on September 26, claiming that the elements of the "Storm Ossetia" and "Alania" volunteer battalions in the area verified the incident.[16] Menyailo reported the incident to the Southern Military District command, which informed the commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army, and called the incident unacceptable towards any Russian soldier. Interethnic tensions between Russian units operating in the frontline and near the rear of western Zaporizhia Oblast may threaten the integrity of Russian defenses and unit cohesion amidst recent Ukrainian gains in the area.

Interethnic tensions may also threaten Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's broader standing within the Russian political sphere amid an ongoing controversy surrounding Kadyrov's son. Kadyrov posted footage on September 25 of his son, Adam Kadyrov, beating a detained man accused of burning a Quran, and Ramzan Kadyrov praised his son for the beating.[17] The incident prompted varied condemnation and calls for investigations from Russian officials. Russian Human Rights Council (HRC) Head Valery Fadeev stated that burning the Quran is a serious crime but that officials must follow rules for detaining suspects, while HRC member Eva Merkacheva called for an investigation and called the situation a "challenge to the entire legal system of Russia."[18] Merkacheva levied a thinly veiled criticism of the Chechen Republic, claiming that "in a particular region [Chechen Republic] they [Chechen officials] have shown that they commit crimes and nothing will happen to them about it."[19] Other Russian officials, including Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova, called for Adam Kadyrov to answer for his crime in a Russian court.[20] Ramzan Kadyrov reportedly responded to a journalist's request for a follow up and reportedly claimed that he had not witnessed the attack and that Adam Kadyrov is "independent and temperamental."[21] Ramzan Kadyrov reportedly praised Adam Kadyrov's behavior and stated he did not punish his son, but said that Adam Kadyrov will be punished to the fullest extent of Russian law if a Russian court convicts him.[22] ISW has long observed tensions between Chechen and non-Chechen officials and military units, and senior Russian officials' emotional reactions suggest that Kadyrov's political standing may be insufficient to protect his son from the consequences of this situation.[23]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu discussed ongoing Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) efforts to increase Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces' combat capabilities and add elements similar to those normally found in motorized rifle units to the VDV, likely to better align VDV elements with their current combat roles in Ukraine. Shoigu stated during a speech to the Russian Defense Ministry Board on September 26 that the Russian MoD is implementing measures to increase the Russian VDV's combat potential by creating new airborne assault formations and increasing the VDV's reconnaissance, strike, and fire capabilities.[24] Shoigu stated that the Russian MoD has nearly finished forming a fifth Russian VDV division, the 104th Airborne Assault (VDV) Division, and an additional parachute regiment subordinate to the Russian 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division.[25] Shoigu stated that the Russian MoD plans for all Russian VDV divisions to have a logistics brigade and repair and restoration battalions by the end of 2023.[26] Shoigu stated that Russian VDV divisions will be "completed" with an artillery brigade but did not specify a time frame for this addition.[27] These additional elements will bring Russian VDV divisions into closer alignment with the force composition of a typical Russian motorized rifle division.[28] Shoigu did not state that Russian VDV divisions would receive tank regiments, which are common in Russian motorized rifle divisions.[29] These additional units will likely allow the Russian military to use Russian VDV divisions almost interchangeably with motorized rifle divisions in the future, and VDV elements in Ukraine have been increasingly operating as combat infantry similar to motorized rifle divisions.[30] The Russian MoD's provision of additional elements to Russian VDV units and formations serving in Ukraine is a recognition of the role Russian VDV forces are currently playing in Ukraine and highlights the non-standard way in which the Russian military is using these forces. These Russian formations have become "airborne" in name only, and it is not clear when the Russian MoD intends for them to take to the skies again.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes on port and military targets in Ukraine on the night of September 25-26. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 38 drones from Krasnodar Krai and Cape Chauda, Crimea, targeting Ukrainian port and border infrastructure and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 26 drones.[31] Russian forces hit the Orlivka-Isaccea ferry crossing that connects Odesa Oblast and Romania, and Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk denied speculations that the Russian drones crossed into Romanian territory.[32] Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces destroyed a Ukrainian MiG-29 fighter aircraft at the Kubakino airfield in Mykolaiv Oblast.[33]

Russian and Western sources largely claimed that Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov is alive after the Russian MoD posted footage of Sokolov allegedly attending a meeting on September 26, although the situation remains unclear at this time. Russian and Western sources largely speculated that footage posted by the Russian MoD on September 26 of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's remarks at the Russian MoD Board meeting purportedly shows Sokolov attending via teleconference.[34] The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces previously reported on September 25 that the Ukrainian strike on the BSF headquarters in Sevastopol on September 22 killed Sokolov, and Russian officials have not yet issued a response confirming or denying reports of Sokolov's death.[35] The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces stated on September 26 that it was clarifying information about Sokolov's possible death but that available sources indicate that he is dead.[36] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on September 26 that he had not received any information from the Russian MoD about the matter and that the Kremlin had nothing to say as this is "solely [the Russian MoD's] prerogative."[37] ISW is unprepared at this time to make an assessment about the authenticity of the Russian MoD's footage of Sokolov or about Sokolov's status on Earth.

The Russian MoD has reportedly recruited some former Wagner Group personnel for MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs) fighting in Ukraine, while negotiations between the reported Wagner leadership and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) have allegedly stalled over disagreements concerning Wagner's independence and cohesion. A reported Wagner-affiliated source claimed on September 26 that the Wagner Group is still operating in Africa and Belarus and that there are no plans to close the organization.[38] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that former Wagner personnel that left the organization with Andrey Troshev (known under the callsign "Sedoy") after Prigozhin's rebellion have joined the MoD-affiliated "Redut" and "Volunteer Corps" PMCs and have begun to redeploy to the Bakhmut area in Ukraine.[39] The milblogger claimed that Troshev is trying to recruit Wagner personnel who are currently operating in Belarus, Africa, and the Middle East for Russian MoD-affiliated PMCs. The milblogger also claimed that Anton Yelizarov (known as "Lotos") is now the head of Wagner and is

negotiating with Rosgvardia about the inclusion of Wagner units within Rosgvardia. Yelizarov is reportedly resisting Rosgvardia's condition that Wagner personnel sign individual contracts, which the milblogger complained would allow Rosgvardia to divide the Wagner units and send them to various areas. ISW previously reported that Russian State Duma deputies will reportedly propose a bill allowing Rosgvardia to include volunteer formations, and Yelizarov is likely pushing for Wagner personnel to be considered a distinct Rosgvardia volunteer formation.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- The tactical situation in Verbov remains unclear as Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 26.
- Likely degraded elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army's 42nd Motorized Rifle Division are increasingly counterattacking in the Novoprokopyivka area, suggesting that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have degraded relatively more elite Russian Airborne (VDV) elements that were responsible for counterattacking in the area.
- Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division are reportedly deployed as far back as Tokmak, continuing to suggest that the Russian command has not manned the multi-echeloned defense in southern Ukraine in depth.
- Interethnic tensions appear to be sowing division between elements of the Russian 42nd Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Interethnic tensions may also threaten Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's broader standing within the Russian political sphere amid an ongoing controversy surrounding Kadyrov's son.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu discussed ongoing Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) efforts to increase Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces' combat capabilities and add elements similar to those normally found in motorized rifle units to the VDV, likely to better align VDV elements with their current combat roles in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes on port and military targets in Ukraine on the night of September 25-26.
- Russian and Western sources largely claimed that Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov is alive after the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage of Sokolov allegedly attending a meeting on September 26, although the situation remains unclear at this time.
- The Russian MoD has reportedly recruited some former Wagner Group personnel for MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs) fighting in Ukraine, while negotiations between the reported Wagner leadership and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) have allegedly stalled over disagreements concerning Wagner's independence and cohesion.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in some areas on September 26.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 25, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 25, 2023, 5:50pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on September 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The tactical situation in Verbov remains unclear amid continued Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and offensive assaults in the Bakhmut direction, inflicting losses on Russian manpower and equipment and depleting Russian forces along the entire front line.[1] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces reached northern Verbov (18km southeast of Orikhiv) but that Russian forces pushed them back to their original positions.[2] Russian sources have yet to directly address a claim from a source reportedly affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces that Ukrainian forces control half of Verbov as of September 24.[3]

The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported on September 25 that a precision Ukrainian strike on the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 22 killed 34 Russian officers, including BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov.[4] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported that the strike, which occurred during a meeting of senior BSF leadership, also wounded 105 Russian personnel.[5] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 23 that the strike seriously wounded the commander of the Russian 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet), Lieutenant General Oleg Tsekov, and the commander of the Russian grouping of forces in Zaporizhia Oblast, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk.[6] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces also reported that the Ukrainian strike on the *Minsk* landing ship in Sevastopol on September 13 killed 62 personnel, noting that many personnel were present as the *Minsk* was scheduled to go on combat duty on September 14.[7] ISW has yet to observe confirmation that these Ukrainian strikes killed Sokolov or any other high-ranking Russian commanders, although the Russian command would be able to easily disprove Ukrainian reporting if these reports are false. Sokolov's and other Russian officers' reported deaths would create significant disruptions in command and control in the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Khalino Airfield and a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Kursk Oblast during a series of drone strikes on September 24. Ukrainian media reported on September 24 that sources connected to the Ukrainian GUR stated that Ukrainian forces struck an FSB

building and an oil refinery near the Khalino Airfield in Kursk Oblast.[8] Russian Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoyt confirmed that a Ukrainian drone struck an administrative building in the Central District of Kursk City.[9] Ukrainian news outlet *RBC-Ukraine*'s sources clarified on September 25 that Ukrainian forces struck the Khalino Airfield and killed an unspecified number of officers of the Russian 14th Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment (105th Guards Composite Aviation Division, 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army, Russia Aerospace [VSK] Forces), which is based at the airfield.[10] The Russian 14th Guards Fighting Aviation Regiment is equipped with Su-30SM aircraft.[11] Russian sources confirmed the strike on the Khalino Airfield and the death of an unspecified number of Russian servicemen.[12]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and missile strikes on the night of September 24-25 against Ukrainian port, grain, and military targets. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 12 Kalibr sea-launched cruise missiles from the Black Sea, two Onyx cruise missiles from the Sevastopol area, and 19 Shahed drones from Krasnodar Krai.[13] Ukrainian air defenses shot down 11 Kalibr missiles and all 19 drones.[14] Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces struck port and grain infrastructure in Odesa Oblast, and footage shows that Russian strikes damaged a hotel in Odesa City.[15] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian MiG-29 fighter aircraft at the Dolhintsevo airfield in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[16] Moldovan government officials stated on September 25 that fragments of an S-300 missile fell in Chitcani (5km south of Tiraspol) in Transnistria and that the missile's origin and flight path have not been confirmed.[17]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on September 25 that US-provided Abrams tanks have arrived in Ukraine.[18] The *New York Times* reported that US officials stated that the US delivered an unspecified number of Abrams tanks to Ukraine on September 23 and that the Biden administration intends to send 31 Abrams in total.[19] *Politico* previously reported on August 31 that Ukraine would receive the first 10 of 31 Abrams tanks in mid-September.[20]

Russian military officials continue efforts to build out the Russian armed forces to suit the needs of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. Russian outlet *Izvestia*, citing sources in the Russian military, claimed on September 25 that the Russian armed forces are forming reconnaissance and assault brigades in combined arms armies and newly formed army corps and that these brigades are already actively recruiting.[21] *Izvestia* reported that the new units will be comprised of assault troops intended to break through layered defenses and reconnaissance troops that will conduct reconnaissance at "tactical depth," and noted that each brigade will receive tanks, light armored vehicles, artillery, and various drones.[22] *Izvestia* emphasized that these new brigades are meant to overcome pre-prepared Ukrainian defensive positions, particularly in areas of Donbas, where Ukrainian forces have been expanding and equipping fortifications since Russia's first invasion in 2014. Colonel Valery Yuryev, chairman of the Russian Union of Paratroopers, told *Izvestia* that the war has stressed the "need to have specialized units for storming fortified areas" and that "separate assault units and formations are necessary."^[23]

The Russian military has previously attempted to adapt to lessons learned in Ukraine by forming similar assault-focused company-sized units intended to target urban and fortified areas in the form of "Storm-Z" companies, which have been primarily active and mostly unsuccessful along the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline and on the Luhansk-Kharkiv Oblast front.[24] ISW has been reporting on ongoing Russian military reforms and the creation of new combined arms army and army corps level formations, and it remains unclear how the Russian force generation apparatus will be able to recruit, train, and staff brigade, army, or army-corps level formations considering the multitude of endemic mobilization issues the Russian army faces at this time.[25]

The Kremlin and the Armenian government continue to deflect blame onto one another over the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan amidst deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivered an address on September 24 in which he criticized Russia by stating that the Russian-led security structures of which Armenia is a part are ineffective and by questioning the motives of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh.[26] Pashinyan blamed Azerbaijan and Russian peacekeepers for the recent events in Nagorno-Karabakh, which Pashinyan labeled as "a policy of ethnic cleansing." The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded to Pashinyan's statement on September 25, blamed Pashinyan for avoiding personal responsibility for "failures in [Armenian] domestic and foreign policy," and heavily criticized Pashinyan's recent turn to the West.[27] Russian milblogger have consistently focused on anti-Pashinyan protests in Yerevan since the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities accepted a Russian peacekeeper-mediated ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan on September 20.[28] ISW previously reported that the Kremlin reportedly distributed a manual on September 19 instructing Kremlin-affiliated media to blame the West and Pashinyan for recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.[29] The initial protests in Armenia following the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan appear to be skewing in the direction of the Kremlin's preferred narrative, although it is unclear if the Kremlin will retain strong Armenian support for Russia in the long-term following the inaction of Russian peacekeeping forces.

Key Takeaways:

- The tactical situation in Verbove remains unclear amid continued Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 25.
- The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported on September 25 that a precision Ukrainian strike on the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 22 killed 34 Russian officers, including BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov
- Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Khalino Airfield and a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Kursk Oblast during a series of drone strikes on September 24.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and missile strikes on the night of September 24-25 against Ukrainian port, grain, and military targets.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on September 25 that US-provided Abrams tanks have arrived in Ukraine.
- Russian military officials continue efforts to build out the Russian armed forces to suit the needs of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin and the Armenian government continue to deflect blame onto one another over the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan amidst deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed gains.
- Russian officials continue to deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

September 24, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on September 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

ISW is providing an assessment of a very dynamic situation in the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive near Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast. ISW emphasizes that the situation remains dynamic and unclear and that the tactical situation is likely changing rapidly. It is too early to forecast if Ukrainian forces will achieve an operational breakthrough in this sector of the front.

Elements of three Russian divisions are actively defending against Ukrainian assaults around the Ukrainian salient in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) are deployed and are defending at the southernmost point of the Ukrainian penetration and are engaging Ukrainian forces in Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv).^[1] Elements of the Russian 76th Air Assault Division deployed to the Ukrainian salient's western flank near Kopani (11km southwest of Orikhiv) towards Robotyne (10m south of Orikhiv) and are counterattacking there.^[2] Elements of the 7th Air Assault Division are deployed on the Ukrainian salient's eastern flank near the Verbove-Novopokrovka line and are counterattacking there.^[3] Sources affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces report that the 56th Air Assault Regiment (7th Air Assault Division) is deployed about 5km north of Verbove near Novofedorivka.^[4]

A Russian source claimed that the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions were ordered to conduct an operational encirclement of the Ukrainian salient, but that they failed to do so and that the 7th VDV Division's effectiveness significantly declined after a successful Ukrainian strike against the division headquarters on September 19.^[5] ISW offers no assessment about these reported orders to encircle Ukrainian forces beyond noting that it would be a sound practice for Russian forces to conduct counterattacks against Ukrainian forces' flanks within limits.

Ukrainian forces are attacking along three directions within the Orikhiv salient as of September 24. Ukrainian forces are conducting attacks from Robotyne against Novoprokopivka.^[6] Ukrainian forces are attacking directly into Verbove's western side.^[7] Ukrainian forces are also attacking north of Verbove.^[8]

Russian sources report that Ukrainian forces broke into Verbove on September 22 and continued attacking the settlement with armored vehicles as of September 24. Geolocated combat footage posted on September 24 shows a Ukrainian BMP operating within Verbove's westernmost village limits.^[9] A VDV-affiliated source reported that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove for the first time on September 22 and continued pushing east.^[10] The VDV source later reported that Ukrainian forces occupy half of Verbove as of September 24.^[11] The VDV source accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of trying to conceal Ukraine's tactical progress in Verbove, rhetorically stating, "For how long can Shoigu's MoD hide the breakthrough in Verbove?"^[12] Several Russian sources reported on September 24 that Ukrainian forces continue deploying vehicles against Verbove, including Bradley infantry fighting vehicles.^[13] Some Russian sources are vehemently denying any Ukrainian breakthrough in Verbove as of September 24.^[14] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces captured new unspecified locations near Verbove on September 24.^[15]

Ukrainian forces are attacking north of Verbove and could isolate the 56th VDV Regiment deployed in Novofedorivka from its sister regiments in the Verbove area according to Russian sources. A Russian VDV source warned that there is a "real threat" of Ukrainian forces reaching the 56th VDV Regiment's rear near Novofedorivka on September 21.^[16] The VDV source warned on September 22 that Ukrainian forces are within 7km of encircling the 56th VDV Regiment and that the regiment would be in a difficult position if its commander did not make a decision to withdraw from Novofedorivka to other previously prepared positions.^[17] ISW does not assess that an encirclement of the 56th VDV Regiment is likely, though Ukrainian forces may isolate it from the rest of the 7th VDV Division if Ukrainians manage to outmaneuver it from Verbove's north and the regiment inexplicably remains in its current positions.

Ukrainian military journalist Konstantyn Mashovets reported on September 22 that Ukrainian forces are attempting to bypass Verbove from the north.^[18] A prominent Kremlin-linked milblogger reported on September 24 that Ukrainian forces improved their positions near Novofedorivka's flank.^[19] Another prominent Russian milblogger reported on September 23 that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack an unspecified tactical height with an elevation of 136.7 meters near Verbove and that Ukrainian forces were deploying vehicles from the north to the south near Verbove.^[20] ISW assesses that this tactical height of 136.7 meters is likely located approximately 3.5km northwest of Verbove based on an analysis of digital elevation data around Verbove. (It is customary in militaries to identify locations based on terrain elevations as marked on commonly used military maps, but ISW does not have access to the Russian maps to check for such markings.)

NASA FIRMS/VIIRS thermal anomaly data collected between September 22-24 shows an unusually intense cluster of heat anomalies north of Verbove. These anomalies, while not dispositive, are a supporting indicator of combat north of Verbove and support the Russian and Ukrainian reports of Ukrainian activity between Novofedorivka and Verbove.

ISW cannot assess the extent of this Ukrainian attack north of Verbove and has not collected enough geospatial information to map it confidently at this time.

A Russian source affiliated with the VDV expressed panic at the prospect of significant Ukrainian advances in the Verbove area. A Russian milblogger, whose stated mission is to protect VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky from removal or arrest, warned on September 22 and 23 that the 56th VDV Regiment was under imminent threat of encirclement following the reported Ukrainian advance into Verbove.^[21] The milblogger asserted that the commander of the 56th VDV

Regiment was unable to make any decision about withdrawal and called on the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to allow Teplinsky to remedy the situation.[22] The milblogger noted high losses and poor morale among the 56th VDV Regiment and claimed that more than half of the personnel of the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions are mobilized personnel.[23] Other Russian sources, including those with close ties to the VDV, have not yet described the situation in Verbove or among VDV forces as this dire. **The Russian milblogger may be exaggerating the situation in the Verbove area to negatively portray the Russian military command and advocate for Teplinsky to have more control over tactical and operational decision-making.**

The milblogger compared the poor morale in the 56th VDV Regiment to the general morale of the Soviet military during its invasion of Afghanistan and of the Russian military during its campaign in Chechnya. This level of poor morale may have significant impacts on the Russian defense in the area as relatively elite VDV units appear responsible for conducting counterattacks, which require high morale.[24] It is less likely to affect the operations of units under direct attack, however, unless it reaches the point of causing surrenders, which is unlikely among VDV units even comprised of mobilized personnel.

Russian forces continue to expend significant combat power on counterattacking to hold their current positions and appear to be resisting the operationally sound course of action of falling back to prepared defensive positions further south. The Russian command constructed a multi-echeloned defense in southern Ukraine that would have allowed the Russian command to deploy defending Russian forces in depth throughout subsequent defensive layers. Russian forces have instead expended considerable amounts of manpower, materiel, and effort to hold the forwardmost defensive positions in southern Ukraine and have only withdrawn to subsequent defensive positions at the direct threat of Ukrainian advances.[25] Russian forces' elastic defense requires that one echelon of Russian forces slows a Ukrainian tactical advance while a second echelon of forces counterattacks to roll back that advance. Counterattacking requires significant morale and relatively high combat capabilities, and the Russian military appears to rely on relatively elite units and formations to counterattack, likely at the expense of these forces' degradation.[26]

Some Russian and Ukrainian sources have acknowledged that some Russian counterattacks in the wider Robotyne area have been senseless.[27] A defense in depth should afford these units respite from further degradation through withdrawal to a subsequent defensive layer. This withdrawal would allow the Russian command to conserve critical combat power for more operationally significant counterattacks and efforts to attrit attacking Ukrainian forces, although the task of conducting an orderly withdrawal under fire or pursuit is quite challenging and risky. American military analysts Michael Kofman and Rob Lee recently assessed that Russian forces have underutilized the depth of their defense and have yet to execute "a true defense in depth" in which Russian forces trade "space for attrition" and that the Russian command's decision to defend forward has allowed Ukrainian artillery units to attrit Russian forces.[28] ISW concurs with this assessment. ISW has observed a concerted Ukrainian effort to attrit Russian forces even as Ukrainian forces make significant tactical gains, and the Russian resistance to withdrawing to defensive positions further south is likely compounding the asymmetric attrition gradient Ukrainian forces are trying to create. Russian counterattacks aimed at holding forward positions have been tactically significant, but it remains unclear if these counterattacks will have lasting operational importance.

The Russian military command may be ordering these counterattacks to buy time, but it is unclear how the Kremlin intends to use time bought at such a price. Russian forces appear to be unwilling to surrender tactical areas and are focusing instead on fighting for every meter instead of benefiting from the depth of their prepared defenses. Ukrainian military journalist Konstantyn Mashovets observed that the Russian military command is achieving its objective of buying more time from these counterattacks but questioned what the Russian military command intends to do with this time.[29] Mashovets argued that the sacrifice of combat-ready forces and assets during defensive operations only makes sense in two situations: if it allows time to organize defensive systems at another prepared line or if it buys time for the organization of a more substantial counterattack or counteroffensive. Mashovets added that both scenarios assume that Russia has additional reserves and the ability to rapidly deploy these reserves to a new defensive line or an operational direction where it plans to carry out a new offensive.[30] Mashovets concluded that regardless of the Russian intent behind buying time, the Russian military command still needs additional reinforcements in the western Zaporizhia direction in addition to forces already concentrated on this frontline for Russian forces' current counterattacks to be operationally sound.

The Russian sacrifice of combat power to hold every meter may alternatively be intended to support the Kremlin's informational and hybrid warfare objectives. Russian President Vladimir Putin first acknowledged the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on June 9 by emphasizing two key and persistent narratives: that Ukrainian forces will not achieve significant successes due to well-prepared Russian defenses and that the Ukrainian forces are suffering heavy losses in personnel and Western military equipment.[31] Putin and the Kremlin have been framing Russian defensive operations as a major battlefield victory, and persistent Russian counterattacks allow the Kremlin to claim these operations as individual victories amidst the general lack of Russian battlefield advances elsewhere. These efforts likely intend to erode support and trust in Ukrainian forces in Ukraine and the West. Putin may have ordered the Russian military command to hold all Russia's initial defensive positions to create the illusion that Ukrainian counteroffensives have not achieved any tactical or operational effects despite substantial Western support. This informational undertaking can only succeed in the long run if Russian forces can actually prevent Ukrainian forces from breaking through and liberating large areas, however.

The Russian resistance to ceding ground may also be tied to Russian military commanders' and officials' attempts to use the counteroffensive to achieve political goals, or it could result from Putin's micromanagement. A Kremlin insider source claimed that Putin reportedly gave Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu a deadline of one month until early October 2023 to improve the situation on the frontlines, stop Ukrainian counteroffensives, and have Russian forces regain the initiative to launch an offensive operation against a larger city.[32] The insider's claim, if true, may indicate that the Russian military command may be ordering relentless counterattacks in hopes of forcing the Ukrainian counteroffensive to culminate, even at a high cost to Russian military capabilities. ISW has previously observed instances in which the Russian MoD, fearing the imminent loss of Putin's favor, intensified its efforts to purge commanders who offered honest but negative views and advice and pursued unachievable military objectives at the expense of Russian forces.[33] The Russian MoD, for example, launched an unsuccessful and costly offensive on Vuhledar in February 2023 to undermine the domestic Russian informational effects of the Wagner Group's progress in Bakhmut and maintain favor with Putin.[34] Russian insider sources and milbloggers who have advocated for Teplinsky claimed that Shoigu has been focusing on setting conditions to convince Putin to remove Teplinsky from command – which would likely be achievable if Shoigu is able to achieve Putin's objectives during the counteroffensive.[35] One pro-Teplinsky channel even claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov had already removed Teplinsky from overseeing the defensive operation in southern Ukraine, although ISW cannot confirm the validity of this claim at this time.[36]

Ukrainian forces may be able to achieve an operationally significant breakthrough in the southern frontline if several key assumptions hold. A significant Ukrainian success will be more likely if:

- 1) Russian forces do not have the necessary reserves or combat power to maintain Russian defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast;
- 2) Ukrainian forces retain enough combat power to continue pushing after exhausting Russian combat power; and
- 3) Russian defensive positions behind the current battle area are not as heavily mined or well prepared as the fortifications that Ukrainian forces have breached.

This hypothesis is invalid if any of these assumptions are invalidated. There are indicators that these assumptions remain valid as of this writing. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military does not have sufficient forces deployed to western Zaporizhia Oblast to completely man its defenses in depth and that Ukrainian forces should be able to operate through Russian field fortifications more rapidly if they are not properly manned.[37] Ukraine's operations in Bakhmut have kept Russian forces committed to eastern Ukraine and away from the southern front and helped deny the creation of a strategic reserve.[38] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 22 that the Russian military deployed its "reserve army" (the 25th Combined Arms Army [CAA]) "roughly north of Bakhmut" to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts in eastern Ukraine.[39] It remains unclear if Ukrainian forces have enough reserve forces and combat power to continue conducting offensive operations in the south until the Russian defenses break to effectively exploit an operational breakthrough. It also remains unclear how heavily mined or well prepared the Russian positions south of the current battle area are.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive is in an extremely dynamic phase and ISW is not prepared to offer any confident forecast of events despite recent positive indicators. Recent promising reports of Ukrainian tactical progress, including breaking through some Russian field fortifications, in the Orikhiv area should not be read as a guarantee that Ukraine is on the cusp of a significant operational success. Observers should be patient with Ukraine's campaign design and should expect Ukraine's counteroffensive to continue through winter 2023 and into spring 2024. Ukraine does not need to achieve a sudden and dramatic deep penetration to achieve success.

Key Takeaways:

- Elements of three Russian divisions are actively defending against Ukrainian assaults around the Ukrainian salient in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces are attacking along three directions within the Orikhiv salient as of September 24.
- Russian sources report that Ukrainian forces broke into Verbove on September 22 and continued attacking the settlement with armored vehicles as of September 24.
- Ukrainian forces are attacking north of Verbove and could isolate the 56th VDV Regiment deployed in Novofedorivka from its sister regiments in the Verbove area according to Russian sources.
- Russian forces continue to expend significant combat power on counterattacking to hold their current positions and appear to be resisting the operationally sound course of action of falling back to prepared defensive positions further south.
- The Russian military command may be ordering these counterattacks to buy time, but it is unclear how the Kremlin intends to use time bought at such a price.
- The Russian sacrifice of combat power to hold every meter may alternatively be intended to support the Kremlin's informational and hybrid warfare objectives.
- The Russian resistance to ceding ground may also be tied to Russian military commanders' and officials' attempts to use the counteroffensive to achieve political goals, or it could result from Putin's micromanagement.
- Ukrainian forces may be able to achieve an operationally significant breakthrough in the southern frontline if several key assumptions hold.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 24.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 23, 2023

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

George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 23, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on September 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

ISW is now prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken through Russian field fortifications west of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast. These fortifications are not the final defensive line in Russia's defense in depth in western Zaporizhia Oblast, but rather a specific series of the best-prepared field fortifications arrayed as part of a near-contiguous belt of an anti-vehicle ditch, dragon's teeth, and fighting positions about 1.7 - 3.5 km west of Verbove.[1]

Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated in an interview with CNN published on September 23 that Ukrainian forces achieved a "breakthrough" on the left flank near Verbove and that Ukrainian forces continue advancing.[2] Combat footage posted on September 22 shows a

destroyed Ukrainian Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) and BMP-2 operating slightly beyond Russia's fighting positions trench line near Verbove, indicating continued Ukrainian progress in deploying more heavy equipment beyond Russia's triune belt of the anti-vehicle ditch, dragon's teeth, and fighting positions.

[3] Commercially available satellite imagery indicates that Ukrainian forces have brought heavy equipment closer to Verbove over the past 96 hours in a manner consistent with Tarnavskyi's statement.[4] *The Wall Street Journal* reported on September 21 that Ukrainian forces achieved a "limited breakthrough" west of Verbove citing an unnamed Ukrainian Air Assault Forces officer.[5]

Ukrainian forces have not overcome all of the prepared Russian defensive positions near Verbove. Ukrainian forces' rate of advance near their breakthrough remains unclear. Russian forces likely still control segments of the long trench line of Russian fighting positions between Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and Verbove, especially near the tactical high ground to the south. Russian forces have reportedly established prepared fighting positions in almost every tree line that Ukrainian infantry are slowly and systematically fighting through. Russian forces have more field fortifications beyond Verbove; there are more anti-vehicle trenches and fighting positions north of Ocheretuvate (26km southeast of Orikhiv), for example. It is unclear the extent to which those positions are manned, however. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military does not have sufficient forces deployed to this sector of the front to completely man its defenses in depth and that Ukrainian forces should be able to operate through Russian field fortifications more rapidly if they are not properly manned.[6]

Ukrainian forces are deepening their penetration in Zaporizhia Oblast and are assaulting Novoprokopivka – a frontline village 1.5 km immediately south of Robotyne. Geolocated combat footage posted on September 23 shows elements of the Russian 70th Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) ambushing and killing two Ukrainian infantrymen in Novoprokopivka's northeastern outskirts, indicating that Ukrainian forces have likely cleared Russian positions between Robotyne and Novoprokopivka.[7] Multiple Russian sources reported that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian attack against northern Novoprokopivka on September 22.[8] This is the first confirmed Ukrainian ground attack in the immediate vicinity of Novoprokopivka.

Ukrainian military officials stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would continue in the winter. Tarnavskyi told CNN that he expected a major Ukrainian breakthrough after Ukrainian forces reach Tokmak (a major Russian stronghold in western Zaporizhia) and that it is important that Ukrainian forces not lose the initiative they currently hold.[9] Tarnavskyi also stated that Ukrainian operations will continue through the winter as Ukrainian forces are mostly advancing on foot without vehicles and that inclement weather will thus not have a major negative effect on the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[10] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov echoed a similar assessment about continued Ukrainian winter operations in an interview with *The War Zone* published on September 22.[11] ISW has previously assessed that, while seasonal weather can slow ground movements and challenge logistics, it will not impose a definite end to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[12] The culmination of the Ukrainian counteroffensive will likely depend rather on the Russian and Ukrainian balance of forces as well as on Western aid to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast has likely destroyed the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet). Budanov stated in his interview with *The War Zone* published on September 22 that the 810th Brigade was "completely defeated" in southern Ukraine.[13] Budanov stated that the 810th Brigade has withdrawn and that Russian airborne (VDV) units replaced them on the front. Budanov's description of the status of the 810th Brigade corresponds most closely to the US military's doctrinal definition of the tactical mission task of "destroy": "physically render[ing] an enemy force combat-ineffective until reconstituted." [14] Elements of the 810th Brigade have reportedly been operating in the Zaporizhia direction since March 2023 and in western Zaporizhia Oblast since June 2023.[15] ISW previously observed the 810th Brigade in October 2022, when it was reportedly operating in Kherson Oblast, and the unit was likely reconstituting in the rear in the interim before assuming positions in Zaporizhia Oblast.[16] The 810th Brigade has repeatedly suffered significant losses, and Ukrainian forces have destroyed the unit in the past, following which the Russian military has reconstituted it. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 19, 2022, that the 158 soldiers of the 810th Brigade had been killed and about 500 wounded.[17] GUR Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on July 31, 2022, that 200 servicemen of the 810th Brigade refused to return to the war in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 12, 2022, that the 810th Brigade lost more than 85% of its personnel in the Kherson direction and that many again refused to return to combat.[18]

A senior Ukrainian official explicitly confirmed that Ukraine's objective in Bakhmut is to fix Russian forces. Ukraine's fixing of Russian forces in Bakhmut may be alleviating pressure on the Kupyansk frontline. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces achieved their objective of pinning Russian forces in Bakhmut and preventing their transfer to other areas of the theater – such as southern Ukraine – in a September 22 interview.[19] Budanov also stated that the Russian military deployed the recently created and not fully formed 25th Combined Arms Army (CAA) of the Eastern Military District "roughly north of Bakhmut." [20] Budanov previously reported on August 31 that the Russian military deployed elements of the 25th CAA to replace elements of the 41st CAA (Central Military District) in the Kupyansk direction as elements of the 41st CAA began a "slow" redeployment to southern Ukraine.[21] The Russian deployment of elements of the 25th CAA to Bakhmut instead of Kupyansk will likely disrupt Russian efforts to fix Ukrainian forces in the Kupyansk direction, as Russian forces need these troops to continue assaults in place of the 41st CAA. Ukrainian officials and Russian sources have indicated that the tempo and the intensity of Russian offensives on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line has significantly decreased in recent weeks as Russian forces are continuing to regroup and rotate personnel in this direction, and the redirection of the deployment of 25th CAA may have alleviated some of the pressure from this frontline.[22] Budanov's statement supports ISW's recent assessment that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut's southern flank have fixed a large amount of Russian combat power in Bakhmut that would otherwise be available to reinforce Russian defenses in the south — or, in this case, to attempt to force Ukrainian forces to redeploy to defend against Russian assaults around Kupyansk.[23]

Ukraine's simultaneous counteroffensives in Bakhmut and southern Ukraine are impeding Russia's long-term force generation efforts as Russia redeloys its new reserves to defend against Ukrainian advances. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) formed a "reserve army" at the end of June, likely referencing the 25th CAA among other formations, which began recruiting personnel from the Russian Far East in mid-May.[24] The formation of the 25th CAA was likely part of Shoigu's announced intent to conduct large-scale force restructuring by 2026, and the use of these forces in combat and defensive operations will likely expend reserves intended for the long-term reconstitution and expansion of Russia's military.[25] The Russian military command has also likely been unable to fully staff or properly train the 25th CAA at this time. Budanov specified that the unfinished 25th CAA has about 15,000 troops, whereas the Russian military had reportedly hoped to recruit 30,000 contract personnel for the 25th CAA.[26] Ukrainian military officials assessed that the 25th CAA would not be combat effective until at least 2024.[27] Russia had previously attempted to form the 3rd Army Corps over the summer of 2022 as a reserve force but had deployed and expended much of this ill-prepared formation defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives in the fall of 2022.[28]

A Ukrainian intelligence chief stated that the September 22 Ukrainian strike on the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol injured senior Russian commanders. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov told *Voice of America* (VOA) in an interview published on September 23 that the Ukrainian strike on the BSF Command headquarters wounded the commander of the Russian grouping of forces in the Zaporizhia direction, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk, who is in “very serious condition” and the commander of the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet), Lieutenant General Oleg Tsekov, who is “unconscious.”[29] Budanov also reported that the strike killed at least nine and injured 16 Russian personnel.[30] VOA reported that the GUR has no information about the alleged death of BSF commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov.[31] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported that Ukrainian forces “precisely” struck the BSF Command headquarters during a meeting of senior BSF leadership.[32] Satellite imagery published on September 22 showing the BSF Command headquarters before and after the strike indicates that Ukrainian forces conducted a precision strike.[33]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 22 to 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed 14 of 15 Shahed-131/136 drones and that Russian forces launched four missiles.[34] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted a missile attack on Kremenchuk, Poltava Oblast.[35] Several Russian sources claimed that the Russian forces conducted a retaliatory strike on Kremenchuk airfield after the Ukrainian strike on the BSF Command headquarters.[36]

Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky appointed former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin as a Russian Federation Council senator representing occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[37] Rogozin is affiliated with the “Tsarskiye Volki” (Tsar’s Wolves) volunteer battalion but has not held a position in the Russian government since his dismissal as head of Roskosmos in July 2022.[38] A Russian insider source claimed that Rogozin has ties to the “Convoy” private military company (PMC) and advocated for its use in Africa and Nagorno-Karabakh to Russian Presidential Administration Head Anton Vaino.[39] ISW previously reported that Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov formed a “Convoy” with Wagner-affiliated Konstantin Pikalov.[40] The insider source claimed that unspecified Russian officials forced Rogozin to go on a “business trip (exile)” to defense industrial base enterprises in Belarus after multiple meetings with Vaino.[41] Rogozin’s appointment as occupied Zaporizhia Oblast Federation Council senator may be indicative of his ties to Russian occupation officials and his attempts to secure a new position in the Russian government.

A Russian insider source argued that the Russian military should reintroduce military officers for political affairs (zapolits) to address the Russian military’s problems with political and ideological commitment — a problem that Russian military thinkers identified in September 2018. The insider source claimed that GRU political officers are using an outdated “Soviet template” to conduct information operations against the enemy and are failing to provide political support to Russian military personnel.[42] The insider source noted that Russian political officers must resolve the contradictions between senior Russian political leaders’ slogans and reality to ensure that military personnel can distinguish between possible and impossible objectives. The insider source claimed that Russian military-political work encourages blind repetition of phrases and orders, which prevents Russian military personnel from understanding and communicating Russian political decisions to their subordinates or explaining contradictions in political leadership messaging. Chairman of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov identified similar issues in his September 2018 essay justifying the creation of the Russian Military-Political Directorate.[43] Kartapolov stated that Russian military-political leadership should adapt Soviet structures to new content. Kartapolov also argued that Russia must ensure the “information protection” of military personnel and create a stable conviction in both the military and broader society about why they must serve Russia. This insider’s argument suggests that the Russian military has not solved the problem that Kartapolov identified over the past five years.

Disjointed Wagner Group contingents reportedly returning to fight in Ukraine are likely to have a marginal impact on Russian combat capabilities without bringing the full suite of effectiveness Wagner had had as a unitary organization under financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin’s and founder Dmitry Utkin’s leadership. Former Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated on September 23 that Wagner personnel are operating in Luhansk Oblast and across different sectors of the frontline.[44] Haidai also stated that he did not know the number of Wagner personnel or the organization under which these Wagner personnel are operating in Ukraine.[45] A Wagner-affiliated source claimed that about 500 Wagner personnel including those who refused to participate in the Wagner rebellion on June 24 have joined a new unspecified organization organized by the former Wagner personnel department head and will likely return to Ukraine to fight on the southern flank of Bakhmut.[46] ISW previously observed reports that the Wagner personnel department head (previously referred to as Vadim V. “Khrustal”) is attempting to recruit Wagner fighters for a new PMC for operations in Africa.[47] These reports indicate that Wagner forces are fragmented and are unlikely to organize into a cohesive fighting force or have an impact on Russian combat capabilities if they return to fighting in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- ISW is now prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken through Russian field fortifications west of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces have not overcome all prepared Russian defensive positions near Verbove.
- Ukrainian forces are deepening their penetration in Zaporizhia Oblast and are assaulting Novoprokopivka – a frontline village 1.5 km immediately south of Robotyne.
- Ukrainian military officials stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would continue in the winter.
- The Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast has likely destroyed the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet).
- A senior Ukrainian official explicitly confirmed that Ukraine’s objective in Bakhmut is to fix Russian forces. Ukraine’s fixing of Russian forces in Bakhmut may be alleviating pressure on the Kupyansk frontline.
- Ukraine’s simultaneous counteroffensives in Bakhmut and southern Ukraine are impeding Russia’s long-term force generation efforts as Russia redeploys its new reserves to defend against Ukrainian advances.
- A Ukrainian intelligence chief stated that the September 22 Ukrainian strike on the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol injured senior Russian commanders.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 22 to 23.
- Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky appointed former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin as a Russian Federation Council senator representing occupied Zaporizhia Oblast
- A Russian insider source argued that the Russian military should reintroduce military officers for political affairs (zapolits) to address the Russian military’s problems with political and ideological commitment– a problem that Russian military thinkers identified in September 2018.
- Disjointed Wagner Group contingents reportedly returning to fight in Ukraine are likely to have a marginal impact on Russian combat capabilities without bringing the full suite of effectiveness Wagner had had as a unitary organization under financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin’s and founder Dmitry

Utkin's leadership.

- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances on September 23.
- Russian authorities are reportedly embezzling funds from military facilities near the border of Ukraine.
- Russian government programs continue to forcibly deport children in occupied Ukraine to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 22, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 22, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

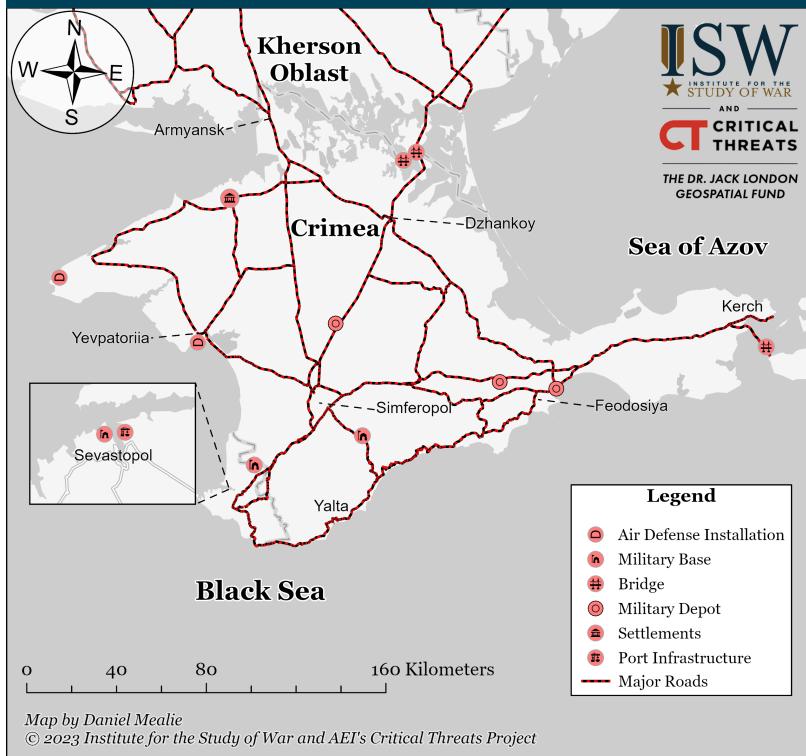
Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:45pm ET on September 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Correction: Andrzej Duda is the President of Poland. An earlier version of this assessment incorrectly identified Duda as Poland's Prime Minister.

Ukrainian forces carried out drone and cruise missile strikes on occupied Crimea and significantly damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol on September 22. The Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated that Ukrainian forces launched a successful strike on the Russian BSF Command headquarters in Sevastopol, Crimea on September 22.[1] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces used Storm Shadow cruise missiles to conduct the strike, and social media footage of the headquarters indicates significant damage to the building.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down five Ukrainian missiles and acknowledged that the Ukrainian strike damaged a building of BSF Command headquarters.[3] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces launched a drone strike preceding the missile strike, and the Russian MoD claimed that Russian air defenses shot down two Ukrainian drones on the western coast of Crimea on the morning of September 22.[4]

Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk thanked Ukrainian pilots in general when amplifying footage of the strike.[5] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Ukrainian forces will strike more Russian military targets in Crimea in the future.[6] Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that Ukrainian forces will continue to strike Sevastopol and that the Russian BSF should destroy their own ships in order to avoid further Ukrainian strikes.[7]

Ukrainian Strikes against Russian Targets in Crimea June 22, 2023 to September 22, 2023



The Russian information space heavily focused its attention on the Ukrainian strike on Sevastopol on September 22. One Russian milblogger complained about Russian authorities' inability to control the spread of Ukrainian information about the consequences of the strike, and other milbloggers criticized Russian authorities and the Russian military for not retaliating sufficiently.[8] Another Russian milblogger claimed that such Ukrainian strikes on Crimea are expected as Ukraine and its Western partners consider Crimea to be Ukrainian territory.[9] Multiple Russian milbloggers claimed that Western partners helped Ukrainian forces target the BSF Command headquarters.[10]

Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22. Geolocated footage published on September 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced southeast of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[11] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces slightly advanced north of Novoprokopivka and are currently about 800 meters away from the settlement's outskirts, a claim that generally corresponds to ISW's assessment of the closest approach of the Ukrainian counter-offensive to the settlement.[12] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction, exhausting and inflicting losses on Russian forces along the entire front.[13]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package on September 21, providing Ukraine with \$325 million worth of military equipment.[14] The DoD package includes AIM-9M missiles for air defense; additional ammunition for HIMARS systems; Avenger air defense systems; anti-drone machine guns; 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds, including dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM); Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracker, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; over three million rounds of small arms ammunition; light tactical vehicles; demolition munitions for obstacle clearing; and spare parts, maintenance equipment, and other field equipment.

The US will reportedly soon provide long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine. Four unnamed US government officials told NBC News in an article published on September 22 that US President Joe Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the US would provide Ukraine with "a small number of long-range missiles."^[15] The officials did not state when the US would announce the provision of ATACMS or when the US would deliver them to Ukraine.^[16] One US official told NBC News that US officials are still discussing the type of missile and the number of missiles the US would provide to Ukraine.^[17] Several unnamed people familiar with ongoing deliberations on ATACMS also told the Washington Post that the Biden administration plans to provide Ukraine with a version of ATACMS armed with cluster bomblets rather than a single (unitary) warhead.^[18] The Washington Post reported that cluster-armed ATACMS have a range of up to 190 miles (depending on the version) and could allow Ukraine to strike Russian military positions far into the rear.

Russian efforts to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners appear to have suffered a setback as Polish President Andrzej Duda reiterated the strength of Polish-Ukrainian relations on September 22. Duda clarified Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's September 21 statement that Poland would no longer transfer weapons to Ukraine and explained that Poland would continue to fulfill weapons supplies agreements with Ukraine but would not transfer new weapons that Poland purchases for its own military.^[19] Duda also stated that the potential conflict between the two countries regarding the export of Ukrainian grain along European land routes does not "significantly affect" the two countries' relationship.^[20] ISW has previously assessed that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure are part of a Russian campaign to damage Ukrainian relations with its Western neighbors, and Poland's swift reiteration of its commitment to Ukraine indicates that this campaign is not succeeding as much as Moscow likely intends.^[21]

A Ukrainian military official swiftly denied Russian claims that Wagner Group forces are operating in occupied Kherson Oblast. Several Russian sources claimed on September 22 that Wagner personnel arrived in combat areas in occupied Kherson Oblast and that assault troops are distributed across sectors of the Kherson Oblast frontline.[22] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk denied this claim on September 22 and stated that Russian sources likely disseminate such claims in order to improve Russian morale.[23] Humenyuk also stated that Chechen forces and Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) forces arrived in occupied Kherson "a few weeks ago" in order to prevent Russian military personnel from deserting.[24] Russian milbloggers may be claiming that Wagner forces have arrived in occupied Kherson Oblast amid rumors that Wagner forces will return to hostilities in Ukraine operating alongside Rosgvardia.[25]

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is reportedly investigating high-ranking Rosgvardia officials over their potential involvement in Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24. A Russian insider source claimed on September 22 that the FSB is investigating Rosgvardia officials after Rosgvardia reportedly allowed Wagner to "hide" shells and equipment in Rosgvardia's warehouses immediately after the Wagner rebellion and during the period of Wagner's disarmament.[26] The source claimed that an unspecified Rosgvardia general with the first name "Roman" oversaw the storage of up to four large containers of Wagner military equipment near a Rosgvardia training ground in the area of "Kazachy Stan" (likely a settlement in an unspecified region of Russia).[27] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin likely aimed to consolidate Russia's internal security apparatus around Rosgvardia following the Wagner rebellion.[28] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on June 27 that it would prepare to transfer Wagner's heavy military equipment to unspecified elements of the Russian military on the same day that Rosgvardia Head Viktor Zolotov announced that Rosgvardia would receive heavy weapons and tanks.[29] The Russian government also officially transferred the "Grom" special units of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs) to the control of Rosgvardia in July.[30]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces carried out drone and cruise missile strikes on occupied Crimea and significantly damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol on September 22.
- The Russian information space heavily focused its attention on the Ukrainian strike on Sevastopol on September 22.
- Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package on September 21, providing Ukraine with \$325 million worth of military equipment.
- The US will reportedly soon provide long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.
- Russian efforts to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners appear to have suffered a setback as Polish President Andrzej Duda reiterated the strength of Polish-Ukrainian relations on September 22.
- A Ukrainian military official swiftly denied Russian claims that Wagner Group forces are operating in occupied Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is reportedly investigating high-ranking Rosgvardia officials over their potential involvement in Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kupyansk area, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk Oblast and reportedly advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border area.
- The Russian government is reportedly planning to increase defense spending by 4.4 trillion rubles (\$46 billion) in 2024.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21, 2023

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Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 21, 2023, 8:55pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:45pm ET on September 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian armored vehicles are operating beyond the final line of the Russian defensive layer that Ukrainian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast are currently penetrating, although ISW is not yet prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken fully through this Russian defensive layer. Geolocated footage posted on September 21 indicates that Ukrainian armored vehicles advanced south of the Russian anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth obstacles that are part of a tri-layered defense and engaged in limited combat immediately west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[1] It is unclear if Ukrainian forces retain these positions, however. This is the first observed instance of Ukrainian forces operating armored vehicles beyond the Russian tri-layer defense.[2] The presence of Ukrainian armored vehicles beyond the final line of the current Russian defensive layer indicates that the Ukrainians have secured their breach of the first two lines of this layer sufficiently to operate vehicles through the breach. Ukrainian forces have likely suppressed Russian artillery and other anti-tank systems in the area enough to bring their vehicles forward.[3] The Ukrainian ability to bring armored vehicles to and through the most formidable Russian defenses intended to stop them and to operate these vehicles near prepared Russian defensive positions are important signs of progress in the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[4] Additional geolocated footage published on September 20 and 21 indicates that Ukrainian forces also advanced west and southwest of Verbove.[5]

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on September 21 that Ukrainian forces have breached the main Russian defensive line in western Zaporizhia Oblast with armored vehicles, citing an unnamed Ukrainian officer serving in the area.[6] WSJ also reported that Ukrainian forces have advanced to the edge of Novoprokopivka (16km south of Orikhiv), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this report as of this publication.[7]

Russian forces currently defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast have been unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from making gradual but steady advances since mid-August. ISW has consistently observed Ukrainian forces making slow but regular advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast despite the Russian military's lateral redeployment of elements of relatively elite units to reinforce Russian defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[8] The Russian military laterally redeployed elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division and the 76th Guards VDV Division to the Robotyne area in mid-August to repel Ukrainian attacks and possibly to relieve elements of the 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades that had been counterattacking against Ukrainian advances during the earlier phases of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[9] Geolocated footage published on September 20 and 21 shows elements of the 22nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade operating west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv), suggesting that the Russian command has tactically transferred elements of the 22nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade to support VDV elements already observed defending in the area.^[10] A Ukrainian soldier defending in southern Ukraine told the WSJ in an article published on September 21 that Russian troops defending front-line trenches are "poor-quality," but that counterattacking assault troops are "stronger."^[11] The Ukrainian soldier's statements are consistent with ISW's observations that relatively elite Russian Spetsnaz and VDV elements appear to be the primary counterattack elements in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting the Russian airfield near occupied Saky, Crimea, and may have damaged Russian aircraft. The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Ukrainian forces launched a combined attack on the Russian airfield near Saky (60km north of Sevastopol).^[12] *Suspilne Crimea* reported that sources in the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) stated that the SBU and the Ukrainian Navy launched drones to overwhelm Russian air defense systems near the airfield and then conducted strikes with Neptune missiles.^[13] Twelve Russian combat aircraft including Su-24 and Su-30 fighter-bombers, were reportedly present at the time of the strikes, and *Suspilne*'s SBU sources stated that strikes caused unspecified serious damage at the airfield.^[14] ISW has yet to observe footage detailing the consequences of the Ukrainian strike, however. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian air defenses downed up to 19 Ukrainian drones over the Black Sea and Crimea on the night of September 20 to 21 but did not acknowledge any Ukrainian missile strikes.^[15] Russia's Black Sea Fleet manages the Saky airfield, which is the latest Black Sea Fleet target that Ukrainian forces have struck.

Satellite imagery confirms that Ukrainian forces also struck the 744th Communications Center of the Command of the Black Sea Fleet in occupied Crimea on September 20 as part of an apparent Ukrainian effort to target Black Sea Fleet facilities.^[16] The imagery shows that the Ukrainian strikes destroyed a significant portion of the command post near Verkhnosadove (16km northeast of Sevastopol).^[17] Ukrainian forces have increasingly targeted Black Sea Fleet naval assets in and around Crimea in recent weeks, including a strike that destroyed a Ropucha-class landing ship and a Kilo-class submarine and damaged the Sevmorzavod naval repair facility in Sevastopol.^[18] Russia's Black Sea Fleet is an element of the Russian navy subordinate to the Southern Military District (SMD), but commands air and ground units in occupied Crimea and elsewhere along the front in Ukraine in addition to its naval vessels. Elements of the Black Sea Fleet's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade are engaged in critical defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and the Black Sea Fleet's 22nd Army Corps is defending positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.^[19] The Black Sea Fleet's control of the Saky airfield gives it charge of ground-based aircraft in addition to its naval-based assets. The Black Sea Fleet appears to be heavily responsible for maintaining Russian logistics from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea to the Russian grouping in southern Ukraine, especially since Ukrainian strikes have complicated Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) in the area.^[20] Russian forces routinely launch drone and missile strikes from Black Sea Fleet assets and within the Black Sea Fleet's area of responsibility in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai.^[21] The Black Sea Fleet is the only formal structure of the Russian military that has had a long-term presence in occupied Ukraine as it has been headquartered in Sevastopol since before Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Black Sea Fleet is more than its naval assets, and the Ukrainian attacks on the Black Sea Fleet will likely achieve effects beyond the degradation of Russian naval capabilities.

Russian forces conducted a notably large series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 20 to 21, likely to correspond with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the United States. Ukrainian sources reported on September 21 that Russian forces launched 44 Kh-101/Kh-555/Kh-55 cruise missiles targeting Ukrainian energy, industrial, and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv City, Cherkasy City, and Lviv City.^[22] Ukrainian air defenses reportedly intercepted 38 Russian cruise missiles.^[23] Ukrainian sources also reported that Russian forces launched six S-300 missiles at Kharkiv City.^[24] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated that Russian forces launched the missiles in several waves from different directions and that the missiles changed course along their routes.^[25] Russian milbloggers amplified photos and footage claiming to show the aftermath of Russian missile strikes throughout Ukraine.^[26] Russian forces have not conducted a comparably large-scale missile strike since the night of August 29 to 30, when Russian forces launched 28 cruise missiles against Ukraine.^[27]

The Kremlin continues to seek to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The export of Ukrainian grain along European land routes has emerged as an area of tension between Ukraine and its European partners since Russia's withdrawal from the initiative in July and its attacks on Ukrainian port infrastructure since then, and ISW has previously assessed that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure are part of a Russian campaign to damage Ukrainian relations with its Western neighbors.^[28] Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morwiecki announced on September 20 that Poland would focus on building up its own weapons arsenals and would no longer transfer weapons to Ukraine.^[29] The Polish and Ukrainian Ministers of Agrarian Policy agreed on September 21 to work together to find a solution regarding the export of Ukrainian agricultural products in the coming days, however.^[30]

The Russian State Duma will reportedly propose a bill allowing the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to include volunteer formations amid continued rumors about the Wagner Group operating alongside Rosgvardia. Russian Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Information Policy Alexander Khinshtein announced that members of the State Duma and Federation Council plan to introduce a bill on September 22 that would allow for the inclusion of volunteer formations within Rosgvardia.^[31] Khinshtein stated that the bill would extend all previously established powers and mechanisms of the Russian MoD to Rosgvardia as Rosgvardia performs tasks in the war in Ukraine similar to those of the Russian MoD.^[32] Khinshtein claimed that the Russian president will make decisions regarding Rosgvardia volunteer formations.^[33] ISW previously reported that Russian sources claimed that some Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia in order to rejoin the war in Ukraine.^[34] A Russian milblogger claimed on September 18 that Rosgvardia Director Viktor Zolotov met with the son of deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Pavel Prigozhin, and Wagner commander Anton Yelizarov (known under the callsign "Lotos") and discussed the "preservation" of Wagner.^[35] Russian opposition media, insider sources, and milbloggers have claimed that Yevgeny Prigozhin left his assets to Pavel Prigozhin and that Pavel Prigozhin will take over the management of Wagner.^[36]

The Kremlin is reportedly pushing propaganda narratives that highlight Russian artillery and aviation while downplaying the efforts of Russian forces conducting ground operations, likely in order to avoid discussion of Russian personnel losses and poor counterbattery capabilities. Russian opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported on September 21 that the Russian Presidential Administration distributed a manual on September 19 instructing Kremlin-affiliated media to highlight Ukrainian equipment and personnel losses and emphasize that Russian artillery fire and air strikes are effectively suppressing Ukrainian offensive actions. [37] ISW has routinely observed Russian units actively engaged in ground assaults, and the Russian information space has repeatedly complained about Russian forces' poor counterbattery capabilities.[38]

The Kremlin is likely aiming to blame Armenian leadership and the West for Azerbaijan's recent military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian Presidential Administration's manual also reportedly advised Kremlin-affiliated media to blame the West and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.[39] The manual also advised state media to emphasize Russian peacekeepers' role in "evacuating civilians." [40] The Russian government is likely attempting to portray Pashinyan's leadership poorly after a series of statements criticizing Armenia's ties to Russia.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian armored vehicles are operating beyond the final line of the Russian defensive layer that Ukrainian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast are currently penetrating, although ISW is not yet prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken fully through this Russian defensive layer.
- Russian forces currently defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast have been unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from making gradual but steady advances since mid-August.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting the Russian airfield near occupied Saky, Crimea, and may have damaged Russian aircraft.
- Satellite imagery confirms that Ukrainian forces also struck the 744th Communications Center of the Command of the Black Sea Fleet in occupied Crimea on September 20 as part of an apparent Ukrainian effort to target Black Sea Fleet facilities.
- Russian forces conducted a notably large series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 20 to 21, likely to correspond with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the United States.
- The Kremlin continues to seek to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative.
- The Russian State Duma will reportedly propose a bill allowing the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to include volunteer formations amid continued rumors about the Wagner Group operating alongside Rosgvardia.
- The Kremlin is reportedly pushing propaganda narratives that highlight Russian artillery and aviation while downplaying the efforts of Russian forces conducting ground operations, likely in order to avoid discussion of Russian personnel losses and poor counterbattery capabilities.
- The Kremlin is likely aiming to blame Armenian leadership and the West for Azerbaijan's recent military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 20, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 20, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on September 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 20. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations and inflicted significant losses on Russian manpower and equipment in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction and are consolidating in newly secured lines.[2] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that Ukrainian forces secured positions in Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian redeployments of airborne (VDV) forces from Bakhmut to the Zaporizhia direction have weakened Russian defenses around Bakhmut.[3] ISW had previously observed elements of the 83rd Separate Air Assault Brigade operating in Zaporizhia, although it is unclear how large a proportion of that unit was redeployed from Bakhmut.[4] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces are preparing defensive positions before Russian forces renew their assaults in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.[5]

Russian servicemen and milbloggers revealed that the Russian military command orders Russian troops to carry out "ill-conceived and unsupported" counterattacks on Bakhmut's southern flank to urgently regain lost ground.[6] Elements of Altai Krai's 1st Battalion of the 1442nd Regiment (a mobilized unit) published a video appeal in which the soldiers claim that they abandoned their military equipment in the Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) area after receiving an order from the Russian military command to form an assault group and attack in the Bakhmut direction.[7] The servicemen noted that the Russian military command began deploying different types of personnel to the frontlines — including soldiers who are currently resting in the rear — without providing them with enough functional artillery shells. The servicemen noted that their shells do not explode when fired, which is likely a symptom of Russia's defense industrial base's (DIB) efforts to speed up the production of shells and skipping quality assurance measures to do so.[8] The servicemen added that the unit is suffering from low morale

after hearing reports that Ukrainian forces destroyed most of an unspecified Russian regiment and almost an entire retreating assault group in the area. The servicemen also claimed that they do not have prepared defensive positions and have to rely on small arms whereas the Ukrainians have artillery. Relatives of the personnel in the 1442nd Regiment had previously appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin after the Russian military command beat the troops for refusing to carry out an assault on September 14.[9]

A Russian milblogger also accused the Russian military command of ordering Russian troops to recapture Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) and the surrounding area without setting proper conditions for such counterattacks.[10] The milblogger claimed that the Russian military command was planning “weak” counterattacks and failed to provide accurate intelligence to Russian assault units. The milblogger observed that Russian forces also lack artillery support, while “hysterical” counterattacks are depleting Russian resources and reserves. The milblogger also claimed that Russian defenses on the adjacent heights in the Andriivka area had collapsed, and it is likely that the Russian military command’s efforts to regain lost positions are preventing Russian forces from preparing new defensive positions on Bakhmut’s southern flank.

Russian forces conducted another round of Shahed drones strikes against Ukraine overnight on September 19-20. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 17 of 24 launched Iranian-made Shahed 136/131 drones in Sumy, Poltava, Kirovohrad, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts and that some of the drones struck an oil refinery in Poltava Oblast.[11] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reiterated that Russian forces have predictably increased the use of drones against Ukraine because Russia can obtain, manufacture, or assemble more drones domestically.[12] Ihnat stated that Russian forces have not changed their drone tactics and continue attempts to bypass Ukrainian air defenses.

A Russian milblogger outlined Russian reconnaissance groups’ drone operator training and operation tactics in Ukraine. The milblogger claimed that most Russian reconnaissance groups have two types of drone operators — a Mavik drone operator who carries out reconnaissance operations and a first-person viewer (FPV) drone operator who conducts attacks.[13] The milblogger noted that Mavik drone operators usually adjust fire and direct ground and drone attacks, while FPV drone operators strike targets that the Mavik drone operators identify.[14] The milblogger claimed that competent Mavik operators will train for up to six months while FPV drone operators train for three months, but noted that the battlefield effectiveness of drones is contingent upon their operators’ skill.[15] The milblogger noted that Russian reconnaissance group commanders do not need approval from senior commanders to strike targets.[16] The milblogger also claimed that the Russian military is training fewer FPV drone operators due to the time and money needed for FPV drone repair, assembly, and operator training.[17] ISW has not observed a decrease in reconnaissance and FPV drone usage, however. The milblogger may be claiming that the Russian military is decreasing drone usage due to high costs in order to generate monetary and drone donations.[18]

Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unspecified saboteurs damaged Russian strategic aircraft at Chkalovsky airfield near Moscow on September 18.[19] The GUR reported on September 20 that the saboteurs planted explosives on an An-148 and an Il-20 aircraft subordinate to the Russian 354th Special Purpose Aviation Regiment and an Mi-28N helicopter that Russian forces use to repel Ukrainian drones. The GUR stated that the explosions severely damaged the aircraft, including the Mi-28N’s tail, and inflicted minor damage on a second An-148 nearby. Russian authorities have not yet reported an attack at the Chkalovsky airfield as of September 20.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on September 20 that he is in good health amidst continued speculations about his possible illness or death. Ramzan Kadyrov directly addressed speculations about his health in a social media post on September 20 claiming that he remains alive and in good health. [20] Kadyrov claimed to not understand why speculations of his health necessitate “fuss” and stated that publications that speculate on his health are untrustworthy. Kadyrov included a video of himself visiting his uncle Magomed Kadyrov in the hospital.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Iranian Chief of the General Staff Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran to discuss Russian-Iranian military cooperation on September 19, a day after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi denied Iran’s provision of drones to Russia. Raisi denied that Iran provides drones to Russia during his speech to the United Nations on September 18.[21] Shoigu and Bagheri visited an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force facility where Shoigu saw Iranian-made drones, air defense systems, missiles; and tactical, medium, and long-range missile systems on September 20.[22] Shoigu stated that Russia and Iran plan to implement a range of unspecified activities in spite of Western sanctions, likely in order to evade the sanctions.[23]

Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized Russian peacekeepers’ humanitarian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh as the Russian information space continues to observe that Russia is losing influence in Armenia. The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities accepted a Russian peacekeeper-mediated ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan on September 20 and reported that Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijani officials will meet in Yevlakh, Azerbaijan on September 21 to discuss “reintegration” and “ensuring the rights and security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.”[24] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenian authorities were not involved in the ceasefire agreement and that Armenian forces were not present in Nagorno-Karabakh.[25] Putin emphasized on September 20 Russian peacekeepers’ roles in protecting civilians and claimed that Russia is in constant contact with Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorno-Karabakh authorities.[26]

The Russian MoD reported that Azerbaijani small arms fire killed Russian peacekeeping personnel driving in Nagorno-Karabakh and that Russian and Azerbaijani investigative authorities are working to clarify the incident.[27] Several milbloggers noted that the Russian military did not respond when Azerbaijani forces shot down a Russian Mi-24 helicopter during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and expressed irritation at the assumption that the Russian military would similarly ignore these deaths.[28] Russian milbloggers continue to lament Russia’s waning influence in Armenia.[29] Russia’s role as a security guarantor for Armenia may be declining as Russia continues to prioritize its military operations in Ukraine at the same time as the Armenian government increasingly expresses its dissatisfaction with its security ties to Russia.[30]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 20.
- Russian servicemen and milbloggers revealed that the Russian military command orders Russian troops to carry out “ill-conceived and unsupported” counterattacks on Bakhmut’s southern flank to urgently regain lost ground.
- Russian forces conducted another round of Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine overnight on September 19-20.
- A Russian milblogger outlined Russian reconnaissance groups’ drone operator training and operation tactics in Ukraine.

- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unspecified saboteurs damaged Russian strategic aircraft at Chkalovsky airfield near Moscow on September 18.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on September 20 that he is in good health amidst continued speculations about his possible illness or death.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Iranian Chief of the General Staff Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran to discuss Russian-Iranian military cooperation on September 19, a day after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi denied Iran's provision of drones to Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized Russian peacekeepers' humanitarian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh as the Russian information space continues to observe that Russia is losing influence in Armenia.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make confirmed gains.
- The Russian Red Cross (RKK) indicated that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, particularly partial mobilization efforts in autumn 2022, caused a decline in mental health among many Russians.
- Russian and occupation authorities continue efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and integrate Ukrainian children into Russian culture.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 19, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

September 19, 2023, 6:50pm 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on September 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian government quickly signaled on September 19 that Russian peacekeeping forces would not intervene in Azerbaijan's military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Russia's previous security ties to Armenia. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that Azerbaijani forces began a military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19.[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the Russian military is in contact with Armenian and Azerbaijani officials "at the highest level."^[2] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova issued a general statement calling on "all sides" to stop the bloodshed, claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh continues to fulfil its assigned tasks, and cited the trilateral Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani agreements signed in 2020 and 2022 as a path toward peace.^[3] Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov stated that the Russian peacekeeping contingent does not have the right to use weapons unless directly threatened.^[4] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent lacks any protocols on the use of force or rules of engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh, and instead operates on the basis of the November 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh peace agreement.^[5] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev and *RT* Editor-in-chief and Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan (both notably nationalistic and extreme voices in the Russian government) claimed that Armenia is experiencing the repercussions of its recent efforts to align with the West and distance itself from Russia, though mainline Russian government officials did not promote this framing and maintained equivocal language calling for an end to the fighting.^[6] Russian milbloggers expressed support for the safety of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh while lamenting Russia's waning influence with Armenia and Azerbaijan.^[7] The Russian military is unlikely to prioritize peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, and minimal Russian peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh are unlikely to affect Russian military operations in Ukraine.

Russian and Ukrainian sources credited superior Ukrainian combat coordination, more precise artillery fire, and stronger electronic warfare (EW) systems for recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut amid continued discussions of significant Russian losses in the area. Ukrainian personnel that participated in the recent liberation of Klishchiivka (7km southeast of Bakhmut) stated on September 18 that high morale, sufficient training, sufficient resources for artillery fire and drone strikes, good coherence between Ukrainian units, and detailed reconnaissance enabled Ukrainian forces to advance.^[8] One Ukrainian commander stated that elements of various Russian units defending in the area suffered from a lack of coherence.^[9] Russian Airborne (VDV), Spetsnaz, and 3rd Army Corps elements defended near Klishchiivka; and persistent issues with horizontal integration among Russian forces in Ukraine likely prevented these disparate Russian elements from sharing information and coordinating combat operations.^[10] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian artillery units south of Bakhmut are increasingly accurate and precise, enabling Ukrainian forces to safely shell Russian advances closer to Ukrainian positions.^[11] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have advantages in aerial reconnaissance as well as stronger EW systems.^[12]

A Russian milblogger with close ties to the VDV acknowledged that elements of the 83rd Guards VDV Brigade, which were defending near Klishchiivka, are now reconstituting in rear areas and that elements of the 31st Guards VDV Brigade continue to defend near the settlement.^[13] Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the Russian 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps) are still operating in the Bakhmut area, although Ukrainian forces have likely rendered these elements combat ineffective.^[14] Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces completely destroyed the combat capabilities of elements of the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 31st VDV Brigade, and the 83rd Brigade during the liberation of Andriivka and Klishchiivka.^[15] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast may correspond with the degradation of Russian forces defending in that sector of the front and that recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with a similar degradation of Russian forces.^[16]

Russian losses have reportedly significantly increased in western Zaporizhia Oblast in recent days, and the Russian military likely struggles with a lack of available combat-effective units that the Russian command is willing to laterally redeploy to this sector of the front. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces

Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces lost 313 personnel (likely a total of killed and wounded) in the Tavriisk direction on September 18, including western Zaporizhia Oblast. Shtupun stated that this is significantly higher than Russian losses during the previous two days when Russian forces lost roughly 200 personnel each day.[17] Shtupun stated that Russian Airborne (VDV) forces are conducting defensive operations in the Tavriisk direction (likely in western Zaporizhia Oblast) and that "Storm-Z" detachments with convict recruits have arrived to act as "cover" for VDV units, possibly referring to the need to cover the VDV units during a potential withdrawal.[18] ISW has previously observed elements of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division and 76th Guards VDV Division conducting counterattacks against Ukrainian forces in the Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) area, and ISW has previously assessed that these operations have likely degraded these VDV forces heavily.[19] "Storm-Z" detachments are often combat ineffective and will likely provide the Russian defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast with marginal combat power.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone and ballistic missile strikes on Ukrainian rear areas on September 19. Ukrainian military officials stated that Russian forces launched 31 drones from Krasnodar Krai and 1 Iskander-M ballistic missile from occupied Crimea and that Ukrainian forces shot down 28 drones.[20] The Ukrainian State Service for Emergency Situations reported that Russian drones hit industrial warehouses in Lviv, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian Iskander missile hit Kryyyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[21] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated on September 19 that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure have destroyed at least 280,000 tons of grain in recent months, which he stated would have been enough to feed up to 10.5 million people for a year.[22]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran on September 19. Shoigu and Bagheri discussed Russian–Iranian bilateral military cooperation and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and Afghanistan. [23] Shoigu stated that Russian–Iranian military relations are developing "dynamically and positively." [24] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) planned Shoigu's visit to Tehran in advance and that it was not coordinated with Azerbaijan's escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. [25] The milblogger also claimed that Shoigu aimed to expand military-technical cooperation with Iran and hypothesized that Russia may be interested in expanding Iranian Shahed drone production on Russian territory.[26]

The Kremlin continues efforts to strengthen its control of the Russian information space ahead of the September 2024 Russian presidential elections. The Russian government announced a ban on services that provide virtual mobile numbers, which includes temporary numbers that individuals can use to sign up for anonymous social media accounts without using their personnel credentials, starting on September 1, 2024.[27] This measure likely aims to crack down on anonymous Telegram accounts that criticize the Kremlin and allows the Kremlin to better control the Russian information space. Announcing this measure a year ahead of its implementation is likely a soft rollout designed to gauge a possible information space reaction to the announcement and allow time to soften or strengthen the measure as the implementation and presidential elections approach. The Russian government will reportedly provide a list of alternative services to allow individuals to anonymously sign up for social media accounts, but it is very unlikely that these alternatives will allow individuals to maintain a similar degree of anonymity from the Russian government as existing virtual mobile number services currently afford.[28]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky delivered a speech at the United Nations on September 19.[29] ISW will cover Zelensky's trip to the United States after his upcoming visit to Washington, D.C.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian government quickly signaled on September 19 that Russian peacekeeping forces would not intervene in Azerbaijan's military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Russia's previous security ties to Armenia.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources credited superior Ukrainian combat coordination, more precise artillery fire, and stronger electronic warfare (EW) systems for recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut amid continued discussions of significant Russian losses in the area.
- Russian losses have reportedly significantly increased in western Zaporizhia Oblast in recent days, and the Russian military likely struggles with a lack of available combat effective units that the Russian command is willing to laterally redeploy to this sector of the front.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone and ballistic missile strikes on Ukrainian rear areas on September 19.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran on September 19.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance on September 19.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on September 19 and advanced along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- A Latvian company has reportedly been exporting chips and microcircuits to Russian defense industrial base (DIB) companies despite international sanctions designed to prevent Russia from importing such components.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 18, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mapes, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 18, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on September 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine's liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka south of Bakhmut may have degraded the Russian defense in the area south of Bakhmut and could have rendered combat ineffective in as many as three Russian brigades according to Ukrainian military officials. Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on September 18 that Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) were important elements of the Russian Bakhmut-Horlivka defensive line that Ukrainian forces "breached."^[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on September 17 that Ukraine's liberation of Klishchiivka will allow Ukrainian forces to control Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) supplying the Russian force grouping in the Bakhmut area — likely referring to Ukrainian forces' ability to establish fire control over the T0513 Bakhmut-Horlivka highway.^[2] ISW is currently unable independently to evaluate the strength and extent of the Russian defensive fortifications in the Bakhmut area, although Russian forces have likely fortified their defense lines near Bakhmut less heavily than they did in southern Ukraine. Russian forces south of Bakhmut are also likely battle-weary from the recent efforts to hold Klishchiivka and Andriivka, and the Ukrainian capture of two settlements defending a key Russian GLOC supporting Bakhmut indicates that these forces will likely struggle to replenish their combat strength and defend against any further Ukrainian offensive activity south of Bakhmut. There are no immediate indications that the liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka will portend a higher rate of Ukrainian advance south of Bakhmut, however, and the Russian defense of positions west of the T0513 will likely continue to present challenges for Ukrainian forces in the area.

The Ukrainian liberation of two villages that Russian forces were fighting hard to hold could correspond with the severe degradation of the Russian units defending them, as Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast appear to correspond with the significant degradation of defending Russian units and formations in that sector of the front. Russian forces defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast since the start of the counteroffensive have done so largely without operational-level unit rotations and have likely suffered compounding losses.^[3] Elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division's 71st, 70th, and 291st Motorized Rifle Regiments (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) routinely repelled Ukrainian assaults and engaged in various "combat clashes," including limited engagements and some counterattacks, during the first phase of the counteroffensive from June to August 2023.^[4] In mid-to-late August, Ukrainian forces began breaking through the initial Russian defensive layer that these elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division had spent considerable amounts of manpower, personnel, and effort to hold.^[5] Russian reporting and footage suggest that many of these elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division have since withdrawn to positions behind a subsequent Russian defensive layer between Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv) and now mainly shell advancing Ukrainian units.^[6] The absence of recent reports and footage of these elements participating in combat engagements in western Zaporizhia Oblast suggests that casualties sustained during the first phases of the Ukrainian counteroffensive rendered them combat ineffective. Elements of the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment reportedly temporarily withdrew to a rear area during the Ukrainian breakthrough and returned to frontline positions in early September, suggesting that Ukrainian advances had degraded this unit enough to compel the Russian command to give it time to refit in the rear — which would be one of the very few unit rotations ISW has observed on this sector of the front.^[7] Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet), which also held forward positions at the initial Russian defensive layer during the earlier phases of the counteroffensive, similarly appear to be deployed further behind the Russian defensive layer ahead of the current Ukraine advance.^[8] Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade reportedly engaged in close combat during the Ukrainian push through Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), and Russian milbloggers maintain that some elements of the unit hold positions near the southern outskirts of Robotyne.^[9]

Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have resulted in the particularly severe degradation of critical elements of the Russian elastic defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Elements of the Russian 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades appeared to be responsible for counterattacking against significant Ukrainian advances in the Robotyne area during the earlier phases of the counteroffensive and likely suffered heavy losses in these operations.^[10] Russian reporting and footage of the Robotyne area in recent weeks has largely omitted mention of these Spetsnaz brigades, suggesting that this degradation may have severely impacted their ability to continue counterattacking. A prominent milblogger claimed that elements of the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade were still operating near the frontline as of September 12, however.^[11] Elements of the Russian 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division that laterally deployed to the Robotyne area in mid-August during the Ukrainian breakthrough now appear to be responsible for conducting counterattacks against the most forward advances of the Ukrainian breach.^[12] Russian sources routinely claim that VDV elements, which may include elements of the 76th Guards VDV Division that also laterally redeployed to the area, repel Ukrainian assaults and conduct counterattacks near Robotyne.^[13] The degradation of the elements of the 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades initially responsible for counterattacking in the Robotyne area likely prompted the Russian command to laterally redeploy these elements of the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions to assume responsibility for counterattacking. The Russian elastic defense requires one echelon of Russian forces to slow a Ukrainian tactical advance while a second echelon of forces rolls back that advance through counterattacking. Counterattacking requires significant morale and relatively high combat capabilities, and the Russian military appears to rely on relatively elite VDV units and formations for this undertaking, possibly at the expense of heavily degrading these forces.^[14]

ISW has not directly observed the level of degradation among the Russian units referenced above and it is possible that some have suffered heavier losses than others. It is also possible that the Russians have used the arrival of elements of the 76th and 7th VDV Divisions to conduct belated unit rotations of their tired frontline units. The current battlefield geometry between the Ukrainian advance and current Russian defensive positions may also be contributing to the apparent absence of these likely degraded units from combat engagements, as the gap between Ukrainian advances and Russian defensive positions may result in less direct combat engagements. Ukrainian forces may engage these units in more direct combat as they further advance into and past the current Russian defensive layer. It is thus too soon to assess with high confidence that the initial defenders in this sector have been rendered combat ineffective, but the evidence currently available points in that direction.

Recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with the similar degradation of defending Russian units in the area. Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces completely destroyed the combat capabilities of elements of the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps), the 31st Guards VDV Brigade, and the 83rd Guards VDV Brigade during the liberation of Andriivka and Klishchiivka.^[15] Russian "Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky's claim that the 31st VDV Brigade commander has been killed supports this statement.^[16] The 72nd Motorized Brigade has likely been rendered combat ineffective, although the exact level of losses among the two VDV brigades remains unclear.^[17] These VDV elements were involved in counterattacking and attempting to roll back Ukrainian advances around Bakhmut — similar to the way that VDV elements operate in western Zaporizhia Oblast — and likely suffered heavy losses.^[18] If recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut resulted in the destruction of the 31st and 83rd VDV brigades' combat capabilities, then the Russian command will likely laterally redeploy

elements of another relatively elite formation to maintain critical elements of the Russian defense south of Bakhmut. Ukrainian counteroffensive operations have pinned elements of two VDV divisions and another VDV brigade in addition to the 83rd and 31st in the Bakhmut direction, and the Russian command may decide to conduct tactical redeployments to make up for the reported losses among the 83rd and 31st VDV brigades.[19] Lateral redeployments from elsewhere in Ukraine or substantial tactical redeployments of other VDV elements in the Bakhmut area would therefore indicate that recent Ukrainian advances have resulted in significant Russian losses.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes on coastal and rear areas of Ukraine on the night of September 17-18. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 24 Shahed drones from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea and 17 Kh-101/555/55 air-launched cruise missiles from Tu-95MS strategic bombers that took off from Volgograd Oblast.[20] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 drones and all 17 missiles.[21] The Ukrainian Air Force noted that the Russian drone strike targeted Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.[22] Russian sources claimed that Russian drones hit ports in Odesa Oblast and that the Russian missiles targeted the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast.[23]

An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko is reportedly responsible for disseminating pro-war propaganda and false information about Ukraine to prominent figures in the Russian information space. Russian opposition news outlets *Meduza*, *Vazhnye Istoryi*, and the *Bell* reported on September 13 that the non-profit organization “Dialog” created multiple popular Telegram channels to increase pro-Russian reporting on the war in Ukraine at the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion and has subsequently been distributing false information about the war in Ukraine to prominent figures in the Russian information space, including Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, prominent milbloggers, and popular news aggregators.[24] Dialog is also reportedly affiliated with pro-Russian Telegram channels that mimic Ukrainian channels.[25] Dialog reportedly advised unspecified individuals in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to issue a “tough” and “prompt” response following increasing reports of a lack of ammunition and provisions among Russian mobilized personnel in Ukraine.[26] Dialog-affiliated sources also reportedly disseminated negative reports about deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin while Wagner forces were fighting in Ukraine.[27] The Russian Ministry of Digital Development reportedly transferred 6.5 billion rubles (about \$67.7 million) to Dialog in 2022, and its deputy general director, Vladimir Tabak, reportedly has ties to Kiriyenko.[28] ISW has consistently observed some Russian sources making similar claims with similar language on the same days, which may suggest that some Russian sources receive information from the same source. Kiriyenko’s reported affiliation with Dialog is consistent with ISW’s assessment that some Russian *siloviki* and senior military commanders control various Telegram channels intended to further their individual objectives in the Russian information space.[29]

Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Moscow on September 18. Lavrov stated in his opening remarks that the world is undergoing “tectonic shifts” and reiterated boilerplate rhetoric on the importance and previous successes of Russian-Chinese cooperation.[30]

Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin issued a direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin to rally supporters to his cause. Girkin, via his lawyer Alexander Molokhov, posted a statement on September 18 dated September 15 that justifies Girkin’s opposition to Putin.[31] Girkin humorously answered the question “why Strelkov [Girkin] has gone crazy” for asserting that he is “better than Putin.” Girkin claimed that the “Troubles” (likely referencing the Time of Troubles in 17th century Russia that preceded the rise of the Romanov dynasty) have begun in Russia and that the Kremlin’s attempts to address the direst issues have failed, so the current “bureaucratic-oligarchic system” will eventually “collapse.” Girkin claimed that it is his “duty” to try to unite other patriots to be a suitable alternative but acknowledged that he may lack the resources to succeed or may have begun his initiative too early. Girkin expressed hope that his efforts will inspire others to “act as leaders of the national-patriotic movement” because “it is too late to be afraid and wait” as it is the “eve of the collapse of Russian statehood.”

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine’s liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka south of Bakhmut may have degraded the Russian defense in the area south of Bakhmut and could have rendered combat ineffective as many as three Russian brigades according to Ukrainian military officials.
- Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have resulted in the particularly severe degradation of critical elements of the Russian elastic defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with the similar degradation of defending Russian units in the area.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes on coastal and rear areas of Ukraine on the night of September 17-18.
- An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko is reportedly responsible for disseminating pro-war propaganda and false information about Ukraine to prominent figures in the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia and advanced in some areas on September 18.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front and advanced in western Zaporizhia on September 18.
- Some Russian sources claimed that former Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) in order to return fighting in Ukraine.

Ukraine’s Operations in Bakhmut Have Kept Russian Reserves Away from the South

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, Special Edition

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

By Daniel Mealie, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

Key Takeaway: Ukrainian forces are celebrating the liberation of two small towns south of Bakhmut, but Ukraine’s entire effort first to defend and now to conduct counter-offensive operations around Bakhmut has been the subject of much unwarranted criticism. Ukraine’s defensive and counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area since summer 2022 are an operationally sound undertaking that has fixed a large amount of Russian combat power that would otherwise have been

available to reinforce Russian defenses in southern Ukraine. Elements of two of Russia's four Airborne (VDV) divisions and three of Russia's four VDV separate brigades are currently defending the Bakhmut area. This significant Ukrainian achievement has helped prevent Russia from creating a large mobile VDV operational reserve that could have been used to stop the main Ukrainian counteroffensive effort in Zaporizhia Oblast. Continued large-scale Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts around Bakhmut are necessary to keep Russian forces fixed in that area, as the likely recent redeployment of a detachment of one VDV separate brigade from near Bakhmut to southern Ukraine shows how eager the Russians are to recoup the combat power that the Ukrainian counteroffensive around Bakhmut is fixing there.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 17, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 17, 2023, 5:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces liberated Klishchiivka, south of Bakhmut, on September 17 and continued successful offensive operations elsewhere in the Bakhmut direction. Geolocated footage posted on September 17 shows Ukrainian forces holding up flags in Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash later confirmed that Ukraine has liberated Klishchiivka, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky congratulated the Ukrainian 80th Air Assault Brigade, 5th Assault Brigade, 95th Air Assault Brigade, and National Police "Lyut" Assault Brigade for their role in liberating the settlement.[2] Further geolocated footage posted on September 16 shows that Ukrainian forces have captured positions east of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut).[3] The liberation of Klishchiivka, as well as continued Ukrainian tactical gains northwest of Bakhmut, are tactical gains of strategic significance because they are allowing Ukrainian forces to fix a considerable portion of Russian airborne (VDV) elements in the Bakhmut area, as ISW's Daniel Mealie discusses in the September 17, 2023 [special edition](#).

Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes at southern Ukraine on the night of September 16-17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched six Shahed drones from the southeastern and southern directions and 10 Kh-101/555/55 air-launched cruise missiles from nine Tu-95MS strategic bombers that took off from Engels Airbase, Saratov Oblast.[4] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces mainly targeted grain infrastructure in southern Odesa Oblast, and Ukrainian military sources stated that Ukrainian forces shot down six Shaheds and six cruise missiles.[5] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command posted images of the aftermath of one Russian strike in an unspecified part of Odesa Oblast.[6] Russian forces additionally struck civilian enterprises in Kharkiv City with four S-300 missiles.[7]

North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un concluded his trip to Russia on September 17 and received several pieces of military technical equipment from the governor of Primorsky Krai. Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Kim visited the Far Eastern Federal University on September 17, where he met with Russian military engineers.[8] TASS and other Russian sources additionally noted that Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako gifted Kim a military vest, an unspecified loitering munition, and an unspecified long-range reconnaissance drone.[9] ISW previously reported that Russia may be open to forms of technological and defensive cooperation with North Korea but is unlikely to provide physical systems due to Russian fears that providing the North Korean regime with such systems may trigger further sanctions against Russia.[10] It is therefore notable that a Russian official gifted Kim with pieces of military technology that will presumably return to North Korea with Kim. United Nations sanctions specify that "All Member States are required to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale, or transfer to the DPRK, through their territories or by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, and whether or not originating in their territories, of all arms and related materiel, including small arms and light weapons..."[11]

South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol stated that Russian and North Korean military technical agreements may violate sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council.[12] Yoon stated that if information about these agreements is confirmed then this will be a violation of the sanctions and illegal.[13] The war in Ukraine has reportedly generated a rapid growth in South Korean arms exports as South Korea replenishes Western stocks of ammunition and systems that the West has sent to Ukraine.[14] South Korea has not yet directly supplied lethal security assistance to Ukraine.[15]

The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to subsume the Wagner Group is prompting Russian officials to more openly back military juntas in West Africa. A Russian military delegation, including Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) General Andrei Averyanov, arrived in Bamako, Mali on September 16.[16] Yevkurov reportedly met with the Burkinabe, Nigerien, and Malian defense ministers; Malian junta head Assimi Goita; and Burkinabe junta head Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba.[17] Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed a security pact on September 16 promising to come to each other's aid in the case of any rebellion or external aggression.[18] The Russian military delegation's meeting with the political and military leadership of the three junta governments before the signing of the agreement likely indicates that Russian officials are prepared to more explicitly support these juntas. Russia has previously used the Wagner Group to forge relationships with the junta governments, but the Russian MoD's efforts to subsume Wagner's assets and operations in West Africa have eliminated the implausible deniability that Wagner previously afforded the Russia government. Yevkurov and Averyanov appear to be heavily involved in the efforts to subsume Wagner, and their participation in the delegation suggests that they are likely using to the seizure of Wagner assets and operations to forge new agreements and partnerships with the junta governments.[19]

Prolonged concern about Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's health in the Russian information space highlights Russian President Vladimir Putin's dependence on Kadyrov for continued stability in Chechnya. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly confirmed that Kadyrov was in

a coma on September 15, prompting rumors about Kadyrov's poor health among Russian milbloggers and insider sources.[20] Kadyrov denied the rumors about his health in a video posted on September 17.[21] The destabilization of Kadyrov's rule in Chechnya would be a major blow to Putin's regime, in part because of how central the establishment of stability in Chechnya through a brutal and bloody war was to Putin's early popularity in Russia. Kadyrov and other Russian officials may be concerned that continued rumors about his health will affect the long-term stability of his, and by extension Putin's, control of Chechnya.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces liberated Klishchiivka, south of Bakhmut, on September 17 and continued successful offensive operations elsewhere in the Bakhmut direction.
- Russian forces launched another series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes at southern Ukraine on the night of September 16-17.
- North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un concluded his trip to Russia on September 17 and received several pieces of military technical equipment from the governor of Primorsky Krai.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to subsume the Wagner Group is prompting Russian officials to more openly back military juntas in West Africa.
- Prolonged concern about Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's health in the Russian information space highlights Russian President Vladimir Putin's dependence on Kadyrov for continued stability in Chechnya.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast area on September 17 and advanced in some areas.
- Ukrainian forces also continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Recent Russian claims that small contingents of former Wagner Group personnel are returning to fight in Ukraine do not indicate that a fully reconstituted Wagner fighting force will return to Ukraine anytime soon if ever.
- Russian occupation administrations continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia and erase Ukrainian cultural identity.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 16, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 16, 2023, 6:25pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on September 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction on September 16 and continued to make gains in the area. Geolocated footage posted on September 15 confirms that Ukrainian forces have advanced south of Rozdolivka (about 13km northeast of Bakhmut) and in northern Klishchiivka (about 6km southwest of Bakhmut).[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar noted that fighting is ongoing near Klishchiivka and Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut) and stated that Ukrainian forces continue to be successful in the Klishchiivka area.[2] Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrsky posted footage of Ukrainian personnel in Andriivka (8km southwest of Bakhmut) following the Ukrainian liberation of the settlement on September 14.[3]

Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast have likely forced the Russian command to prioritize the Russian defense there and laterally redeploy elements of a relatively elite formation away from the Russian defense south of Bakhmut. North Ossetian volunteer battalions "Storm Ossetia" and "Alania," which are operating in western Zaporizhia Oblast, posted an image on September 16 purporting to show a small detachment of the Russian 83rd Separate Guards Air Assault (VDV) Brigade in Nesteryanka (on the western shoulder of the current Ukrainian breach in western Zaporizhia Oblast).[4] Elements of the 83rd Brigade deployed to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations around Klishchiivka in late June and were observed in combat in the area in late August.[5] Elements of the 83rd Brigade were reportedly still operating in the Bakhmut area as of September 11, although elements of the brigade may have been split across two different sectors of the front.[6] Klishchiivka has been a focal point of fighting in the Bakhmut area in recent weeks, and the redeployment of any elements of the 83rd VDV Brigade amid Ukrainian advances near Klishchiivka suggests a deep concern about Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and the Russian prioritization of the defense there.

ISW has previously assessed that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along several lines of effort would force the Russian command to prioritize certain sectors of the front and conduct lateral redeployments that offer Ukraine opportunities for exploitation.[7] Ukrainian counteroffensive operations have fixed relatively elite units and formations to the area, including elements of the 98th VDV Division, the 83rd VDV Brigade, the 11th VDV Brigade, the 31st VDV Brigade, the 106th VDV Division, and the 364th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff Main Directorate).[8] Russian forces have thus far been unwilling to send these relatively elite formations to aid in the critical defensive effort in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Ukrainian operations around Bakhmut appear to continue preventing the Russian command from doing so at scale. ISW will publish a review of the strategic significance of how Ukrainian operations have fixed Russian forces to the Bakhmut area in an upcoming special edition.

Ukrainian forces also advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 16 and continued to penetrate the Russian defensive layer that lies ahead of the current extent of Ukrainian advances. Geolocated footage published on September 16 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced along Russian defensive positions to the west of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).[9] Additional geolocated footage published on September 15 indicates that Ukrainian infantry advanced further along a series of Russian defensive positions immediately west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) but likely did not maintain control of these positions.[10] The Ukrainian presence at these Russian defensive positions indicates that Russian forces do not control these positions either and that Ukrainian forces are continuing to operate past the Russian defensive layer that runs northwest of Verbove to north of Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv).

Ukrainian forces have likely made a significant tactical breach along a section of the current Russian defense layer in the Robotyne area over the past several weeks that they continue to widen. Ukrainian forces have continued offensive operations past a section of the Russian defensive layer west of Verbove since penetrating it on September 4 and have widened their breach along a 2.6km section of those Russian defensive positions.[11] The continued absence of observed Ukrainian heavy equipment and vehicles past this defensive layer continues to indicate that Ukrainian forces have yet to complete a breakthrough of this defensive layer, however.[12] Ukrainian officials have indicated that the series of Russian defensive positions currently ahead of the Ukrainian advance may be less challenging than the initial Russian defensive layer that Ukrainian forces broke through to the north.[13] Russian forces had concentrated the majority of their combat power at those forward-most Russian defensive positions to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, and these Russian forces have likely suffered heavy losses and conducted fighting withdrawals to prepared positions behind the current defensive layer.[14] ISW has long assessed that Russian forces lack the manpower to man the entire multi-echeloned Russian defensive fortification systems in southern Ukraine, and the Russian forces defending the current layer of defense are likely elements of formations that have been fighting in the area without operational-level unit rotation since the start of the counteroffensive or elements of formations that laterally transferred from elsewhere along the front.[15]

Russian ultranationalists continued to complain about endemic lying within the Russian military after Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev voiced similar complaints on September 15. A Russian milblogger posted a statement reportedly from a subscriber on September 16 that concurred with Gurulev's assertion that the culture of lying in the Russian military is the main issue preventing a Russian victory in Ukraine.[16] Another Russian milblogger stated that the issue is a "disaster" and that lies occur at all levels of the Russian military as subordinate commanders are afraid to report the truth about the condition and needs of units and formations.[17] The milblogger stated the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Russian President Vladimir Putin are likely receiving false reports. The milblogger added that tyranny (bad command culture), fraud, and a lack of military resourcefulness are some of the issues affecting the Russian military in Ukraine and that the main goal of the Russian military should be to minimize personnel losses. A Russian insider source compared Gurulev to deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in his role as the "front line truth teller."[18]

A Ukrainian naval drone strike likely damaged a Russian ship in the Black Sea on September 14. Ukrainian newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda* published a photo reportedly from a source within the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) that indicates that Ukrainian naval drones struck and damaged a Russian Bora-class corvette near the entrance to Sevastopol Bay in occupied Crimea on September 14.[19] Ukrainian Digital Transformation Minister Mykhailo Fedorov stated on September 16 that Ukraine will conduct more drone attacks on Russian ships in the future.[20] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian ships do not stay at their bases but are constantly moving between naval bases in Russia and occupied Crimea to avoid strikes against them.[21] Russian forces have previously used large ships in the Black Sea to mitigate the damage that Ukrainian strikes have inflicted on other Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in southern Ukraine, and Ukrainian forces are likely targeting Russian ships in the Black Sea to further damage Russia's ability to mitigate ongoing logistics complications among other things.[22]

A Ukrainian official confirmed on September 16 that a civilian vessel used the Ukrainian corridor in the Black Sea to reach a Ukrainian port for the first time. Ukrainian Minister for Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Oleksandr Kubrakov announced that civilian bulk carriers flying the Palau flag used the existing Ukrainian corridor to sail towards Chornomorsk, where the vessels will load over 20,000 tons of grain for export to countries in Africa and Asia.[23] The Kremlin previously escalated its posturing in the Black Sea to curtail maritime traffic to Ukraine and increase its leverage to extract maximalist concessions to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative.[24] United Kingdom military aircraft are reportedly conducting patrols over the Black Sea to deter Russian forces from acting aggressively towards civilian vessels.[25] Kubrakov stated that five civilian vessels have traveled from Ukraine along the Ukrainian Black Sea corridor since August 15: *Joseph Schulte, Primus, Anna-Theresa, Ocean Courtesy, and Puma*.[26]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met in Vladivostok, where Kim viewed pieces of Russian weapons technology on September 16. Kim viewed Tu-22MS, Tu-95MS, and Tu-160 strategic bombers; Su25SM3, Su-30SM, and Su-34 fighter-bombers; a MiG-31I missile carrier with Kinzhal missiles; the frigate *Marshal Shaposhnikov*; a Uranus anti-ship missile system; and Kalibr cruise missiles.[27] Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) Commander Lieutenant General Sergey Kobylash told Kim that the Tu-160 strategic bombers received new Kh-BD cruise missiles with a claimed range of over 6,500 kilometers and can carry 12 such missiles.[28] Russia is highly unlikely to provide physical systems or weapons to North Korea due to Russian President Vladimir Putin's likely concern that this provision may trigger secondary sanctions against Russia, but Putin may be open to other forms of technological and defensive cooperation with North Korea in return for North Korean artillery ammunition.[29]

The Russian military leadership may be removing ineffective air defense officials on the pretext of corruption charges to avoid admitting the failures of Russian air defenses against increasing drone strikes on Russian cities including Moscow. Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on September 16 that the Tula Oblast Venesky District Court sentenced Vladislav Gukov, former head of the MoD Department of State Defense Procurement, to a nine-year prison term for corruption.[30] *Kommersant* noted that the investigation found that Gukov accepted over 15 million rubles (\$154,950) in bribes from various enterprises that were meant to supply the MoD with "urgently needed" X-ray diagnostic systems for KamAZ vehicles.[31] A Russian insider source alleged that Gukov was a close personal friend of Major General Vyacheslav Lobuzko, former commander of a division of the 3rd Separate Air Defense Army and one of the designers of the "Voronezh" cruise and ballistic missile detection system, whom Russian authorities also imprisoned for corruption in May.[32] The insider source additionally claimed that Gukov was personally responsible for signing off on the procurement of air defense systems and complexes.[33]

Gukov's corruption charge and his role as a prominent Russian air defense official closely mirror the case of the commander of the Moscow-based 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense, Army Major General Konstantin Ogienko, whom Moscow Oblast authorities arrested on similar corruption and bribery charges relating to giving state defense property to an unnamed civilian organization.[34] ISW has no reason to doubt that these air defense officials are complicit in corruption and

bribery schemes, but the recent trend of arrests of prominent air defense officials on corruption charges may suggest that higher echelons of the Russian military wish to remove these air defense officials from their positions without having to admit that the Russian domestic air defense system is failing.[35]

Russian military officials continue efforts to solidify Russia's relationship with African states amidst changing dynamics on the continent resulting from the Russian MoD's efforts to subsume the Wagner Group. Russian milbloggers and Malian national broadcaster ORTM reported that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov arrived in Bamako, Mali on September 16 and met with the Malian and Nigerien defense ministers and Malian junta head Assimi Goita. [36] Russian milbloggers speculated that Yevkurov and the Malian and Nigerien ministers discussed military-technical cooperation, the implications of the coup in Niger, and increased the Russian MoD's support for the Malian junta against Tuareg rebels in northern Mali.[37] One Russian source suggested that the MoD seeks to take over Wagner Group remnants in northern Mali, which is consistent with ISW's previous observation that the Russian MoD has recently made efforts to assume control of Wagner's operations on the African continent.[38] Yevkurov notably visited multiple African countries including Burkina Faso, Libya, and Syria in early September to replace "private military companies" with MoD elements.[39] The Ukrainian Resistance Center relatedly reported on September 16 that the Russian MoD is increasingly sending representatives to Algeria, Mali, and Sudan to convince remaining Wagner fighters to sign contracts with a structure affiliated with and supervised by the MoD.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction on September 16 and continued to make gains in the area.
- Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast have likely forced the Russian command to prioritize the Russian defense there and laterally redeploy elements of a relatively elite formation away from the Russian defense south of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces also advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 16 and continued to penetrate the Russian defensive layer that lies ahead of the current extent of Ukrainian advances.
- Ukrainian forces have likely made a significant tactical breach along a section of the current Russian defense layer in the Robotyne area over the past several weeks that they continue to widen.
- Russian ultranationalists continued to complain about endemic lying within the Russian military after Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev voiced similar complaints on September 15.
- A Ukrainian naval drone strike likely damaged a Russian ship in the Black Sea on September 14.
- A Ukrainian official confirmed on September 16 that a civilian vessel used the Ukrainian corridor in the Black Sea to reach a Ukrainian port for the first time.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met in Vladivostok, where Kim viewed pieces of Russian weapons technology on September 16.
- The Russian military leadership may be removing ineffective air defense officials on the pretext of corruption charges to avoid admitting the failures of Russian air defenses against increasing drone strikes on Russian cities including Moscow.
- Russian military officials continue efforts to solidify Russia's relationship with African states amidst changing dynamics on the continent resulting from the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) efforts to subsume the Wagner Group.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatov-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia on September 16 and advanced in some areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on September 16 and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers continue complaining about the role of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) in perpetuating issues affecting Russian military personnel.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to resettle residential areas of occupied Ukraine with Russians.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 15, 2023

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, and Mason Clark

September 15, 2023, 6:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on September 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces liberated Andriivka in the Bakhmut area on September 14 and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 15. The Ukrainian General Staff and other Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces liberated Andriivka on September 14 and achieved unspecified partial success near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) on September 15.[1] The Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade reported that its personnel liberated Andriivka and "completely destroyed" the Russian 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps) after encircling the settlement.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and are inflicting significant losses on Russian manpower and equipment near Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[3]

Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev complained about lying within the Russian military and highlighted the effectiveness of Ukrainian air defenses against Russian helicopters. Gurulev published a Telegram message on September 15 largely reiterating known Russian challenges, though with several notable points. Gurulev complained that the culture of lying in the Russian military is the main issue preventing a Russian victory in Ukraine and claimed that false reports are leading to poor decision-making at many levels within the Russian military.[4] Gurulev also stated that Ukrainian air defenses at the front are effective against Russian helicopters and are preventing Russian helicopters from using previously highly effective anti-tank missiles, and he reiterated common complaints about Ukraine's ability to conduct drone strikes on Russian rear areas and insufficient Russian counterbattery capabilities.[5] Gurulev is notable for having previously leaked the audio message of former Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (SMD) Major General Ivan Popov's grievances over the lack of support for Russian forces on July 12, and Gurulev's likely senior ties with the SMD lend weight to his complaints.[6]

Ukrainian forces conducted naval drone strikes on Russian ships in the Black Sea on September 14.[7] Ukrainian Strategic Command reported that Ukrainian forces caused unspecified damage to two Russian "Vasily Bykov" Project 22160-class patrol ships in the southwestern Black Sea on September 14.[8] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian Black Sea Fleet forces destroyed two Ukrainian naval drones in this area.[9] Ukrainian newspaper *Ukrainskaya Pravda* reported that sources in the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) stated that a Ukrainian naval drone significantly damaged a Russian Bora-class corvette near the entrance to Sevastopol Bay on September 14 but the Russian MoD claimed that Russian Black Sea Fleet forces destroyed a Ukrainian naval drone and repelled the attack.[10] A Russian source claimed that the corvette was not visibly damaged.[11]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/-136 drone strikes targeting Ukrainian rear areas on September 15. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 17 drones from Krasnodar Krai in the direction of Khmelnytskyi Oblast and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 17 drones.[12] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated that the Russian strike targeted Ukrainian aircraft.[13]

Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov explicitly stated that mobilized personnel will only demobilize at the end of Russia's "special military operation."[14] Kartapolov added that Russian mobilized personnel will not receive rotations, but that they are entitled to leave every six months. [15] Kartapolov's explicit commentary is likely meant to dissuade Russian legislators from considering a proposed amendment that would establish terms for demobilizing personnel mobilized in autumn 2022.[16] The Kremlin continues to resist formally rescinding the partial mobilization decree in order to legally justify the continued service of mobilized personnel for an indefinite period of time.[17]

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko reiterated standing claims about negotiations and perceived grievances against the West during a meeting in Sochi on September 15. Putin and Lukashenko reportedly also discussed economic issues, Kim Jong Un's visit to Russia, and Russian force generation efforts.[18] Putin and Lukashenko reiterated boilerplate rhetoric accusing the West of manipulating Ukraine. Putin claimed that 300,000 people have signed military service contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) - presumably within the past six to seven months, updating a figure given by Putin on September 12.[19]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues efforts to assume control over the Wagner Group's operations in North Africa and may have assigned former commander of the Aerospace Forces (VKS) Sergei Surovikin to this task. Russian sources posted pictures of Army General Sergei Surovikin, the previously dismissed Wagner-affiliated former VKS commander, in Algeria on September 15.[20] Russian state news outlet *Kommersant* reported that a source close to Surovikin stated that the trip may be connected to Surovikin's possible appointment to oversee unspecified operations in Africa.[21] Russian milbloggers claimed that Surovikin's new formal position as Head of the Coordination Committee on Air Defense Issues under the Council of Defense Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is purely nominal and speculated that Surovikin may take over Wagner assets and operations in the region.[22] Surovikin may be involved in Russian efforts to subsume Wagner operations due to his affiliation with Wagner and his command experience, although it is unclear if the Russian MoD intends for Surovikin to assume direct command of these efforts. Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel-General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and elements of the Main Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff have also been reportedly heavily involved in efforts to subsume Wagner's operations in the Middle East and Africa.[23] *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Russian officials, including Yevkurov, met with Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, in recent weeks to request access to ports in Benghazi or Tobruk for Russian warships.[24] Yevkurov reportedly visited Libya several times in the past months to replace "private military companies" (PMCs) with Russian MoD-controlled formations.[25] The Kremlin may be attempting to revive a longstanding campaign to secure access to a Mediterranean port in Libya in parallel with the effort to subsume Wagner's operations in Libya.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces liberated Andriivka in the Bakhmut area on September 14 and continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 15.
- Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev complained about lying within the Russian military and highlighted the effectiveness of Ukrainian air defenses against Russian helicopters.
- Ukrainian forces conducted naval drone strikes on Russian ships in the Black Sea on September 14.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/-136 drone strikes targeting Ukrainian rear areas on September 15.
- Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov explicitly stated that mobilized personnel will only demobilize at the end of Russia's "special military operation."
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues efforts to assume control over the Wagner Group's operations in North Africa and may have assigned former commander of the Aerospace Forces (VKS) Sergei Surovikin to this task.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 15.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to strengthen ground lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting occupied southern Ukraine to Russia and occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 14, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mapes, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 14, 2023, 7:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on September 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and around Bakhmut and reportedly advanced south of Bakhmut on September 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified partial successes near Bakhmut, Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut).[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar prematurely announced the Ukrainian liberation of Andriivka but later clarified that heavy fighting for the settlement is still ongoing.[2] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Ilya Yevlash stated on September 13 that Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces out of positions near Minkivka (15km northwest of Bakhmut) and Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut).[3] The Ukrainian General Staff and Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces continue to gradually advance in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast).[4]

Ukrainian forces struck a Russian air defense system near occupied Yevpatoria, Crimea, on September 14, suggesting that there may be systemic tactical failures with Russian air defense systems in occupied Crimea. The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Ukrainian forces struck the location of a Russian surface-to-air missile system near Yevpatoria (68km northwest of Sevastopol).[5] Ukrainian news outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that a source affiliated with the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) stated that the SBU and the Ukrainian Navy conducted a "unique special operation" that destroyed a Russian S-400 "Triumf" system near Yevpatoria.[6] Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the S-400 system's radar and antennas with drones and struck the launch complexes with two Neptune cruise missiles.[7] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian air defenses intercepted 11 Ukrainian drones over Crimea but did not mention any Ukrainian missile strikes.[8] Geolocated footage published on September 14 shows an explosion near Yevpatoria and subsequent smoke plumes in the area.[9] Additional geolocated footage shows that Russian forces had recently deployed an S-400 battery outside of Yevpatoria and that the explosion occurred in the same location where a Russian S-400 system had been deployed in August 2022.[10] The strike suggests that Russian forces were unprepared to intercept missiles with the system or were unable to do so. Ukrainian forces struck a Russian S-400 air defense system near Olenivka, Crimea (117km northwest of Sevastopol) on August 23, and the second Ukrainian strike on a significant Russian air defense system in recent weeks indicates that such tactical failures may reflect a wider systemic issue with Russian air defenses in occupied Crimea.[11]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure on September 14. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 22 drones in the direction of Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Sumy oblasts and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 17 of the drones.[12] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces primarily targeted port infrastructure in Odessa Oblast.[13] Ukrainian Minister for Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Oleksandr Kubrakov stated that Russian strikes from July 18 to September 12 have damaged or partially destroyed 105 Ukrainian port facilities and that the monthly export of Ukrainian grain has decreased by almost three million tons as a result.[14] The Russian strike campaign against Ukrainian grain and port infrastructure is likely meant to support the Kremlin's effort to leverage international desire for Russia's return to the Black Sea Grain Initiative to exact extensive concessions.[15] The Kremlin may have no intention of returning to the deal, however, and may instead aim to increase the market share and attractiveness of Russian grain by degrading Ukraine's grain export potential.[16] The Kremlin also likely intends for continued strain on Ukrainian grain export routes to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners as Ukraine and the West continue to work on re-routing Ukrainian grain exports along land corridors.[17]

The commander of the Russian 247th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) Vasily Popov was reportedly killed in combat in Ukraine. [18] Vasily Popov likely recently replaced Pyotr Popov as commander of the 247th VDV Regiment in August or September 2023, and Vasily Popov is the second commander of the 247th Regiment to be killed in action in Ukraine after Colonel Konstantin Zizevsky died in February 2022.[19] Elements of the 247th Regiment are reportedly operating in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[20] ISW has previously assessed that relatively elite VDV forces are conducting limited counterattacks in critical sectors of the front, and Vasily Popov's death supports ISW's assessment that these counterattacks will likely attrit these units further.[21]

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on September 13 recognizing Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko as complicit in Russian crimes committed in Ukraine and called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue an arrest warrant for him. The European Parliament's resolution stated that Belarus is complicit in the war in Ukraine and is involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus, Russia, and occupied areas of Ukraine.[22] ISW continues to assess that Belarus is a co-belligerent in the war and is involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children.[23] ISW has also assessed that Belarus may be facilitating sanctions evasion schemes for Russia.[24] Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenko will meet in Sochi, Russia on September 15.[25]

Russian State Duma and Federation Council members proposed blocking WhatsApp likely as part of the Kremlin's broader initiative to establish central control over the Russian information space. Facebook's parent company Meta announced on September 13 that WhatsApp launched a channel feature to over 150 countries, likely including Russia, that will function similarly to Telegram channels.[26] Russia designated Meta as an extremist organization in March 2022 and banned its Facebook and Instagram services in Russia.[27] Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security Head Viktor Bondarev, State Duma Committee on Information Policy Head Alexander Khinshtein, and State Duma Deputy Anton Gorenkin said that Russia should consider blocking WhatsApp in Russia if WhatsApp launches Russian language channels.[28] Russian state media censor Roskomnadzor reported that Russia could block WhatsApp if it disseminates prohibited

information.[29] Russian authorities are likely attempting to funnel the Russian information space onto a limited number of closely monitored or controlled social media platforms.

Some Russian sources suggested that ongoing tensions between the Russian MoD and the Wagner Group are diminishing Wagner's ability to operate across the African theater. A Russian insider source claimed on September 12 that "difficult logistics" are forcing Wagner forces in Africa to "make do with local reserves" to continue operations after the rebel coalition Coordination of the Movement of Azawad (CMA) claimed to have captured Bourem, Gao Region, Mali. [30] Russian sources, including a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, claimed that the Russian MoD and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) deliberately disrupted Wagner's logistics by preventing Wagner from using Russian airbases in Syria to reinforce the Wagner contingent in the Central African Republic (CAR) — reports consistent with ISW's recent observations.[31] The milblogger claimed that the CMA took advantage of destabilization fueled in part by tensions resulting from the MoD's ongoing effort to subsume Wagner.[32] The milblogger warned that other armed groups may also take advantage of the destabilization and that the MoD will have to invest resources in the region to avoid reputational fallout.[33] Wagner forces in Africa notably conduct counterterrorism operations, but these operations are often ineffective, and the current Wagner group contingent in MENA is likely insufficient to conduct counterterrorism operations at a scale that could meaningfully contain new or escalating conflicts.[34]

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) declared two US diplomats *persona non grata* and expelled them from Russia on September 14.[35] The Russian MFA accused the US Embassy's first and second secretaries of illegally maintaining contact with an arrested former US Consulate employee and ordered the diplomats to leave Russia within the next seven days.

Western defense sources reportedly stated that a Russian fighter jet intentionally fired at a British surveillance plane in September 2022 due to ambiguous commands rather than because of a missile malfunction as the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed at the time. The BBC reported that three senior Western defense sources stated that a Russian Su-27 fighter jet pilot intentionally fired a missile at a British Royal Air Force (RAF) plane but missed on September 29, 2022.[36] The Western defense sources reportedly stated that the Russian pilot believed he had permission to fire after receiving an ambiguous command from a Russian ground station and fired a second missile, which reportedly either malfunctioned or was aborted.[37] A second Russian pilot flying another Su-27 reportedly interpreted the order differently and did not fire at the British aircraft.[38] The Russian MoD claimed in October 2022 that the Su-27 jet fired the missile due to a "technical malfunction."^[39]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and around Bakhmut and reportedly advanced south of Bakhmut on September 14.
- Ukrainian forces struck a Russian air defense system near occupied Yevpatoria, Crimea, on September 14, suggesting that there may be systemic tactical failures with Russian air defense systems in occupied Crimea.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure on September 14.
- The commander of the Russian 247th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) Vasily Popov was reportedly killed in combat in Ukraine.
- Some Russian sources suggested that ongoing tensions between the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Wagner Group are diminishing Wagner's ability to operate across the African theater.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 14.
- Ukrainian forces also advanced along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- The Kremlin is reportedly trying to censor Russian media coverage of a possible second wave of reserve mobilization in order to prevent protests and voter discontent ahead of the 2024 Russian presidential elections.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 13, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 13, 2023, 6:40pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted missile strikes on occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 13, damaging a Russian landing ship, a Kilo class submarine, and port infrastructure. The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Ukrainian forces successfully conducted missile strikes on Russian naval means and port infrastructure in occupied Sevastopol.[1] Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that the missiles struck the Russian state-owned ship repair facility Sevmorzavod, damaging repair facilities as well as a landing ship and a submarine, both of which he described as unrecoverable.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses intercepted seven out of 10 Ukrainian cruise missiles targeting the Sevmorzavod ship repair facility but acknowledged that Ukrainian missiles struck two ships under repair.[3] Geolocated footage published on September 13 shows explosions at the dry dock in the Sevastopol port.[4] Satellite imagery published on September 12 shows one Ropucha class landing ship and one Kilo class

submarine at the dry dock, and satellite imagery published on September 13 shows that the Ukrainian missile strike likely destroyed the two vessels.^[5] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that there were no Russian missile carriers present during the strike but noted that Ukrainian intelligence is still unaware of which submarine was at the dry dock.^[6] The apparent destruction of the two vessels will likely render the dry dock inoperable until Russian forces can clear the debris, which may take a significant amount of time. The extent of the damage to Sevmorzavod's repair facilities beyond the dry dock is unclear, and any damage to one of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's main repair facilities in occupied Crimea will likely have reverberating impacts in the event of further Ukrainian strikes on Russian naval assets.

Russian officials largely did not address the strike, while select Russian ultranationalists responded with predictable outrage. Crimean occupation officials claimed that the strikes damaged residential buildings and injured several dozen people, although they did not say whether the injured were Russian military personnel.^[7] Prominent Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov expressed deep anger at the strike and called for retaliatory strikes on Western facilities that produced the alleged missiles that Ukraine used in the strike.^[8] Solovyov's call for escalation with the West is boilerplate rhetoric for his domestic audience but is not reflective of any actual Kremlin position on the matter. Russian milbloggers expressed concerns that the Ukrainian strike portends an intensification of Ukraine's interdiction campaign targeting occupied Crimea.^[9] One milblogger argued that Russian forces are unable to strike Ukrainian airfields at scale and that Russian military inaction allowed Ukrainian forces to sufficiently strengthen airfields against Russian strikes.^[10]

Ukrainian forces advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut amid continued counteroffensive operations on both sectors of the front on September 13. Geolocated footage published on September 12 indicates that Ukrainian forces made limited gains south of Robotyne (12km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 13 that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified partial successes near Robotyne as well as near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut) in the Bakhmut direction.^[12]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Sumy and Odesa oblasts on the night of September 12 to 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 34 of 45 Shaheds, which mainly targeted port infrastructure in Izmail and Reni, Odesa Oblast.^[13] Odesa Oblast Administration Head Oleh Kiper reported that the drone strikes damaged the port and civilian infrastructure in Izmail Raion.^[14] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched the drones from occupied Cape Chauda in Crimea, Primorsko-Akhtarsk in Krasnodar Krai, and Kursk Oblast.^[15]

Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely concerned that Russia's growing relationship with North Korea may endanger Russia's existing sanctions evasion schemes. Putin met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Amur Oblast on September 14.^[16] Putin called the meeting "productive" and reported that he and Kim had a "frank exchange of views on the situation in the region and on bilateral relations."^[17] Putin also stated that Russia continues to comply with restrictions on military-technical cooperation with North Korea but noted that within the "framework of the current rules, there are opportunities."^[18] Putin is likely neutrally portraying his meeting with Kim in order to balance Russia's interest in acquiring North Korean artillery munitions with concerns about the risk of triggering secondary international sanctions on Russia due to potential trade with North Korea amidst increased international scrutiny of Russian sanctions evasion.

The Russian MoD reportedly temporarily disrupted a Wagner Group force rotation to Syria amid reports of the Russian MoD's ongoing efforts to subsume Wagner operations in Syria. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger amplified a claim on September 13 that the Russian MoD blocked Wagner forces from rotating personnel from Africa through the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia, Syria, prompting the Wagner forces to negotiate with the Syrian MoD to rotate through the Tiyas airbase in Homs Governorate instead.^[19] The milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD used vehicles on the runway to prevent a Wagner plane from landing at the Tiyas airbase on September 12, and then deployed helicopters threatening to shoot down a Wagner plane. The milblogger claimed that the Wagner leadership in Syria contacted Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov who allowed the plane to land.^[20] Yevkurov's reported involvement in this engagement as well as his recent trips to Africa continues to suggest that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has likely appointed Yevkurov to oversee the MoD's effort to subsume the remnants of the Wagner Group.^[21]

This reported Russian MoD-Wagner conflict in Syria suggests that elements of the Wagner Group may still have a cohesive leadership and that the MoD has deep concerns about the semi-independence of Wagner's Syria contingent. Wagner's ability to negotiate with senior Russian and Syrian MoD officials indicates that Wagner likely retains a cohesive-enough leadership to operate semi-independently of the Russian MoD. The Russian MoD's decision to deny Wagner's use of the Hmeimim airbase and disrupt the force rotation indicates that the MoD is likely concerned about Wagner's insubordination toward the Russian military in Syria, though the precise concerns are unclear. The Wagner contingent in Syria may have better combat capabilities than Wagner contingents in other African states due to some combination of training, provisions, and organization. The MoD may also be concerned that the Syria Wagner contingent is more loyal to Prigozhin than the other Wagner arms. Syria is the only country in which the Wagner Group has a major contingent co-located with a major Russian MoD presence, and the Russian MoD detained Wagner commanders only in Syria and not elsewhere abroad following the June 24 rebellion.^[22]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces conducted missile strikes on occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 13, damaging a Russian landing ship, a Kilo class submarine, and port infrastructure.**
- **Ukrainian forces advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut amid continued counteroffensive operations on both sectors of the front on September 13.**
- **Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Sumy and Odesa oblasts on the night of September 12 to 13.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely concerned that Russia's growing relationship with North Korea may endanger Russia's existing sanctions evasion schemes.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly temporarily disrupted a Wagner Group force rotation to Syria amid reports of the Russian MoD's ongoing efforts to subsume Wagner operations in Syria.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances.**

- Reports from Western and Russian independent sources indicate that Russia has circumvented some Western sanctions to increase weapons production but still struggles to produce weapons at the pace required by the war in Ukraine.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) published footage showing GUR and Ukrainian partisans conducting a drone strike on a Russian occupation passportization office in occupied Enerhodar, Zaporizhia Oblast on September 12.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 12, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 12, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian insider sources claimed that the Kremlin's inner circle is again actively disagreeing about the necessity of and preparations for a second wave of reserve mobilization ahead of the semi-annual fall conscription cycle, which starts on October 1. A Russian Telegram channel with alleged connections to Russian security sources claimed that select Russian officials are "seriously" preparing for a second wave of reserve mobilization and are hoping to conduct another reserve mobilization wave in the fall.^[1] It is important to distinguish between Russia's normal semi-annual conscription callup, a large-scale reserve mobilization like the one that brought more than 300,000 reservists into the Russian armed forces in Fall 2022, crypto-mobilizations that bring reservists into the force at lower numbers over a long period of time, and various efforts to encourage or coerce Russians to sign ostensibly voluntary contracts with the Russian military. The channel claimed that Russian officials want to mobilize between 170,000 to 175,000 reservists and move the fall conscription date from October 1 to November 1 to accommodate a reserve mobilization processes, while simultaneously conducting "contract mobilization" to recruit an additional 130,000 personnel for contract service using coercive measures.^[2] The channel claimed that a powerful group of "siloviki hawks" is also proposing stricter reserve mobilization measures such as restricting certain individuals from obtaining mobilization deferrals, which has sparked major disagreements with officials in the Russian Presidential Administration. The channel claimed that the Presidential Administration fears a response to such measures from other Russian officials and broader Russian society.

These plans, proposals, and disagreements are not new and do not indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin has ultimately decided to conduct a second reserve mobilization wave in the near term. ISW previously observed an increase in discussions about reserve mobilization preparations and speculations in the lead-up to the spring conscription cycle earlier in 2023.^[3] Select Russian officials have also proposed more dramatic mobilization measures that have not materialized.^[4] Putin also emphasized Russian contract service recruitment rates when responding to the question about the potential second reserve mobilization wave at the Eastern Economic Forum on September 12.^[5] Putin's response does not necessarily set information conditions to prepare Russian society for involuntary mobilization and instead may suggest his commitment to ongoing crypto mobilization practices. Any new reserve mobilization wave depends on Putin.^[6]

Putin also reamplified several boilerplate information operations falsely framing the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed endeavor and accused Ukraine of being unwilling to negotiate during his address at the Eastern Economic Forum. Putin claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed to produce concrete results and presented likely very inflated numbers of claimed Ukrainian personnel and equipment losses.^[7] Putin also accused Ukraine of being unwilling to negotiate and claimed that Russia cannot pursue an end to hostilities as long as Ukraine is pursuing a counteroffensive, thereby furthering a longstanding Russian information operation that seeks to accuse Ukraine as being the party disinterested in negotiations in order to undermine Ukrainian battlefield successes and reduce international support for Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.^[8]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 12 and have reportedly advanced south of Bakhmut and Robotyne. Ukrainian military sources stated that Ukrainian forces are conducting active offensive operations near Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut).^[9] The Ukrainian General Staff also stated that Ukrainian forces were additionally successful south and southeast of Robotyne (about 13km south of Orikhiv).^[10] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun clarified that Ukrainian forces have advanced between 300-500 meters south and southeast of Robotyne.^[11] The Ukrainian Military Media Center noted that Russian forces are increasingly pulling reserves from deep within Russian territory to the frontline in Ukraine out of fear of a Ukrainian breakthrough.^[12]

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrived in Primorsky Krai on September 12 and will meet with Putin in the coming days, likely to discuss the provision of North Korean artillery munitions to Russia. Kim met with Russian Minister of Natural Resources and Ecology Alexander Kozlov and Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako upon arriving in Russia.^[13] Kim's trip to Russia is his first known trip outside of North Korea since the COVID-19 pandemic.^[14] ISW will continue to follow developments in the lead-up to the meeting and will report on the content of the meeting once it becomes available.

Russian authorities have reportedly adjusted air defense systems around Moscow in light of recent increased drone strikes on the city, likely in part to assuage complaints in the Russian information space about the ineffectiveness of air defenses around the capital. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) stated that Russian authorities have moved short and medium-range air defense systems, including Pantsir-S1 systems, to elevated positions around Moscow City to target drones.^[15] The UK MoD noted that these adjustments are also likely meant to visibly demonstrate to the population that Russian authorities are taking steps to combat increasingly frequent drone strikes in the Russian rear, particularly in Moscow Oblast.^[16] ISW has previously reported that Russian sources

have complained about Moscow air defenses' inability to stop such drone strikes, with some blaming Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and his administration directly.
[17]

A car killed a Russian milblogger in occupied Donetsk City on September 11. Russian milblogger Gennady Dubovoy died after a car struck him as he crossed the road, and some other Russian milbloggers mourned Dubovoy's death.[18] Dubovoy's death comes amid an ongoing Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) campaign to censor Russian ultranationalist milbloggers whose narratives and complaints deviate too far from accepted official narratives.[19] Dubovoy has recently levied criticisms against the Russian government for its treatment of Russian combat veterans and former Wagner Group fighters, and recently stated that he took a step back from the ultranationalist information space due to demands to report on the "confirmation of your [referring to Russian officials] delusions."^[20] Dubovoy recently indicated that he is not a supporter of imprisoned ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin, whose supporters have recently been the targets of official and public censorship.[21]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian insider sources claimed that the Kremlin's inner circle is again actively disagreeing about the necessity of and preparations for a second wave of reserve mobilization ahead of the semi-annual fall conscription cycle, which starts on October 1.
- These plans, proposals, and disagreements are not new and do not indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin has ultimately decided to conduct a second reserve mobilization wave in the near term.
- Putin also reamplified several boilerplate information operations falsely framing the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed endeavor and accused Ukraine of being unwilling to negotiate during his address at the Eastern Economic Forum.
- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrived in Primorsky Krai on September 12 and will meet with Putin in the coming days, likely to discuss the provision of North Korean artillery munitions to Russia.
- Russian authorities have reportedly adjusted air defense systems around Moscow in light of recent increased drone strikes on the city, likely in part to assuage complaints in the Russian information space about the ineffectiveness of air defenses around the capital.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia and advanced in some areas on September 12.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on September 12 and advanced near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia.
- Russian officials introduced a bill to the Russian State Duma that would punish Russian servicemen fighting within volunteer armed formations for losing or deliberately destroying military equipment or supplies.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport children from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia under the guise of recreational programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 11, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

September 11, 2023, 4:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on September 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 11 and have reportedly advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian military officials announced on September 11 that Ukrainian forces have liberated 2 square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut direction over the past week and have made gains near Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (9km southwest of Bakhmut).[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces have gained a total of 4.8 square kilometers in the Tavriisk (Zaporizhia) operational direction over the past week, particularly south of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and west of Verbove (20km southeast of Orikhiv).[2]

The Rosgvardia may be recruiting previously imprisoned former Wagner Group fighters, likely to further subsume Wagner remnants while bolstering Russia's domestic security apparatus. Russian opposition outlet *iStories* reported on September 11 that relatives of previously imprisoned former Wagner fighters revealed that some of their relatives received invitations to serve in the Rosgvardia following a series of tests and certifications.[3] *iStories* noted that the Rosgvardia is asking former Wagner fighters to pass a security check and provide documentation of official pardons of their prison sentences, as well as documentation of the conclusion of their contracts with Wagner. *iStories* also amplified the claims of a Rosgvardia servicemember from the 2nd Battalion of an unidentified Moscow-based Rosgvardia unit that ex-Wagner fighters are serving in his unit, including those without any conventional military experience. Another Rosgvardia servicemember from Rostov-on-Don alleged that his unit has sent ex-Wagner fighters to guard "strategic objects" in occupied Ukraine. The Rosgvardia's possible active recruitment of former Wagner fighters is noteworthy in the wake of recent efforts by the Russian leadership to strengthen the Rosgvardia's role as a domestic security organ following Wagner's June 24 armed rebellion.[4] ISW has previously reported on the transfer of "Grom" units (elite anti-drug special units of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs) and heavy weaponry to the Rosgvardia following the rebellion.[5] The Rosgvardia may be recruiting former Wagner fighters to maximize its force generation pool, or potentially to exert more direct control over former Wagner elements in the hopes of consolidating domestic security following the rebellion.

Russian border guards expressed similar grievances about limited capabilities and equipment to those voiced by Russian troops serving in Ukraine and continued to express concern over potential Ukrainian raids into Russia. A Russian milblogger who serves on the Kremlin's human rights council amplified complaints that the Russian had authorities poorly equip border guard units and failed to supply them with sufficient digital communications systems, reconnaissance and strike drones, mobile transport, and medical supplies.[6] The milblogger noted that these grievances come from almost all border service departments within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).[7] The milblogger noted that border service units formed task forces to participate in the Soviet war in Afghanistan and were equipped with artillery, aviation, and armored vehicles, implying modern FSB border guard units need similar capabilities.[8] The milblogger claimed that border guard units only receive anti-tank missiles and mortars from personal connections with Russian military units, and advocated for Russian authorities to provide better equipment — including self-propelled artillery systems and electronic warfare systems — to current border guards, especially those in Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts, which border Ukraine.[9] The milblogger's reference to the Soviet border guards' participation in the war in Afghanistan and call for the provision of more complex systems suggest that Russian border guards continue to be concerned about the threat of possible Ukrainian cross-border raids into Russia and Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian territory.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting southern Ukraine on the night of September 10 to 11. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 12 Shaheds over Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts and another unspecified drone.[10] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 11 that Russian forces are changing tactics and using drones "en masse." [11] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched 10 missiles, including Kh-31P anti-radar missiles and Ka-59 guided cruise missiles, at Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[12]

The Kremlin's ruling United Russia party unsurprisingly achieved most of its desired results in highly fraudulent local elections in Russia and occupied Ukraine. The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) claimed that United Russia won gubernatorial elections in 13 regions and is leading in six regions where votes are still being counted.[13] United Russia gubernatorial candidates won over 72 percent of the vote in 13 out of 20 regions in Central Russia, the Russian Far East, and Siberia.[14] All three of the candidates that Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly endorsed — Nizhny Novgorod Governor Gleb Nitkin, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, and Smolensk Governor Vasily Anokhin — won or are leading by major margins.[15] United Russia reportedly received 83 percent of the vote in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast in Ukraine, 78 percent in Donetsk Oblast, 74 percent in Luhansk Oblast, and 74.8 percent in Kherson Oblast.[16] Non-United Russia gubernatorial candidates won in only two regions, Khabarovsk and Oryol oblasts, where Communist Party incumbents were re-elected.[17] ISW has previously reported on the Kremlin's extensive preparations to intimidate voters and directly falsify results to ensure a United Russia victory throughout Russia and in highly fraudulent "elections" in occupied Ukraine.[18]

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet in Vladivostok in the coming days, likely to discuss bilateral relations and North Korea's supplies of artillery munitions to Russia.[19] The Kremlin announced on September 11 that Kim will meet with Putin in the coming days, and Kim has reportedly left Pyongyang and is traveling to Russia.[20] ISW will continue to follow developments in the lead-up to the meeting.

US and Armenian forces began joint military exercises in Armenia on September 11. The Armenian Ministry of Defense stated that the joint US-Armenian "Eagle Partner 2023" exercises will prepare Armenian forces to take part in international peacekeeping missions and will last until September 20.[21] 85 US personnel and 175 Armenian personnel are participating in exercises at the Zar and Armavir training grounds near Yerevan.[22] "Eagle Partner 2023" will occur against the backdrop of increasingly tense relations between Moscow and Yerevan, as well as heightened tensions between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 11 and have reportedly advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Rosgvardia may be recruiting previously imprisoned former Wagner Group fighters, likely to further subsume Wagner remnants while bolstering Russia's domestic security apparatus.
- Russian border guards expressed similar grievances about limited capabilities and equipment to those voiced by Russian troops serving in Ukraine and continued to express concern over potential Ukrainian raids into Russia.
- The Kremlin's ruling United Russia party unsurprisingly achieved most of its desired results in highly fraudulent local elections in Russia and occupied Ukraine.
- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet in Vladivostok in the coming days, likely to discuss bilateral relations and North Korea's supplies of artillery munitions to Russia.
- US and Armenian forces began joint military exercises in Armenia on September 11.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 11.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least one sector of the front on September 11 and advanced near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian Central Election Committee Head Alexander Sidyakin unsurprisingly claimed that United Russia received the majority of votes in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.
- Ukrainian and United Kingdom military officials reported on September 11 that the Russian military intends to mobilize over 400,000 personnel by the end of 2023.

[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 10, 2023](#)

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

Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

September 10, 2023, 4:05pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on September 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued to advance south of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on September 10. Geolocated footage posted on September 10 shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced east of Novoprokopivka (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[1] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun noted that Ukrainian forces continue to advance near Robotyne (12km south of Orikhiv) and have liberated 1.5 square kilometers of territory in this direction.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Ilya Yevlash reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) in Donetsk Oblast.[3]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 10 that Ukrainian forces will continue counteroffensive operations into late 2023.[4] Cold and wet weather will affect but not halt active combat, as it has done in the first 18 months of the war. Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated on September 10 that Ukrainian forces probably have 30 to 45 days of "fighting weather" left.[5] Seasonal heavy rains and heavy mud in late autumn will slow ground movements for both sides, and low temperatures impose a variety of logistics challenges. The start of such seasonal weather is variable, however.[6] While weather considerations will affect Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, they will not impose a definite end to them. A hard freeze occurs throughout Ukraine in the winter that makes the ground more conducive to mechanized maneuver warfare, and Ukrainian officials expressed routine interest in exploiting these weather conditions in winter 2022–2023.[7]

Russian military personnel continue to detail persistent problems hindering Russian operations along the frontline in Ukraine. The "Rusich" Sabotage and Reconnaissance Group, a far-right Russian irregular paramilitary unit, published a list of various issues on September 8 that it claims are persistent along the frontline. Rusich claimed that Russian counterbattery range and accuracy are inferior to Ukrainian capabilities and claimed that Russian forces lack laser-guided Krasnopol shells and UAVs to guide them.[8] The Rusich Group also claimed that the Russian Tornado-S multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) is less resistant to electronic warfare (EW) than Ukraine's US-provided HIMARS systems.[9] The Rusich Group also noted that many Russian personnel buy their own communication technology, making it difficult for different units using different models of technology to communicate with each other.[10] The Rusich Group claimed that Russian forces do not evacuate wounded or dead personnel from frontline areas, and that this lack of evacuations has prompted some Russian personnel to refuse to complete combat tasks.[11] The Rusich Group may be experiencing these problems at a higher intensity and frequency than Russian forces writ large because it is a small and irregular formation, but ISW has routinely observed other Russian units expressing similar issues with counterbattery capabilities, communications, and evacuations.[12]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone strikes targeting Kyiv Oblast on the night of September 9 to 10. Ukrainian military sources reported on September 10 that Ukrainian forces downed 26 of 33 drones that Russian forces launched from the direction of Kursk Oblast.[13] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces dispersed the Shahed drones in the air and attacked targets from different directions in order to complicate Ukrainian air defense operations.[14] Kyiv Oblast Administration Head Ruslan Kravchenko stated that Russian strikes damaged an infrastructure facility, a school, residential buildings, and a rehabilitation center in Kyiv Oblast.[15] Russian milbloggers claimed that NASA FIRMS/VIIRS data suggests that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian military arsenal in Rokytnianskyi Raion, Kyiv Oblast.[16]

Army General Sergei Surovkin, the previously dismissed Wagner-affiliated former commander of Russia's Aerospace Forces (VKS), has reportedly become the head of the Coordination Committee on Air Defense Issues under the Council of Defense Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Several low-profile and local Russian outlets reported on September 10 that the CIS Council of Defense Ministers unanimously voted on Surovkin's appointment to head of the air defense committee, and noted that Surovkin will now be responsible for overseeing the function of the joint air defense system of CIS member states.[17] More mainstream and Kremlin-affiliated newswires notably did not report on Surovkin's new appointment and have not mentioned Surovkin at all since Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed him as VKS commander on August 23.[18] ISW previously assessed that Surovkin's move to a leadership position with the CIS is consistent with previous patterns of the Russian military leadership shifting disgraced and ineffective commanders to peripheral positions far removed from Ukraine without discharging them from the Russian military entirely.[19]

Russia held the final day of voting for regional elections on September 10 amid reports of electoral falsifications and intimidation. Affiliates of imprisoned ultranationalist Igor Girkin claimed that Russian officials falsified all electoral results in Nakhodka, Primorsky Krai, and attacked an independent candidate in Saratov, Saratov Oblast.[20] Girkin's affiliates noted that Russian officials coerced people to vote to improve voter turnout but that average turnout will likely be at 35 percent. [21] The *Radio Free Europe/Free Liberty (RFE/RL)* branch *Sever Realii* reported that Russian authorities detained three Yabloko Party candidates in Veliky Novgorod, Novgorod Oblast.[22] Russian sources also reported that Kremlin newswire *RIA Novosti* published the results of the regional elections in the Republic of Sakha before the closure of the polls there.[23] *RFE/RL* branch *Idei Realii* reported that Russian authorities issued a military summons to a Communist Party candidate in the Republic of Bashkortostan when he visited a polling station.[24]

Russian sources claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh has not conducted personnel rotations due to increasing tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[25] The Russian sources also claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent is on "full alert" because of the potential escalation between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces.[26] Russian sources will likely increasingly discuss the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh if hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan intensify, which may impact their coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued to advance south of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on September 10.

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 10 that Ukrainian forces will continue counteroffensive operations into late 2023. Cold and wet weather will affect but not halt active combat, as it has done in the first 18 months of the war.
- Russian military personnel continue to detail persistent problems hindering Russian operations along the frontline in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone strikes targeting Kyiv Oblast on the night of September 9 to 10.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly regained some lost positions in some areas.
- Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on September 10 that the Russian military has concentrated over 420,000 military personnel in occupied Ukraine, not including Rosgvardia (Russian national guard) and other military units and structures.
- Russian occupation officials held the final day of voting for Russian regional elections in occupied territories on September 10, continuing efforts to coerce residents to vote and portray the elections as legitimate.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 9, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

September 9, 2023, 3:55pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on September 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces made confirmed advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made claimed advances south of Bakhmut on September 9. Geolocated footage published on September 9 shows that Ukrainian forces advanced northwest of Novomayorske (18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, where Russian sources claim fighting has intensified in recent days.^[1] Additional geolocated footage published on September 9 shows that Ukrainian forces also advanced northeast and east of Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv) and west of Verbove (20km southeast of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes south of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).^[3] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces forced Russian forces to withdraw from Andriivka (9km southwest of Bakhmut), and another prominent milblogger claimed that Andriivka is now a contested "gray zone."^[4] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces also achieved unspecified success south of Klishchiivka.^[5]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi reemphasized Ukraine's right to target critical Russian strategic and military objects in rear areas. Skibitskyi stated on September 8 that Ukraine identifies and strikes the most critical Russian objects in Russian rear areas using drones, missiles, and agents on Russian territory.^[6] Skibitskyi emphasized that Ukrainian forces target military facilities and objects of the military-industrial complex that help with missile production and logistics support. Skibitskyi stated that Ukraine purposefully targets these objects to degrade Russian offensive potential and achieve a "domino effect" where destroying one object forces other dependent enterprises to stop production.

Russia's war in Ukraine is increasingly constraining Russian local and regional politics, with even the minimal pre-war competition suppressed and regional governments increasingly focused on their ability to generate resources for the war. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)'s Tatar-Bashkir service *Idel Realii* posted an interview on September 8 with Russian political scientist Dmitry Loboyko regarding "the peculiarities of election campaigns during the war."^[7] Loboyko stated that this election season is one of the most "uncompetitive" in Russian history and that it particularly lacks opposition alternatives, especially as people are increasingly voting with the mindset that the war in Ukraine may last a year, five years, or even ten years.^[8] Loboyko also noted that Russian federal subjects (regions) are competing for resources on the basis of how many military personnel each region was able to mobilize for the war, with the insinuation that the federal government allocates more resources to regions that mobilized more personnel, thereby increasing inter-regional competition.^[9] Loboyko's insights suggest that the war in Ukraine, and its continued drain on Russian regions, has contributed to a more muted political atmosphere within Russia. ISW has previously observed that Russian officials, particularly those affiliated with the leading United Russia party, appear concerned with the impacts the war will have on the electorate during local and regional elections, and the muted political atmosphere outlined by Loboyko aligns with these observations.^[10] Various Russian insider sources additionally reported on September 9 that Russian President Vladimir Putin has publicly backed Nizhny Novgorod Governor Gleb Nitkin, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, and Smolensk Governor Vasily Anokhin in the regional elections.^[11] The insider sources suggested that the Kremlin is invested in publicly backing the infrastructure and connectivity projects that these regional leaders espouse.^[12] As the war continues, Russian officials will likely continue to have to balance the suppression of domestic political opposition with the need to posture the government as being actively involved in ameliorating domestic matters.

The Kremlin continues to refuse to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative in an attempt to extract maximum concessions from the West and may believe that apparent support or acceptance for its demands from some international actors offers it more leverage in renegotiating the deal. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reiterated on September 9 that Russia will not resume its participation in the grain deal until all its demands are met.^[13] Peskov specifically highlighted the Kremlin's demand for the reconnection of the Russian Agricultural Bank to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) banking system and suggested that the reconnection of one of the bank's subsidiaries is insufficient.^[14] UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres recently sent a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov offering extensive concessions for Russia's return to the deal, which included SWIFT reconnection for a Russian Agricultural Bank subsidiary in Luxembourg.^[15] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan similarly supported offering Russia extensive concessions during the G20 summit in New

Delhi, where he reportedly called on G20 leaders to resume insurance for Russian grain and fertilizer cargos and to reconnect Russian banks to SWIFT.[16] The Kremlin may believe that Erdogan's and Guterres' support for offering concessions places further pressure on the West to acquiesce to Russian demands for rejoining the grain deal, and Russian officials will likely continue to reject offers that meet many of these demands in the hope of extracting a maximalist set of concessions. [17] The Kremlin may alternatively have no intention of returning to the grain deal, however, and may instead aim to increase the market share and attractiveness of Russian grain by degrading Ukrainian grain export potential through continued strikes on grain and port infrastructure.[18]

The Telegraph reported on September 8 that the United Kingdom's military aircraft are conducting patrols over the Black Sea to deter Russian forces from conducting attacks against civilian vessels carrying grain exports.[19] NATO previously announced on July 26 that it would increase surveillance and reconnaissance in the Black Sea region, including with maritime patrol aircraft and drones, given Russian threats against civilian ships and attacks on Ukrainian ports.[20]

The Group of 20 (G20) adopted a standard and boilerplate consensus declaration during the G20 summit on September 9 that called for a “durable peace” in Ukraine without explicitly condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.[21] The G20 advocated for all states party to the G20 mandate to uphold the rules and principles of international law and called for initiatives that would lead to a “comprehensive, just, and durable peace in Ukraine.”[22]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces made confirmed advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made claimed advances south of Bakhmut on September 9.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi reemphasized Ukraine’s right to target critical Russian strategic and military objects in rear areas.
- Russia’s war in Ukraine is increasingly constraining Russian local and regional politics, with even the minimal pre-war competition suppressed and regional governments increasingly focused on their ability to generate resources for the war.
- The Kremlin continues to refuse to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative in an attempt to extract maximum concessions from the West and may believe that apparent support or acceptance for its demands from some international actors offers it more leverage in renegotiating the deal.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia and advanced in some areas on September 9.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to manufacture a guise of legitimacy and legality around ongoing local elections in occupied regions of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 8, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Annika Ganzeveld, and Mason Clark

September 8, 2023, 7:05pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on September 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces have reportedly made notable changes to their command and control (C2) in Ukraine to protect command infrastructure and improve information sharing, although Russian force deployments are likely still exacerbating issues with horizontal integration. Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) Deputy Director of Analysis Magarita Konaev and CSET Fellow Owen Daniels stated on September 6 that Russian forces moved headquarters out of range of most Ukrainian strike systems and have placed forward command posts further underground and behind heavily defended positions.[1] It is unclear if Russian forces have employed this more protected command infrastructure throughout Ukraine and to what degree these defensive efforts have impeded Ukraine’s ongoing interdiction campaign.[2] Konaev and Daniels stated that Russian forces have improved communications between command posts and units at the front by laying field cables and using safer radio communications.[3] The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) stated on September 4 that Russian forces are also trying to improve signals through the wider use of application-based C2 services that require less training.[4] Konaev and Daniels noted that signals at the battalion level downward are still often unencrypted and that Russian personnel still frequently communicate sensitive information through unsecure channels.[5]

Konaev and Daniels concluded that Russian forces still face challenges creating a horizontally integrated command structure to share information across different units in real time, a challenge the Russian military previously identified which has been exacerbated by Russia’s current force structure in Ukraine.[6] The Russian force grouping in Ukraine is comprised of both regular and irregular units, often deployed together and separate from their respective parent formations, further complicating efforts to horizontally integrate units. Russian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast, for example, are notably comprised of elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District), Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), Spetsnaz, naval infantry, irregular volunteer battalions, and brigades entirely made up of mobilized personnel.[7] Russian command is likely struggling to share information and create a common command space across these widely disparate forces defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.

Artillery constraints in Ukraine are reportedly prompting the Russian military to accelerate longstanding efforts to implement a fires doctrine prioritizing accuracy over volume. Konaev and Daniels stated that Russian forces have tightened the link between reconnaissance systems and artillery units to improve fire accuracy, as Russian forces face growing constraints on their ability to leverage mass indirect fire.[8] RUSI noted on September 4 that Russian commanders are doubling down on the need to prioritize the development of a reconnaissance fires complex (RFC) due to assessing that existing Russian fires doctrine, which heavily relies on a high volume of fires and pre-established calculations of the density of fires needed to achieve certain effects, without a reliable system of rapid battle damage assessment, is non-viable.[9] Russian forces have long sought to implement the concept of RFC prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which dictates that Russian forces employ high-precision, long-range weapons linked to real-time intelligence data and precise targeting provided by an intelligence and fire-direction center.[10] RUSI added that Russian forces are prioritizing strike accuracy over volume because they lack the ammunition to sustain mass indirect fires, have difficulties transporting a large volume of ammunition to the frontline, and see diminishing effectiveness with mass strikes.[11] Russia is also reportedly increasing the production of Krasnopol laser-guided shells and Lancet drones (loitering munitions) to increase fires accuracy.[12] Russian units at the front are rapidly learning and innovating, but their ability to fully implement the desired RFC will likely be constrained by their ability to issue improved communications systems — and provide necessary training — to forces in combat.

Russian forces are additionally reportedly adapting their deployment of electronic warfare (EW) complexes. Konaev and Daniels stated that Russian forces have dispersed their deployment of EW complexes since spring 2022 from a concentration of roughly 10 EW complexes for every 20 kilometers of the frontline to 1 major EW system every 10 kilometers, with additional supporting EW assets deployed as needed.[13] The dispersal of these EW assets suggests that Russian forces have improved the coverage that a single EW complex provides, although Konaev and Daniels noted that the systems still have issues with limited coverage and EW fratricide.[14] RUSI stated that Russian forces are dispersing Pole-21 systems and treating them as disposable EW systems in order to provide wide-area protection from Ukrainian drone strikes.[15] Russian sources particularly credited superior Russian EW capabilities for aiding Russian forces' successful defense against the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine in June.[16] Konaev and Daniels added that these EW systems continue to present challenges for Ukrainian drones transmitting targeting information and securing Ukrainian signals.[17]

Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to advance south of Bakhmut and south of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed gains on September 8. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing to advance south of Bakhmut and achieved unspecified successes south of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).[18] One Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Andriivka (9km southwest of Bakhmut) and in Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), although another milblogger noted that the situation in Klishchiivka is unclear at this time.[19] Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces seized positions on the northwestern outskirts of Novomayorske (18km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) on the Donetsk–Zaporizhia Oblast border. [20]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Odesa Oblast on the night of September 7–8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 8 that Ukrainian forces downed 16 of 20 Shahed drones that Russian forces launched at grain and port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast. [21] Ukrainian Southern Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are launching drone strikes from Crimea in order to bypass Ukrainian air defenses.[22] Humenyuk also noted that the number of drones that Russian forces have launched and markings on the drones indicate that Russia has established domestic drone production.[23] ISW reported on September 6 that Russian authorities intend to expand domestic drone production beyond the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Tatarstan Republic into the Bashkortostan Republic.[24] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces may increase the frequency of drone strikes on Ukraine.[25] Romanian news agency *Digi24* reported on September 8 that the Romanian National Committee for Emergency Situations authorized the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations to issue warning and alarm messages where there are Russian drone attacks in the area.[26]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly rejected an offer from the UN Secretariat that met many of Russia's stated demands to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative on September 6, indicating that the Kremlin is either delaying its return to the grain deal in an attempt to extract maximum concessions from the West or has no intention whatsoever of returning to the grain deal. Lavrov stated on September 6 that the Russian government received a letter from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres offering several concessions in exchange for the resumption of the grain deal.[27] Lavrov stated and *Reuters* reported that the concessions in the letter included: reconnection to SWIFT for a Russian Agricultural Bank subsidiary in Luxembourg within 30 days, the creation of an insurance platform for Russian cargo and ships against Ukrainian strikes in the Azov and Black seas; the unblocking of Russian fertilizer assets in the EU, and approval for Russian ships carrying food and fertilizers to dock in European ports.[28] Lavrov publicly dismissed the UN Secretariat's offer as a "workaround" that does not create a real solution to the problem.[29] Guterres stated on September 7 that the UN is "actively engaged" in attempting to improve Russia's grain and fertilizer exports in order to convince Moscow to allow the safe export of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea.[30] *Reuters* confirmed the existence of the letter and its contents on September 8.[31] The UN's letter notably offers concessions to most of the previously expressed Russian demands, with the exception of the renewal of operations for the Togliatti–Odesa ammonia pipeline as Lavrov noted on September 6.[32] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin likely views the Black Sea Grain Initiative as one of its few remaining avenues of leverage against the West and has withdrawn from the deal and engaged in escalatory rhetoric to extract extensive concessions.[33]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated boilerplate rhetoric justifying the current war in Ukraine while commemorating a Soviet military victory during the Second World War on September 8. Putin claimed that soldiers of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR and LNR) militias inherited their courage and resilience from ancestors who fought to recapture Donbas in the Second World War and reamplified the narrative falsely portraying the current Ukrainian government as "Nazis." [34] Putin's September 8 speech is a continuation of the rhetoric from his September 5 speech invoking the memory of significant Soviet military victories to set ideological conditions for a prolonged war effort.[35]

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) directly responded to recent indications that the Armenian government may be questioning its decades-long security relationship with Russia. The Russian MFA claimed on September 8 that it observed doubts within Armenian official circles and political elite about Armenian bilateral ties with Russia, trilateral Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani ties, and ties to the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The MFA claimed that Armenian leadership has conducted "unfriendly actions," including indicators that ISW recently identified: the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, the visit of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's wife Anna Hakobyan to deliver the humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and Armenia's decision to host joint military exercises with the United States.[36] The MFA also criticized Armenian leadership for moving to ratify the International Criminal Court (ICC) Rome Statute and stated that it issued a formal protest to the Armenian Ambassador to Russia, Vagharshak Harutyunyan, in response to these "unfriendly actions." [37] The MFA's direct

response to these events indicates that Russian anger over indications of Armenian dissatisfaction with Russian security guarantees are not confined to the Russian ultranationalist information space but includes the Russian government.[38]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package on September 7, providing Ukraine with \$600 million worth of military equipment.[39] The DoD reported that the package includes: equipment to sustain Ukraine's air defense systems, additional ammunition for HIMARS systems, 105mm artillery rounds, electronic warfare and counter-electronic warfare equipment, demolition munitions for obstacle clearing, mine-clearing equipment, and support and equipment for training, maintenance, and sustainment activities.

Unknown Russian actors may be helping Russian officials to censor Russian milbloggers who have previously criticized the Kremlin's war effort in Ukraine. Supporters of imprisoned former Russian officer and ultranationalist Igor Girkin amplified an appeal from a Russian milblogger and serviceman Mikhail Polynkov who claimed that unknown individuals hacked into and stole access to his Telegram channel.[40] Polynkov claimed that these hackers began to impersonate him and are writing social media posts that contradict his opinions. Polynkov added that the hackers also published a post attacking another prominent milblogger (who advocates for veteran rights), unlisted many of his popular posts, and are trying to find information to blackmail him and his affiliates. Polynkov claimed that these hackers are not ordinary thieves who are attempting to scam his audience for money but instead are individuals who disagreed with his criticism of the Kremlin. ISW has recently observed several crackdowns against Russian ultranationalist veterans who consistently criticized the Kremlin likely as part of a centralized effort to silence some critical milblogger voices.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces have reportedly made notable changes to their command and control (C2) in Ukraine to protect command infrastructure and improve information sharing, although Russian force deployments are likely still exacerbating issues with horizontal integration.
- Artillery constraints in Ukraine are reportedly prompting the Russian military to accelerate longstanding efforts to implement a fires doctrine prioritizing accuracy over volume.
- Russian forces are additionally reportedly adapting their deployment of electronic warfare (EW) complexes.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to advance south of Bakhmut and south of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed gains on September 8.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed-131/136 drone strikes targeting Odesa Oblast on the night of September 7–8.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly rejected an incredibly favorable offer from the UN Secretariat that met many of Russia's stated demands to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative on September 6, indicating that the Kremlin is either delaying its return to the grain deal in an attempt to extract maximum concessions from the West or has no intention whatsoever of returning to the grain deal.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) directly responded to recent indications that the Armenian government may be questioning its decades-long security relationship with Russia.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line but did not make any confirmed advances on September 8.
- *The New York Times* (NYT) — citing Western, African, and Russian sources — reported that Russian intelligence structures are competing for control of the Wagner Group's assets and operations in Africa.
- Russian occupation officials continue to hold illegal regional elections in occupied Ukraine. Russian occupation officials in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts announced the start of in-person voting in occupied territories on September 8.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 7, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

September 7, 2023, 5:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 7 and made further gains on both sectors of the front. Geolocated footage published on September 7 indicates that Ukrainian forces have made further advances northwest of Verbove (18km southwest of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces made further advances in the area and other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces temporarily advanced to the northwestern outskirts of Verbove on September 6, likely indicating further recent Ukrainian advances northwest of the settlement.[2] Satellite imagery collected on September 6 shows burning foliage in a tree line roughly a kilometer northwest of Verbove, suggesting that Russian forces are firing on advancing Ukrainian forces in the area.[3] Geolocated footage published on September 7 indicates that Ukrainian forces have made

marginal gains northwest of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[4] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes south of Bakhmut and near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[5]

US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director of Analysis Trent Maul stated that there is a “realistic possibility” that Ukrainian forces will break through the entire Russian defense in southern Ukraine by the end of 2023, while a Ukrainian source suggested that upcoming Russian defensive positions are weaker than those Ukrainian forces have previously breached. Maul stated on September 6 in an interview with the *Economist* that the recent Ukrainian breach of the “first” of three Russian defensive layers in southern Ukraine gives Ukrainian forces a “realistic possibility” to break through the remaining series of Russian defensive positions by the end of 2023.[6] Maul stated that Ukrainian forces have also advanced into the “second” Russian defensive layer, likely referring to recent advances by light Ukrainian infantry past the series of Russian defensive positions that run northwest of Verbove to north of Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[7] Former Ukrainian Aidar Battalion Commander Yevhen Dykyi stated on September 4 that battles are already ongoing at these Russian defensive positions but that Ukrainian forces have not yet broken through them.[8] Dykyi stated that the minefields ahead of the upcoming Russian defensive layer are not continuous, consistent with previous Ukrainian statements suggesting that Ukrainian forces have already advanced through the densest minefields.[9] Dykyi stated that Russia’s “third” defensive layer in southern Ukraine is primarily comprised of command posts, communication points, and warehouses and mainly acts as a support line for the Russian defensive positions further north.[10] Dykyi argued that Russian forces will not be able to hold back Ukrainian advances at this “third” series of Russian defensive positions, implying that a definitive Ukrainian breach of the current Russian defensive layer would be operationally decisive. However, Maul notably stated that the bulk of Russian reinforcements are deployed to the “third” Russian defensive layer, contradicting Dykyi’s suggestion that these positions are merely supportive in nature.[11] The subsequent series of Russian defensive positions may be weaker, less mined, and less manned than the defensive layer that Ukrainian forces have breached. **Russian defenses are not uniform across the front in southern Ukraine, however, and assessments of the strength of subsequent Russian defensive positions may be extrapolations based on limited information from small sectors of the front. Ukrainian forces are making tactical gains and successfully attriting defending Russian forces and ISW continues to assess Ukraine’s counteroffensive may achieve operational successes in 2023, but subsequent series of Russian defensive positions still pose significant challenges for Ukrainian forces and may in sections be strongly held.**

Russian forces conducted another large-scale Shahed-136/131 drone attack against Sumy and Odesa oblasts overnight on September 6-7. Ukrainian Air Force Command stated that Russia launched 33 Shaheds in several groups from the northern, southeastern, and southern directions, predominantly aimed at grain infrastructure in Odesa Oblast, and that Ukrainian forces destroyed 25 of the drones.[12] Geolocated footage posted on September 7 shows the aftermath of the Shahed strike on port infrastructure in Kiliya, Odesa Oblast.[13] Ukrainian Southern Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk noted that Russia is increasingly using such loitering munitions because they are cheaper to manufacture than missiles and are available in larger quantities.[14]

Moscow Oblast authorities detained the commander of the 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense Army on bribery and corruption charges amidst continued and escalating drone attacks on Moscow. Russian media reported on September 7 that the Moscow Garrison Military Court detained Major General Konstantin Ogienko for bribery and noted that 4th Air Defense Division Commander Major General Dmitry Belatsky organized the allocation of state defense property to an unnamed civilian organization in collusion with Ogienko.[15] The 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense Army, including its 4th Air Defense Division, is notably responsible for the air defense of Moscow City and the surrounding oblast. Drone strikes on Moscow Oblast have recently become more prevalent, and it is likely that command changes resulting from a bribery case against top commanders of one of the most elite elements of Russia’s domestic air defense could further complicate Moscow’s ability to defend against such attacks. While ISW has not observed evidence to suggest that Ogienko was detained for reasons other than bribery charges, Russian sources have recently complained that Russian air defense elements are responsible for failing to curb increased drone attacks on Moscow, and Ogienko’s removal could be a response to such allegations.[16]

Russian President Vladimir Putin promoted three Russian generals, including Central Military District (CMD) and Russian Central Grouping of Forces in Ukraine Commander Colonel General Andrey Mordvichev, on September 6. Putin promoted Mordvichev and 8th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) Commander Gennady Alashkin to the rank of colonel general, and Ministry of Defense (MoD) Main Armored Directorate Head Alexander Shestakov to the rank of lieutenant general.[17] The Central Grouping of Forces is primarily committed in Ukraine on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, and the 8th CAA is currently deployed near Bakhmut and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line. [18] These promotions award each general with a rank that corresponds with his current command and are not necessarily unusual. Putin likely awarded these promotions now to reward loyalty and obedience to the senior Russian military command, rather than to recognize battlefield performance or particular responsibilities. Putin has previously publicly lauded Mordvichev, indicating that Mordvichev may hold more of Putin’s favor than other military district commanders, as ISW has previously assessed.[19]

Russian sources accused Armenian authorities of detaining a pro-Russian blogger in Goris, Armenia, on September 6. Head of Rossotrudnichestvo (Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) Yevgeny Primakov claimed that “unknown masked men” abducted pro-Russian blogger Mikayel Badalyan in Goris on the night of September 6.[20] Primakov noted he had interviewed Badalyan on a *Radio Sputnik* segment the day before and that Badalyan criticized the Armenian government for its “anti-Russian policy.”[21] *Sputnik Armenia* also noted that Armenian authorities also detained columnist Ashot Gevorgyan in Goris.[22] Badalyan’s and Gevorgyan’s alleged arrests occurred against the backdrop of increasing tensions between Armenia and Russia, with Armenia beginning to deliver humanitarian aid to Ukraine for the first time, preparing for joint military exercises with the US, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan publicly questioning Armenia’s historical reliance on Russia for security guarantees.[23] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded to the incident and called it a “provocation” aimed at further spoiling the relationship between Russia and Armenia. [24]

The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) cancelled regional elections in some areas in Russia near the Ukrainian border for the first time. Russian CEC Head Ella Pamfilova announced on September 7 the cancellation of local elections in Shebekino Raion and the village of Zhigailovsky in Belgorod Oblast due to the “high alert” regime in the area.[25] Russian authorities previously passed a law in May 2023 authorizing the CEC to cancel elections in certain areas under martial law.[26] The CEC likely cancelled these elections due to prior criticism of evacuations from Shebekino and the possibility that there may not be enough civilians remaining in Shebekino to portray these elections as legitimate.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 7 and made further gains on both sectors of the front.
- US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director of Analysis Trent Maul stated that there is a “realistic possibility” that Ukrainian forces will break through the entire Russian defense in southern Ukraine by the end of 2023, while a Ukrainian source suggested that upcoming Russian defensive positions are weaker than those Ukrainian forces have previously breached.
- Ukrainian forces are making tactical gains and successfully attriting defending Russian forces and ISW continues to assess Ukraine’s counteroffensive may achieve operational successes in 2023, but subsequent series of Russian defensive positions still pose significant challenges for Ukrainian forces and may in sections be strongly held.
- Russian forces conducted another large-scale Shahed-136/131 drone attack against Sumy and Odesa oblasts overnight on September 6-7.
- Moscow Oblast authorities detained the commander of the 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense Army on bribery and corruption charges amidst continued and escalating drone attacks on Moscow.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in the Bakhmut direction, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not make any confirmed advances on September 7.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 6, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, and Mason Clark

September 6, 2023, 5:05pm 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.](#)

[Click here to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.](#)

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut and western Zaporizhia Oblast directions and have made gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of September 6. Geolocated footage shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced along the trench line west of Verbove (about 20km southeast of Orikhiv), and the Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes in the Robotyne—Novoprokopivka direction south of Orikhiv. [1] The Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing successful offensive operations south of Bakhmut.[2]

Ukrainian and Russian sources report the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) faces growing challenges in replacing basic supplies in addition to known challenges in rebuilding its stocks of precision weapons. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov reported on September 6 that Russia can only produce “dozens” of Kalibr cruise missiles and smaller numbers of Iskander missiles per month, which will not enable Russia to replenish its pre-2022 stocks.[3] Yusov reported that Russia struggles to obtain modern optical equipment, electronics, chips, and circuits and that “gray imports” and smuggling cannot completely cover the Russian DIB’s needs. Russian sources additionally noted that the Russian DIB cannot produce enough rubber to replace worn tires for military equipment vital to frontline operations, and noted that increasing wear on tires will make it difficult for wheeled vehicles to move in muddy, rainy, and icy conditions. [4] The Russian sources claimed that Russian authorities claimed at an unspecified time that they would find solutions to worn tires by mid-August, but the situation has not changed as of September 5.[5] Poor quality and insufficient tires will impose increasing constraints on Russian mobility in the muddy season and winter.

Russian forces conducted a large missile and drone strike against Ukraine overnight on September 5-6. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched seven Kh-101, Kh-555, and Kh-55 air-launched cruise missiles from aircraft operating out of Engels airbase in Saratov Oblast; one Iskander-M ballistic missile; and 25 Shahed 136/131 drones from the Primorsko-Akhtarsk direction.[6] Ukrainian air defenses shot down all eight missiles and 15 drones.[7] Ukrainian officials reported that the Russian strike damaged the port and agricultural infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.[8] Romanian Defense Minister Angel Tilvar stated on September 6 that several pieces of a Russian drone fell on Romanian territory near its border with Ukraine.[9] The Romanian Ministry of Defense previously denied the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry’s September 4 statement that a Russian drone fell on Romanian territory.[10]

Russian sources continue to speculate on the current role and future of dismissed Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin, the former commander of Russia’s Aerospace Forces (VKS). Several Russian insider sources and milbloggers remarked that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) removed Surovikin’s profile from the official MoD website other than his video appeal released during the Wagner rebellion asking the group to stand down.[11] The removal of Surovikin’s profile is not remarkable in itself — Russian military leadership removed Surovikin as commander of the Aerospace Forces (VKS) in August, and the absence of his profile from the MoD website could be a simple reflection of this fact.[12] Some Russian insider sources additionally claimed that State Duma Deputy and retired Colonel General Viktor Zavarzin stated that Surovikin has taken a new position in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[13] ISW has previously observed a pattern of Russian generals who underperform in command roles in Ukraine (such as former Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Alexander Chaiko and former Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Andrey Serdyukov) being reassigned to external theaters and peripheral locations such as Syria as a form of punishment, while not being entirely removed from the Russian military.[14] Appointing Surovikin to a role in the CIS, which does not appear to be a military or command role, suggests that Russian military leadership is likely continuing the practice of shifting disgraced or ineffective commanders to positions not involved in the war in Ukraine.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced an additional \$175 million military assistance package for Ukraine during an unannounced visit to Kyiv on September 6. The package includes air defense equipment, artillery rounds, and anti-tank weapons.[15] Blinken stated that the United States aims to ensure that Ukraine "has what it needs" to both succeed in the current counteroffensive and to develop long term defensive capabilities.[16] Blinken called Ukrainian progress in the counteroffensive "very, very encouraging." [17]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut and western Zaporizhia Oblast directions and have made gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of September 6.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources report the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) faces growing challenges replacing basic supplies in addition to known challenges rebuilding its stocks of precision weapons.
- Russian forces conducted a large missile and drone strike against Ukraine overnight on September 5-6.
- Russian sources continue to speculate on the current role and future of dismissed Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin, the former commander of Russia's Aerospace Forces (VKS).
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced an additional \$175 million military assistance package for Ukraine during an unannounced visit to Kyiv on September 6.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 6.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front and advanced near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 6.
- Russian authorities continue crypto-mobilization efforts amid continued rumors of a new wave of general mobilization.
- Ukrainian reports indicate that Russian and occupation authorities continue attempts to increase social control in occupied Ukraine by cracking down against pro-Ukrainian materials in occupied schools.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 5, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 5, 2023, 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.](#)

[Click here to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.](#)

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on September 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continue to advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Geolocated footage posted on September 5 shows Russian forces striking Ukrainian positions northwest and west of Robotyne, indicating that Ukrainian forces have advanced into an area near the settlement that Russian forces previously claimed to control. [1] Additional geolocated footage posted on September 5 shows that Ukrainian forces have also advanced south of Robotyne and northwest of Verbove (about 10km east of Robotyne). [2] Geolocated evidence of Ukrainian forces northwest of Verbove suggests that Ukrainian forces are advancing along the line of Russian fortifications that runs into the settlement. Ukrainian military sources also confirmed that Ukrainian forces have been successful in the Robotyne—Novoprokopivka directions south of Orikhiv, and further reported that Ukrainian forces are pursuing successful offensive operations south of Bakhmut. [3]

Russian sources continue to complain that Russian forces lack sufficient counterbattery capabilities and artillery munitions in the face of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive activities, which the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) are reportedly attempting to combat. Russian milbloggers claimed on September 4 and 5 that Russian counterbattery systems are performing poorly along the front in Ukraine. [4] The milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are relying heavily on Lancet drones and 220mm and 300mm rounds for Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), of which there are limited stockpiles. [5] One Russian milblogger noted that the Russian MoD's plans to form five new artillery brigades in each of Russia's five military districts are in part meant to improve general counterbattery capabilities. [6] It is unclear if the milblogger is claiming that the MoD plans to form five or 25 brigades total. The milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD would equip the new brigades with 203-mm 2S7 Pion and 2S7M Malka artillery systems from Russian stores. [7] *The New York Times* reported on September 4 that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok from September 10-13 and will reportedly discuss North Korea's supply of artillery shells to Russia. [8] Russian sources have continually complained that Russian forces face problems with counterbattery operations. [9]

Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area are likely succeeding in pinning elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division and preventing them from laterally redeploying to critical areas of the front in western Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian milblogger posted an audio recording on September 5 purportedly from a soldier in the Russian 247th VDV Regiment in which the soldier claims that he has to retrieve bodies of Russian personnel near Staromayorske because the Russian command is not overseeing the retrieval of bodies and claimed that his unit lost 49 killed in action in one day of fighting. [10] The Russian soldier's claims suggest that elements of the 247th Regiment remain defending in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area, despite claims from a prominent Russian source in late August that some elements are fighting in the Robotyne area. [11] ISW previously observed that elements of 108th VDV Regiment and 56th VDV Regiment — the two other constituent regiments of the 7th VDV Division — have redeployed to the Robotyne area. [12]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric intended to dismiss recent Ukrainian advances and highlight the beginning of a new academic year for Russian military institutions during a meeting with Russian military leadership on September 5. Shoigu claimed that the Ukrainian forces had not achieved any of their goals for the counteroffensive.[13] Shoigu noted that the Zaporizhia direction, most likely referring to the Robotyne area, has become the tensest area of the front lines and that Ukrainian forces have committed several brigades from their "strategic reserve" to this area.[14] Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have destroyed a heavily exaggerated amount of Ukrainian personnel and military equipment since the Ukrainian counteroffensive began in June 2023. [15] Shoigu noted that Russian military schools and training programs began a new academic year on September 1.[16] Shoigu also noted that the curriculum of Russian military training programs has been adjusted to prepare students for the conditions they would face fighting in Ukraine.[17]

Russian President Vladimir Putin drew historical parallels between Soviet participation in the Second World War and the current war in Ukraine to set ideological expectations for a prolonged war effort. Putin gave a speech on September 5 that invoked the memory of significant Soviet military victories during the Second World War, including turning points in the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk and recapturing the Caucasus and Donbas.[18] Putin had notably attended a concert in honor of the Battle of Kursk's 80th anniversary as Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane crashed on August 23.[19] Putin criticized the international community's "attitude" to the buildup to the Second World War — very likely criticizing European countries for failing to intervene against Nazi Germany prior to the outbreak of war (and ignoring the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that briefly allied the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany, permitted the Soviet invasion of the Baltic States, and partitioned Poland) — as also creating conditions for the current conflict in Ukraine and drew parallels between reconstruction efforts and veterans assistance measures during and after the Second World War and the current war in Ukraine.[20] Putin also reamplified the Kremlin information operation falsely portraying the Ukrainian government as a "Nazi regime." These direct parallels between the "special military operation" and the Second World War are likely the closest that Putin or any other senior Russian official has come to acknowledging the war in Ukraine as an actual war. These parallels also message to a domestic Russian audience that the ongoing Russian war effort is really a war effort despite the insistence on the euphemistic "special military operation."

The Armenian government appears to be seriously questioning its decades-long security relationship with Russia, amid reports of Armenian humanitarian aid to Ukraine and increasing public dissatisfaction with Russia's security guarantees. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenia service *Radio Azatutyun* reported on September 5th that the Armenian government has reportedly sent unspecified humanitarian aid to Ukraine for the first time since the war in Ukraine began.[21] *Radio Azatutyun*'s sources claimed that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's wife Anna Hakobyan will personally deliver the aid to Kyiv and attend the "Third Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen" that begins on September 6.[22] The Armenian government has not officially confirmed this information. Pashinyan notably stated that Russia cannot meet Armenia's security needs in an interview with Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* published on September 4 and called Armenia's dependence on Russia for security a "strategic mistake."[23] Pashinyan also reported that Russia could not meet Armenia's security needs even if it so desired, given the Russian military's current need for weapons and ammunition likely referring to use in Ukraine.[24] Kremlin newswire TASS notably reported on August 28 that Azerbaijani law enforcement officers detained three Nagorno-Karabakh residents, reportedly escorted by Russian peacekeepers, at a checkpoint in the Lachin corridor, prompting protests outside the Russian embassy in Yerevan.[25] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger confirmed on September 5 that Major General Kirill Kulakov replaced Colonel General Alexander Lentsov as the commander of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh.[26]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continue to advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian sources continue to complain that Russian forces lack sufficient counterbattery capabilities and artillery munitions in the face of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive activities, which the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) are reportedly attempting to combat.
- Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area are likely succeeding in pinning elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division and preventing them from laterally redeploying to critical areas of the front in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric intended to dismiss recent Ukrainian advances and highlight the beginning of a new academic year for Russian military institutions during a meeting with Russian military leadership on September 5.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin drew historical parallels between Soviet participation in the Second World War and the current war in Ukraine to set ideological expectations for a prolonged war effort.
- The Armenian government appears to be seriously questioning its decades-long security relationship with Russia, amid reports of Armenian humanitarian aid to Ukraine and increasing public dissatisfaction with Russia's security guarantees.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 5.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front and advanced near Bakhmut, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 5.
- Russian sources continue to report on Russian efforts to recruit volunteers amid continued rumors of general mobilization.
- The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reportedly attempted to assassinate a Russian occupation official in occupied Luhansk Oblast on September 5.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 4, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 4, 2023, 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.](#)

[Click here to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.](#)

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian light infantry has advanced to positions beyond anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth anti-tank obstacles that comprise the current Russian defensive layer ahead of the Ukrainian advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Ukrainian forces likely intend to hold those positions. ISW is not prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have breached this Russian defensive layer in the absence of observed Ukrainian heavy equipment in these areas. Geolocated footage published on September 4 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced to tree-line positions that are east of the Russian anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth obstacles that are a part of a tri-layered defense immediately west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).^[1] Geolocated footage published on September 4 indicates that Ukrainian light infantry has also advanced further into a series of prepared Russian defensive positions along the road that runs northwest into Verbove.^[2] Other geolocated footage published on September 4 indicates that Ukrainian forces have advanced up to Russian defensive positions between Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv).^[3] Ukrainian forces are widening the breach they have already made in one Russian defensive layer and are reportedly maneuvering more equipment and personnel into tactical rear areas of this layer.^[4] Ukrainian forces appear to be making gains in the immediate vicinity of the not-yet-breached Russian defensive layer that runs northwest of Verbove to north of Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv) with infantry assaults and heavy artillery fire on Russian positions further into and south of this layer.^[5] The deployment of Ukrainian heavy equipment and more substantial forces to these areas than ISW has so far observed would indicate both a breach of this Russian defensive layer and an effort to widen that breach.

Russian forces reportedly attempted to expand minefields in southern Ukraine following the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in June. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported that the Russian command determined at the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive that Ukrainian forces might be able to easily breach the Russian doctrinal minefield depth of 120 meters leading Russian forces to aim to increase the depth of their minefields up to 500 meters.^[6] RUSI stated that Russian forces lacked enough mines to mine these larger areas as densely as Russian doctrine dictates, causing Russian forces to deviate from doctrine, including by using improvised explosive devices and a wider and differential distance between mines.^[7] RUSI stated that Russian forces tried to compensate for decreased minefield density by increasing the effectiveness of anti-tank mines by placing two on top of each other.^[8] Ukrainian operations across several sectors of the front have likely further compounded these constraints on the Russian effort to expand minefields by forcing Russian forces to disperse their mining efforts along wide sectors of the frontline. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun stated on September 3 that minefields near the next series of Russian defensive positions in western Zaporizhia are less dense than the initial defensive layer that Ukrainian forces advanced through.^[9] ISW has previously assessed that Ukrainian forces may encounter denser minefields at certain sections of subsequent series of Russian defensive positions, however.^[10]

Limitations on Russian artillery capabilities and Ukrainian advantages in counter-battery fire are forcing the Russians to deviate from their own doctrine, RUSI reported. RUSI stated that Russian forces have been attempting to adapt their fire doctrine since before Ukrainian counteroffensive operations began.^[11] RUSI noted that Russian forces are attempting to prioritize strike accuracy over volume because they lack enough ammunition to sustain doctrinally designated artillery fire, have difficulties transporting a large volume of ammunition to frontline areas, and are seeing diminishing effectiveness of mass strikes as they lose counterbattery radars and their guns suffer from barrel wear.^[12] RUSI stated that Russian forces are attempting to increase the production of Krasnopol laser-guided shells and the use of Lancet drones (loitering munitions) in order to increase accuracy and reduce the number of munitions used in attacks.^[13] RUSI also observed that Russian forces have often prepared their fighting positions for remote demolition with improvised explosives instead of striking their own positions with artillery after Russian forces have withdrawn, as Russian doctrine dictates.^[14] These adaptations suggest that reduced Russian artillery capabilities may be further weakening the Russian defense in certain sectors as artillery fire is a critical component of the Russian elastic defense. A shift towards more precise fire doctrine may allow Russian forces to strengthen these capabilities, but constraints on Russian training capacity will likely prevent Russian forces from implementing this shift at scale in the near term. Russian sources have continually claimed since the start of the counteroffensive that the Russians lack sufficient counterbattery capabilities on various sectors of the front.^[15] Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Commander Colonel Margo Grosberg reported on September 1 that Ukrainian artillery capabilities are "equal or even better" than those of Russian forces and have been able to push Russian artillery units back from the frontline, preventing them from supporting Russian forces.^[16]

Russian forces conducted a drone strike on Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa oblasts on the night of September 3-4. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 32 Shahed 136/131 drones from Cape Chauda, Crimea, and Primorske-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai on the night of September 4 and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 23 of the drones.^[17] Ukrainian Southern Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian drones struck civilian infrastructure in Odesa Oblast, and Russian sources claimed that drones struck port infrastructure in Reni and Izmail, Odesa Oblast.^[18] Head of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Council Mykola Lukashuk reported that a drone strike destroyed 1,500 tons of grain in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.^[19] Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Oleg Nikolenko stated that a Russian drone fell on Romanian territory, which the Romanian Ministry of Defense subsequently denied.^[20]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's unwillingness to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative until all of Russia's extensive terms are met at a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Putin reiterated claims that the West ignored its obligations to allow Russia to export grain and fertilizer at a meeting with Erdogan in Sochi, Russia on September 4.^[21] Putin claimed that Russia will supply 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain for free to unspecified African countries in "the coming days."^[22] Putin and Erdogan claimed that Turkey is willing to help process and transport one million tons of grain intended for these countries.^[23] Putin and Erdogan also announced Qatar's interest in providing financial support so that these countries can receive free grain.^[24]

Head of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine Erik Mose stated on September 4 that the commission has not yet concluded that Russia is committing genocide in Ukraine. Mose stated that the commission must determine the intent of the perpetrators and identify the "need" to physically or biologically exterminate a certain group to meet the legal qualifications under the Genocide Convention.^[25] Mose stated that the commission has found evidence for a large number of war crimes, specifically evidence of torture and strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure that the commission could consider as crimes against humanity.^[26] Mose also stated that the commission previously determined that certain statements in Russian mass media could be considered as incitement to commit genocide.^[27] Mose noted that the commission's investigation into genocide in Ukraine will continue.^[28] Article II of the 1948 Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention) states that "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measure intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."^[29] Article III states that "the following acts shall be punishable: genocide; conspiracy to commit genocide; direct and public incitement to commit genocide; attempt to commit genocide; complicity in genocide."^[30]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian light infantry has advanced to positions beyond anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth anti-tank obstacles that comprise the current Russian defensive layer ahead of the Ukrainian advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Ukrainian forces likely intend to hold those positions. ISW is not prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have breached this Russian defensive layer in the absence of observed Ukrainian heavy equipment in these areas.
- Russian forces reportedly attempted to expand minefields in southern Ukraine following the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in June.
- Limitations on Russian artillery capabilities and Ukrainian advantages in counter-battery fire are forcing the Russians to deviate from their own doctrine, RUSI reported.
- Russian forces conducted a drone strike on Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa oblasts on the night of September 3-4.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's unwillingness to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative until all of Russia's extensive terms are met at a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
- Head of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine Erik Mose stated on September 4 that the commission has not yet concluded that Russia is committing genocide in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 4.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 4.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced on September 4 that the Russian military will not be holding "Zapad-2023" joint strategic exercises scheduled for September.
- Russian occupation officials continued the fifth day of early voting for Russian regional elections in occupied territories on September 4.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 3, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

September 3, 2023, 6:05pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12pm ET on September 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian military officers offered notably frank and direct commentary about the prospects of further Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and indicated that the series of prepared Russian defensive positions immediately ahead and further south of the Ukrainian advance may be less challenging to Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi, who commands the Ukrainian grouping in southern Ukraine, discussed Ukraine's counteroffensive in an interview with *The Guardian* on September 2.[1] Tarnavskyi stated that Ukrainian forces have decisively breached Russian forces' "first line of defense" and that he expects faster Ukrainian gains as Ukrainian forces press on a weaker "second line" of defense.[2] Ukrainian forces have advanced up to the next series of prepared Russian defensive positions in certain areas in the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast, although many Russian sources assert that these positions are the first, not the second, defensive layer in a multi-echeloned Russian defense in southern Ukraine.[3] Ukrainian officials and Russian milbloggers are using different terminology to describe the same positions. Russian sources characterize the first series of positions that Ukrainian forces have previously breached as a forward line without giving it an ordinal number, and the series Ukrainian forces are currently approaching as the first main line of defenses — while Ukrainian forces characterize these positions as Russia's second line of defenses.

Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces devoted 60 percent of their time and resources into building the series of defensive positions that Ukrainian forces have now breached and only 20 percent each to the two subsequent defensive layers further south.[4] This breached series of Russian defensive positions consists of a system of interconnected Russian trenches and dugouts guarded by anti-tank ditches and dense minefields, and Tarnavskyi's reporting supports ISW's previous observation that Russian forces may have not extended similarly challenging preparations throughout subsequent series of defensive layers, particularly regarding the density of minefields.[5] Russian defensive positions are not uniform in strength across the frontline in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Tarnavskyi's description of weaker Russian defensive positions may refer only to the immediate Robotyne area. Tarnavskyi also commented on the weight of Ukrainian efforts elsewhere in southern Ukraine and suggested that the Ukrainian advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast is an operational priority.[6]

Ukrainian military officials particularly noted that advancing Ukrainian forces can operate more freely in areas with sparser Russian minefields. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun stated on September 3 that minefields near the next series of Russian defensive positions are less dense than the initial defensive layer that Ukrainian forces advanced through.[7] Shtupun and Tarnavskyi both stated that Ukrainian forces are deploying more vehicles in these areas and maneuvering more equipment and troops towards the next Russian defensive layer, but they acknowledged that minefields will still present a significant threat.[8] Tarnavskyi stated that Ukrainian forces spent more time on mine clearing than they expected to at the beginning of the counteroffensive and that consistent Russian artillery and aviation fire forced Ukrainian infantry to conduct mine clearing only at night.[9] Shtupun added that heavy minefields forced Ukrainian breaching operations onto narrow paths — the exact intent of minefields under Russian defensive doctrine.[10] Ukrainian forces may now be better positioned to maneuver more freely in the tactical rear of the breached Russian defensive layer. Tarnavskyi's description of the Russian minefields may pertain only to the immediate Robotyne area, and Ukrainian forces may encounter heavily dense minefields at certain sections of subsequent series of Russian defensive positions. Although

Ukrainian forces certainly face further hard fighting regardless, Tarnavskyi characterized Ukrainian forces as having successfully broken through the most difficult Russian defenses.

Ukrainian military officials noted that the strength of the next series of Russian defensive positions around Robotyne will likely depend on Russian force composition in the area. Tarnavskyi stated that Ukrainian forces in the Robotyne area are destroying the Russian units that provide cover for retreating Russian forces and that Russian forces are operating in defensive "patches," likely referring to strongpoints rather than a continuous defensive line.[11] Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksandr Rodyansky stated that upcoming Russian defenses are not as well protected.[12] Shtupun also noted that Russian forces are deploying reserves of unknown quality to defend in the area.[13] Shtupun is likely referencing the lateral redeployment of previously degraded elements of the 7th Guards Airborne and 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Divisions to the Robotyne area from elsewhere in the theater.[14] Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces are deploying reserves from both Ukraine and within Russia, likely referencing Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov's statement on September 1 that the Russian military deployed elements of a newly created "reserve army" (the 25th CAA) to allow Russian forces to conduct further lateral redeployments to strengthen the defense in southern Ukraine.[15] Tarnavskyi noted that Russian forces will run out of their best soldiers sooner or later, giving Ukrainian forces an impetus to attack more often.[16] Tarnavskyi acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are also losing their "strongest and best" and must therefore concentrate on certain areas of the front as a result.[17] Shtupun optimistically noted that additional Ukrainian successes will allow Ukrainian forces to commit more personnel to the ongoing Ukrainian breach of Russian defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[18]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast).[19] Geolocated footage published on September 2 and 3 indicates that Ukrainian forces control southern Klishchiivka.[20] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes in the direction of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[21]

Several Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to operate on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River in occupied Kherson Oblast. Generally reliable Russian milbloggers have consistently claimed since August 30 that Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the left bank of the Dnipro River northwest of Pidstepne and in the Antonivsky Bridge area.[22] One milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have been able to transfer supplies and personnel to positions on the left bank during the past week.[23] Another milblogger claimed that units of mobilized personnel and volunteers are defending in the Kherson direction after unspecified Airborne (VDV) elements departed for Zaporizhia Oblast.[24] The milblogger is likely referring to elements of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division, which ISW observed deploying from the Kherson direction to the Robotyne area in Zaporizhia Oblast in late August.[25] The Kherson Oblast area is likely relatively poorly defended if the milblogger's claims of mobilized personnel and volunteers replacing VDV elements are true.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast on September 3. Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed 22 of the 25 Shahed drones that Russian forces launched from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea.[26] Most Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian drones struck Ukrainian port infrastructure in Reni, Odesa Oblast.[27] Several Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian strikes primarily targeted Ukrainian military fuel storage facilities near the ports.[28] Russian sources claimed that Russian Shahed drones also struck port infrastructure in Izmail, Odesa Oblast.[29]

The Russian military appears to be recruiting personnel at scale through ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts, although the quality and allocation of these new servicemembers remains unclear. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev stated on September 3 that 280,000 people signed contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) since the start of 2023.[30] Medvedev noted that this figure includes individuals formerly in the Russian military reserve or who previously fought as volunteers. Russian State Duma Deputy Andrey Gurulev stated on September 3 that Russian officials intend to sign a total of 420,000 contracts before the end of 2023.[31] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced on June 10 that all volunteer formations were required to sign military contracts with the Russian MoD by July 1, so Medvedev and Gurulev's figures likely include many volunteers that have already been fighting in Ukraine; however, ISW cannot independently confirm how many of these claimed 280,000 personnel are entirely new to the war in Ukraine.[32] Regardless, the Russian military is continuing to successfully recruit for the war in Ukraine at scale. The level of training and combat experience of these contract personnel likely varies, as the Russian military advertises contracts ranging from a few months to two years.[33] These contract soldiers are likely less skilled and experienced than the Russian military's pre-war number of "kontraktniki," professional long-service soldiers. Contract soldiers received greater training and occupied key positions (such as technicians and vehicle crews) in Russian units, with relatively elite units such as Airborne (VDV) formations having a higher proportion of kontraktniki.[34] Many units suffered heavy losses among kontraktniki at the beginning of the war and have unlikely been able to reconstitute with the same quality of personnel.[35] State Duma Deputy Viktor Sobolev stated that the Russian General Staff determined the 420,000 figure as necessary for the creation of new formations and units, likely referencing Defense Minister Shoigu's intent to form many new Russian army formations.[36] However, the Russian military faces the competing priorities of establishing long term new formations and rushing personnel to the front in Ukraine. As ISW previously reported, new formations earmarked for reserves have reportedly already deployed to the frontline ahead of schedule.[37]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on September 3 that he dismissed current Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov and intends to replace him with Rustem Umerov.[38] Umerov is currently the chairman of Ukraine's State Property Fund.[39] Zelensky stated that he believed the Ministry of Defense "needs new approaches and other formats of interaction with both military and society at large" and that he hopes the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada will confirm Umerov this week.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian military officers offered notably frank and direct commentary about the prospects of further Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and indicated that the series of prepared Russian defensive positions immediately ahead and further south of the Ukrainian advance may be less challenging to Ukrainian forces.
- Ukrainian military officials particularly noted that advancing Ukrainian forces can operate more freely in areas with sparser Russian minefields.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 3.
- Several Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to operate on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River in occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast on September 3.

- The Russian military appears to be recruiting personnel at scale through ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts, although the quality and allocation of these new servicemembers remains unclear.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk, in the western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 3.
- Russian law enforcement is patrolling and guarding polling stations in occupied Ukraine to prevent citizens from expressing opposition to the elections and recording the voting process.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 2, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 2, 2023, 5:00pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on September 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on September 2. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[1] Russian milbloggers who have recently maintained that Russian forces hold positions in the southern part of Robotyne claimed that Russian forces withdrew from the southern outskirts of the settlement to unspecified positions further south.[2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 1 that Ukrainian forces have overcome the Russian “first line of defense” in some areas of the Zaporizhia direction, but that the situation remains difficult due to additional Russian concrete fortifications and dense minefields. [3]

The *New York Times* reported on September 2 citing Ukrainian military personnel that Russian forces are spreading inflammable agents on mined fields and igniting them with drone-launched grenades while Ukrainian forces clear mines from the areas in an effort to hinder Ukrainian mine clearing efforts that have allowed Ukrainian forces to advance in certain areas.[4] Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Commander Colonel Margo Grosberg reported on September 1 that Ukrainian artillery capabilities are “equal or even better” than those of Russian forces and have been able to push Russian artillery units back from the frontline, preventing them from supporting Russian forces.[5] This observation is not universally true across the frontline, as Ukrainian units regularly report coming under heavy Russian artillery fire corrected by Russian drones. Grosberg also stated that Ukrainian forces have been successful at severely damaging Russian artillery radars since July.[6] Russian sources have repeatedly expressed concerns since mid-July over the lack of Russian counterbattery artillery capabilities, particularly in southern Ukraine.[7]

Select Russian sources claimed that Russian officers of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) defending in Zaporizhia Oblast contacted former 58th CAA commander Major General Ivan Popov due to the worsening situation at the Russian frontline. Russian milbloggers claimed that Popov has maintained contact with his former subordinates in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and a Russian insider source claimed that these officers turned to Popov for help instead of their new commander.[8] The Russian military command dismissed Popov as the commander of the 58th CAA (Southern Military District) in early July after he engaged in clear insubordination by attempting to bypass Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and bring his complaints about poor counterbattery capabilities, heavy losses, and a lack of rotations directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin.[9] Russian sources have routinely expressed concern about the issues that Popov highlighted and their detrimental impacts on the Russian defensive effort in southern Ukraine.[10] Popov partially established a precedent for insubordination, and his conduct reportedly prompted the Russian military command to begin removing similarly insubordinate commanders from frontline units, although not all reports of commanders removed were confirmed.[11] Russian sources claimed that Popov encouraged his former subordinates to report the truth about the front to the higher Russian command, possibly encouraging them to replicate his insubordination.[12] Popov’s contact with his former subordinates, if true, suggests that Popov’s replacement has not won the trust of his subordinates either because he is less competent or because he is less forthright with senior Russian leadership about continuing challenges facing the Russian defense in western Zaporizhia.

The Russian ultranationalist information space response to a Russian critique of anti-Western mindsets and Russian propaganda demonstrates that the ultranationalist community retains the ability to coalesce around certain issues. Director of the Russian think tank the Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada, Valery Garbuzov, published an article on August 29 criticizing Russian ruling elites who, he argues, have created and perpetuated a series of “utopian myths” about Russian hegemony, the “crisis of capitalism,” and Russia’s claimed leadership of a global anti-Western coalition.[13] Prominent voices within the Russian ultranationalist information space levied largely coherent criticisms against Garbuzov’s article on September 2, criticizing Garbuzov’s argument and the Russian political and informational structures that allowed Garbuzov to hold a prominent position in the Russian political sphere.[14] One prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian Telegram channels have filled an analytical gap in the Russian information space following the onset of the war in Ukraine that think tanks should fill and continue to do so 18 months later.[15]

Prominent Russian milbloggers likely have a monetary incentive to regularly report information about the war in Ukraine that is uncritical of Russian authorities. BBC reported on September 1 that prominent Russian milbloggers claimed that they can make between about 48,000 and 188,000 rubles (about \$500 to 1,950) per advertisement on their Telegram channels.[16] BBC reported that an advertising agent working with Wagner-affiliated channels claimed that a prominent Wagner Group-affiliated source made around 31,500 rubles (about \$330) per advertisement.[17] The advertising agent told BBC that several employees of RIA FAN, a now-shuttered media outlet affiliated with former Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, received only about 10,500 to 21,800 rubles (about \$108 to \$226) per

advertisement due to their lower subscriber count.[18] BBC noted that Russia's average monthly salary is about 66,000 rubles (about \$685). Prominent milbloggers' monthly salaries are thus likely much higher than the Russian average. Russian milbloggers are likely economically incentivized to maintain and grow audiences through war reporting that is uncritical of Russian authorities, as criticism of the Russian authorities, resistance to attempted censorship, and potential legal problems could lead to a decrease in advertisements, although milbloggers who present themselves as telling unpleasant truths can also gain large followings. Alexander "Sasha" Kots, a prominent milblogger who also serves on the Kremlin's Human Rights Council, claimed that milbloggers have a "direct channel to privately communicate information" to the Russian MoD.[19]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on September 2.
- Select Russian sources claimed that Russian officers of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) defending in Zaporizhia Oblast contacted former 58th CAA commander Major General Ivan Popov due to the worsening situation at the Russian frontline.
- The Russian ultranationalist information space response to a Russian critique of anti-Western mindsets and Russian propaganda demonstrates that the ultranationalist community retains the ability to coalesce around certain issues.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas on September 2.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along at least one sector of the front on September 2 and advanced near Bakhmut, in western Donetsk Oblast, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) has formed its own Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) units, elements of which reportedly operate both on the front line and in far rear areas of occupied Ukraine.
- Russian and occupation authorities are encouraging residents of occupied Ukraine who are residing in Russia to vote in the occupation regional elections, likely to increase voter turnout and the perception of electoral legitimacy.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 1, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

September 1, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on September 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov reported that the Russian military deployed elements of a newly created "reserve army" (the 25th CAA) to enable units currently on the frontline in Luhansk Oblast to laterally redeploy to defend against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine. Budanov stated on August 31 that the Russian military deployed elements of the newly formed 25th Combined Arms Army (reportedly formed under the Eastern Military District) to replace elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (Central Military District) in the Kupyansk direction, and that these elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) began a "slow" redeployment to an unspecified area in southern Ukraine.[1] Elements of the 41st CAA's 35th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade and 90th Tank Division participated in the failed Russian winter 2023 offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast and have continued limited offensive activity along the Svatove-Kremenna line through now.[2] These units are likely degraded and have been operating without brigade and regiment level rotations like many frontline Russian units throughout the theater. ISW previously assessed that a lack of operational reserves would force the Russian command to conduct further lateral redeployments and make tough decisions about what sectors of the front to prioritize.[3] The Russian military command appears to have deployed elements of the newly formed and likely low quality or understrength 25th CAA to Luhansk Oblast to free up the relatively more effective 41st CAA elements for southern Ukraine. Budanov added that elements of the 25th CAA are already participating in hostilities in Luhansk Oblast.[4]

The 25th Combined Arms Army is unlikely to be combat effective at scale given its rushed deployment, ahead of a previously reported intended deployment date of December 2023. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) formed a "reserve army" at the end of June, likely referencing the 25th CAA, which began recruiting personnel from the Russian Far East in mid-May.[5] The 25th CAA will reportedly consist of 30,000 contract personnel in two motorized rifle divisions as well as an unspecified number of tank and artillery battalions, although it is unclear what elements have actually formed to date.[6] Budanov stated that Russian forces formed the 25th CAA as a "strategic" reserve and did not intend for the formation to be combat ready before October or November 2023.[7] A Russian administrator in Dalnegorsk, Primorsky Krai posted a recruitment ad for the 25th CAA on June 5 that claimed that the 25th CAA would train personnel from September 1 to December 1 and then deploy to either Zaporizhia or Kherson Oblast - ISW has not independently observed reporting of the October or November date Budanov cited but has no reason to question this statement.[8] Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department Oleksii Hromov stated on July 5 that the 25th CAA would not be combat ready until at least 2024.[9] Budanov noted that the 25th CAA elements that have arrived in Luhansk Oblast are understaffed and lack training, unsurprising due to their accelerated deployment.[10] ISW cannot yet independently verify that elements of the 25th CAA are operating in Luhansk Oblast, and the scale of the 25th CAA's commitment is unclear from Budanov's comments. The current size and capabilities of the elements of the 25th CAA deployed to Ukraine five months prematurely are unclear. The formation is likely either severely understaffed and not near the paper strength of two divisions, or is poorly trained much like initial Russian mobilized units in fall 2022, or both.

The Russian command likely views the deployment of a combat ineffective formation to Luhansk Oblast as a tolerable risk given the relatively lower tempo of operations along much of the Luhansk Oblast frontline. The recent lateral redeployment of elements of the 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division from the Kremenna area in Luhansk Oblast to the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast in late August further suggests that the Russian military command likely views this sector of the front as relatively safe.[11] Ukrainian forces are conducting limited ground attacks in Luhansk Oblast compared to other areas of the front.

Additional Russian lateral redeployments and the immediate commitment of intended operational reserves suggest that short term reinforcement needs are impeding intended long-term reconstitution efforts. The redeployment of elements of the 41st CAA to southern Ukraine is the third major Russian lateral redeployment since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in June and the second in recent weeks.[12] Russian formations at the division level (and in some areas lower) defending in southern Ukraine have done so without rotation since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and these forces have committed substantial material, manpower, and effort to hold back Ukrainian advances.[13] The second lateral deployment in the span of a few weeks suggests an increasing Russian concern about the stability of Russian defenses in light of Ukrainian advances around Robotyne. The creation of the 25th CAA is likely a part of Shoigu's long-term objective previously announced in January 2023 to form several new major ground forces formations, and the deployment of elements of the 25th CAA to avoid creating gaps in the Russian defense suggests that the immediate threat of a Ukrainian breakthrough is serious enough to supersede that effort.[14]

Russian "Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky continues to highlight the impact of the lack of Russian counter-battery capabilities on Russian morale in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area. Khodakovsky claimed on September 1 that Russian forces continue to suffer from a lack of counter-battery capabilities in the Novomayorske-Novodonetske-Kermenchyk area (12km to 18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka), where Khodakovsky and the "Vostok" Battalion are reportedly defending.[15] Khodakovsky insinuated that Russian forces are experiencing extreme physical and psychological stress in this area due to constant Ukrainian artillery fire and the Russian inability to return fire.[16] Khodakovsky expressed concerns about whether distressed and exhausted Russian forces will be able to defend against a future Ukrainian offensive in this sector of the front.[17]

Khodakovsky has previously highlighted similar concerns about the Russian defense in this area, although his recent comments are more negative and defeatist in tone.[18] Khodakovsky's complaints about the lack of counter-battery capabilities in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and concerns about its impacts on Russian morale are not necessarily indicative of a wider phenomenon in the Russian defense. However, Khodakovsky's comments likely accurately reflect the situation in his limited but important sector of the frontline as well as the situation for often neglected proxy military formations such as Khodakovsky's Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion. Khodakovsky noted on August 31 that Russian forces cannot lose sight of the daily fight against Ukrainian forces while fantasizing about "burying the enemy in the future." [19] Khodakovsky may believe that senior Russian commanders have done exactly this by letting the situation deteriorate to the point that Russian forces may be unable to defend against future Ukrainian offensives in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made some advances on September 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations south of Bakhmut, and geolocated footage shows that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced northwest of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[20] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the Novodanylivka-Novopokropivka direction (5km to 13km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[21] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv), however.[22] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on July 1 that the US has observed notable Ukrainian progress in the "Zaporizhia area" (likely meaning the western Zaporizhia Oblast direction) in the past 72 hours and that Ukrainian forces have achieved some success against the "second line of Russian defenses" in southern Ukraine.[23] Kirby also stated that anonymous US officials' criticisms of the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive are unhelpful.[24]

Politico confirmed previously-reported numbers of refurbished US Abrams tanks set to arrive in Ukraine by mid-September. Politico confirmed that Ukraine will receive the first 10 of the 31 promised refurbished US Abrams tanks by mid-September following refurbishment in Germany, citing a US Department of Defense official and another source.[25] The US Army Europe and Africa Spokesperson Colonel Martin O'Donnell stated that the US remains committed to delivering the 31 Abrams during an unspecified timeframe in the fall.[26] O'Donnell stated that 200 Ukrainian servicemen recently completed one of the final phases of Abrams training. Ukraine is unlikely to deploy the initial Abrams tanks (two platoons) until the entire brigade set is ready for operations.

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov is reportedly visiting multiple African countries as part of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) continued effort to assume control over the Wagner Group's operations in Africa. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Yevkurov is conducting a tour of various African countries including Burkina Faso and recently visited Libya and Syria in an attempt to replace "private military companies" (PMCs) with Russian MoD-controlled formations.[27] The milblogger also claimed that the Russian MoD is forming a "volunteer corps" to function as an "expeditionary corps" that will include over 20,000 personnel.[28] The "expeditionary corps" may be a reference to the "Rossiyskiy Ekspeditzionnyi Korpus" (Russian Expeditionary Corps) PMC that Russian officials are allegedly creating to conduct operations abroad.[29] Bloomberg reported on August 31 that unnamed sources close to the Russian MoD and an unspecified PMC claimed that a Russian MoD-affiliated PMC is positioned to take control of Wagner's operations in the Central African Republic.[30] ISW has continually observed claims since the Wagner rebellion on June 24 that the Russian MoD is attempting to consolidate control over Wagner operations in Africa.[31]

A Russian public opinion poll indicates that there is likely little to no societal discontent around the Wagner Group or its financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, and the true cause of the plane crash will have little impact on both Russian perceptions and the future of the Wagner Group. Independent Russian polling organization Levada Center found that roughly equivalent percentages of Russians believe that either Prigozhin's death was accidental; Russian authorities intentionally orchestrated Prigozhin's death; Prigozhin is still alive; or the cause of Prigozhin's death is difficult to determine.[32] Levada Center polls conducted on June 23 and August 23 found that Russians are almost evenly split between disapproving and approving of Prigozhin's activities.[33] Public opinion on the death of Prigozhin (very likely a Kremlin-directed assassination) would only impact Kremlin or Ministry of Defense decision making if public opposition reached a far higher threshold, and the Kremlin likely in fact benefits from continued disagreement in Russian society over the circumstances of Prigozhin's death.

A fringe Russian milblogger arrested on August 31 for allegedly discrediting the Russian military reportedly pled guilty on September 1.[34] Russian state media outlet TASS reported that Andrey Kurshin, administrator of the "Moscow Calling" Telegram channel, pled guilty to charges for knowingly disseminating false information about the Russian military and faces up to 10 years in prison.[35] Russian media outlet Baza claimed that Russian officials charged Kurshin for posts made on September 14 and November 23, 2022 covering Russian shelling of Zaporizhia Oblast and a strike near a dam on the Inhulets River near Kherson City, respectively.[36] Kurshin, via the "Moscow Calling" channel, has actively criticized the Russian military, Ministry of Defense (MoD), and Kremlin throughout the war for

poor Russian conduct, and these specific and older posts are unlikely to be the impetus for Kurshin's arrest. Russian authorities reportedly arrested prominent ultranationalist Igor Girkin based on Telegram posts two months prior to his arrest but reportedly began investigating Girkin on the same day he levied especially harsh critiques against Russian President Vladimir Putin, as ISW has previously reported.[37]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov reported that the Russian military deployed elements of a newly created "reserve army" (the 25th CAA) to enable units currently on the frontline in Luhansk Oblast to laterally redeploy to defend against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.
- The 25th Combined Arms Army is unlikely to be combat effective at scale given its rushed deployment, ahead of a previously reported intended deployment date of December 2023.
- Additional Russian lateral redeployments and the immediate commitment of intended operational reserves suggest that short term reinforcement needs are impeding intended long-term reconstitution efforts.
- Russian "Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovskiy continues to highlight the impact of the lack of Russian counter-battery capabilities on Russian morale in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made some advances on September 1.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed gains.
- Russian occupation officials announced on September 1 that voting began for the Russian regional elections held in occupied Ukraine and will continue in various forms through September 10.
- Russian officials continue efforts to forcibly indoctrinate Ukrainian youth into Russian culture and identity by integrating schools in occupied Ukraine into the Russian educational system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 31, 2023

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Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

August 31, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on August 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31 and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front. The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions and achieved unspecified success in the direction of Novodanylivka-Novoprokopivka (5km to 13km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the Bakhmut direction.[2] Ukrainian Chief of the Main Directorate of Missile Forces and Artillery and Unmanned Systems of the General Staff Brigadier General Serhiy Baranov stated that Ukrainian forces have reached parity in counterbattery capabilities with Russian forces.[3] Baranov stated that NATO-provided artillery systems with ranges of 30km to 40km allow Ukrainian forces to destroy Russian artillery systems and force Russian forces to move their artillery further from the frontline.[4] Ukrainian officials previously made statements in late July indicating that Ukraine's interdiction campaign is successfully degrading Russian counterbattery capabilities. [5] Russian sources have repeatedly expressed concerns since mid-July over the lack of Russian counterbattery artillery capabilities, particularly in southern Ukraine. [6]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted Ukraine's domestic production of long-range missiles on August 31, likely as part of a coordinated Ukrainian campaign promoting increased Ukrainian strike capabilities against Russian deep rear areas. Zelensky stated that a Ukrainian-produced long-range weapon successfully hit a target 700 kilometers away, but did not provide further details about the strike or the weapon.[7] Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov previously stated on August 26 that a new but unspecified Ukrainian-made missile struck a Russian S-400 air defense system in Crimea on August 23, and Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated on August 24 that Ukrainian forces have the ability to strike any part of occupied Crimea.[8]

Russian authorities arrested a notable fringe ultranationalist Russian milblogger on accusations of discrediting the Russian military, likely as part of centralized efforts to silence some critical milblogger voices without prompting a general backlash. Russian authorities arrested Andrei Kurshin, who reportedly runs the Telegram channel "Moscow Calling," on August 31 but did not specify what content Kurshin posted that prompted the charges.[9] The "Moscow Calling" channel routinely criticizes Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and notably commonly attacks many aspects of Russia's military conduct of the war in Ukraine while supporting the ultranationalist goals underpinning the war itself. The wider Russian ultranationalist information space welcomed Kurshin's arrest and noted that he routinely discredited the Russian military by mocking Russian military deaths and writing "vile" thoughts about the Russian war effort.[10] "Moscow Calling" also regularly supports imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin, likely generating further Kremlin opposition towards

Kurshin.[11] Elements of the wider Russian ultranationalist community revealed Kurshin's previously anonymous identity in April after he joked about the assassination of Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky), and at the time milbloggers called on Russian authorities to punish Kurshin for fostering anti-government attitudes online.[12] Kurshin and Girkin's arrests suggest that the Kremlin may be arresting prominent ultranationalist voices that the wider community largely reviles to avoid backlash as the Kremlin intensifies its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space.[13] Kurshin's arrest does not necessarily portend wider repression of more mainstream Russian milbloggers. Milblogger reactions, including those who have been outright critical of the Russian military leadership, additionally suggest that the milblogger community has been and is willing to establish unofficial guidelines for what is permissible criticism of the war and the Russian leadership. The Kremlin likely benefits from and encourages this self-policing, to a certain degree, among milbloggers - tolerating some criticism while cultivating key milbloggers and seeking to silence particularly critical voices.

Russian military authorities allegedly ordered the detention of three Russian milbloggers who have recently criticized the Russian MoD – a move that sparked a backlash in only a small corner of the Russian information space. Russian milbloggers claimed that the commander of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and possibly a high-level Russian military official ordered Russian Military Counterintelligence to detain the three Russian milbloggers who have recently been critical of the Russian MoD's handling of issues within the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. [14] Reactions to the detention orders were largely isolated to the small community that has been perpetuating discussions about the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade since August 25, indicating that the Russian MoD is likely choosing targets whose punishment will not have significant repercussions in the Russian information space and this discussion is unlikely to last in the wider milblogger space.[15]

Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin and his associates conducted likely futile political maneuvers intended to coalesce into a coherent and meaningful political opposition group. Girkin announced on August 31 that he intends to run for president in the 2024 Russian presidential elections, but primarily used the announcement to reiterate his longstanding critiques of Russian President Vladimir Putin.[16] Girkin's theoretical "campaign" will have little to no impact and should not be construed as a direct political threat to the Kremlin. Girkin criticized Putin for being an ineffective military leader, failing to remove inept senior officials, and for prioritizing rich billionaires and longtime friends over the needs of Russia - all of which are longstanding rhetorical points from Girkin.[17] Girkin's announcement is not a serious presidential bid (and the Kremlin will not allow it to be one) but rather an attempt to bring attention to Girkin's imprisonment, his longtime criticisms of Putin, and his attempts to form a political movement. Kirill Fedorov, member of the Girkin-run Angry Patriots Club, stated that Girkin's presidential announcement is a surprise and that the Angry Patriots Club had previously decided against Girkin or other members participating in the coming electoral cycle after Girkin's arrest, and did not discuss the possibility of Girkin running for president during a recent meeting.[18] The Russian Movement in Support of Strelkov (Igor Girkin) announced on August 30 that it formed the "Russian Strelkov Movement" and unanimously elected Girkin as its head, one of many recent political announcements likely aimed at preventing the movement from fracturing without Girkin's leadership and voice to hold the movement together.[19] Girkin's August 31 announcement prompted limited reactions in the Russian ultranationalist information space that largely centered around confusion, sarcastic support, and criticism of the alleged presidential bid due to Girkin's and Russia's current political situations.[20] Prior announcements about the formation of political movements from Girkin's associates have not resulted in any significant reaction, and the Angry Patriots Club is likely desperate to maintain relevance and cohesion with Girkin imprisoned.[21]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31 and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted Ukraine's domestic production of long-range missiles on August 31, likely as part of a coordinated Ukrainian campaign promoting increased Ukrainian strike capabilities against Russian deep rear areas.
- Russian authorities arrested a notable fringe ultranationalist Russian milblogger on accusations of discrediting the Russian military, likely as part of centralized efforts to silence some critical milblogger voices without prompting a general backlash.
- Russian military authorities allegedly ordered the detention of three Russian milbloggers who have recently criticized the Russian MoD – a move that sparked a backlash in only a small corner of the Russian information space.
- Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin and his associates conducted likely futile political maneuvers intended to coalesce into a coherent and meaningful political opposition group.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and unsuccessfully counterattacked in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russify Ukrainian youth.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 30, 2023

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

Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 30, 2023, 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.](#)

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on August 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly destroyed four Russian Il-76 planes during a drone strike on a Russian airfield in Pskov Oblast on the night of August 29 to

30. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov stated that the drone strike destroyed four Russian Il-76 planes and possibly damaged two other planes at the Pskov airfield but did not comment on the nature of the strike or claim responsibility for it.[1] Geolocated footage and Russian sources confirmed the strike and the destruction of at least two Russian Il-76 planes.[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that over 21 Ukrainian drones struck the Pskov airfield. [3] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian air defenses and electronic warfare (EW) systems also downed Ukrainian drones over Oryol, Tula, Voronezh, Ryazan, Kaluga, Bryansk, and Moscow oblasts.[4] Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin stated that Russian air defenses repelled a massive Ukrainian drone strike on the Central Federal Okrug (a large administrative area including Moscow but not Pskov) and that at least one of the drones was headed toward Moscow, possibly suggesting that Russian authorities may have initially believed that Ukrainian forces intended to strike Moscow or the region around it.[5] Russian forces may have focused their air defenses on covering Moscow and somehow missed the unusually large number of Ukrainian drones that reportedly struck the Pskov airfield. The Ukrainian drones that Russian air defenses downed over the six other oblasts were likely en route to Moscow or Pskov Oblast and likely were not part of a Ukrainian effort to strike targets in the other oblasts.

Russian propagandists and milbloggers criticized Russian forces for their inability to defend Russian territory and military facilities, while simultaneously criticizing recent Russian MoD censorship efforts. A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that the Ukrainian strike on the Peskov airfield indicates that Russian air defenses have not adapted to defend against repeated Ukrainian drone strikes, in contrast with how Russian air defenses in Crimea have adapted.[6] The milblogger also criticized Russian authorities for not keeping expensive military aircraft in hangars.[7] Another prominent Russian milblogger expressed concern that there will be no safe places in western Russia due to Ukraine's growing technical capabilities and suggested that Russian forces need to take this into account when securing military and strategic facilities.[8] Still, another milblogger noted that the requirement for Russian authorities to secure and defend Russian airfields is at a "qualitatively different level" from what it had been.[9] Russian sources also challenged the Russian MoD's recent censorship efforts by noting the need for truth and honesty in reporting about Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, including one Russian milblogger who criticized official Russian television channels for not reporting the Ukrainian strikes.[10] Prominent Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov expressed his outrage in response to the drone strike and criticized Russian elites who are calling on the Kremlin to freeze the war in Ukraine and negotiate to save Russia's economy.[11]

Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile and drone strike predominantly targeting Kyiv on the night of August 29-30, likely in retaliation for the Ukrainian strikes earlier on Moscow and Pskov oblasts. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 28 Kh-101, Kh-555, and Kh-55 air-launched cruise missiles from aircraft operating out of Engels airbase in Saratov Oblast and the Caspian Sea, and 16 Shahed-136/131 drones from Krasnodar Krai and Kursk Oblast.[12] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 28 cruise missiles and 15 drones over Kyiv, Odesa, Cherkasy, and Mykolaiv oblasts. [13] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that Ukrainian forces shot down over 20 air targets over Kyiv.[14] This Russian strike was considerably larger than other Russian strikes in recent weeks and was likely in retaliation for the Ukrainian strikes on Moscow and Pskov Oblasts earlier in the night.

Ukrainian light infantry - likely reconnaissance elements - infiltrated east of Russian field fortifications near Verbove as of August 30. Geolocated footage published on August 30 shows Ukrainian infantry on the northwestern outskirts of Verbove, indicating that Russian control over the outskirts of the settlement is degraded.[15] The footage, however, does not indicate that Ukrainian forces established control over the area at this time, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces have not yet breached the defensive line around Verbove.[16] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces were successful in the Novodanylivka-Novopokropivka (4-15km south of Orikhiv) and Mala Tokmachka-Verbove (7-18km southeast of Orikhiv) directions.[17] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces continue offensive operations south of Bakhmut, and geolocated footage published on August 28 shows that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced south of Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut).[18] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced in the direction of Volodyne (13km south of Velyka Novosilka) on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border and that Russian forces had to retreat from several heights in the area.[19]

The Kremlin has reportedly undertaken several efforts to silence or confuse reports about Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's funeral, which likely indicates that the Kremlin remains worried about Prigozhin's appeal in Russia and among Wagner forces even after his death. Two acting Russian officials told *The Moscow Times* that the Russian Presidential Administration and Federal Security Service (FSB) deliberately made Prigozhin's funeral a secret to avoid further making him a martyr.[20] The officials noted that Russian Presidential Administration's First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergei Kiriyenko, officers from several intelligence agencies, and FSB officials met to develop a plan that would prevent any chance of public outcry or protest and mislead the public about the location of Prigozhin's burial. *The Moscow Times* added that there were many conflicting reports about the location of Prigozhin's funeral on August 29. Some Russian Telegram channels noted that Russian federal channels largely ignored Prigozhin's funeral, likely also as part of the Kremlin's planned "coverage" of the funeral.[21] ISW continued to observe some Russian Telegram channels baselessly speculating that Prigozhin survived the crash, which may have also been an information operation to overwhelm the Russian information space with misleading reports and deflect from Prigozhin's funeral.[22]

Some Russian officials may be probing the views of milbloggers about Prigozhin and his death to identify and censor Russian ultranationalists not clearly connected with Prigozhin or Wagner. A Russian milblogger claimed that he received a visit from "aggressive" Telegram channel advertisers who had asked him to promote several Telegram channels that exaggerated the topic of the Wagner leadership's death in "almost an abusive manner."[23] The milblogger noted that this request was strange because the Kremlin and the Russian state media had "already closed this topic" and he refused to promote these channels. The refusal reportedly prompted one advertiser to accuse him of supporting the rebellion and opposing Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Constitution.[24] The milblogger noted that division within Russian society would not benefit the Russian war effort. The milblogger has been consistently critical of the Russian military leadership and supportive of Russian Airborne Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky – who had previous links to the Prigozhin but who survived the armed rebellion apparently unscathed and still in power.[25] The incident, at the very least, suggests that prominent milbloggers are self-censoring their discussions about Prigozhin's death and have modeled their coverage of this subject on the Kremlin. The incident may also support the above outlined hypothesis that certain Russian social media actors may be attempting to overwhelm the Russian information space, or it could indicate that Russian officials are trying to identify other prominent ultranationalist voices who may be promoting insubordination of the regime or the military and tie them in some way to Prigozhin.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov reiterated his loyalty to Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 30 in continued attempts to distance himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Kadyrov posted a picture of himself with Putin and proclaimed that he is "an infantryman of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief" and is "ready to fulfill any order" from Putin.[26] Kadyrov has repeatedly attempted to align himself with Putin and the Russian MoD and away from Prigozhin following Prigozhin's fall from grace.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly destroyed four Russian Il-76 planes during a drone strike on a Russian airfield in Pskov Oblast on the night of August 29 to 30.
- Russian propagandists and milbloggers criticized Russian forces for their inability to defend Russian territory and military facilities, while simultaneously criticizing recent Russian MoD censorship efforts.
- Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile and drone strike predominantly targeting Kyiv on the night of August 29-30, likely in retaliation for the Ukrainian strikes earlier on Moscow and Pskov oblasts.
- Ukrainian light infantry - likely reconnaissance elements - infiltrated east of Russian field fortifications near Verbove as of August 30.
- The Kremlin has reportedly undertaken several efforts to silence or confuse reports about Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's funeral, which likely indicates that the Kremlin remains worried about Prigozhin's appeal in Russia and among Wagner forces even after his death.
- Some Russian officials may be probing the views of milbloggers about Prigozhin and his death to identify and censor Russian ultranationalists not clearly connected with Prigozhin or Wagner.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov reiterated his loyalty to Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 30 in continued attempts to distance himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 30 and reportedly advanced.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along at least two sectors of the front on August 30 and advanced near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly banning Wagner Group soldiers from fighting in Ukraine.
- The Ukrainian Crimean-based "Atesh" partisan group claimed that its partisans successfully detonated an explosive at the campaign headquarters of the United Russia party in occupied Nova Kakhovka, Kherson Oblast on August 29.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 29, 2023, 8:45pm ET

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on August 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces advanced near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 29. Geolocated footage published on August 29 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut and about five kilometers southeast of Robotyne.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[2] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun reported on August 28 that Ukrainian forces continued to secure positions in Robotyne and are demining the area.^[3] Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces could bring more troops to the Robotyne area and would have greater opportunities for maneuver.^[4] Shtupun noted that Robotyne is near the highway to Tokmak, an important Russian ground line of communication (GLOC).^[5] A Russian milblogger suggested that Russian forces are continuing to commit a significant number of reserves, Airborne (VDV) elements, and TOS-1 thermobaric artillery systems to the area – likely indicating that Russian forces are worried about the vulnerability of their positions in Robotyne.^[6] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces intend to deplete Ukrainian offensive potential by fixing Ukrainian forces in engagements in the settlement of Robotyne.^[7]

Russian sources continued to express concerns over Russian vulnerabilities in eastern and western Zaporizhia Oblast. One Russian milblogger claimed that the situation near Verbove (18km southwest of Orikhiv) is “very dangerous.”^[8] Russian “Vostok” Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky, reportedly defending the eastern Donetsk-western Zaporizhia Oblast border area, claimed that Russian forces in his sector are stretched in a long arc along the frontline, are having difficulties transferring reserves, and lack resources.^[9] Khodakovsky claimed that Ukrainian efforts to cut off Russian transport routes would further complicate the situation.^[10] Khodakovsky has previously highlighted concerns about the Russian defense in the eastern Donetsk-western Zaporizhia Oblast border area, specifically relating to poor Russian counterbattery capabilities, heavy Russian losses, exhausted Russian forces, and a lack of reserves.^[11] The “Vostok” Battalion claimed that Ukrainian forces disrupted their logistics on August 28 by striking their rear area with drones.^[12] The “Vostok” Battalion noted that Ukrainian shelling has wounded several of its personnel and that Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems are failing to down Ukrainian aircraft and drones.^[13] Khodakovsky’s and the “Vostok” Battalion’s complaints are likely those of tactical commanders focused on their own local issues on a sector of the front that is of lower priority to Russian theater commanders who are focusing efforts in western Zaporizhia. These concerns could well be valid, but senior Russian commanders could have contingencies in place should the situation here deteriorate that they have not troubled to communicate to Khodakovsky and his colleagues. Such tensions between de-prioritized tactical commanders and higher commanders are not uncommon in war.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and reported Wagner logistics and security head Valery Chekalov were buried on August 29 in St. Petersburg in separate cemeteries, likely to prevent the creation of a single pilgrimage site that would establish the deceased Wagner members as martyrs. Prigozhin’s

and Chekalov's funerals were held at the Porokhovskoye and Severnoye Cemeteries, respectively.[14] The funerals were closed to the public, and Russian police and National Guard (Rosgvardia) units secured the areas.[15] The Kremlin's likely efforts to separate the Wagner burial sites to prevent their martyrdom in the public eye may prove ineffective as the official Telegram channel of Prigozhin's press service, which had been inactive since June 26, publicly confirmed Prigozhin's burial site on August 29 and called on anyone "wishing to say goodbye" to visit.[16] Wagner-affiliated sources did not comment on the future of the Wagner private military company, likely indicating a hesitancy within the organization to appoint a successor given the Kremlin's and the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) efforts to destroy the Wagner Group since the rebellion and the challenges any successor loyal to the Kremlin would likely face in securing his position within Wagner.[17]

Russian milbloggers accused the Russian MoD for the fifth consecutive day of attempting to conceal concerns over the mistreatment of a Southern Military District (SMD) brigade operating in occupied Kherson Oblast.[18] Russian milbloggers have continued to criticize the Russian MoD for mistreating elements of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District). The milbloggers also accused the Russian MoD of reportedly staging a response video in which five men claiming to be serving in the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade called on milbloggers to refrain from discussing the brigade's alleged lack of artillery support and supplies in the Dnipro River delta area.[19] One milblogger noted the Russian military command began punishing servicemen of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade for speaking out about these problems and added that state-affiliated milbloggers and propagandists are discrediting that concerns of a unit that is operating on a dangerous coastal frontline on the east (left) bank Dnipro River.[20] Milbloggers also claimed that these problems began after the Russian military command appointed a former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 100th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade commander with the alias "Skif" to command the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade.[21] Milbloggers claimed that "Skif" had previously "destroyed" the 100th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade while receiving state honors.[22] **The Russian MoD notably has yet to silence these complaints, which may indicate that the Russian military command is unsure it can effectively do so at this time.**

These milblogger persistent complaints are likely an attempt to spark command changes that may favor Russian Airborne Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, who reportedly oversees Russian forces in southern Ukraine. Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian military command needs to immediately change its leadership if Russia wants to win the war and claimed that Ukrainian forces pose a threat to the allegedly mistreated 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade.[23] Ukrainian small-scale raids, however, do not pose a significant threat to the Russian grouping of forces in occupied Kherson Oblast – and milblogger concern is more likely aimed at discrediting unwanted commanders such as "Skif," who was likely appointed by the Russian Chief of General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov or "Dnepr" Group of Forces (Kherson Oblast) Commander Colonel General Oleg Makarevich. Some of these milbloggers have previously complained about Gerasimov, Makarevich, and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu for failing to respond to Ukrainian threats in occupied Kherson Oblast, not providing boats to Russian forces, or blaming them for other military failures.[24] Some of these milbloggers had specifically attacked Makarevich, whom the Russian military command previously appointed to replace Teplinsky in January 2023 before Russian President Vladimir Putin reinstated Teplinsky in March-April 2023. [25] Some of these milbloggers also have a history of publicly praising Teplinsky and opposing Gerasimov's or Shoigu's efforts to remove Teplinsky from his position after the Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24.[26] Teplinsky had been previously loosely affiliated with Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and had repeatedly been insubordinate to Gerasimov and Shoigu.[27] Teplinsky may have lost some authority since the rebellion or may be attempting to prevent Gerasimov and Shoigu from undermining his authority. These complaints may also be a part of an ongoing campaign to discredit Makarevich that existed prior to the rebellion and highlight that factional divisions within the Russian military command have continued past the rebellion.

The Russian MoD may be reverting to the more limited coverage of the war in Ukraine while attempting to censor complaints along the frontline and reports of Ukrainian advances. The Russian MoD recently changed its daily reporting style to reduce the daily amount of information it reports on the war.[28] The Russian MoD previously issued a daily situational report that differed from the individual situational reports from the press services of each Russian grouping of forces. [29] The press services of each Russian grouping of forces issued text directly copied from the overall daily situational report instead of their own original reports on August 29, however.[30] The Russian MoD has consistently attempted to institute an information policy that would provide limited information about the frontlines throughout the war.[31] The Russian MoD's change in reporting, if this trend continues, may reflect its wider efforts to censor Russian reporting on the war and unify its own narrative.

The US State Department announced a new military aid package for Ukraine on August 29. The \$250 million package includes AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, mine clearing equipment, HIMARS rockets, and Javelin anti-armor systems.[32]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin is currently focused on promoting five main information operations against Ukraine, all of which ISW has observed. The GUR reported on August 29 that the Russian Presidential Administration held a meeting on August 25 to approve the specific narratives that Russian media should promote in the information space.[33] The Russian narratives include claims that Ukraine is conducting mass mobilization regardless of age, gender, or health; claims that Ukraine's Western partners are disappointed in Ukraine's prospects for victory; claims that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is failing; claims that the Ukrainian government is completely corrupt and is not fighting corruption and; claims that Russian authorities provide good living standards and conditions in occupied Ukraine.[34] Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko and Russian media representatives reportedly attended the meeting. ISW has observed all five false narratives in the Russian information space.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces advanced near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 29.
- Russian sources continued to express concerns over Russian vulnerabilities in eastern and western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and reported Wagner logistics and security head Valery Chekalov were buried on August 29 in St. Petersburg in separate cemeteries, likely to prevent the creation of a single pilgrimage site that would establish the deceased Wagner members as martyrs.
- Russian milbloggers accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for the fifth consecutive day of attempting to conceal concerns over the mistreatment of a Southern Military District (SMD) brigade operating in occupied Kherson Oblast.
- These milblogger persistent complaints are likely an attempt to spark command changes that may favor Russian Airborne Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, who reportedly oversees Russian forces in southern Ukraine.

- The Russian MoD may be reverting to more limited coverage of the war in Ukraine while attempting to censor complaints along the frontline and reports of Ukrainian advances.
- The United States State Department announced a new military aid package for Ukraine on August 29.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin is currently focused on promoting five main information operations against Ukraine, all of which ISW has observed.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border area but did not make confirmed advances.
- The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on August 29 that the Russian MoD is still unlikely to meet its targets for volunteer recruitment, despite offering incentives such as high salaries and additional social benefits.
- Ukrainian sources reported that occupation authorities continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 28, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 28, 2023, time 7:10pm 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.

[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on August 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials formally acknowledged that Ukrainian forces had liberated Robotyne amid continued Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on August 28 that Ukrainian forces have liberated Robotyne, achieved unspecified successes southeast of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and south of Mala Tokmachka (7km southeast of Orikhiv), and are advancing in the directions of Novodanylivka (4km south of Orikhiv), Novopokropivka (15km south of Orikhiv), Mala Tokmachka, and Ocheretuvate (25km southwest of Orikhiv).^[1] Heat anomalies from NASA FIRMS/VIIRS sensors and Russian claims of Ukrainian advances likely indicate that Ukrainian forces advanced near Verbove.^[2] Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces out of positions east of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and in the center of the settlement and have made unspecified progress near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut).^[3]

Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continue offensive operations in the southern direction, which she specified is the main direction of Ukrainian offensive operations.^[4] Malyar's statement is consistent with the scale of Ukrainian offensive operations that ISW has observed in southern and eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces are currently conducting two operational efforts in southern Ukraine in western Zaporizhia Oblast and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and Malyar did not indicate one effort as the main offensive direction.

The Russian military command continues to expend relatively elite Russian airborne forces by deploying these troops to defend vulnerable positions against Ukrainian counteroffensives. Geolocated footage published on August 27 indicates that the Russian military command deployed elements of the Russian 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division to reinforce Russian positions near Robotyne likely from the Kremenna area in Luhansk Oblast.^[5] ISW had previously observed that elements of almost all Russian VDV formations are operating in areas where Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations, and this lateral redeployment further suggests that Russian forces may be using relatively elite units to reinforce critical sectors of the frontline.^[6] Russian forces previously redeployed the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division from Kherson Oblast to support Russian defenses in eastern and western Zaporizhia Oblast and have transferred other VDV forces from Luhansk Oblast to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensives on Bakhmut's flanks.^[7] The Russian military command has consistently relied on VDV formations as both an offensive and a defensive force and they are likely degraded from their high operational tempo. The degradation of these forces will likely weaken Russia's ability to sustain complex defensive operations and almost certainly disrupt any Russian intent to resume offensive operations at scale, which have predominantly relied on relatively elite infantry that Russia now lacks.

Russian forces conducted a missile strike on the rear areas of Ukraine on August 28. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched four Kalibr cruise missiles from the Black Sea and two Kh-59 cruise missiles from the airspace above occupied Kherson Oblast in the direction of Kryvyi Rih on the night of August 28 and that Ukrainian air defenses intercepted all but two Kalibr missiles.^[8] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that the Russian missiles struck a civilian industrial facility in Poltava Oblast.^[9]

A Ukrainian intelligence official indicated that Russian forces may have marginally replenished their stocks of high-precision missiles through conservation in the summer of 2023. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi stated on August 28 that Russian forces have a total of 585 missiles left in their stocks that have a range of more than 500km.^[10] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov last provided official Ukrainian figures on Russian missile stocks in early January 2023 in the closing months of the Russian strike campaign that targeted critical infrastructure from roughly October 2022 to March 2023.^[11] Skibitskyi offered new figures for Russian missile stocks, compared with Reznikov's January 2023 figures as follows:

- 270 Iskander ballistic and cruise missiles (+126 from January)
- 140 sea-based Kalibr cruise missiles (+81 from January)
- Roughly 100 Kh-101/Kh-55/Kh-555 cruise missiles (-18 from January)
- Roughly 75 Kinzhal ballistic missiles (+22 from January)

- 150 Kh-22/32 missiles (-12 from January).[12]

It is unclear if these figures are estimates or exact amounts, but they nevertheless suggest that Ukrainian intelligence assesses that Russian forces have been able to marginally replenish their stocks of high precision missiles since the end of the larger Russian air campaign in the fall and winter of 2022. Russian forces launched a new air campaign in May 2023 focused on maintaining a more regular pace of strikes against Ukraine with fewer missiles, and Skibitskyi suggested that this allowed Russian forces to replenish their stocks.[13] Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russia is able to produce roughly a hundred missiles across various types per month, and this has likely allowed Russian forces to either maintain or marginally replenish their stocks during the summer air campaign.[14] Skibitskyi stated that Russian defense enterprises are struggling to produce several dozens of specific types of missiles a month due to foreign component shortages.[15]

Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces may intend to resume a wider campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the fall of 2023, but assessed Russia likely has not replenished its missile stocks to sustain a campaign on the scale of the winter 2022-2023 strikes. Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces are conducting reconnaissance on Ukrainian infrastructure facilities and may begin a massive strike series with missiles and drones at the end of September or in October.[16] Russian forces conducted strikes with up to 100 missiles in a single strike series during the air campaign in the fall and winter of 2022, and the marginal replenishment of their missile stocks will likely prevent them from conducting an air campaign at anywhere near that scale.[17] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russia is increasing its missile production but not enough to maintain the same intensity of strikes as the fall and winter of 2022.[18]

Ukrainian officials assessed that any upcoming Russian strike campaign may employ new tactics that use fewer missiles and more drones. Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces are improving their targeting and decision-making speed, are more carefully selecting targets, and are meticulously searching for flight routes that can bypass Ukrainian air defense systems.[19] ISW has previously reported on Russian forces' ability to innovate and learn over the course of the war.[20] Skibitskyi stated that possible upcoming large-scale Russian strikes may use only about 10 to 30 missiles but will be accompanied by a much larger number of Iranian Shahed-131/136 drones.[21] Skibitskyi and Ihnat stated that a larger number of drones would allow Russian forces to further bypass Ukrainian air defenses, allowing other projectiles to reach their targets.[22] Ihnat stated that drones will likely be used in strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure, and Skibitskyi noted that Russian forces have previously used Shahed drones to widely damage Ukrainian electrical substations.[23] Russia has reportedly begun domestically producing modified versions of Shahed-131/136 drones but is reportedly struggling to produce them at the pace and quality it desires.[24] ISW previously assessed that the Russian command may believe that a large number of strike drones will allow Russian forces to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses, although Shahed drones remain Russia's high precision weapon system most vulnerable to Ukrainian air defenses.[25]

Ukrainian strikes reportedly damaged Russian aircraft and equipment at an airfield in Kursk Oblast on August 27. RBK-Ukraine cited Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) sources that SBU military counterintelligence conducted a drone strike on an airfield near Kursk City on the night of August 27, damaging four Russian Su-30 fighter aircraft, one MiG-29 fighter aircraft, and radars for a S-300 missile system and two Pantsir missile systems.[26] Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoyt claimed that Ukrainian drones damaged an apartment building, and Russian milbloggers claimed on August 28 that satellite imagery of the airfield showed no visible damage to Russian military equipment.[27] ISW cannot independently confirm the results of the Ukrainian strikes.

Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for ignoring ultranationalists' complaints over the mistreatment of a Southern Military District (SMD) brigade operating in the Kherson direction. Russian milbloggers continued to claim that the Russian military command chose to ignore and silence reports about elements of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) suffering significant losses with inadequate artillery support and poor leadership in the Kherson direction.[28] One milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD continues to face bureaucratic problems that prevent the Russian military from ingesting criticism and undergoing reforms.[29] The milblogger claimed that Russian ultranationalists were hopeful that the Russian military command would improve its management of the war effort after Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion that sought to change Russia's military command – but such hopes did not materialize.[30] The milblogger claimed that the outrage over the treatment of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade divided the Russian information space into milbloggers who are loyal to the Russian MoD and those who oppose the Russian MoD. Another milblogger claimed that he refrains from sharing 90 percent of his information on Russian military failures, noting that Russian officials perceive the limited amount of criticism as a personal attack on them instead of thinking on how to improve conditions for Russian servicemen.[31]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials formally acknowledged that Ukrainian forces liberated Robotyne amid continued Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut.
- The Russian military command continues to expend relatively elite Russian airborne forces by deploying these troops to defend vulnerable positions against Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- A Ukrainian intelligence official indicated that Russian forces may have marginally replenished their stocks of high-precision missiles through conservation in the summer of 2023.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces may intend to resume a wider campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the fall of 2023, but assessed Russia likely has not replenished its missile stocks to sustain a campaign on the scale of the winter 2022-2023 strikes.
- Ukrainian officials assessed that any upcoming Russian strike campaign may employ new tactics that use fewer missiles and more drones.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for ignoring ultranationalists' complaints over the mistreatment of a Southern Military District (SMD) brigade operating in the Kherson direction.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk, and did not make any confirmed advances.
- Russian lawmakers and the Russian information space expressed varied opinions about a proposed Russian State Duma bill that would deprive individuals of their acquired Russian citizenship for evading military registration and mobilization.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on August 28 that partisans created an explosion at the barracks of a Chechen "Akhmat-1" Rosgvardia riot police (OMON) unit in Enerhodar in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 27, 2023, 6:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on August 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern and eastern Ukraine. Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces are advancing in the directions of Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv), Mala Tokmachka (9km southeast of Orikhiv), and Ocheretuvate (25km southeast of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[1] Shtupun also stated that Ukrainian forces advanced near Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) and Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and achieved unspecified successes near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in the Berdyansk direction (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area) and in an unspecified location in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast).^[2] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction.^[3]

A Ukrainian soldier, likely operating in the Robotyne area, offered further tactical details on the prepared Russian defensive positions that Ukrainian forces have penetrated and on those that are currently ahead of them. The Ukrainian soldier stated that, in the Robotyne area, there is a system of interconnected Russian trenches, dugouts, and limited underground tunnels that allow Russian forces to facilitate the movement of personnel, weaponry, and ammunition from different tactical positions along the front.^[4] The Ukrainian soldier stated that anti-tank ditches and minefields stretch across fields in front of and in between these interconnected layers of defensive positions.^[5] The soldier added that all "unexcavated" areas around these prepared defensive positions are heavily mined and that Russian forces have narrowly designated unmined paths in their defensive layers to allow Russian forces to reach firing positions.^[6] The Ukrainian soldier did not indicate whether the Ukrainian forces had passed through the densest minefields but suggested that Ukrainian forces still had to demine areas at a gradual pace before advancing further.^[7] ISW previously assessed that areas near the next series of prepared Russian defensive positions may be less heavily mined to give Russian forces operating north of these positions the ability to retreat, although the Ukrainian soldier's reporting suggests that this may not be the case in the areas where Ukrainian forces are currently approaching the next Russian defensive layer.^[8] Ukrainian forces are now within striking distance of the next series of Russian defensive positions, which appears to be comprised of a relatively more contiguous array of anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth anti-tank obstacles with Russian fighting positions behind these obstacles similar to the previous layer of Russian defenses.^[9] The highly interconnected systems of trenches and dugouts that the Ukrainian soldier described is the result of months of Russian preparation and it is unclear if Russian forces extended that system throughout subsequent series of defensive positions further south.

The composition of Russian defensive positions in southern Ukraine and the ambiguities about how Russian forces are manning and equipping them continues to obscure how the next phase of fighting will transpire. ISW recently assessed that a lack of observed uncommitted Russian forces in the area may suggest that a subsequent series of Russian defensive positions may be less heavily defended than the positions that Ukrainian forces already penetrated to the north, although this remains unclear.^[10] Russian forces have reportedly conducted additional lateral transfers to the Robotyne area with elements of the 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division from the Kremenna area in Luhansk Oblast and are also reportedly redeploying unspecified elements from the Kherson direction to the area.^[11] Russian forces committed elements of the 7th VDV Division immediately to combat after laterally transferring them to the Robotyne area in early August, although the Russian command could decide to commit these new reinforcements to strengthen the next series of defensive positions south of the current Ukrainian advance.^[12] Russian forces committed a considerable amount of materiel, effort, and manpower to hold the series of defensive positions that Ukrainian forces are currently penetrating, and it is unclear if Russian forces will retain the advantages they have held if they cannot commit the same level of resources and personnel to these next layers of defense.^[13] The next Russian defensive layer will, nevertheless, very likely pose significant challenges for the Ukrainian advance.

Russian forces conducted missile strikes against targets in Ukraine on the night of August 26 to 27 and reportedly targeted a Ukrainian airfield in Kyiv Oblast. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted four Russian Kh-101, Kh-55, and Kh-555 cruise missiles out of eight unspecified Russian projectiles launched at Ukraine.^[14] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian missiles struck a Ukrainian military airfield near Pinchuky, Kyiv Oblast.^[15]

The Russian MoD appears to have unsuccessfully attempted to silence Russian milbloggers' concerns over the alleged mistreatment of a Russian brigade operating in occupied Kherson Oblast — sparking further criticism from the ultranationalist community. A Russian state-affiliated war correspondent released a video on August 26 claiming to show five Russian servicemen of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) currently operating on the Dnipro River delta islands in a trench.^[16] The servicemen asked that Russian milbloggers stop spreading complaints on social media concerning the brigade's alleged lack of artillery support and accused Russian milbloggers of harming the brigade's operations in the delta area. The servicemen also called on milbloggers to fight on the frontlines if they wanted to help the Russian war effort. ISW reported on August 25 and August 26 that Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade were suffering significant casualties under Ukrainian artillery fire on an island in the Kherson direction and that commanders were ignoring the personnel's calls for artillery fire.^[17] Several Russian milbloggers responded to the appeal and claimed that the video was clearly staged to deflect criticism from the brigade's leadership and the Russian MoD.^[18] Russian milbloggers claimed that the servicemen appeared to be wearing new uniforms, which the milbloggers noted is inconsistent with claims that these servicemen are fighting in trenches. The Russian MoD had consistently tried throughout the full-scale invasion to silence criticisms in the Russian information space by accusing Russian milbloggers of violating Russian operational security.^[19]

The Russian Investigative Committee announced on August 27 that genetic tests confirm that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin was among 10 people killed in a plane crash on August 23.^[20] Wagner commanders and representatives have refrained from commenting on the announcement and called on Russians to stop spreading rumors and fake news.^[21] Wagner's official Telegram channels were likely referring to Telegram channels that claim to be affiliated with Wagner and are baselessly speculating that Prigozhin is still alive.^[22]

Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian MoD had been actively setting conditions to halt Wagner Group's operations in the Middle East and Africa prior to Prigozhin's death on August 23. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger amplified reports that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov visited Syria and Libya to coerce local officials into severing their cooperation with Wagner forces.^[23] Yevkurov reportedly told Syrian officials to block Wagner's logistics to the Central African Republic (CAR) that originated in Syria and prompted Syrian Defense Minister Ali Mahmoud Abbas to deliver Wagner an ultimatum demanding that Wagner hand over weapons and leave Syria by September 20.^[24] The reports noted that Yevkurov will likely be meeting with African officials to set similar ultimatums for Wagner personnel in other countries. Yevkurov also reportedly told Wagner representatives in Syria that there have been no decisions regarding who will oversee the Wagner contingent after Prigozhin's assassination and urged them to enlist in the Russian MoD-affiliated "Redut" private military company (PMC) as well as preparing to disarm soon. The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD is trying to fully reassign Wagner personnel to either a "volunteer corps" based out of "Patriot" Park in Moscow Oblast or to the "Redut" PMC.^[25] The milblogger added that the Russian MoD negotiators are afraid of directly pressuring Wagner personnel and are instead pressuring Middle Eastern and African officials to sever their ties with Wagner – leaving the Wagner personnel without a choice. The milblogger observed that Wagner cannot independently exist following the Russian MoD's June 1 announcement that volunteer formations cannot be independent of the Russian MoD.

The Russian MoD may be more intensely focused on disbanding the Wagner Group than Russian President Vladimir Putin. Former BBC Russian Service investigative journalist Andrey Zakharov, citing unnamed sources, reported that Putin allowed Prigozhin to continue Wagner operations in the Middle East and Africa but instructed him to not intervene in Ukraine or Russia during one of their two meetings after Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 24.^[26] Zakharov added that the Russian MoD, on the other hand, intensified efforts to "strangle" Wagner in Syria and Africa, and Prigozhin together with Wagner's leadership flew to Moscow to attempt to resolve this issue before his assassination. Zakharov added that currently, the fate of "Prigozhin's empire" — inclusive of his military contracts and contracts for the extraction of oil, gas, and gold — in the Middle East and Africa is unclear. The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger noted that a third party, possibly another Russian force structure, should adopt Wagner's foreign assets rather than having the Russian MoD do so to prevent tension and the destruction of these assets. A Russian source also claimed that the Russian MoD may have been rushing to disband Wagner because the Kremlin had yet to decide on Wagner's fate and because the MoD wanted to be the first organization to assume control over Wagner's leftovers.^[27]

ISW cannot independently confirm the validity of these reports, but if these accounts are true, they may indicate that Putin is not micromanaging the dissolution of the Wagner PMC but rather has passed this responsibility to the Russian MoD. The surge of these accounts across Russian milblogger and opposition communities, however, may also be an attempt to separate Putin from Prigozhin's assassination and the prospective dissolution of Wagner.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern and eastern Ukraine.
- A Ukrainian soldier likely operating in the Robytne area offered further tactical details on the prepared Russian defensive positions that Ukrainian forces have penetrated and on those that are currently ahead of them.
- The composition of Russian defensive positions in southern Ukraine and the ambiguities about how Russian forces are manning and equipping them continues to obscure how the next phase of fighting will transpire.
- Russian forces conducted missile strikes against targets in Ukraine on the night of August 26 to 27 and reportedly targeted a Ukrainian airfield in Kyiv Oblast.
- The Russian Investigative Committee announced on August 27 that genetic tests confirm that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin was among 10 people killed in a plane crash on August 23.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) had been actively setting conditions to halt Wagner Group's operations in the Middle East and Africa prior to Prigozhin's death on August 23.
- The Russian MoD may be more intensely focused on disbanding the Wagner Group than Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make confirmed advances.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to coerce migrants and foreigners living in Russia to fight in the war in Ukraine in exchange for Russian citizenship.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 26, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 26, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on August 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces have made further tactically significant gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and several Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces are advancing through what Ukrainian and US sources suggested may be the most challenging series of prepared Russian defensive positions. Geolocated footage published on August 25 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced 1.5km southward northeast of Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv).[1] US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated on August 25 that Ukrainian forces are currently attacking through the main set of Russian defensive preparations along the axis of Ukrainian advance.[2] Reuters reported on August 26 that a Ukrainian commander fighting in southern Ukraine stated that Ukrainian forces believe they have broken through the most difficult line of Russian defenses in the area and will now be able to advance more quickly.[3] The Ukrainian commander reportedly stated that Ukrainian forces have entered areas where they encountered only Russian "logistics groups" and that he expects that further Ukrainian breakthroughs in these areas will be easier.[4] A Russian milblogger claimed on August 25 that Ukrainian forces were attacking in the direction of rear defensive lines near Verbove (18km southwest of Orikhiv), suggesting that Ukrainian forces may be near tactical rear areas within the series of Russian defensive positions that they are currently penetrating - though these reports should not be misinterpreted to indicate Ukrainian forces have entered Russian rear areas at the operational level.

Ukrainian forces now appear within striking distance of the next series of prepared Russian defensive positions, which may be weaker than the previous set of Russian defenses but still pose a significant challenge. The series of defensive positions that Ukrainian forces are currently advancing through were comprised of dense layers of minefields and fortifications to which Russian forces committed considerable manpower, materiel, and effort to hold.[5] The series of Russian defensive positions now ahead of Ukrainian forces likely consists of a relatively more contiguous array of anti-tank ditches; dragon's teeth anti-tank obstacles; and additional minefields - with Russian fighting positions behind these obstacles - much like the first Russian line of defense. However, the extent of the minefields in the area of this series of prepared defensive positions is unclear, although they may be less heavily mined to give Russian forces operating north of these positions the ability to retreat.[6] ISW additionally recently assessed that this series of prepared defensive positions may be less heavily defended than the positions Ukrainian forces already penetrated to the north, although this remains unclear.[7]

Each of these Russian "lines" are layered defensive positions with their own forward and rear area positions, and it is important to differentiate between the rear areas of individual Russian defensive positions and of Russian defenses in southern Ukraine as a whole. Russian defensive "lines" are additionally notional in the sense that Russian prepared positions are not uniform across the front in southern Ukraine, and are not fully manned. There are additional series of prepared Russian defensive positions further south of the current Ukrainian advance, although Russian forces will only be able to fully leverage these positions if they have the available personnel and materiel to incorporate them into cohesive defensive operations.

A Ukrainian source indicated that Russian forces have laterally redeployed elements of a relatively elite formation from the Kreminna area in Luhansk Oblast to the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast. A Ukrainian reserve officer reported on August 26 that Russian forces transferred elements of the 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division to the Robotyne area from the Kreminna area.[8] ISW has observed elements of the 76th VDV Division operating in the Kreminna area but cannot confirm if all elements of the 76th VDV Division were deployed in the area or what elements remain near Kreminna.[9] ISW has now observed elements of almost every Russian VDV formation operating in areas where Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations, including elements of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division operating in southern Ukraine; and elements of the 98th Guards VDV Division, 106th Guards VDV Division, 11th Guards VDV Brigade, and 83rd Guards VDV Brigade operating near Bakhmut.[10] A Russian source has claimed that elements of the 31st Guards VDV Brigade are also defending in the Bakhmut area, although ISW has not observed further indicators that these elements are present.[11] Lateral redeployments of elements of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division from Kherson Oblast to the frontline in Zaporizhia Oblast and elements of the 76th VDV Division from the Kreminna area to the Robotyne area suggest that Russian forces may be using relatively elite units to reinforce critical sectors of the front. This additional lateral redeployment, if true, further supports ISW's assessment that a lack of sizeable operational reserves would force the Russian command to conduct further lateral redeployments and make decisions about what sectors of the front to prioritize.[12] Elements of these VDV formations may be more heavily committed in certain sectors of the front than others and each formation is unlikely to be operating as a cohesive brigade or division-level asset, and all reports should be understood as referring to elements of the relevant formation.

Russian irregular formations remain willing to threaten to withdraw from combat unilaterally despite recent efforts by Russian military command to purge and suppress insubordination. The "Rusich" Sabotage and Reconnaissance Group, a far-right Russian irregular paramilitary unit, announced on August 25 that the group will refuse to conduct combat missions in Ukraine until the Russian government secures the release of Rusich commander and founding member Yan Petrovsky, who is currently in Finnish custody.[13] Ukrainian authorities requested the extradition of Petrovsky from Finland to Ukraine, where he is suspected of various charges related to terrorism.[14] The Rusich Group accused the Russian government of not meeting its obligations to protect Russians abroad by not securing Petrovsky's release earlier, and asked why Rusich personnel should protect Russia if the Russian government will not protect Russians.[15] The Rusich Group indicated that it is likely operating on the Robotyne-Verbove line in western Zaporizhia Oblast, a critical area of the frontline where the Russian military command likely cannot afford for any units to rebel and refuse to conduct combat missions.[16] The Russian MoD has notably previously struggled with insubordination and threats of desertion from other Russian units in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[17]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly prosecuting the junior officers and soldiers of a Russian unit that complained about senior commanders' inattention to frontline issues, following a MoD pattern of deflecting blame away from senior officers. Russian milbloggers claimed on August 26 that an assistant to an unspecified Russian deputy defense minister arrived in Kherson Oblast to investigate complaints associated with the 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) that sparked outrage within the Russian information space on August 25.[18] These milbloggers claimed that the Russian MoD official is protecting the 205th Brigade's commander and punishing protesting company commanders.[19] These Russian milbloggers expressed continued anger at this deflection of responsibility and at the broader Russian officer system that does not allow for officers with new command styles.[20] These claims are unconfirmed, but the speed at which the Russian military command is reportedly responding likely demonstrates their deep concern about insubordination in the military, as well as of public criticism of the Russian military command. The Russian MoD has previously shown a propensity for deflecting blame away from senior officers and holding lower-level soldiers responsible for problems.[21] The Russian military has recently suffered from multiple public instances of insubordination, and ISW has previously assessed that the Russian military chain of command is deteriorating.[22]

No prominent channels known to be directly affiliated with Wagner have shared additional information on the future of the group despite speculation from nominally pro-Wagner channels, while the majority of Russian sources have focused their attention on kinetic activity on the frontline. Insider sources have continued to report details about the flight crew killed in the crash as well as the ongoing Russian government investigation into the crash.[23] Russian sources that are not aligned with Wagner have largely stopped speculating about Prigozhin's death and the future of the Wagner Group and have focused their reporting on operations on the frontline.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces have made further tactically significant gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and several Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces are advancing through what Ukrainian and US sources suggested may be the most challenging series of prepared Russian defensive positions.
- Ukrainian forces now appear within striking distance of the next series of prepared Russian defensive positions, which may be weaker than the previous set of Russian defenses but still pose a significant challenge.
- A Ukrainian source indicated that Russian forces have laterally redeployed elements of a relatively elite formation from the Kreminna area in Luhansk Oblast to the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian irregular formations remain willing to threaten to withdraw from combat unilaterally despite recent efforts by Russian military command to purge and suppress insubordination.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly prosecuting the junior officers and soldiers of a Russian unit that complained about senior commanders' inattention to frontline issues.
- No prominent channels known to be directly affiliated with Wagner shared additional information on the future of the group, while the majority of Russian sources have focused their attention on kinetic activity on the frontline.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances.
- Russian regional governments continue to facilitate the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 25, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 25, 2023, 7:55pm 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's August 24 remarks about Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's death established the Kremlin-approved narrative on the issue, and Russian government officials, Kremlin affiliates, and the Russian information space continued to toe this line on August 25. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov lambasted suggestions and claims that Putin was involved in the death of Prigozhin, calling them "an absolute lie."^[1] Peskov stated that there are no official forensic details on Prigozhin's death yet and claimed that Putin had not met with Prigozhin in the Kremlin in recent days.^[2] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov mirrored some of Putin's language about Wagner and Prigozhin by stating that Prigozhin "undoubtedly made a great contribution" to the Russian war effort in Ukraine.^[3] The Russian information space largely followed the Kremlin-approved narrative and continues to refrain from linking the Kremlin to the plane crash.^[4]

Some prominent voices in the Russian information space notably deviated from Putin's established narrative, however. Former Putin bodyguard and current Tula Oblast Governor Alexey Dyumin stated that it is possible to "forgive mistakes and even cowardice, [but] never betrayal," and claimed that Prigozhin and Wagner Group founder Dmitry Utkin were not "traitors."^[5] Dyumin's statement implies that the Wagner June 24 rebellion was not actually a rebellion. Some Russian sources floated Dyumin as a possible replacement for Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu after the rebellion, and Putin made a public point that Shoigu retains a dominant position.^[6] Russian "Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky stated on August 25 that some groups of sources, excluding imprisoned ardent nationalist Igor Girkin, are trying to use Prigozhin's death to discredit Russian authorities to sow instability and argued that these claimed discreditation campaigns are a sign of instability within Russia.^[7] Khodakovsky called for Girkin's release following Prigozhin's death on August 23 on the grounds that more (presumably good) people were needed to defend Russia.^[8] Girkin's official Telegram account published a statement from him via his lawyer on August 24, wherein Girkin claims that Prigozhin's plane crash is indicative of deepening unrest within Russia - mirroring Khodakovsky's complaint.^[9] Girkin also claimed that the "[19]90s are back," implying that Putin's broad effort to restore order to Russia following the chaos and gangsterism following the fall of the Soviet Union has failed — a direct attack on a central tenet of Putin's claimed legitimacy.^[10]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko issued a statement on Prigozhin's death on August 25 that likely aimed at balancing his relationship with the Kremlin with maintaining domestic control, but that also directly contradicted his previous statements concerning the deal he brokered between the Kremlin and Prigozhin. ISW incorrectly forecasted yesterday that Lukashenko would refrain from publicly speaking about Prigozhin's death to avoid exacerbating his

tenuous position with the Kremlin.[11] Lukashenko's likely desire to maintain the appearance of being a sovereign leader appears to have outweighed any such concerns. Lukashenko asserted that Wagner would continue to operate within Belarus according to a system that he and Prigozhin had built in recent months and that 10,000 Wagner personnel will be in the country within a few days.[12] The Wagner contingent in Belarus has been reportedly declining in recent weeks, likely due to the Kremlin's and Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) apparently successful effort to weaken Wagner.[13] Lukashenko directly responded to satellite imagery showing that up to a third of the tents at the Wagner camp in Tsel, Asipovichy, Belarus had been dismantled in the previous month and claimed that Wagner and Belarusian officials had only dismantled unnecessary tents not needed for the expected number of Wagner fighters.[14] It is extremely unlikely that 10,000 Wagner fighters will arrive in Belarus, nor are many Wagner personnel needed as advisors and trainers to help Lukashenko build an unspecified Belarusian "contract army."[15] Lukashenko has routinely attempted to portray himself as a sovereign leader despite Russia's current de-facto occupation of the country, and he likely hopes to prevent his domestic audience from viewing Putin's almost certain assassination of Prigozhin as the Kremlin's unilateral cancellation of agreements that he had made with Wagner.[16]

Lukashenko also expanded on his role in the negotiations that led to the agreement that ended Wagner's June 24 rebellion. Lukashenko stated that over a series of several calls he warned both Prigozhin and Utkin that pressing the rebellion would result in their deaths, portraying himself again as the one who convinced Prigozhin to end the rebellion.[17] Lukashenko likely hoped to underscore the initial deal and Wagner's arrival in Belarus as examples of his ability to make high-level security decisions outside of the Kremlin's dictates. Lukashenko endorsed the Kremlin narrative line that Putin had absolutely nothing to do with Prigozhin's "accident," dismissed assertions that a missile brought down the plane, and even claimed that he had warned Prigozhin via Putin about an unspecified assassination attempt.[18] Lukashenko notably tried to absolve himself of any responsibility for failing to protect Prigozhin by claiming that safety guarantees were never a part of the conversations he had with Wagner and the Kremlin.[19] Lukashenko had indicated on June 27, however, that Putin "promised" both Lukashenko and Prigozhin that Prigozhin and the Wagner would enjoy unspecified "security guarantees" in Belarus.[20]

The Financial Times reported on the bleak future of the Wagner Group's operations in Africa following Prigozhin's death. The *Financial Times* (FT) cited people familiar with the matter as saying that Prigozhin's recent trip to Africa may have aimed to prevent the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) from taking control of Wagner's operations in Africa.[21] This report is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that Prigozhin was likely attempting to counter efforts by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin to weaken and destroy Wagner following the rebellion.[22] FT reported that a longtime acquaintance of Prigozhin stated that Wagner's operations in Africa will likely struggle without Prigozhin's leadership.[23] An FT source close to the Russian MoD stated that it is unlikely the Russian military would be able to fully replicate Wagner's operations in Africa under Prigozhin if the Russian MoD did take over Wagner.[24]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 25 and reportedly advanced as Russian milbloggers expressed concern over a lack of reinforcements and troop rotations in the area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified successes in the directions of the Novodanylivka-Novopokropivka (5-13km south of Orikhiv) line and the Mala Tokmachka-Ocheretuvate (9-25km southeast of Orikhiv) line.[25] A prominent Russian milblogger expressed concern about the ability of battle-weary Russian forces to defend against possible future renewed Ukrainian attacks near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) amid claims that fighting shifted to southern Robotyne.[26] The milblogger claimed that many of the Russian servicemen fighting near Robotyne have been on the frontline since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and that these units struggle with a shortage of frontline reinforcements.[27] This claim supports ISW's assessment that Russian forces fighting in the western Zaporizhia Oblast area have been defending against Ukrainian attacks since the start of the counteroffensive without rotation or significant reinforcement.[28]

Reports of a Russian unit suffering significant losses with inadequate support on an unspecified island in the Dnipro River delta sparked outrage against the Russian military command in some parts of the Russian information space. Russian milbloggers amplified a complaint allegedly from personnel of the Russian 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) claiming that elements were suffering significant casualties under Ukrainian artillery fire on an island in the Kherson direction and that commanders were ignoring the personnel's calls for artillery fire.[29] The personnel claimed that a company commander tried to evacuate his unit from the island, but senior commanders stopped the evacuation, sent away the commander, and dismissed two other commanders who supported the withdrawal.[30] Russian milbloggers quickly jumped to criticize the Russian military command for failing to solve systemic issues among Russian forces on the Kherson frontline, including a lack of supplies and frontal assaults against Ukrainian east-bank positions under heavy artillery fire and with no support.[31] Milbloggers heavily criticized Russian commanders for failing to take accountability and for not resolving these issues.[32] The Russian information space previously eviscerated the Russian military command for similar failures combating a limited Ukrainian presence near the Antonivsky Bridge on the Kherson frontline in late June, and some milbloggers claimed that this widespread criticism was the only factor that compelled the Russian military command to fix the issues at the time.[33] The current round of criticism follows recent complaints about the failure to adequately respond to a limited Ukrainian presence on the east bank of the Dnipro River and criticism that Russian authorities never provided promised boats to Russian forces in the area.[34]

Ukrainian drones likely struck a Russian duty station in occupied Crimea on August 25. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov stated that Ukrainian drones targeted the base of the Russian 126th Guards Coastal Defense Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) near Perevalne, Simferopol Raion.[35] Crimean Tatar Resource Center Head Eskander Bariev also stated that residents reported explosions throughout occupied Crimea, particularly near Perevalne.[36] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces launched 42 drones at targets in Crimea but that Russian air defense and electronic warfare (EW) systems downed all 42 Ukrainian drones.[37] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that this was the largest Ukrainian drone strike in recent months.[38] GUR Chief Major General Kyrylo Budanov reiterated on August 24 that Ukrainian forces have the ability to strike any part of occupied Crimea.[39]

Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful missile and drone strike against targets in Odesa Oblast overnight on August 24-25. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched two Kh-59 missiles, two Kalibr missiles, and one Shahed-136/131 drone and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all five projectiles.[40] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that the Russian missiles targeted Odesa City and a port in Odesa Oblast.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's August 24 remarks about Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's death established the Kremlin-approved narrative on the issue, and Russian government officials, Kremlin affiliates, and the Russian information space continued to toe this line on August 25.
- Some prominent voices in the Russian information space notably deviated from Putin's established narrative, however.

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko issued a statement on Prigozhin's death on August 25 that likely aimed at balancing his relationship with the Kremlin with maintaining domestic control, but that also directly contradicted his previous statements concerning the deal he brokered between the Kremlin and Prigozhin.
- The Financial Times reported on the bleak future of the Wagner Group's operations in Africa following Prigozhin's death.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on August 25 as Russian milbloggers expressed concern over a lack of reinforcements and troop rotations in the area.
- Reports of a Russian unit suffering significant losses with inadequate support on an unspecified island in the Dnipro River delta sparked outrage against the Russian military command in some parts of the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian drones likely struck a Russian duty station in occupied Crimea on August 25.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk Oblast on August 25 and advanced.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on August 25 and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian authorities are likely setting conditions to falsify the results of the September 2023 regional elections in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 24, 2023, 7:50pm 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on August 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Wagner Group will likely no longer exist as a quasi-independent parallel military structure following Russian President Vladimir Putin's almost certain assassination of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin, and reported Wagner logistics and security head Valery Chekalov on August 23. The death of Wagner's central leadership disrupts Wagner's ability to reverse the effects of the Kremlin's and the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) campaign to weaken, subsume, and destroy the organization following the June 24 armed rebellion.^[1] The Russian MoD has reportedly established private military companies (PMCs) that have been recruiting current and former Wagner personnel to assume control over Wagner's operations abroad.^[2] Russian sources claimed that the Kremlin refused to pay the Belarusian government for Wagner's deployment to Belarus and that financial issues were already leading to reduced payments that were causing Wagner fighters to resign.^[3] Satellite imagery from August 1 and 23 shows that Wagner had dismantled almost a third of the tents at its camp in Tsel, Asipovichy, Belarus in the previous month, suggesting that the effort to weaken Wagner may have resulted in a notable flight of Wagner personnel from the contingent in Belarus.^[4] Some milbloggers denied claims that Wagner fighters are dismantling their camp in Tsel, however.^[5] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on August 23 that an unspecified number of Wagner personnel at camps in Belarus began preparations to return to Russia following Prigozhin's death.^[6] The central Wagner leadership had brought Wagner to the height of its independence during the offensive to capture Bakhmut and was attempting to retain some semblance of that independence in the aftermath of Wagner's rebellion.^[7] The elimination of this central leadership likely ends any remaining means Wagner had to operate independently of the Russian MoD. It remains unclear whether the Kremlin intends for Wagner to completely dissipate or intends to reconstitute it as a much smaller organization completely subordinate to the Russian MoD. A third option—restoring Wagner as a quasi-independent organization under a new commander loyal to the Kremlin—is possible but unlikely.

Putin delivered a brief *de facto* eulogy of Prigozhin and reportedly deceased Wagner leadership on August 24, and portrayed Prigozhin as his loyal subordinate up until his death, the armed rebellion notwithstanding. Putin characterized Prigozhin as having a "difficult fate" in which he made "serious mistakes," and Putin noted that he had known Prigozhin since the early 1990s. Putin notably stated that Prigozhin "achieved the necessary results both for himself and what I [Putin] asked him for – for a common cause, as in these last months." Putin's comment implies that Prigozhin had been fulfilling Putin's orders recently and throughout their acquaintance and notably refrains from suggesting that Prigozhin had ever betrayed Putin, but subtly indicates that Prigozhin's loyalty through the years was not enough to offset the "serious mistake" of launching a rebellion against the Russian military leadership. Putin's speech largely confirms ISW's prior assessment that Prigozhin did not intend to oust Putin during his June 24 rebellion and instead saw himself as loyal to Putin while seeking to force Putin to fire the Russian military leadership as he had been demanding.^[8] A Russian insider source, citing an unnamed individual who knew Prigozhin, claimed that Prigozhin was confident that Putin would forgive him.^[9] Prigozhin likely underestimated how seriously his rebellion had personally humiliated Putin. Prigozhin had also apparently overestimated the value of his own loyalty to Putin. Putin places significant value on loyalty and has frequently rewarded loyal Russian officials and military commanders even when they have failed. Prigozhin's rebellion was an act of significant insubordination despite his claim that he rebelled out of loyalty to Russia.^[10] Putin's statement was therefore a warning to those currently loyal to Putin that some mistakes are too serious for loyalty to overcome.

The exact cause of Prigozhin's plane crash remains unclear as US and Russian sources offered varying explanations, while Wagner-affiliated channels continued to call on Russian sources to stop speculating. US officials have provided different preliminary unconfirmed explanations for the plane crash: surface-to-air missiles, a bomb aboard the aircraft, or other sabotage.^[11] Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder stated that the Pentagon currently has no indication that a surface-to-air missile downed the plane.^[12] Russian state news outlet *Kommersant* reported on August 23 that sources close to the Russian Investigative Committee stated that there is no reason to believe that a terrorist attack downed Prigozhin's plane, contradicting a Russian official who immediately blamed terrorism.^[13] A Russian insider source previously reported that Russian authorities are setting conditions to blame the attack on terrorism.^[14] The Russian

information space largely continued to speculate about the potential causes of the crash, including mechanical failure, sabotage, surface-to-air missiles, and air-to-air missiles but noted the lack of information from Russian officials.^[15] Some sources claimed that Russian authorities are investigating the possibility of an explosive device planted on the wing or landing gear, and one insider source claimed that Russian authorities are investigating Prigozhin's personal pilot and the cofounder of MNT Aero, which owned the plane.^[16] Many Wagner-affiliated channels tried to minimize this speculation by calling on the information space to wait until confirmed Wagner sources publish official information.^[17]

The Wagner Council of Commanders have notably not released a public statement following the downing of Prigozhin's plane. A Russian news aggregator claimed that the Wagner Council of Commanders met on the evening of August 23 to prepare a joint statement and announce what would happen to Wagner in the near future.^[18] The Wagner Council of Commanders has not released any statement as of this publication, and several Wagner-affiliated sources emphasized that circulating reports about the contents of the expected statement are false.^[19] The Wagner Council of Commanders' silence may be due to chaos and confusion within their ranks following Prigozhin's and Utkin's assassination or due to explicit instructions from Russian authorities to remain silent. The Kremlin may view a public statement from the Wagner Council of Commanders as an attempt to organize and reconstitute an independent Wagner force that could continue to threaten the Kremlin and the Russian MoD. Putin's willingness to publicly assassinate the Wagner leadership is likely prompting the Wagner Council of Commanders to refrain from publicly appointing successors to Prigozhin and Utkin at this time. A member of the Wagner Council of Commanders personally selected by Putin to replace Prigozhin now would risk becoming the focus of ire of Wagner rank and file upset about the assassination of Wagner's leadership.

Putin's almost certain assassination of Wagner's leadership has made it very clear that the Kremlin will be outwardly hostile to those who attempt to secure independence for their own parallel military structures. ISW previously assessed that Putin's demonstrative assassination of Wagner's leadership was meant to reassert his dominance and exact vengeance for the humiliation of Wagner's rebellion, and specific individuals who may have planned to oppose Putin, the Kremlin, or the MoD likely took note.^[20] The Kremlin will likely view any future efforts to establish independent parallel military structures explicitly through the prism of its experience with Wagner and Prigozhin. The assassination of Wagner's leadership will likely serve as a standing threat against those with designs on creating parallel military structures reminiscent of Wagner.

The June 24 agreement between Putin, Prigozhin, and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko was likely invalidated by the destruction of Prigozhin's aircraft, and Lukashenko will likely remain silent on the matter to avoid provoking Putin and further risking his already vulnerable position. Prigozhin's safety and survival were likely crucial to the June 24 agreement in which Putin allegedly promised unspecified "security guarantees" to Prigozhin and the Wagner Group in Belarus.^[21] Prigozhin's death likely canceled a key pillar of this agreement, rendering the rest of it moot. Lukashenko will likely remain silent on the matter so as to not provoke Putin, especially since Lukashenko's act of directly negotiating with Prigozhin in June and then bragging about the role he had played notably embarrassed Putin. Prigozhin's assassination has likely signaled to Lukashenko both a dramatic reduction of his negotiating space with the Kremlin and an implicit threat against his continued attempts to resist Union State integration efforts.^[22]

Putin may avoid making Prigozhin a martyr, but Utkin's assassination will likely become a long-term grievance for Wagner personnel. ISW had long assessed that Putin refrained from eliminating Prigozhin out of fears of angering Wagner personnel, and he may have determined that he had sufficiently separated Wagner from Prigozhin in the months since the rebellion and could assassinate Prigozhin without prompting a serious backlash.^[23] Putin's likely calculus for killing Utkin probably focused more on the immediate opportunity to destroy Wagner's leadership completely and less on the ramifications of Utkin's death. There has been an outpouring of support and condolences for both Prigozhin and Utkin following the downing of the plane on August 23, although Wagner-affiliated sources appear to be more heavily focusing on their loss of Utkin.^[24] A prominent Wagner-affiliated channel posted primarily about Utkin on August 24 and stated that Utkin will be forever inscribed in Russian military history.^[25] Grievances over Utkin's assassination may become a focal point for future conflicts between the Russian military establishment and current and former Wagner personnel. Wagner personnel are unlikely to conduct immediate reprisals against those they view as responsible for Utkin's death, however.

The Russian information space largely refrained from linking the Kremlin and the Russian MoD to Prigozhin's and Utkin's assassination. Russian milbloggers and insider sources largely discussed new reports about the ongoing investigation and entertained theories that an explosive device may have led to the crash.^[26] One milblogger criticized the other milbloggers for devaluing the work of the departments responsible for preventing terrorist attacks by promulgating a narrative of a terrorist attack on board Prigozhin's plane.^[27] Another milblogger claimed that Wagner is a household name that will not be forgotten in Russia even if Wagner is disbanded and its personnel is persecuted.^[28] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russia had lost its military elite – the Wagner Group – as a result of Prigozhin's death.^[29]

Ukrainian forces advanced closer to the Russian second line of defense in the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 24, further widening their breach of Russian defensive lines in the area. Geolocated footage published on August 24 shows that Ukrainian forces advanced further towards the Russian defensive lines west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and into southern Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).^[30] Some Russian milbloggers indicated that Russian forces maintain limited if any, positions in southern Robotyne and that fighting continues east of Robotyne.^[31] A prominent Russian milblogger expressed concern at the Ukrainian breach of Russian defensive lines in western Zaporizhia Oblast and stated that this is a critical moment on the battlefield.^[32] The milblogger stated that Russian forces need to hold their positions for at least another month and a half to try to make gains in another area of the frontline and attempt to shift the battlefield situation in favor of Russian forces.^[33] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valeri Zaluzhnyi responded to criticisms about the Ukrainian counteroffensive by stating that it was not a counterinsurgency but the Battle of Kursk, referencing a weeks-long World War II battle that ultimately allowed the Soviet army to regain the battlefield initiative and recapture significant swaths of territory.^[34]

Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk reported that Russian forces are conducting additional lateral redeployments from Kherson Oblast to the frontline in Zaporizhia Oblast, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have further degraded Russian defensive lines in the area. Humenyuk reported on August 23 that Russian forces are transferring units from the Kherson direction to the Zaporizhia direction due to the large number of wounded personnel among forces defending in Zaporizhia Oblast.^[35] Humenyuk did not specify the Russian formations or units that are laterally redeploying to the Zaporizhia direction, nor did she specify whether the Russian forces are transferring to western Zaporizhia Oblast or to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.^[36] Russian forces laterally redeployed elements of the 7th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division from the Kherson direction to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area following the start of the counteroffensive in June and additional elements to the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast in early August.^[37] Humenyuk's reporting supports ISW's previous assessment that Russia's lack of operational reserves will force the Russian command to conduct additional

redeployments as Ukrainian counteroffensive operations continue to degrade defending Russian forces in several sectors of the front.^[38] Russian lateral redeployments will likely weaken the Russian defensive lines in aggregate as these transfers offer Ukrainian forces additional opportunities for exploitation.^[39] Exploiting these opportunities or preventing further lateral reinforcements will likely require Ukrainian forces to continue efforts in several sectors of the front that either pin Russian forces to a certain area or present the Russian command with dilemmas about which axes to reinforce.^[40] A Ukrainian offensive focused exclusively on a single axis would allow Russian forces to laterally redeploy forces from elsewhere in Ukraine without worrying about the consequences of weakening other sectors of the front as ISW has previously observed.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated boilerplate anti-Western rhetoric at the BRICS summit on August 24 despite some members' statements against turning BRICS into an "anti-Western" organization. Putin made claims about the BRICS countries' "unanimous" support for the formation of a multipolar world and reiterated boilerplate Russian rhetoric aimed at painting Russia and its partners as opposing the West.^[41] Some founding BRICS countries seemed less willing to fully align with Russia and its anti-Western rhetoric during the BRICS summit; Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said that he did not want BRICS to be a "counterpoint to the G7, G20, or the United States." South Africa's representative in the BRICS negotiations, Anil Sooklal, stated that "BRICS is not anti-West."^[42] The BRICS countries adopted the Johannesburg II Declaration on August 24 which included standard statements promoting multilateralism and more representation for developing countries in international organizations.^[43] The BRICS countries also announced that they invited Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to join the organization in 2024.^[44]

Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Dnipro City, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on August 24. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat reported that Russian forces launched two Iskander-M ballistic missiles from Rostov Oblast, an Iskander-K ballistic missile from Crimea, and likely S-300 missiles from occupied Tokmak at Dnipro City.^[45] Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Head Serhiy Lysak reported that Ukrainian Eastern Air Command shot down one missile but that the other Russian missiles struck transportation infrastructure in the city.^[46]

Ukrainian forces conducted a limited raid on the western shore of occupied Crimea on August 24. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) posted footage and announced that Ukrainian forces landed on the shores near Olenivka and Mayak (both 116km northeast of Sevastopol).^[47] The GUR reported that Ukrainian forces skirmished with Russian forces and raised a Ukrainian flag prior to leaving the shore.^[48] Most Russian sources dismissed the landing as insignificant, but some prominent milbloggers expressed concern about Russian defensive vulnerabilities in the western Black Sea and western Crimea.^[49]

Key Takeaways:

- The Wagner Group will likely no longer exist as a quasi-independent parallel military structure following Russian President Vladimir Putin's almost certain assassination of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin, and reported Wagner logistics and security head Valery Chekalov on August 23.
- Putin delivered a brief de facto eulogy of Prigozhin and reportedly deceased Wagner leadership on August 24, and portrayed Prigozhin as his loyal subordinate up until his death, the armed rebellion notwithstanding.
- The Wagner Council of Commanders have notably not released a public statement following the downing of Prigozhin's plane.
- Putin's almost certain assassination of Wagner leadership has made it very clear that the Kremlin will be outwardly hostile to those that attempt to secure independence for their own parallel military structures.
- The Russian information space largely refrained from linking the Kremlin and the Russian MoD to Prigozhin's and Utkin's assassination.
- Ukrainian forces advanced closer to the Russian second line of defense in the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 24, further widening their breach of Russian defensive lines in the area.
- Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk reported that Russian forces are conducting additional lateral redeployments from Kherson Oblast to the frontline in Zaporizhia Oblast, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have further degraded Russian defensive lines in the area.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 24, and reportedly advanced.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along at least two sectors of the front on August 24 and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 23, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 23, 2023, 9:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:30pm ET on August 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and founder Dmitry Utkin reportedly died after Russian forces shot down an aircraft transporting senior Wagner commanders over Tver Oblast. The Russian Federal Aviation Agency (Rosaviatsiya) reported on August 23 that all the passengers – Yevgeny Prigozhin, Dmitry Utkin, Sergei Propustkin, Yevgeny Makaryan, Alexander Totmin, Valery Chekalov, Nikolai Matyusev – died in the crash along with all three crew members.

[1] Russian opposition outlet *Dossier* reported that Chekalov, who is under US sanctions for transferring munitions to Russia and has acted on behalf of Prigozhin, oversaw Wagner transport logistics and “civilian” projects abroad.[2] A Russian insider source claimed that Chekalov also served as head of Wagner’s security services, though another source refuted this claim.[3] *Dossier* also reported that several other passengers joined Wagner between 2015 and 2017 and fought in Syria, although their current positions are unclear.[4] Russian sources amplified footage apparently showing a Russian missile striking an aircraft carrying Prigozhin, Utkin, and other Wagner commanders and the wreckage of the aircraft.[5] An insider source claimed that two S-300 missiles shot down the aircraft.[6] Flight tracking data for an Embraer Legacy 600 jet (registration number RA-02795) registered to the Wagner Group stopped after 6:11pm Moscow time while over Tver Oblast.[7] Russian sources claimed that a second Wagner Group-owned Embraer jet (registration number RA-02748) departed Moscow but turned around and landed at Ostafyevo airport in Moscow around the time of the strike.[8] Flight tracking data showed that this second aircraft arrived in St Petersburg at 6:27pm and flew back to Moscow 20 minutes later arriving at 8:02pm, however.[9]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin have been destroying the Wagner private military company (PMC) and weakening Prigozhin’s authority since the rebellion – and the assassination of Wagner’s top leadership was likely the final step to eliminate Wagner as an independent organization. Wagner and Russian insider sources reported that the Russian MoD recently began forming new PMCs to replace Wagner in Africa and the Middle East and started recruiting Wagner personnel.[10] Wagner commanders indicated that two high-ranking Wagner officials joined the Russian MoD, and insider sources claimed that some Wagner personnel began to leave Belarus after Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko refused to finance Wagner when he discovered that Russia would not pay Wagner’s costs.[11] Prigozhin’s online persona has been largely silenced since the rebellion – possibly as part of the deal between Lukashenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Prigozhin – which may have negatively impacted Wagner’s ability to recruit new personnel amidst the Kremlin’s defamation campaign against Prigozhin. The Russian MoD and the Kremlin had effectively created conditions in which Prigozhin could no longer adequately support the Wagner contingent unless he was able to secure new funding and missions for Wagner personnel in the immediate term. Such conditions could have eventually led Wagner to slowly lose fighters and cause Prigozhin to lose his relevancy and influence.

Prigozhin was likely attempting to counter the Russian MoD’s and the Kremlin’s destruction of Wagner. A Russian insider source with reported ties to Russian security services claimed that Prigozhin’s “hasty” departure to and from Africa was in response to the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff’s (GRU) plans and measures to undermine Wagner’s presence in Africa.[12] The source claimed that GRU Deputy Head (Head of the Special Activities Service) Colonel General Andrei Averyanov led the effort to completely block Wagner from operating in Africa and that there were plans to create and train an army corps of more than 20,000 people as Wagner replacements. The source added that Prigozhin was deeply opposed to these efforts and “made every effort to prevent them.” ISW observed that Prigozhin and Wagner’s representatives intensified their efforts to reestablish Wagner in Africa and the Middle East in mid-August, and Prigozhin even published a video of himself in an unspecified African country on August 21 – one of the few published videos of Prigozhin since the rebellion.[13] This video appeared to have heavy recruitment undertones, and it is possible that Prigozhin had traveled to Africa in hopes of securing further missions for Wagner personnel independent of the Russian MoD and the Kremlin.[14] Averyanov has reportedly participated in other high-profile assassination attempts such as the poisoning of Sergei and Yuliya Skripal, and it is possible that Russian officials capitalized on Prigozhin’s panic and impulsivity to eliminate Wagner’s top-most leadership.

Wagner PMC’s future without a leader remains uncertain. A Russian news aggregator claimed that the Wagner council of commanders is currently meeting at the time of this publication to prepare a joint statement and announce what will happen to Wagner in the near future.[15] The aggregator, citing an unnamed source, also claimed that Wagner had long developed a mechanism to mitigate the aftermath of Prigozhin’s and Utkin’s deaths.[16] The source, however, refused to disclose what such mitigations entail but noted that “in any scenario, [these mitigations] will be bad news.”[17] Wagner-affiliated channels urged Russian media to refrain from speculations about Prigozhin, Wagner’s fate, and the council of commanders.[18] A prominent Russian milblogger with reported connections to the Russian State Duma claimed that Wagner personnel are still “at their posts” in Belarus and Africa and denied the claims that Wagner personnel are being evacuated.[19] Prigozhin and Utkin were undeniably the faces of Wagner, and their assassinations will have dramatic impacts on Wagner’s command structure and the Wagner brand. Wagner commanders and fighters may begin to fear for their lives or become demoralized. The Russian MoD’s and Kremlin’s inroads into Wagner’s operations and the absence of Prigozhin – who would fight for new opportunities for Wagner personnel – may further lead to the degradation of the Wagner grouping.

Putin almost certainly ordered the Russian military command to shoot down Prigozhin’s plane. Elements of the Russian military, especially Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, would be extremely unlikely to execute Prigozhin without Putin’s order. The entirety of the Russian political and security sphere likely viewed Prigozhin’s continued survival following Wagner’s rebellion as at Putin’s discretion. ISW will make further assessments based on the assumption that Putin ordered Prigozhin’s assassination unless evidence to the contrary emerges. ISW’s previous standing assessment that Putin was unlikely to kill Prigozhin for fear of angering Wagner personnel has thus been invalidated.[20]

Putin may have concluded that he had sufficiently separated Prigozhin from Wagner and could kill him without turning Prigozhin into a martyr for the remaining Wagner personnel. Some Wagner commanders recently appeared to betray Wagner for the Russian MoD-affiliated Redut PMC, suggesting that the Kremlin’s and Russian MoD’s efforts to separate Wagner elements from those loyal to Prigozhin were partially succeeding.[21] Increasing reports of Wagner’s financial issues and corresponding reports of Wagner personnel leaving the group due to decreased payments and opportunities to deploy may have resulted in Prigozhin losing favor among the Wagner rank-in-file.[22] The Russian MoD has been setting conditions to replace the Wagner Group with MoD-affiliated PMCs, and Russian sources have claimed that these PMCs are attempting to recruit current and former Wagner personnel.[23] Putin may have decided that Wagner personnel had reached a point where they were sufficiently more interested in payments and deployments with these new PMCS than their continued loyalty to Prigozhin and that he could safely kill Prigozhin.

Alternatively, Putin may have decided that Prigozhin had crossed a pre-established redline with his efforts to retain Wagner’s access to operations in Africa. Putin, Prigozhin, and Lukashenko may have included an agreement in the deal that ended Wagner’s rebellion that required Prigozhin to limit his and Wagner’s media presence and/or curtail Wagner’s operations in Africa. Prigozhin’s August 21 video claiming that Wagner is expanding its presence in Africa and subsequent uptick in Wagner recruitment advertisements may have crossed a pre-established redline if Prigozhin had agreed to silence himself.[24] Prigozhin’s alleged repeated attempts to prevent the Russian MoD from completely replacing the Wagner contingent in Africa may have also crossed a pre-established redline restricting Wagner’s African operations. Putin may have decided that Prigozhin had violated enough aspects or all of the pre-established deal.

It is possible that Putin has intended to execute Prigozhin for some time and that the downing of Prigozhin’s plane on August 23 was coincidental timing, although this is unlikely. Kremlin newswire *RIA Novosti* reported on August 23 that Putin formally dismissed Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin as

commander of Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and replaced him with Colonel General Viktor Afzalov.^[25] The official confirmation of Surovikin's dismissal in Russian state media on the same day as Prigozhin's assassination is likely no coincidence. The Kremlin likely intends for both publicized punishments to send a clear message that those who were involved in the June 24 rebellion have been dealt with and that Wagner's challenge to the Russian leadership is a settled affair.

Putin's almost certain order for the Russian MoD to shoot down Prigozhin's plane is likely a public attempt to reassert his dominance and exact vengeance for the humiliation that the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24 caused Putin and the Russian MoD. Putin notably attended a publicly televised concert in honor of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Kursk around the time that Russian air defenses downed Prigozhin's plane. Putin's attendance at the televised concert echoed the memory of Soviet state television showing Swan Lake on television in August 1991 as the Soviet Union collapsed.^[26] Russian sources noted that it has been exactly two months since the beginning of Wagner's armed rebellion during which Wagner forces shot down several Russian helicopters and killed at least 13 Russian servicemen.^[27] The decision to have Russian air defenses be the method for Prigozhin's assassination allowed the Russian MoD to directly avenge what was one the deadliest days for Russian aviation since the start of the full-scale invasion. Putin had suffered significant humiliation for failing to stop Wagner's rebellion, relying on Lukashenko to stop Prigozhin's march, and failing to punish Wagner servicemen who were responsible for shooting down Russian aircraft on June 24.^[28] Putin's behavior during the rebellion reportedly concerned his inner circle about his ability to sustain his regime, and CIA Director William Burns reiterated similar observations about Putin's judgments and detachment from events.^[29] Burns also noted that "Putin is the ultimate apostle of payback," and it is likely that Putin was waiting to set proper conditions to finally avenge himself on Prigozhin without appearing impulsive or overreacting.^[30] Putin needed to exact ostentatious revenge against Prigozhin not only to prove that he is not a weak leader, but also to support his military – which in the eyes of many Russians did not see justice carried out for the events of June 24.

Specific individuals who may have planned to oppose Putin, the Kremlin, or the MoD have likely taken note of Prigozhin's ultimate fate and other recent measures to reassert the Kremlin's backing for the senior Russian military leadership. Putin notably sidelined Tula Oblast Governor Alexey Dyumin at the recent Army-2023 forum, publicly posturing him as subordinate to Shoigu following suggestions that Dyumin might replace Shoigu.^[31] Putin and Gerasimov visited the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, which Wagner forces occupied during the rebellion, likely to publicly demonstrate the Kremlin's backing of Gerasimov.^[32] Prigozhin's fate is also likely meant to serve as a deterrent to elements of the Russian military who may try to follow an existing precedent of insubordination that Prigozhin helped establish.^[33] Lukashenko notably embarrassed Putin by directly negotiating with Prigozhin to end the rebellion, and Prigozhin's assassination may signal to Lukashenko both a dramatic reduction of his negotiating space with the Kremlin and an implicit threat against his continued attempts to resist Union State integration efforts.^[34]

The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions to deflect overt responsibility for Prigozhin's assassination away from Putin and the Russian military. Rosaviatsiya created a special commission to investigate the technical condition of the crashed aircraft, the meteorological conditions on the flight route, and the dispatch services and ground radio equipment.^[35] The Russian Investigative Committee has initiated a criminal case on the charge of violating the rules of traffic safety and operation of air transport.^[36] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger noted that the Investigative Committee may choose the "erroneous" launch of air defense systems as the main version of the event given the claimed Ukrainian drone strikes on Moscow.^[37] A Russian insider source claimed that the crash will likely be framed as a terrorist act that occurred onboard, and Russian State Duma Deputy Yevgeniy Popov already echoed this narrative in the Russian information space.^[38] A Wagner-affiliated channel criticized Russian state TV channels for failing to mention the crash during the evening news cycle.^[39]

The wider Russian information space refrained from commenting on the reasons behind the crash, with only a few sources tying the incident to the Kremlin and/or the Russian MoD. Many sources observed that the crash occurred exactly two months after the start of Prigozhin's rebellion.^[40] Several insider sources claimed that the incident indicated that Putin "has something to be afraid of" and speculated that Putin's system (likely referring to his regime) is undergoing a new wave of changes.^[41] Some milbloggers claimed that Prigozhin's assassination will have "catastrophic consequences" and that this incident is a lesson that one must always continue going until the end – implying that Prigozhin should have continued his march on Moscow.^[42] Most milbloggers refused to comment on Prigozhin's death, citing a lack of available official information.^[43] ISW will resume its coverage of milblogger reactions on August 24.

Russian milbloggers will likely focus most of their coverage in the coming days on Prigozhin's assassination and may report less on the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian milbloggers similarly shifted much of their reporting to cover Wagner's rebellion on June 24 to developments within Russia and it took several days for them to return to their normal reporting on the frontlines in Ukraine.^[44] The Kremlin may have decided to ostentatiously kill Prigozhin at this time in part to shift focus in the Russian information space away from the frontlines in Ukraine amidst notable Ukrainian advances. ISW's coverage of kinetic activity on the frontlines in the coming days may be constrained if Russian reporting is limited.

Further tactically significant Ukrainian gains in and around Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast are widening the Ukrainian breach of Russian defensive lines in the area and threatening Russian secondary lines of defense. Geolocated footage published on August 22 and 23 indicates that Ukrainian forces have advanced further in Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and control most of the settlement and have made further gains west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).^[45] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the direction of Novopokropivka (13km south of Orikhiv) and Novodanylivka (5km south of Orikhiv).^[46] Russian forces had likely hoped to use their positions in and around Robotyne as a launching point for counterattacks against the western flank of the Ukrainian advance east of the settlement, where Ukrainian forces appear to be widening their penetration through Russian first lines of defense. The Ukrainian advance through Robotyne itself and the potential liberation of the settlement will deprive Russian forces of positions near the western flank of the Ukrainian breach and therefore give Ukrainian forces more maneuver space to launch offensive operations against the Russian secondary line of defense that runs south of Robotyne to the western outskirts of Verbove. A successful deep penetration of Russian defensive lines likely requires a widening of the initial penetration to prevent Russian forces from cutting off a too-narrow thrust.

Ukrainian advances have now brought Ukrainian forces within roughly two kilometers of the secondary lines of Russian defense, a relatively more continuous set of field fortifications consisting of anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth anti-tank obstacles. The extent of minefields in the area is unclear, although areas in front of these secondary lines of defense may be less heavily mined to give Russian forces north of the lines the ability to retreat. ISW previously assessed that these secondary lines of defense may be relatively weaker than the first Russian defensive lines in the area due to a lack of uncommitted Russian forces in the area and further lateral deployments from other sectors of the front.^[47]

Ukrainian forces likely struck a Russian S-400 air defense system in Crimea on August 23. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) announced and posted footage of a strike on a Russian S-400 long and medium-range anti-aircraft missile system near Olenivka, Crimea (116km northwest of Sevastopol and about 140km south of Kherson City).[48] GUR reported that the strike destroyed an air defense installation, an unspecified number of missiles, and killed nearby Russian military personnel, though the footage only shows part of the installation exploding.[49] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger suggested that Ukrainian forces likely used a Harpoon, Neptune, or Brimstone II missile to strike the air defense system.[50] Russian milbloggers expressed concern that Ukrainian forces were able to operate a drone and record footage of the strike roughly 120km behind the current frontline.[51] A Ukrainian strike on a Russian air defense installation deep within the Russian rear indicates a number of Russian tactical failures, particularly that Russian forces were seemingly unprepared to intercept the missiles with the air defense system or operate electronic warfare jamming to prevent Ukrainian forces from operating a drone in the area. These tactical failures, though surprising and serious, may not be indicative of wider systemic issues within Russian air defenses, however.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Pentagon Spokesperson General Patrick Ryder notably pushed back on an alleged US intelligence assessment that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will fail to meet its objectives. Sullivan stated on August 22 that the United States does not assess that the war in Ukraine "is a stalemate."^[52] Sullivan stated that the United States continues to support Ukraine in its counteroffensive efforts and noted that Ukrainian forces continue to take territory.^[53] Sullivan noted that the United States will continue to support Ukrainian forces as they operate according to their tactics and timetable and proceed according to the strategic and operational decisions of their commanders and leadership.^[54] Ryder stated on August 23 that it is "inappropriate" to draw any conclusions about the Ukrainian counteroffensive while fighting continues across the frontline and that Ukrainian forces continue to advance.^[55] Sullivan's and Ryder's statements are a notable response to the *Washington Post*'s August 18 report that the US intelligence community has assessed that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast and will not achieve its principal objective of severing the Russian land bridge to Crimea.^[56]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes across Ukraine on the night of August 22 to 23 and destroyed grain infrastructure at the port in Izmail, Odesa Oblast. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched nine missiles and up to 20 Shahed-131/136 drones and that Ukrainian forces destroyed 11 drones, including nine over Odesa Oblast.^[57] Ukrainian Minister for Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Development Oleksandr Kubrakov reported on August 23 that the Russian drone strike on the port of Izmail destroyed over 13,000 tons of grain intended for Egypt and Romania.^[58] Kubrakov reported that Russian strikes have destroyed 270,000 tons of grain since Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17.^[59] The Russian destruction of additional Ukrainian grain infrastructure comes less than a day after Putin attempted to mitigate dissatisfaction from African countries at Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal during the BRICS Business Forum in South Africa.^[60]

Key Takeaways:

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and founder Dmitry Utkin reportedly died after Russian forces shot down an aircraft transporting senior Wagner commanders over Tver Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin have been destroying the Wagner private military company (PMC) and weakening Prigozhin's authority since the rebellion – and the assassination of Wagner's top leadership was likely the final step to eliminate Wagner as an independent organization.
- Prigozhin was likely attempting to counter the Russian MoD's and the Kremlin's destruction of Wagner and Wagner's future remains uncertain.
- Putin almost certainly ordered the Russian military command to shoot down Prigozhin's plane.
- Putin's almost certain order for the Russian MoD to shoot down Prigozhin's plane is likely a public attempt to reassert his dominance and exact vengeance for the humiliation that the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24 caused Putin and the Russian MoD.
- Specific individuals who may have planned to oppose Putin, the Kremlin, or the MoD have likely taken note of Prigozhin's ultimate fate and other recent measures to reassert the Kremlin's backing for the senior Russian military leadership.
- The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions to deflect overt responsibility for Prigozhin's assassination away from Putin and the Russian military.
- Further tactically significant Ukrainian gains in and around Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast are widening the Ukrainian breach of Russian defensive lines in the area and threatening Russian secondary lines of defense.
- Ukrainian forces likely struck a Russian S-400 air defense system in Crimea on August 23.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in the Bakhmut area, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on August 23 and did not make any confirmed advances.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 22, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan with Mitchell Belcher

August 22, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on August 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued to make advances in and around Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of August 22 amid indications that Russian forces likely have a limited presence in the settlement. Geolocated footage published on August 21 and 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced in southeastern Robotyne and east of the settlement near Novopokrovka (13km southeast of Orikhiv).[1] The Ukrainian 47th Mechanized Brigade published a video on August 22 showing its personnel successfully evacuating civilians from Robotyne while accompanied by Ukrainian journalists.[2] The 47th Mechanized Brigade stated that its personnel broke through multi-echelon Russian defensive lines near Robotyne and have entered the settlement.[3] The evacuations and the presence of Ukrainian journalists suggests that areas of Robotyne may be relatively secure due to diminished Russian positions in the settlement itself and the nearby area. Russian maximalist claims that Ukrainian forces only maintain positions on the very northern outskirts of the settlement are likely false given the footage and reporting from the 47th Brigade. Most Russian milbloggers continue to acknowledge that Ukrainian forces hold positions in much of northern Robotyne and that Russian forces likely control at most positions on the southern outskirts of the settlement at this time.[4]

Russian forces appear to be concentrating their limited available reinforcements from elsewhere in the theater in the Orikhiv direction in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian military journalist Konstantin Mashovets reported that elements of the 108th Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) deployed near Robotyne as of August 16 and near Novopokrovka as of August 20.[5] Elements of the 108th were deployed near the Antonivsky Bridge as of July 29, and the "Sokol" Volunteer Battalion of the 108th VDV Regiment was reportedly operating near Staromayorske and Urozhaine in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area as of August 14.[6] Elements of the 7th VDV Division's 56th Regiment have likely been engaged in fighting in the immediate vicinity of Robotyne since early August. [7] Elements of the 7th VDV Division's 247th Regiment appear to be still operating south of Velyka Novosilka in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, although a prominent Russian milblogger suggested that some elements may be operating in the Robotyne area.[8] Elements of the 7th VDV Division's air assault regiments may be deployed across two axis as separate battalions and platoons, however. ISW previously assessed that the lateral redeployment of elements of the 7th VDV Division to the Robotyne area suggested that Ukrainian forces had severely degraded Russian forces in the area, and the possible commitment of elements of all three of its air assault regiments may suggest the further deterioration of the Russian situation in the area.

Ukrainian offensive operations in other sectors of the front remain important because they can fix Russian units in place and prevent further lateral reinforcements. Criticisms of continued Ukrainian efforts in other sectors and calls for Ukraine to concentrate all available reserves on a single axis are thus problematic. Ukrainian offensive operations around Bakhmut have fixed elements of multiple Russian airborne divisions and separate brigades in that area, as ISW has previously noted, rendering them likely unavailable to stiffen Russian resistance in the south.[9] Ukrainian offensive operations south of Velyka Novosilka proceeding in parallel with operations toward Melitopol present Russian defenders with multiple dilemmas and the need to choose which axis to reinforce. Sound campaign design requires balancing between weighting a decisive main effort and avoiding allowing the enemy to concentrate all reserves on stopping a single obvious thrust.

The Ukrainian advance in the Robotyne area brings Ukrainian forces closer to launching operations against second lines of defense that may be relatively weaker than the first Russian defensive line in the area. ISW has not observed any new Russian formations or units arrive in western Zaporizhia Oblast beyond the lateral transfer of the elements of the 7th VDV Division and the arrival of "Akhmat-Yug" Battalion elements in August.[10] Elements of the 503rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (19th Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) previously operating near Nesteryanka (12km northwest of Robotyne) have reportedly arrived in the immediate vicinity of Robotyne, likely to reinforce failing Russian defenses in the area.[11] Russian forces deployed to the wider western Zaporizhia Oblast operational direction have been defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives since the start of the counteroffensive without rotation.[12] Russian forces do not appear to have uncommitted regular units in Zaporizhia Oblast. All elements of the Russian grouping in Zaporizhia Oblast that ISW observed in the area in the months leading up to the counteroffensive have since been engaged in defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast or in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[13] ISW has since observed additional Russian elements that were likely already in the area only after they started defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, however, and it remains possible that some yet unobserved and uncommitted elements may occupy positions at secondary lines of defense.[14]

The lack of observed Russian formations and units at secondary lines of defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast may suggest that elements of units and formations already engaged in fighting may occupy these positions. Russian tactical reporting about counterattacks in the Robotyne area suggests that the 22nd and 45th Spetsnaz Brigades occupy positions behind the first line of defense and possibly at the second.[15] Elements of the 22nd and 45th Spetsnaz Brigades appear to be responsible for launching counterattacks against significant Ukrainian advances in the area and therefore are likely degraded.[16] The likely lack of Russian operational reserves, together with the limited lateral transfers to western Zaporizhia Oblast and observed separate uncommitted units at second lines of defense, suggests that second lines of Russian defense may be significantly less heavily defended. The Russian formations and units currently occupying secondary lines of defense are largely unknown at this time, however, and ISW offers this assessment with low confidence.

Russian forces appear concerned about recent Ukrainian advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Satellite imagery from November 2022, December 2022, and August 2023 shows that Russian forces have notably sped up the expansion of defensive fortifications near Chervonoselivka (38km southwest of Velyka Novosilka and 27km from the current frontline) in Zaporizhia Oblast over the last month.[17] Ukrainian Colonel Petro Chernyuk stated that all conditions are set for Ukrainian forces to enter the Northern Azov region and "demolish" Russian positions in southern Ukraine and occupied Crimea.[18] Chernyuk stated that Russian forces are strengthening their positions on the Perekop Isthmus (around 160km north of Sevastopol) and are building three lines of defense in the area.[19] Chernyuk suggested that Russian forces would not have built additional defenses if they were sure they could hold their positions on the Perekop Isthmus.[20] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Russian forces have created four unspecified "groups" in Crimea in preparation for a Ukrainian counteroffensive and noted that this has never happened before.[21] The construction of additional defensive fortifications in Zaporizhia Oblast and on the Perekop Isthmus and the creation of four unspecified "groups" in Crimea may indicate that Russian forces are growing increasingly concerned about recent Ukrainian advances along the southern front.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's unwillingness to renegotiate the Black Sea Grain Initiative until all of Russia's extensive terms are met during the BRICS Business Forum in South Africa on August 22. Putin claimed that the West ignored obligations to Russia for the export of grain and fertilizer abroad and that the West prevented Russia from transferring free mineral fertilizers to unspecified countries.[22] Putin claimed that Russia has refused to extend the grain deal since July 18 and will continue to refuse until all Russia's conditions are met.[23] Putin, nevertheless, reiterated Russia's promise to send six African countries 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain for free.[24] Putin's promotion of Russian agricultural exports to Africa is likely aimed at mitigating dissatisfaction from African countries at Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal and Russia's destruction of about 180,000 tons of Ukrainian grain, some of which was likely intended for Africa.

[25] Putin delivered the remarks via teleconference as Russian and South African concerns about South Africa's status as a signatory to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Putin's ICC arrest warrant have shadowed the BRICS forum in the past months.[26]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be trying to increase Wagner's presence in Africa as part of an effort to maintain Wagner as a cohesive and independent organization. A Wagner recruitment Telegram channel announced on July 30 that Wagner stopped all recruitment and that all Russian regional recruitment centers suspended work indefinitely before advertising new jobs on August 21.[27] An OSINT monitoring group, "All Eyes on Wagner," reported on August 22 that Wagner sources have been advertising jobs in the Middle East and Africa following Prigozhin's August 21 claim that Wagner is expanding its presence in Africa. [28] The advertisement reportedly offers a monthly salary of 150,000 rubles (about \$1,500) for jobs in the Middle East and 195,000 to 250,000 rubles (about \$2,050 to \$2,640) for jobs in Africa.[29] A Wagner recruitment Telegram channel consistently advertised the monthly salary for Wagner positions in Ukraine as 240,000 rubles (about \$2,530) since the start of 2023.[30] The significant decrease in salary is consistent with recent reports that Wagner is financially struggling and may be losing personnel due to salary cuts.[31] ISW continues to assess that Wagner's new recruitment effort may indicate that Prigozhin is attempting to secure a contract in Africa and deploy existing and new personnel from Russia and Belarus, actions that Prigozhin may see as Wagner's final option to maintain its independence from the Russian MoD.[32]

A Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) delegation arrived in Libya on August 22, likely as part of the Russian MoD's efforts to set conditions to possibly replace the Wagner Group with MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs). Libyan National Army Commander Marshal Khalifa Haftar invited the Russian MoD delegation, led by Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, to Libya to discuss bilateral cooperation in combating international terrorism and other issues.[33] ISW has observed evidence indicating that Wagner forces continue to operate in Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic.[34] The arrival of a Russian MoD delegation in Libya indicates that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu likely maintains his reported objectives of taking over Russia's relationships with African countries and replacing Wagner with MoD-affiliated PMCs.[35]

Claims that the Russian MoD formally dismissed nominal Russian deputy theater commander in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin as commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) generated a muted response among Russian milbloggers. Russian opposition journalist Alexey Venidikov claimed on August 22 that the Russian MoD issued a decree dismissing Surovikin as the commander of the VKS.[36] Russian media figure Ksenia Sobchak claimed that the Russian MoD issued a closed decree dismissing Surovikin on August 18.[37] Several Russian milbloggers claimed that news of Surovikin's alleged dismissal is not new and does not change anything because Russian authorities removed Surovikin from power immediately after Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion.[38]

The Kremlin is reportedly planning to cancel gubernatorial elections in the Republic of Khakassia in order to prevent a Russian veteran's loss and ensure a United Russia victory, likely demonstrating the Kremlin's concern over domestic support for the war and the fragility of its veneer of electoral legitimacy. Russian opposition media outlet Meduza reported on August 21 that the United Russia candidate in the gubernatorial race in the Republic of Khakassia, State Duma deputy and veteran of the war in Ukraine Sergei Sokol, is likely to lose to incumbent Valentin Konovalov of the Communist Party.[39] Kremlin-backed United Russia leadership reportedly realized that primarily promoting Sokol as a veteran of the war in Ukraine was causing voters to question his qualifications to head a regional government and is reportedly now presenting Sokol as an "effective lobbyist" who will be able to garner more support for Khakassia from the federal government. Meduza reported that the Kremlin, in preparation for Sokol's loss, is planning to cancel the election citing "allegations of falsifications." [40] The Central Election Commission has already criticized the local election commission for misusing administrative resources in July.[41] The Kremlin will reportedly give Sokol a "compensatory post" in the regional or federal government and conduct new elections with a new United Russia candidate.[42] The Kremlin will reportedly only cancel the elections if the results are close; if Konovalov wins by a significant margin, the Kremlin, according to a Meduza source close to the Presidential Administration, may recognize the results "in order not to inflame the situation." [43] ISW previously reported that United Russia electoral campaigns are not highlighting the war in Ukraine out of concerns about voter support for the war.[44] ISW also previously reported that the Kremlin likely fears its electoral legitimacy in upcoming elections may weaken, possibly presenting United Russia with a greater need to falsify and manipulate election results.[45]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued to make advances in and around Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of August 22 amid indications that Russian forces likely have a limited presence in the settlement.
- Russian forces appear to be concentrating their limited available reinforcements from elsewhere in the theater in the Orikhiv direction in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian offensive operations in other sectors of the front remain important because they can fix Russian units in place and prevent further lateral reinforcements. Criticisms of continued Ukrainian efforts in other sectors and calls for Ukraine to concentrate all available reserves on a single axis are thus problematic.
- The Ukrainian advance in the Robotyne area brings Ukrainian forces closer to launching operations against second lines of defense that may be relatively weaker than the first Russian defensive line in the area.
- Russian forces appear concerned about recent Ukrainian advances in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russia's unwillingness to renegotiate the Black Sea Grain Initiative until all of Russia's extensive terms are met during the BRICS Business Forum in South Africa on August 22.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be trying to increase Wagner's presence in Africa as part of an effort to maintain Wagner as a cohesive and independent organization.
- A Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) delegation arrived in Libya on August 22, likely as part of the Russian MoD's efforts to set conditions to possibly replace the Wagner Group with MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs).
- The Kremlin is reportedly planning to cancel gubernatorial elections in the Republic of Khakassia in order to prevent a Russian veteran's loss and ensure a United Russia victory, likely demonstrating the Kremlin's concern over domestic support for the war and the fragility of its veneer of electoral legitimacy.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia on August 22 and advanced in certain areas.

- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 22 and made advances near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue their campaign of religious persecution in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 21, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 21, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces made tactically significant gains in and east of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 20-21 while continuing counteroffensive operations on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border and in eastern Ukraine. Geolocated footage published on August 20 and August 21 indicates that Ukrainian forces reached the central part of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and broke through some Russian defenses south of Mala Tokmachka (9km southeast of Orikhiv).^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces succeeded in the direction southeast of Robotyne and south of Mala Tokmachka, and that Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked east of Robotyne.^[2] Malyar and Russian sources stated that fighting is ongoing in Robotyne.^[3] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces captured some positions in a part of the Russian forward defensive lines after intensifying attacks on the Robotyne-Verbove (21km southeast of Orikhiv) line.^[4] Some Russian sources reported that Russian forces retreated from some positions near Verbove as part of their elastic defense, likely in response to a Ukrainian advance south of Mala Tokmachka.^[5] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian attacks on Robotyne are tactically significant because a Ukrainian advance in the area may allow Ukrainian forces to begin operating past the densest Russian minefields.^[6] Ukrainian advances across fields in this area likely confirm this assessment. Persistent Ukrainian advances in the Robotyne area also likely aim to degrade Russian forces that have committed significant effort, resources, and personnel to hold positions around Robotyne.

Ukrainian forces also reportedly advanced in the Bakhmut and Kreminna directions over the past week and continue counteroffensive operations south and southeast of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.^[7] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces recaptured three square kilometers around Bakhmut over the past week and 43 square kilometers in total since Wagner Group forces captured Bakhmut in May 2023.^[8] Ukrainian Severodonetsk City Administration Head Andriy Vlasenko reported that Ukrainian forces achieved some unspecified successes south of Kreminna while conducting active mobile defenses in the area.^[9]

Russian milbloggers continue to indicate that Russian forces lack equipment and suffer from low morale along the entire frontline. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces – especially the 20th Combined Arms Army (Western Military District) and 2nd Combined Arms Army (Central Military District), both operating in eastern Ukraine – lack light transportation vehicles, which inhibits them from using equipment and operating effectively and reduces their morale.^[10] The milblogger claimed that Russian personnel must register their privately-owned vehicles with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), after which their vehicles disappear or get transferred elsewhere.^[11] The milblogger claimed that Russian commanders regularly punish servicemen who keep their vehicles for minor administrative violations and that Russian personnel feel that they are “at war” with their commanders.^[12] A Russian milblogger claimed on August 21 that Russian authorities have not provided Russian forces operating in the Kherson direction with boats and have ignored milbloggers’ ongoing appeals since July 2.^[13] “Vostok” Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovskiy claimed that Russian forces continue to face problems with counterbattery operations after Russian forces began experiencing artillery systems shortages and claimed that Russian forces began to receive “outdated” D-20 towed gun-howitzers.^[14] Khodakovskiy claimed that the “outdated” D-20 howitzers are not suitable for counterbattery combat, possibly referring to barrel wear from constant use that makes tube artillery less accurate over time.^[15] Multiple milbloggers have claimed that Russian forces lack adequate counterbattery capabilities, especially since Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army Major General Ivan Popov’s dismissal in early July.^[16] Another Russian milblogger, however, claimed that Russian forces are improving artillery tactics and that artillery units have become far more accurate than they were a year ago.^[17] The milblogger may be suggesting that mobilized personnel who did not have prior military experience have learned to accurately strike targets. Ongoing complaints from Russian personnel suggest that the Russian MoD is unwilling or unable to address persistent equipment shortages and problems with low morale. Russian forces may be improving tactics and learning from previous mistakes as the war continues, however. The protraction of the conflict resulting in part from delays in the provision of Western aid to Ukraine gives Russian forces time to improve and to learn from their mistakes.

The Russian MoD is creating new military formations possibly to allow more combat effective units currently defending in Kherson Oblast to redeploy to more critical sectors of the front. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on August 21 that the Russian military is highly likely forming the new 18th Combined Arms Army (CAA) from other units currently operating in Kherson Oblast, including the 22nd Army Corps.^[18] The UK MoD reported that the new army will consist mostly of mobilized personnel and will focus on defensive operations in southern Ukraine.^[19] Russian authorities in Dalnegorsk, Primorsky Krai stated on June 5 that the newly created 25th CAA (Southern Military District), for which the Russian MoD has been recruiting volunteers from the Russian Far East since mid-May, will deploy to Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts in December 2023.^[20] The Russian MoD previously formed the 3rd Army Corps (Western Military District) in the summer of 2022 from mostly volunteer battalions which were then largely destroyed in Kharkiv Oblast and Bakhmut.^[21] The formation and reported future deployment of the new 18th and 25th CAAs to southern Ukraine are likely meant to allow more effective standing formations such as the 49th CAA (Southern Military District) currently operating in Kherson Oblast to redeploy to more critical sectors of the front possibly to reinforce combat-weary Russian forces degraded defensive lines.^[22]

Russian insider sources indicated that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov may have decisively won Russian President Vladimir's Putin favor following the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion. A Russian insider source claimed that Putin postponed a meeting with Alexey Dyumin, former Putin bodyguard and current Tula Oblast governor, and forced Dyumin to publicly escort Shoigu at the recent Army-2023 Forum in Moscow.^[23] The insider source claimed that the Kremlin wants to portray Shoigu and Dyumin as having positive relations and to gauge public reactions.^[24] The Kremlin, however, likely aimed to publicly subordinate Dyumin to Shoigu. Dyumin and Shoigu have notably had a tense relationship, and Russian milbloggers recently floated Dyumin as a replacement for Shoigu immediately after the Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24.^[25] A Wagner-affiliated source claimed that the Russian General Staff now has "carte blanche" and has purged all proteges of Army General Sergey Surovkin, a former deputy theater commander and Wagner affiliate who was reportedly ousted and placed under house arrest.^[26] The source also claimed that unspecified aspects of the Putin-Wagner deal collapsed for unknown reasons, which could indicate increased Putin favor for Shoigu and Gerasimov if true. Putin also recently publicly met with Gerasimov in Rostov-on-Don for the first time since the Wagner rebellion, which further indicates that Putin has fully aligned himself with Shoigu and Gerasimov despite their military failure and inability to stop the rebellion.^[27]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to re-establish Wagner in Africa, and some Russian sources are portraying this reported effort as necessary for Wagner's survival. A Wagner-affiliated source claimed that Wagner representatives and possibly Prigozhin himself arrived in Mali on August 19 possibly to discuss the regional security situation or cooperation with Niger.^[28] Another prominent Wagner-affiliated source published footage of Prigozhin on August 21 in which Prigozhin claims to be in Africa and claims that Wagner is increasing its presence in Africa.^[29] A Russian insider source claimed that Prigozhin began a media campaign to portray Nigeriens as begging for Wagner's intervention in order to help Wagner secure a contract with Niger and thereby save Wagner.^[30] The source claimed that Wagner has struggled with significant personnel and financial issues from funding cuts following the June 24 rebellion and the recent claimed (but unconfirmed) withdrawal from Belarus.^[31] Wagner likely has thousands of personnel to dedicate to operations in Africa if Wagner is able to both secure a contract and deploy personnel from Russia and Belarus, actions that Prigozhin may see as Wagner's final option to maintain its independence from the Russian MoD.

Some Russian sources are likely running an information operation to exaggerate the degree to which Wagner is struggling to survive, possibly in support of the Russian MoD effort to destroy Prigozhin's reputation and the whole Wagner Group. Russian insider sources are increasingly portraying Shoigu and Gerasimov as having Putin's full support and ousting insubordinate commanders while painting Wagner as a private military company increasingly struggling to survive.^[32] ISW has observed indicators that the Wagner Group is struggling to maintain coherence, including recent reports of conflict within the Wagner high-level representatives.^[33] These Russian sources may be exaggerating the degree to which Wagner is struggling, however, especially if reports of Prigozhin's travel to Africa are accurate and his reported efforts to secure contracts for Wagner are successful. Shoigu likely seeks to deal a final blow to Wagner but may struggle to make that blow decisive. A Russian milblogger noted that the Russian MoD may struggle to replace Wagner in Africa as Russian forces need time to train before deploying, have not established the connections with locals that Wagner has, and may destabilize conflicts rather than quell them.^[34] If Wagner is able to secure contracts in Africa and deploy its personnel before the Russian MoD can deploy personnel, then Prigozhin and Wagner may retain at least some ability to operate independently in Africa contrary to the MoD's efforts to eliminate Wagner.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces made tactically significant gains in and east of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 20-21 while continuing counteroffensive operations on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border and in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers continue to indicate that Russian forces lack equipment and suffer from low morale along the entire frontline.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is creating new military formations possibly to allow more combat effective units currently defending in Kherson Oblast to redeploy to more critical sectors of the front.
- Russian insider sources indicated that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov may have decisively won Russian President Vladimir's Putin favor following the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to re-establish Wagner in Africa, and some Russian sources are portraying this reported effort as necessary for Wagner's survival.
- Some Russian sources are likely running an information operation to exaggerate the degree to which Wagner is struggling to survive, possibly in support of the Russian MoD effort to destroy Prigozhin's reputation and the whole Wagner Group.
- Russian sources made and walked back claims about significant Russian advances in the Kupyansk direction amid continued offensive actions on August 21.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kremenna, Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and advanced near Bakhmut.
- The Russian government continues to introduce mandatory nationalistic and militaristic courses into high school curriculum to promote military service among Russian youth.
- Belarusian authorities reportedly exposed forcibly deported Ukrainian children to pro-Kremlin propaganda in Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 20, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 20, 2023, 6:50pm ET

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front and advanced near Robotyne. Geolocated footage published on August 19 and 20 shows that Ukrainian forces recently advanced east of Robotyne.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Berdyansk directions (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area).[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue to face issues with counterbattery capabilities on all sectors of the front, but particularly in the Zaporizhia direction.[3] The milblogger also claimed that Russian units are facing officer shortages due to manpower losses and that privates command some Russian companies, which should have a junior officer in command.[4]

Ukrainian strikes against Russian deep rear areas are generating discontent in the Russian information space and sparking criticism of the Russian military command, as Ukraine likely intends. Some Russian milbloggers expressed anger at recent Ukrainian strikes on the Kerch Strait Bridge and called for Russian forces to target the families, homes, and other properties of Ukrainian decisionmakers to deter further Ukrainian strikes against Russian deep rear areas.[5] The milbloggers referenced prior Soviet and Russian retaliatory strategies in Lebanon and in the northern Caucasus, and one milblogger claimed that it is easy for Russian officials to disregard the need for retaliation because Ukrainian strikes do not directly impact their livelihoods. Former Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik claimed on August 20 that strikes against Moscow are becoming normalized following three consecutive days of alleged Ukrainian strikes against the city and called on Russian forces to make retaliatory strikes "personally painful" for decisionmakers who ordered the Moscow strikes.[6] A Russian insider source claimed that Russian air defenses did not activate to defend against an overnight strike against a Kursk City rail station on August 19 to 20, highlighting a frequent milblogger complaint that Russian forces fail to defend against strikes on Russian territory.[7] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that the Russian leadership has likely been pressuring the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) command to improve Russian air defense coverage in western Russia, suggesting that both the higher Russian leadership and the ultranationalist information space are placing pressure on the Russian military command in response to the strikes.[8]

Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas are demonstrably degrading the morale of Russian forces in Ukraine, which could threaten the stability of Russian defenses on multiple critical areas of the front. Russian frontline units, particularly in southern Ukraine, have frequently struggled with degraded morale following Ukrainian strikes on rear areas.[9] Morale issues can quickly intensify and spread among Russian frontline units if one unit under pressure breaks, which could spread panic and significantly reduce the combat effectiveness of other Russian forces. A broken Russian frontline unit would threaten the integrity of other frontline defenses, and such a break in the Russian frontline would provide a vulnerability that Ukrainian forces could exploit. Russian forces also likely lack the necessary reserves to rotate out or quickly replace a broken unit, as ISW has previously assessed, making the preservation of morale in frontline units imperative.[10] **Morale issues pertaining to the Russian defense against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations are only relevant if Ukrainian forces can degrade Russian morale to the breaking point and take advantage of it; these morale issues will not matter if Russian forces do not break under this pressure. There is no way to predict if, when, or where a Russian unit might break under sustained pressure, but Ukrainian forces are setting conditions to increase the likelihood of such a development.**

Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for not preventing an alleged Ukrainian drone attack on Soltsy airbase in Novgorod Oblast on August 19 and for downplaying the severity of the damage to aircraft based there. The Russian MoD claimed on August 19 that Russian forces shot down a Ukrainian drone using small arms and that a fire damaged one aircraft but that firefighters promptly put out the fire.[11] Images published on August 20 reportedly show a Tu-22M3 (NATO reporting name Backfire-C) long-range supersonic bomber on fire at the Soltsy airbase.[12] A Russian insider source claimed that witnesses said that fire damaged or completely destroyed two aircraft.[13] Several Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces used a small and relatively inexpensive quadcopter drone to conduct the attack and criticized the Russian MoD for not storing the aircraft in hangars, noting that even elementary protective structures and nets are reliable against quadcopters.[14] The damage or even destruction of two Tu-22M3 aircraft will not generate militarily significant effects in itself, but Russian milbloggers' responses to the attack show the way in which such deep attacks support larger Ukrainian efforts to degrade Russian morale.

The Netherlands and Denmark confirmed that they will transfer F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine but did not specify when. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to the Netherlands on August 20 and met with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to discuss the transfer of the aircraft.[15] Zelensky stated that the Netherlands and Denmark will transfer 42 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, of which the Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) specified that Denmark will provide 19.[16] Rutte stated that the transfers will occur when Ukraine meets certain conditions, which the Danish MoD announced includes US legal permission, the training of Ukrainian pilots, and the creation of support infrastructure in Ukraine.[17] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated on August 18 that the US will grant the legal permission after Ukrainian pilots complete their training on the aircraft.[18] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on August 17 that Ukraine will not receive the fighter jets by the winter of 2023-2024.[19]

Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk nevertheless stated on August 20 that the provision of Western aircraft, such as the F-16, will allow Ukrainian forces to combat the main Russian aviation threat—the Su-35 fighter jet.[20] Oleshchuk assessed that if Russian forces lost between two and five percent of their current aircraft then Russian forces would temporarily stop flying combat missions to develop a response.[21] Oleshchuk argued that this temporary pause would give Ukraine temporary air superiority and therefore allow Ukrainian forces to significantly accelerate counteroffensive operations.[22] The impact of F-16 fighter jets on Ukrainian counteroffensive operations depends on numerous factors, and ISW offers no assessment of Oleshchuk's argument at this time.

Russian officials have reportedly drafted a plan to conduct a decade-long ethnic cleansing campaign in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on August 20 that Ukrainian partisans gained access to a Russian occupation development document that stipulates a 300,000 increase in Mariupol's overall population by 2035 through migration from Russia.[23] The Resistance Center reported that an existing preferential mortgage program for Russians who move to occupied Mariupol is a part of this resettlement effort.[24] Russian occupation officials have engaged in a series of efforts to attract Russian citizens to the occupied territories in Ukraine, although this alleged document is the most detailed account of the extent of the Kremlin's long-term repopulation goals.[25] Mariupol had a pre-invasion population of over 400,000 people and roughly 120,000 residents remained in the occupied city as of May 2023.[26] The Russian siege of Mariupol during the first phases of the Russian full-scale invasion killed up to 25,000 Ukrainian civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands from the city.[27] Russian officials reportedly deported an additional 50,000 residents from the city to Russia and other occupied territories in the months following its capture.[28] The development document's repopulation goals indicate that the Kremlin intends to remake Mariupol as a predominantly ethnic Russian city after engaging in a systematic and likely

intentional effort to depopulate the city of ethnic Ukrainians. ISW continues to assess that the ongoing Russian efforts to deport Ukrainians and repopulate Ukrainian cities with imported Russian citizens likely amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in addition to being apparent violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[29]

Wagner Group commanders accused two high-ranking Wagner representatives of betraying Wagner for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-affiliated Redut private military company (PMC).[30] Wagner commander Anton Yelizarov (known under the callsign "Lotos") claimed that Andrey Troshev (known as "Sedoy") left Wagner with another Wagner commander, who was later identified as Vadim V. (nicknamed "Khrustal").[31] Yelizarov claimed that Troshev had never commanded Wagner units and was not a member of Wagner's Council of Commanders. Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin had repeatedly introduced Troshev as his personal representative prior to Wagner's rebellion on June 24 and as the director of Wagner-affiliated "League for the Protection of the Interests of Veterans of Local Wars and Military Conflicts." [32] Troshev appeared to be Prigozhin's close confidant and had reportedly established connections with Putin and the Russian MoD through his work with Wagner.[33] Troshev has previously appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin on behalf of Wagner, and Putin identified him as a Kremlin-affiliated Wagner commander on June 29.[34] The Wagner commander nicknamed Koldun claimed that "Khrustal," who led Wagner's personnel department, is now calling Wagner fighters to recruit them into a new PMC for operations in Africa.[35] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger and Wagner commanders criticized Troshev and "Khrustal" for cowardice and numerous personal and professional failures, and claimed that Wagner military commanders have not left Wagner.[36] Wagner sources also tried to downplay Troshev's and Khrustal's authority within Wagner.

Troshev's and Khrustal's betrayal of Wagner may represent a growing fracture within the Wagner leadership, indicating that the Kremlin's and Russian MoD's efforts to disband Wagner are partially succeeding. A Russian milblogger claimed that the Russian MoD continues to form new PMCs to immediately replace Wagner in Africa, despite the fact that such units reportedly need at least 12 to 18 months to train and to establish new relations with African countries.[37] The Kremlin and the Russian MoD are apparently using Troshev and "Khrustal" to recruit Wagner fighters and commanders under the promise of new missions in Africa while setting conditions to restrict Prigozhin's contingent from continuing operations in Africa and the Middle East.[38] Wagner sources' public denouncement of Troshev and "Khrustal" as cowards may indicate that Wagner commanders are attempting to deter other commanders and Wagner representatives from leaving Wagner.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front and advanced near Robotyne.
- Ukrainian strikes against Russian deep rear areas are generating discontent in the Russian information space and sparking criticism of the Russian military command, as Ukraine likely intends.
- Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas are demonstrably degrading the morale of Russian forces in Ukraine, which could threaten the stability of Russian defenses.
- The Netherlands and Denmark confirmed that they will transfer F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine but did not specify when.
- Russian officials have reportedly drafted a plan to conduct a decade-long ethnic cleansing campaign in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.
- Wagner Group commanders accused two high-ranking Wagner representatives of betraying Wagner, possibly representing a growing fracture within the Wagner leadership and suggesting that the Kremlin's and Russian MoD's efforts to disband Wagner are partially succeeding.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, Kremenna, Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast on August 20 and marginally advanced near Bakhmut.
- Wagner Group fighters continue to commit violent crimes after returning to Russia.
- Russian officials continue to forcibly transport mothers and children from occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia under the guise of medical retreats.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 19, 2023

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

Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 19, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on August 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces launched a missile strike during the day on August 19 targeting Chernihiv City center after carrying out a series of Shahed drone strikes overnight. Russian forces struck Taras Shevchenko Theater in Chernihiv City, killing seven people and injuring 117.[1] Chernihiv Oblast Administration Head Vyacheslav Chaus reported that Russian forces "probably" launched a "ballistic missile" at the theater, and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces used an Iskander-M ballistic missile during the strike.[2] The theater reportedly hosted a drone exposition called "Lyuti Ptashky" (Angry Birds), which had previously occurred in other Ukrainian cities.[3] The event organizer, Maria Berlinska, stated that organizers only shared the location of the event with individuals who registered and were screened before attending the event.[4] The event reportedly ended shortly after an air raid warning, and organizers advised people to hide in a shelter.[5] Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russian forces are targeting public events to emotionally affect Ukrainians and noted that Russian forces have previously

struck public events even without prior public announcements of such events.^[6] Many Russian milbloggers originally claimed that Russian forces targeted a Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) building, before most indicated that Russian forces struck the drone exhibition.^[7]

Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces also carried out 17 Shahed drone strikes overnight on August 19 and that Ukrainian forces shot down 15 drones.^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff later reported that Russian forces also carried out five missile strikes.^[9] The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces destroyed a Ukrainian ammunition depot in Khmelnytskyi Oblast, and Ukrainian regional officials reported that Russian attacks overnight on unspecified targets wounded eight people.^[10] The Zhytomyr Oblast Administration reported that a Russian loitering munition targeted unspecified infrastructure in the oblast and that debris from the shot down drone sparked a localized fire.^[11]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike on Soltsy airbase in Novgorod Oblast and reportedly damaged strategic aircraft on August 19.^[12] Geolocated images published on August 19 show smoke rising from the Soltsy airbase.^[13] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces shot down a Ukrainian drone using small arms and that a fire damaged one aircraft.^[14] A Russian insider source claimed that the fire damaged at least two aircraft and that the Soltsy airbase housed an unspecified number of Tu-22M3 (NATO reporting name Backfire-C) long-range supersonic bombers.^[15] The source also claimed that Russian forces moved the undamaged aircraft to Olenya air base, Murmansk Oblast.^[16]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 19, and advanced along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[17] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces continue to maintain the initiative in the Bakhmut direction.^[18] Geolocated footage published on August 16 indicates that Ukrainian forces recently made limited advances east of Nevelske (directly west of Donetsk City).^[19] Additional geolocated footage published on August 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[20] CBS News reported on August 18 that anonymous US officials stated that Ukrainian forces are advancing in the direction of Tokmak (a major Russian stronghold in western Zaporizhia Oblast) and have cleared a Russian minefield north of Tokmak.^[21] US officials are likely referring to recent Ukrainian advances north and east of Robotyne (about 23km northeast of Tokmak). ISW previously assessed that recent Ukrainian advances near small settlements in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia are likely tactically significant because of the structure of Russian defensive lines.^[22] These advances may allow Ukrainian forces to begin operating in less heavily mined areas of the Russian line of defense that are likely more conducive to more rapid Ukrainian gains.^[23]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov and senior officers at the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on August 19.^[24] This was reportedly Putin's first visit to Rostov-on-Don since the Wagner Group took control of the SMD headquarters on June 23-24.^[25] Putin rarely visits areas associated with the war in Ukraine; in April he visited Kherson and Luhansk oblasts and in March he visited Mariupol.^[26] Putin's visit to the SMD headquarters is likely a public gesture that he continues to side with Gerasimov and his group of commanders despite these commanders' failure to stop Wagner's rebellion or achieve the war aims Putin set for them. Putin's visit occurred about two months after the rebellion, and he is likely attempting to portray himself as in control of his regime and military.

The Russian MoD is continuing to set conditions to possibly replace Wagner Group forces with MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs). A Wagner-affiliated source that there is an ongoing effort to recruit Wagner personnel to deploy to missions abroad as part of PMCs. The source claimed that unspecified Russian authorities – likely referring to Russian MoD – are forming the new "Rossiyskiy Ekspeditiionniy Korpus" (Russian Expeditionary Corps) PMC at the base of one of the advanced Spetsnaz brigades.^[27] The source also claimed that the Russian MoD controls "Redut" PMC (also known as "Zvezda" PMC), which is currently recruiting personnel for missions in Africa instead of in Ukraine.^[28] The source suggested that Redut PMC may have been attempting to recruit Wagner fighters to Redut's operations in Africa, referring to a statement that Wagner commanders issued on August 9 warning fighters about calls from "second-rate" PMCs advertising jobs in Africa.^[29] The Russian MoD may be attempting to lure Wagner personnel away from Wagner with new work opportunities at MoD-controlled PMCs as part of a wider effort to break up Wagner.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched a missile strike during the day on August 19 targeting Chernihiv City center after carrying out a series of Shahed drone strikes overnight.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike on Soltsy airbase in Novgorod Oblast and reportedly damaged strategic aircraft on August 19.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 19, and advanced along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov and senior officers at the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don on August 19.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is continuing to set conditions to possibly replace Wagner Group forces with MoD-affiliated private military companies (PMCs).
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and advanced in certain areas on August 19.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree on August 17 establishing the Donetsk Higher Combined Arms Command School under the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), likely in an effort to further integrate proxy military formations in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.
- Russian officials continue to deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 18, 2023

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

August 18, 2023, 6:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The *Washington Post* reported on August 17 that the US intelligence community has assessed that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast and will not achieve its principal objective of severing the Russian land bridge to Crimea. The unverified intelligence assessment reportedly states that effective Russian defensive operations and dense minefields have constrained Ukrainian advances and will continue to do so.^[1] Anonymous US officials reportedly stated that Ukrainian forces will advance to within several miles of Melitopol but not further.^[2] A Ukrainian advance to within a few miles of Melitopol would bring the critical road and rail connections on which Russia relies to supply its forces within range of Ukrainian artillery systems, severely compromising Russia's ability to continue to use them for that purpose. It is unclear from published reports why US intelligence analysts have reportedly concluded that seizing Melitopol is the only way Ukraine can sever the Russian land bridge. ISW has, in fact, assessed that Ukraine has many options for severing critical Russian ground lines of communication along the northern Sea of Azov coast of which the seizure of Melitopol is only one.^[3] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken notably offered a diverging opinion from the alleged intelligence assessment on August 15, stating that the prospects for Ukraine's counteroffensive to make significant "strategic gains" will remain unclear for at least a month or longer.^[4]

It is premature to make assessments about the overall success of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations occurring along several lines of advance toward several different apparent objectives. ISW has consistently assessed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will be a protracted, non-linear series of operations, which will likely continue to occur in phases of differing tempos.^[5] The Ukrainian counteroffensive is not a discrete set of scheduled operations, and current counteroffensive operations are likely setting more favorable conditions for larger significant operations.^[6] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations are significantly degrading defending Russian forces and that the overall degradation of the Russian defensive line creates opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially operationally significant.^[7]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 18 and have reportedly advanced further near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdiansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[8] Geolocated footage published on August 17 and 18 indicate that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in northeastern Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), from which Russian sources had previously claimed that Russian forces had expelled Ukrainian forces.^[9] The footage confirms that recent Ukrainian advances in the Robotyne area have likely been tactically significant, and ISW previously assessed that such advances are likely reflective of a significant degradation of the Russian forces defending the area.^[10] Russian milbloggers claimed on August 18 that Ukrainian forces control northern Robotyne and conducted assaults in unspecified areas south and southeast of the settlement after Russian forces "temporarily withdrew" from Robotyne itself, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have made further advances in the area.^[11] The relative speed of these alleged Ukrainian advances suggests that the areas north of the settlement may have been heavily more mined than areas into which Ukrainian forces are currently trying to advance.^[12] Geolocated footage published on August 18 also indicates that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains south of Urozhaine in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.^[13]

The Kremlin has intensified its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space, threatening the credibility of Russian sources that inform the wider Western coverage of battlefield realities in Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) held the "Arms and Society: Mental Security Strategy" psychological operations conference as part of the ongoing Army-2023 forum on August 17.^[14] The conference included discussions about the historical, ideological, geopolitical, informational, and psychological aspects of the "special military operation" and "informational and ideological concepts" to combat the "information policy of unfriendly countries." The conference featured prominent voices in the Russian information space, including politicians, political voices, journalists, and prominent Russian ultranationalist milblogger Yevgeny Poddubny, signaling the MoD's likely effort to consolidate control over pro-war voices and messaging.^[15] Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor announced on August 18 that the Russian State Duma will consider legislation in the fall that would criminalize the publishing of information on Russian military asset locations, Ukrainian strike locations, and strike aftermaths.^[16] This effort immediately follows recent similar Crimean occupation and Russian Federal Council efforts, and the Russian information space largely did not react to these prior efforts.^[17] A prominent Russian milblogger dryly commented on Roskomnadzor's August 18 announcement that Russian authorities finally cracked down against military censorship after a year and a half of war.^[18] Another Russian milblogger claimed that implementing these censorship measures will drive Russians to stop following Russian information space voices and listen to pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western channels instead.^[19]

The Russian ultranationalist community has widely considered Russian milbloggers to be the last remaining credible voice on the war in Ukraine, and the Kremlin's effort to censor and control their reporting may eliminate that trust. The Kremlin's effort to control milblogger content, therefore, threatens to undermine the Kremlin's other effort to leverage select Russian milbloggers' connections to the wider ultranationalist community.^[20] Kremlin control over milblogger content would replace tactical and operational reporting on the war in Ukraine with unchallenged Kremlin narratives and make accurate coverage of battlefield realities more challenging.^[21]

Ukrainian Operational Command South Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk challenged Russian claims that Russian authorities have adequately repaired the Chonhar bridge after a Ukrainian strike on August 6. Humenyuk stated on August 18 that Russian officials continue repairs on the Chonhar and Henichesk bridges and that Russian officials are struggling with repairs due to a lack of suitable specialists willing to travel to dangerous areas.^[22] Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are attempting to use alternative pontoon crossings at the Chonhar and Henichesk bridges to transport large loads of materiel because the bridges are currently unable to support large loads.^[23] Humenyuk also stated that Russian military logistics continue to rely on the M-17 (Armyansk-Oleshky) route through the Armyansk checkpoint.^[24] Humenyuk's statement that Russian forces continue to use an alternative pontoon crossing at the Chonhar Bridge for heavy loads indicates that Russian authorities likely opted for quick, short-term repairs at the bridge instead of more time-consuming, long-term

repairs. Russian authorities have likely chosen to prioritize partially reopening critical ground lines of communications (GLOCs) over fully repairing bridges supporting critical military and civilian transport.

The Russian MoD accused Ukrainian forces of targeting Russian ships in the Black Sea with an unmanned naval drone overnight on August 17 to 18. The Russian MoD claimed that the Russian *Pyliv* and *Vasily Bykov* patrol ships destroyed the Ukrainian drone before it hit a Russian vessel in the southwestern part of the Black Sea (approximately 237km southwest of Sevastopol).^[25] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the *Pyliv* and *Vasily Bykov* patrol ships were accompanying a tanker from the Mediterranean Sea and speculated that a drone may have targeted the tanker.^[26] The milblogger speculated that Ukrainian forces may have launched the drone from the civilian container ship *Joseph Schulte*, as the *Joseph Schulte* was allegedly traveling through the Bosphorus Strait at the same time as the attempted strike.^[27] The milblogger conceded that the location of the drone's launch remains unclear, however. ISW previously reported on August 16 that the *Joseph Schulte* was the first civilian vessel to travel through a Ukrainian-created temporary corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea.^[28] The milblogger's suggestion that Ukrainian forces may have launched the naval drone from a civilian ship is likely an attempt to justify further Russian escalation in aggressive Black Sea posturing and set informational conditions to justify future Russian strikes on civilian ships traveling through the Black Sea.

Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) Director Viktor Zolotov is allegedly attempting to remove Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu from his post. Russian lawyer Kirill Kachur, who was charged by the Russian Investigative Committee in absentia for embezzlement and bribery in 2022 and claims to have insider knowledge about internal Kremlin politics, alleged that Zolotov hoped to replace Shoigu with "one of his former subordinates and former adjutants to Vladimir Putin" as Defense Minister – possibly referring to current Tula Governor Alexei Dyumin, who previously worked in the Presidential Security Service as Putin's bodyguard and adjutant and as Zolotov's deputy.^[29] The source claimed that the recent bill allowing Rosgvardia to receive heavy military equipment was the Kremlin's compensation to Zolotov for rebuffing his effort to remove Shoigu.^[30] Another Russian insider source had claimed on August 3 that Dyumin is also attempting to remove Shoigu as Defense Minister.^[31]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric intended to weaken international support for Ukraine at the Second "International Anti-Fascist Congress" in Minsk, Belarus. Shoigu stated that the Congress will focus on uniting international efforts to eradicate Nazi ideology and insinuated that Western elites and the Ukrainian government promote neo-fascist ideology.^[32] Shoigu claimed that representatives of more than 30 countries are attending the congress.^[33]

Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) reportedly attempted to use civilians to sabotage weapons shipments to Ukraine in Poland. *The Washington Post* reported that the GRU attempted to recruit civilians in Poland to commit sabotage operations, including the derailment of trains on a railway through which more than 80 percent of military equipment delivered through Poland to Ukraine flows.^[34] The GRU also reportedly recruited civilians to post pro-Russia propaganda fliers in public spaces, hide tracking devices in military cargo, scout Polish seaports, and place cameras along railways.^[35]

Key Takeaways:

- The *Washington Post* reported on August 17 that the US intelligence community has assessed that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast and will not achieve its principal objective of severing the Russian land bridge to Crimea.
- It is premature to make assessments about the overall success of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations occurring along several lines of advance toward several different apparent objectives.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 18 and have reportedly advanced further near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Kremlin has intensified its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space, threatening the credibility of Russian sources that inform the wider Western coverage of battlefield realities in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Operational Command South Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk challenged Russian claims that Russian authorities have adequately repaired the Chonhar bridge after a Ukrainian strike on August 6.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Aviivdka-Donetsk City line, and in the eastern Donetsk-western Zaporizhia border area on August 18 and advanced in some areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 17, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 17, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

"Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky suggested that Russia freeze the war in Ukraine along the current frontlines, reintroducing a narrative that had been largely dormant since Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion. Khodakovsky stated that Russia will not be able to topple Ukraine militarily in the near term and that Russian forces are unlikely to easily occupy additional Ukrainian cities, echoing comments Prigozhin had made in April 2023.^[1] Khodakovsky concluded that Russia will likely have to come to a "truce" and that Russia may enter a phase "of neither peace nor war" with Ukraine.

[2] Khodakovsky suggested that Ukraine would be sufficiently weakened in this state of frozen conflict and that Russia would be able to exert more influence over Ukraine in such a situation than it currently can during the "Special Military Operation." [3] Prigozhin's April 14 essay suggested that Russia freeze the war in Ukraine to set conditions for a future victory without negotiations. [4] Russian sources have periodically claimed that a Kremlin faction is interested in freezing the war along the current frontlines for similar reasons as well as over concerns about domestic political stability and the economic fallout from the war. [5] Discussion of this narrative has waned with Prigozhin's relative silence following Wagner's June 24 rebellion and the arrest of ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin, who routinely called on the Kremlin to resist the faction that aims to freeze the war. [6] Khodakovsky may be reintroducing the narrative into the Russian information space on behalf of the faction allegedly interested in freezing the war, although Khodakovsky likely has limited influence on the Russian leadership itself. ISW continues to assess that a temporary ceasefire in Ukraine and protraction of the war will only benefit Russia by allowing Russian forces to reconstitute and letting Russia wear down Western support for Ukraine. [7]

Khodakovsky commands forces defending in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and his comments about freezing the war follow the Ukrainian liberation of Urozhaine on August 16, suggesting that recent Ukrainian advances may be significantly weakening confidence in the Russian defense along the wider front in southern Ukraine. Khodakovsky has previously highlighted concerns about the Russian defense in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, specifically relating to poor Russian counterbattery capabilities, heavy Russian losses, exhausted Russian forces, and a lack of reserves. [8] Khodakovsky previously called for an operational pause on August 13 so that Russian forces could accumulate resources for a new operation. [9] Khodakovsky's escalation from calling for an operational pause to suggesting that Russia freeze the conflict is likely associated with his firsthand experience of recent tactically significant Ukrainian advances and the degradation of defending Russian forces in Urozhaine.

Recent Ukrainian advances near small settlements in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast are likely tactically significant because of the structure of Russian defensive lines. Ukrainian Colonel Petro Chernyk stated on August 15 that the three-echeloned Russian defensive line in southern Ukraine is comprised of a first line of minefields stretching several kilometers deep; a second line with artillery, equipment, and personnel concentrations; and a third line of rear positions meant to preserve resources. [10] Recent Ukrainian advances north and northeast of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia may allow Ukrainian forces to begin operating in the areas past the densest minefields. [11] If the areas around the second Russian line of defense are less heavily mined, then they would likely be more conducive to more rapid Ukrainian gains. ISW has no ability to assess the density or depth of Russian minefields, however.

Russian forces have dedicated significant effort, resources, and personnel to hold settlements such as Robotyne and Urozhaine, and recent Ukrainian advances in these areas are therefore likely reflective of a wider degradation of defending Russian forces. ISW continues to assess that Russian forces lack significant operational reserves, and the intense Russian effort to hold these settlements instead of withdrawing their forces means that Ukrainian forces have likely had to thoroughly degrade Russian units before advancing. [12] ISW recently observed Russian forces conduct lateral redeployments of elements of the 7th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division from Kherson Oblast and possibly from the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area to the Robotyne area, further suggesting that recent Ukrainian advances have significantly degraded the Russian forces that have been defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast without rotation since the start of the counteroffensive. [13] The lack of Russian operational reserves means that Russian forces will have to reinforce certain areas of the front at the expense of others, likely weakening Russian defensive lines in aggregate and offering Ukrainian forces opportunities for exploitation. [14] Khodakovsky's recent complaint that the Russian command failed to send reinforcements to secure exhausted Russian forces defending Urozhaine may indicate that the Russian command is already making difficult choices about what sectors to prioritize as Ukrainian forces advance. [15] Russian forces increasingly appear likely to have to withdraw to secondary prepared defensive positions without significant support in the case of a Ukrainian breakthrough, and the further degradation of Russian forces creates opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially operationally significant. [16] Khodakovsky's apparent waning confidence in the Russian defense in southern Ukraine may indicate that he believes that recent advances have made a Ukrainian breakthrough more likely.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 17 and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions. [17] Geolocated footage published on August 16 indicates that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains in southern Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut). [18] Additional geolocated footage published on August 14 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced southwest of Novopokrovka (16km southeast of Orikhiv). [19] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two Russian Ka-52 attack helicopters on August 17. [20] Ukrainian military sources and geolocated footage posted on August 17 indicate that Ukrainian forces downed a Russian Ka-52 helicopter near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast. [21] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Mykola Oleshchuk stated that Ukrainian air defense units downed another Russian Ka-52 helicopter in the Bakhmut direction, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of a downed Russian Ka-52 helicopter in this direction. [22] The destruction of two Russian Ka-52 helicopters in the same day could indicate that protracted Russian aviation operations without rest may be degrading Russia's limited cadre of pilots, although it would be premature to draw firm conclusions from two instances.

Russian efforts to ramp up the domestic production of Iranian Shahed-136/-131 drones indicates that Russia aims to develop the long-term capability to conduct large strike series in Ukraine. The Washington Post reported that a drone production facility in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone aims to build 6,000 Iranian Shahed drones domestically by 2025. [23] The Washington Post cited leaked documents from a disillusioned Alabuga facility worker that state that Russia aims to develop a drone manufacturing capability that exceeds Iran's production capacity and aims to improve on existing capabilities of the Iranian Shahed-131 and -136 drones. The report noted that Russia is focused on producing and improving the Shahed-136 variant, which has a payload 10 times larger than the Shahed-131. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuri Ihnat stated on August 17 that Russian forces are producing many missiles, helicopters, and aircraft but are unable to sustain this production. [24] Ihnat recently assessed that Russian forces will rely on strike drones because they are cheaper and easier to manufacture than precision missiles. [25] Ihnat stated that Russian forces are largely launching precision missiles that Russia recently produced, which indicates that Russian forces are prioritizing targeting Ukraine with precision missiles over restoring their stockpiles. [26] Russian forces currently use Shahed drones in Ukraine primarily as decoys so that high precision missiles have better chances of hitting their targets. The Russian command may believe that a large number of strike drones will allow Russian forces to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses, although Shahed drones remain Russia's high precision weapon system most vulnerable to Ukrainian air defenses. [27] Shahed drones do not carry sufficient payloads to significantly damage most critical military targets, and Russian forces are likely to continue using the drones to target soft and civilian targets in Ukraine. [28]

The Washington Post report indicates that Russia is struggling to produce its own variants of the Shahed drones at the pace and quality it desires. The Washington Post cited experts who assessed from the leaked documents that the Alabuga drone production facility has only manufactured the external

components for 300 drones and is about one month behind schedule.[29] The leaked documents indicate that the Alabuga facility has struggled to fill specialist positions and that workers, including the one who leaked the documents, struggle with morale issues and that the plant has had to implement incentives such as increased pay and coercive measures such as seizing passports to retain workers. The documents also indicate that the Alabuga facility is struggling to obtain necessary drone components from foreign sources, as Russia only produces four of the 130 necessary internal components, and recent US blanket sanctions have further hindered Russia's ability to acquire some electrical components.

Russia is likely dissatisfied with the quality of Shahed-131- and -136 drones it sources from Iran but likely seeks to retain Iran as a long-term strategic defense partner. *The Washington Post*'s leaked documents indicate that Iran has consistently held an advantage over Russia with the provision of the Shahed drones on Iranian rather than Russian terms.[30] The documents state that Iran leveraged negotiations to provide the smaller Shahed-131 drone to Russia despite Russia's strong preference for the larger Shahed-136. *The Washington Post* reported that an estimated 25 percent of Iranian-provided drones arrive damaged, many even inoperable. Russia has continued to posture itself as supporting or partnering with Iran in other strategic initiatives, including promoting Iranian weapons at the ongoing Army-2023 development forum, continuing bilateral defense cooperation discussions, and seeking to expel US forces from Syria, however.[31]

Russian reports about the state of the Chonhar Bridge in occupied Kherson Oblast indicate that Ukrainian strikes disrupted a major Russian ground line of communication (GLOC) to Crimea for 11 days. Crimean occupation Transport Minister Anatoly Tsurkin claimed on August 16 that traffic resumed on the Chonhar road bridge connecting Crimea with occupied Kherson Oblast after a Ukrainian strike on August 6 damaged the bridge and forced authorities to reroute civilian and likely military traffic.[32] The road bridge is part of a critical Russian GLOC, and the resumption of traffic on the bridge 11 days following the strike indicates that the Ukrainian interdiction campaign against Russian deep rear areas in southern Ukraine is able to temporarily disrupt Russian logistics supporting the Russian defense of critical sectors of the front during the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[33] The status of rail activity on the Chonhar railway bridge is unknown at this time, as is the status of the damaged road bridge across the Henichesk Strait.

Russian authorities are likely targeting individuals associated with the "Golos" Movement for Defense of Voters' Rights, including its Co-Chairperson Grigory Melkonyants, to suppress meaningful electoral opposition in preparation for the 2024 presidential election. Russian opposition news outlets reported that Russian authorities searched the premises of 14 associates of Melkonyants in eight oblasts in connection with the case against Melkonyants.[34] Russian authorities also reportedly arrested "Golos" Movement Coordinator Vladimir Yegorov on charges of disobeying the police and searched Yegorov's home in connection to the case against Melkonyants.[35] "Golos" Movement Co-Chairperson Stanislav Andreychuk stated that the case against Melkonyants is connected to the upcoming regional elections in Russia and claimed that Russian authorities have made it difficult for "Golos" to cover Russian elections over the past year.[36] The "Golos" Movement had remained the main independent election observation organization in Russia until recently.[37]

Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers reportedly detained the lawyer of arrested former FSB officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin on August 17. Russian sources claimed that FSB officers detained Girkin's lawyer, Alexander Molokhov, in Yalta on suspicion of extortion after he was invited to the city by a developer in an arbitration case and offered money.[38] Russian sources claimed that the FSB officers held Molokhov for 10 hours before releasing him but did not initiate a criminal case.[39]

An imprisoned former Russian Federal Protection Service (FSO) general with alleged knowledge of Russian President Vladimir Putin's private Black Sea residence died suspiciously on August 16. Gennady Lopyrev, a former lieutenant general in the Russian Federal Protection Service (FSO), who was serving a sentence for bribery in a penal colony in Ryazan Oblast, Russia, died on August 16.[40] The chairman of the Public Monitoring Commission of Ryazan Oblast, Viktor Boborykin, did not provide the cause of Lopyrev's death, but a Russian insider source claimed that Lopyrev was "unexpectedly" diagnosed with leukemia on August 14 after suddenly complaining of shortness of breath despite normal health indicators.[41] The insider source claimed Lopyrev was "the keeper of secrets" related to the construction of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Black Sea residence in Gelendzhik, often referred to as "Putin's Palace." [42]

Key Takeaways:

- "Vostok" Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky suggested that Russia freeze the war in Ukraine along the current frontlines, reintroducing a narrative that had been largely dormant since Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion.
- Khodakovsky commands forces defending in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and his comments about freezing the war follow the Ukrainian liberation of Urozhaine on August 16, suggesting that recent Ukrainian advances may be significantly weakening confidence in the Russian defense along the wider front in southern Ukraine.
- Recent Ukrainian advances near small settlements in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast are likely tactically significant because of the structure of Russian defensive lines.
- Russian forces have dedicated significant effort, resources, and personnel to hold settlements such as Robotyne and Urozhaine, and recent Ukrainian advances in these areas are therefore likely reflective of a wider degradation of defending Russian forces.
- Russian efforts to ramp up the domestic production of Iranian Shahed-136/-131 drones indicates that Russia aims to develop the long-term capability to conduct large strike series in Ukraine.
- Russian reports about the state of the Chonhar Bridge in occupied Kherson Oblast indicate that Ukrainian strikes disrupted a major Russian ground line of communication (GLOC) to Crimea for 11 days.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 17 and advanced in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 17 and advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 16, 2023

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

August 16, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on August 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 16 and advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, including liberating the village of Urozhaine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[1] Geolocated footage published on August 16 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced northeast of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast and have likely made wider gains in the surrounding areas given weeks of consistent Ukrainian activity in the forested areas northeast of the settlement.^[2] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces liberated Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area, and the Ukrainian 35th Marine Brigade published footage of their personnel raising the Ukrainian flag in the center of the settlement.^[3] Ukrainian reporting on the liberation of Urozhaine is in line with previous statements by Ukrainian officials about the liberation of other settlements in the area and recent reports by Russian forces that Russian units in the area were withdrawing.^[4] Russian claims about Ukrainian assaults further south and east of the limits of the settlement further indicate that Ukrainian forces likely control the majority of the settlement.^[5]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces have committed their "main reserves" to counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, although continued Russian claims of small Ukrainian infantry assaults in the area do not correspond with the alleged commitment of major elements of Ukraine's mechanized reserves.^[6] Russian sources appear to be incorrectly portraying Ukrainian reserves as one large unitary contingent that Ukraine would commit to fighting as a whole and prematurely claiming that Ukraine has committed all of its reserves based on scattered observations of western-equipped Ukrainian units.^[7]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of August 15 to 16, primarily targeting grain and port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces targeted port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast with an unspecified number of Shahed-131/136 drones and reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 13 of the drones over Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts.^[8] Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that an unspecified number of Russian drones struck Ukrainian port infrastructure and residential buildings and destroyed a grain silo and elevator in Reni, Izmail Raion, Odesa Oblast.^[9]

The first civilian vessel travelled through a Ukrainian-created temporary corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea on August 16 as part of Ukrainian efforts to circumvent Russian attempts to further curtail maritime traffic. Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for Restoration and Minister for Communities, Territories, and Infrastructure Development Oleksandr Kubrakov reported on August 16 that the container ship *Joseph Schulte* left the Odesa port through one of the temporary corridors.^[10] Ukrainian Monitoring Group on Sanctions and Freedom of Navigation of the Institute of Black Sea Strategic Studies Head Andriy Klymenko stated on August 16 that Ukraine is implementing strategies to create a "grain corridor" without Russia and had submitted a map of possible routes for the "grain corridor" to the International Maritime Organization in mid-July.^[11] The Ukrainian Navy announced the creation of temporary traffic routes for civilian ships going to and from Ukrainian Black Sea ports beginning on August 8.^[12] Russian Ambassador to Turkey Alexei Yerkhov announced on August 16 that Russia is working with unnamed partners on alternatives to the Black Sea Grain Deal so that Russia can deliver food to countries in need.^[13] The Kremlin likely seeks to curtail maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports without fully enforcing a blockade through escalatory posturing in the Black Sea, including the recent forcible stop and inspection of a civilian cargo ship on August 13.^[14] Russia's naval posturing in the Black Sea may not yet be having this desired effect, and Russia is likely trying to promote its own initiatives to export Russian and stolen Ukrainian grain to further undermine the potential success of a Ukrainian-established "grain corridor."

Russian ultranationalists are increasingly criticizing Russian military command for failing to recruit and train effective middle-level military officers to lead Russian forces on the frontlines in Ukraine. Some Russian milbloggers recently expressed their frustrations with middle-level military officers and accused them of introducing unnecessary bureaucratic measures, mistreating wounded and deceased Russian military personnel, issuing commands that lead to military losses, and misinforming the Russian higher military command.^[15] One Russian milblogger claimed that a middle-level military officer ordered his unit to introduce additional bureaucratic measures following a visit from the head of the Russian Air and Missile Defense Troops — likely Lieutenant General Andrey Demin — who originally advised against such bureaucratic practices.^[16] Some milbloggers claimed that anger in the Russian information space directed at mid-level military officers should instead target the senior officials who appointed poor commanders.^[17] Some milbloggers noted that the senior military leadership is supporting a system that fails to recruit and train a new generation of middle-level officers, instead appointing old and ineffective commanders to the frontlines.^[18] One milblogger noted that the Russian military command and Russian leadership, in general, prefer officers that are loyal rather than competent and are incapable of training new officers, while another milblogger claimed that Russia will not eliminate this detrimental culture within its military without making significant changes to the Russian military leadership.^[19]

Russian senators proposed an amendment to ban the distribution of photos and videos containing information about Russian military activities and locations on August 16, amplifying a recent trend of cracking down on public imagery of the war. Russian Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Construction Head Senator Andrey Klishas stated on August 16 that a group of Russian senators has proposed an amendment to the laws "On Mass Media" and "On Information, Information Technology and Information Protection" prohibiting the distribution of photos or videos of Russian troop deployments and redeployments, military infrastructure, the location of critical facilities, and videos or photos that could be used to confirm the defeat of an element of the Russian military.^[20] The amendment also reportedly bans the distribution of photos or videos that: show the location of shelling and strikes on Russian territory; explain how Russian forces use specific weapons, air defense systems, drones, and other weapons; or reveal information that could help identify a Russian weapon's type, location, launch patterns, or flight path.^[21] Klishas noted that official Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) content will be exempt from punishment.^[22] Russian authorities will reportedly fine violators up to 500,000 rubles (\$5,290) or imprison them for up to three years.^[23]

Crimean occupation authorities announced their intention to propose a similar amendment on August 14 following Ukrainian strikes targeting the Kerch Strait bridge.
[24] These efforts are consistent with ISW's prior assessments that the Kremlin and Russian MoD intend to gain greater control over the Russian information space and the narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine, particularly through attempts to court or control Russian milbloggers.
[25] Russian milbloggers notably did not comment on the Ukrainian strikes on the Chonhar bridge on August 7, suggesting that Russian officials may have directed Russian correspondents to not offer commentary on Ukrainian strikes on Russian logistic nodes.
[26] It remains unclear exactly how this amendment or prior guidance issued by Russian authorities to Russian milbloggers shapes their coverage of the war in Ukraine. Any significant censorship or self-censorship among milbloggers will affect ISW's ability to cover Russian operations, and ISW will continue to track changes in the Russian information space that could affect open-source reporting on the war in Ukraine.

The Russian MoD may be using the Army-2023 Forum in Moscow to coerce countries into refusing to cooperate with the Wagner Group and to advertise Russian MoD-controlled private military companies (PMCs). Wagner-affiliated sources amplified claims on August 16 that the Russian MoD is using the Army-2023 Forum to request that countries refuse all cooperation with Wagner and is offering the services of Russian MoD-controlled PMCs instead.
[27] The Russian MoD is also reportedly threatening to end military-technical support and support at the United Nations if countries continue to leverage existing ties with Wagner.
[28] Wagner-affiliated sources claimed that the Russian MoD already issued Burkina Faso an ultimatum by threatening to end Russian support if Burkina Faso continues to use Wagner forces.
[29] These claims are unconfirmed and primarily come from Wagner-affiliated sources, but track with ISW's previous assessments that the Kremlin seeks to destroy or restructure Wagner in favor of Russian MoD-controlled PMCs.
[30]

Russian sources claimed that the Russian military command placed nominal Russian deputy theater commander in Ukraine and notable Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovkin under house arrest as of early August. Russian State Duma Deputy Viktor Sobolev claimed on August 9 that the Russian military leadership suspended Surovkin from his involvement in the war in Ukraine but did not comment on the reason for the suspension.
[31] Sobolev added that Surovkin may return to the Russian military command if he does not "have any serious violations," but his reinstatement depends on a decision from Russian President Vladimir Putin. *Politico Europe* reported that a Russian insider source claimed on August 13 that Surovkin is under some kind of house arrest but has been able to meet with subordinates.
[32] The insider source claimed that there is no official investigation into Surovkin but suggested that Putin has instructed the military leadership to silence and isolate Surovkin.
[33] Surovkin's position in the Russian military and legal status remains unclear. ISW previously assessed that the Russian veteran community may be attempting to rehabilitate Surovkin following intense scrutiny over his affiliations with the Wagner Group in the wake of Wagner's June 24 rebellion.
[34] Putin's reported decision to isolate Surovkin may indicate that he has not decided on Surovkin's fate at this time, consistent with Putin's observed policy of allowing disgraced or ineffective commanders to return to his favor rather than removing them completely.
[35]

Former Eastern Military District Commander Army General Gennady Zhidko died on August 16, reportedly from cancer.
[36] Zhidko reportedly served as overall theater commander in Ukraine during the Russian offensive operation to capture Lysychansk and Severodonetsk, Luhansk Oblast, in the summer of 2022, before being dismissed from both positions following Ukraine's rapid liberation of territory during the Kharkiv counteroffensive.
[37]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 16 and advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border.
- Ukrainian reports and video released by Ukrainian troops confirm that Ukrainian forces liberated Urozhaine, on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, on August 16.
- Russian sources are prematurely asserting that Ukrainian forces have committed their entire "main reserves" to counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast based on scattered observations of western-equipped Ukrainian units.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of August 15 to 16, primarily targeting grain and port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.
- The first civilian vessel traveled through a Ukrainian-created temporary corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea on August 16 as part of Ukrainian efforts to circumvent Russian attempts to further curtail maritime traffic.
- Russian ultranationalists are increasingly criticizing Russian military command for failing to recruit and train effective middle-level military officers to lead Russian forces on the frontlines in Ukraine.
- Russian senators proposed an amendment to ban the distribution of photos and videos containing information about Russian military activities and locations on August 16, amplifying a recent trend of cracking down on public imagery of the war.
- The Russian MoD may be using the Army-2023 Forum in Moscow to coerce countries into refusing to cooperate with the Wagner Group and to advertise Russian MoD-controlled private military companies (PMCs).
- Russian sources claimed that the Russian military command placed nominal Russian deputy theater commander in Ukraine and notable Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovkin under house arrest as of early August.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and did not make any confirmed advances.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 15, 2023

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

Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

August 15, 2023, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on August 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 15 and reportedly advanced in Luhansk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut, Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast), and Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[1] Coordinates published by a Russian milblogger on August 15 indicate that Ukrainian forces have advanced south of Dibrova (7km southwest of Kremmina).^[2] Geolocated footage posted on August 14 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced into Robotyne, and further Russian and Ukrainian reporting published on August 15 suggests that Ukrainian forces have committed additional counteroffensive brigades to the western Zaporizhia oblast area.^[3] Ukrainian Colonel Petro Chernykh stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is advancing slowly in southern Ukraine because Ukrainian forces must overcome a three-echeloned Russian defensive line.^[4] Chernykh stated that the Russian line of defense includes a first line of minefields stretching several kilometers wide; a second line with artillery, equipment, and personnel concentrations; and a third line of rear positions meant to preserve resources.^[5] Chernykh noted that Ukrainian counterbattery measures are especially important in order to prevent Russian artillery from targeting Ukrainian mine-clearing equipment.^[6] Chernykh's statements are in line with ISW's previous assessments that Russia's doctrinally sound elastic defense is slowing Ukrainian forces' advances in southern Ukraine.^[7]

Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile strike against targets mainly in Ukrainian rear areas on the night of August 14-15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 28 missiles, including four Kh-22 anti-ship missiles, 20 Kh-101/555 air-based cruise missiles, and four Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles, at targets throughout Ukraine on the night of August 14-15 and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 16 Kh-101/555 and Kalibr missiles.^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched eight S-300/400 missiles in ground attack mode at targets in Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia Oblasts.^[9] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the missile strikes targeted key enterprises in Ukraine's defense-industrial base.^[10] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Russian missiles targeted various rear areas of Ukraine, including industrial areas in Dnipropetrovsk, Volyn, Lviv, Cherkassy and Donetsk oblasts.^[11] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast, although Ukrainian sources did not confirm this strike.^[12] Russian sources may be inflating claims of the strike on Khmelnytskyi Oblast in order to frame Russia as effectively targeting Ukrainian assets associated with Ukraine's counteroffensive capabilities.^[13]

The Kremlin is using the Army-2023 forum in Moscow (August 14-20) to foster bilateral military and political relations with other states and posture itself as a reliable and technologically advanced partner. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that over 77,000 representatives from over 1,500 Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises are presenting over 28,500 defensive and technical developments at the forum, and that representatives from over 82 countries are in attendance.^[14] The MoD claimed that Russia conducted 14 bilateral meetings on the first day of the forum.^[15] Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin met with officials from Myanmar, Pakistan, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh, and Djibouti to discuss bilateral defense relations.^[16] The Russian MoD also posted photographs of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu viewing Iranian, Chinese, and Indian exhibitions.^[17] Chinese Defense Minister Colonel General Li Shangfu spoke at the forum to celebrate Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation and to signal Chinese readiness for further cooperation.^[18] The Russian MoD featured multiple Iranian drones at the forum.^[19] The Russian MoD also postured itself as a viable long-term defense partner and weapons producer by hosting conversations on long term Russian military training, the intended integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into Russian weapons and control systems, the utilization of three-dimensional printing for Russian naval repairs, and the modernization of domestic rescue and underwater equipment.^[20]

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Shoigu made largely boilerplate comments framing the Russian government as effectively meeting Russian force generation efforts, portraying Western and Ukrainian resources as limited, and promoting international cooperation against the West. Shoigu claimed on August 15 at the Moscow International Security Conference that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) has produced various weapons, tanks, armored vehicles, and drones in an amount of time and alleged that Russian and Soviet equipment capabilities surpass Western equipment capabilities.^[21] Shoigu claimed that Western sanctions on Russia have helped to increase domestic military equipment production through import substitution at DIB enterprises, part of a longstanding (and inaccurate) Kremlin narrative since 2014 claiming that international sanctions strengthen Russia.^[22] Shoigu claimed that in contrast, Ukrainian resources and Western military arsenals are almost completely depleted.^[23] ISW continues to assess that Russia has failed to mobilize its DIB to adequately support the war effort, however.^[24]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated unsubstantiated claims on August 15 at the Moscow International Security Conference that the West is responsible for "igniting the conflict" in Ukraine.^[25] Shoigu and Putin reiterated rhetoric accusing the West of creating instability in Africa, Latin America, and Asia and advocated for deepening Russian defense relations with those countries and the creation of a "multipolar world order."^[26] Shoigu also alleged that the West escalated international conflicts including "the situation around Taiwan."^[27] Shoigu's reference to Taiwan likely indicates Russia's continued efforts to create a "no limits" partnership between Beijing and Moscow despite China's reservations.

Wagner Group-affiliated sources are undermining private military companies (PMCs) affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Several Russian and Belarusian insider sources claimed on August 15 that rumors currently circulating about the alleged transfer of Wagner commanders to the Russian MoD's "Redut" PMC are false.^[28] The insider sources called the rumors a "dream" of the Russian MoD and denied that any Wagner commanders are transferring to "Redut" and are instead continuing to fulfill tasks as part of Wagner leadership.^[29] Wagner affiliated sources and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin previously harshly criticized "Redut" and its constituent units over the backdrop of Wagner's tensions with the Russian MoD during the Battle of Bakhmut.^[30] The acerbic responses of many Wagner-affiliated channels to the allegation that some Wagner commanders may be transferring to "Redut" suggests that Wagner sources have a continued interest in undermining various MoD-associated organs. As ISW reported on August 14, the Russian MoD appears to be struggling to consolidate control of other PMCs associated with Russian businessmen and enterprises, and likely hopes to maintain a grasp on "Redut" despite rhetorical attacks by Wagner affiliated channels.^[31]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to comment on Wagner issues on the African continent to remain active in the information space, but is notably refraining from commenting on the war in Ukraine. A Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel posted an audio recording of Prigozhin on August 15 wherein Prigozhin commented on the alleged arrests of protesters wearing Wagner shirts in Ghana and claimed that the incident proves that Wagner has continued support around the world and in Africa.^[32] Wagner channels previously posted an audio clip of Prigozhin discussing the coup in Niger and Wagner's presence in Africa on August 8.^[33] Prigozhin appears to be using his limited public addresses to focus on platforming Wagner's interests in Africa as opposed to commenting on the

situation in Ukraine or reports of Wagner activity in Russia and Belarus, possibly indicating he is following imposed limitations on his involvement - even rhetorically - with the war in Ukraine.

Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported that Russian authorities are developing a mechanism to fully control and shut off civilian mobile telecommunications networks in the event of a declared emergency, possibly related to pro-Ukrainian cross border raids. *Kommersant* reported on August 15 that Russian authorities are considering amendments to the Russian development strategy for the communications industry that would create a mechanism for law enforcement agencies and civilian communication operators to share frequencies and allow law enforcement agencies to take complete control over jointly used frequencies in the event of a declared emergency.[34] *Kommersant* reported that experts say it is possible that sharing frequencies could also improve the quality of mobile communications "in peacetime" because operators will have access to previously restricted frequencies currently only used by Russian authorities.[35] Russian authorities may hope to institute such mechanisms to exert greater control of communications networks and the wider information space in the wake of recent events such as limited pro-Ukrainian cross-border incursions, wherein civilian communications greatly contributed to panic spreading and undermining the official Russian line of the incidents.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 15 and reportedly advanced in Luhansk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile strike against targets mainly in Ukrainian rear areas on the night of August 14-15.
- The Kremlin is using the Army-2023 forum in Moscow (August 14-20) to foster bilateral military and political relations with other states and posture itself as a reliable and technologically advanced partner.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Shoigu made largely boilerplate comments framing the Russian government as effectively meeting Russian force generation efforts, portraying Western and Ukrainian resources as limited, and promoting international cooperation against the West.
- Wagner Group affiliated sources are undermining private military companies (PMCs) affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to comment on Wagner issues on the African continent to remain active in the information space but is notably refraining from commenting on the war in Ukraine.
- Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported that Russian authorities are developing a mechanism to fully control and shut off civilian mobile telecommunications networks in the event of a declared emergency, possibly related to pro-Ukrainian cross border raids.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and reportedly advanced near Svatove and Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 15 and reportedly advanced in Luhansk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian "Vostok" Battalion, which is notably fighting near Urozhaine claimed on August 15 that Russian forces have entirely lost Urozhaine and blamed a lack of infantry and equipment for the loss of the settlement, but ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation that Russian forces have completely withdrawn from the town.
- The Russian federal subject "Bashkortostan Regiment" volunteer formation has reportedly deployed to Ukraine.
- Russian authorities continue to integrate occupied Ukrainian territories into the Russian cultural and educational sphere.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 14, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 14, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on August 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 14 and reportedly advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Berdyansk (western Donetsk Oblast and eastern Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[1] Malyar added that Ukrainian forces achieved some unspecified successes south and southeast of Staromayorske (9km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) in the Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) direction. Malyar noted that Ukrainian forces are continuing to advance in Urozhaine, and some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces control the northern part of the settlement.[2] Alexander Khodakovsky, commander of the "Vostok" battalion defending near Urozhaine, complained that Russian forces are not deploying additional reserves and artillery battalions to the area.[3] Khodakovsky claimed that the "Vostok" battalion is fighting for Urozhaine with all available forces but that the forces operating in the area are exhausted and suffering losses. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces lack available operational reserves that would allow them to carry out rotations or bring in additional reinforcements, and that Russian defensive lines may be brittle.[4] Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Robotyne (13km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in southern Klishchiivka (7km

southwest of Bakhmut).^[5] Malyar added that Ukrainian forces advanced by three square kilometers in the Bakhmut direction in the past week and liberated 40 square kilometers total since Ukrainian forces began their offensive operations in this direction.^[6]

Crimean occupation authorities are attempting to impose new federal penalties on individuals who publish content revealing the locations and operations of Russian military assets in occupied Crimea, likely in response to Ukraine's ongoing interdiction campaign. Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov announced on August 14 that Crimean occupation officials will propose amendments at a federal level to increase the liability for the spread of photos and videos showing the location and operation of Russian air defense systems, other systems, and military and strategic assets.^[7] The amendments would also penalize individuals who publish images of the aftermath of Ukrainian strikes. Aksyonov's initiative likely intends to improve Russian operational security and limit awareness of Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas in the Russian information space, and occupation officials have previously discussed similar restrictions following the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge on July 17.^[8] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger and prominent Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov both expressed concern that Russian authorities could wrongfully use such amendments to censor Russian journalists and milbloggers who report on Ukrainian strikes.^[9] Another Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian officials are unlikely to successfully prevent the publication of strike footage.^[10]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes targeting Odesa Oblast on the night of August 13 to 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed all eight Russian-launched Kalibr cruise missiles and 15 Shahed-131/136 drones.^[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that falling missile and drone debris caused fires in several locations in Odesa City.^[12]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely remains unable to fully take control of some Russian private military companies which are affiliated with or receive sponsorship from Russian officials and businessmen. Russian opposition outlet *Dossier* reported on August 14 that longtime associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin Arkady Rosenberg and the Russian state-affiliated bank VTB have provided over 300 million rubles (\$3.04 million) to the Convoy PMC since late 2022.^[13] *Dossier* reported that Russian energy enterprises Promresurs and Coal Trading also gave a combined 109.5 million rubles (\$1.11 million) to Convoy PMC, even though neither enterprise's profit margins supported the donations. Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov reportedly politically supports the Convoy PMC. The Convoy PMC began formal recruitment for activities in Ukraine in November 2022, and Convoy personnel signed contracts either directly with Convoy PMC or with the Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District). *Dossier* noted that Convoy is not subordinate to the 150th Motorized Rifle Division and has its own area of responsibility in Ukraine and command structure. Convoy PMC is reportedly based out of occupied Perevalne, Crimea, and is currently operating in the Kherson direction after originally defending Russian logistics lines on the Melitopol-Dzhankoy highway.^[14] Convoy PMC reportedly has 400 personnel as of summer 2023, who receive salaries of 200-300 thousand rubles (\$2,030-3,045) per month.^[15] Ongoing private financial and political support for the Convoy private military company (PMC) and its continued operations in Ukraine separate from the MoD command structure indicates that the MoD is unable to fully integrate irregular formations into the conventional Russian military despite its announced intent to do so.

Convoy PMC founder Konstantin Pikalov has prior affiliations with the Wagner Group and is reportedly affiliated with the Russian General Staff Main Directorate (GRU). *Dossier* reported that Pikalov is also the cofounder of the St. Petersburg Cossack Society "Convoy," and that Pikalov attempted to break into the military services industry starting in 2014 but did not experience much success until he joined the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2018.^[16] Pikalov reportedly served as an advisor to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin or as part of a security detail rather than as a fighter. *Dossier* reported that Pikalov is affiliated with GRU agent Stanislav Poluzanov, whom he later recruited as a deputy commander in Convoy. *Dossier* reported that there are no records of Pikalov interacting with Prigozhin-affiliated structures after 2018, and Convoy PMC continued international security work in 2019. *Dossier* reported that Pikalov had little military experience prior to his involvement with the Wagner Group and that Pikalov is the opposite of Prigozhin: "manual and safe for power."

US officials announced a new \$200 million security assistance package for Ukraine on August 14.^[17] US officials announced that the package will include additional HIMARS rockets; Patriot air defense missiles; TOW anti-tank missiles; and mine-clearing equipment.^[18]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 14 and reportedly advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Crimean occupation authorities are attempting to impose new federal penalties on individuals who publish content revealing the locations and operations of Russian military assets in occupied Crimea, likely in response to Ukraine's ongoing interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes targeting Odesa Oblast on the night of August 13 to 14.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely remains unable to fully take control of some Russian private military companies which are affiliated with or receive sponsorship from Russian officials and businessmen.
- US officials announced a new \$200 million security assistance package for Ukraine on August 14.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, along the Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, along the Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced near Kupyansk.
- The Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) continues to form new regiments and appoint prominent Russian ultranationalists to command its units, possibly in an effort to incentivize recruitment.
- Russian authorities are removing local officials in occupied territories of Ukraine likely in order to fill openings with preferred candidates in the upcoming regional elections.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 13, 2023

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

August 13, 2023, 3:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 13 and reportedly advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions and achieved partial success near Robotyne (western Zaporizhia Oblast, 13km south of Orikhiv).[1] Several Russian sources claimed on August 12 that Russian forces withdrew from Urozhaine (in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast area), although many Russian sources refuted those claims on August 13 and claimed instead that Russian forces still occupy the southern part of Urozhaine, that fighting is ongoing, and that areas of Urozhaine are contested.[2] **ISW has not observed confirmation that Russian forces have completely withdrawn from Urozhaine and Russian forces likely currently maintain positions in at least the southern part of the settlement.**

The Russian information space is seizing on Ukrainian gains in Urozhaine (in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) to highlight poor Russian morale and command challenges in the area. A Russian milblogger complained on August 12 that the Russian 37th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) failed to dedicate tank units to support its infantry in Urozhaine and prematurely withdrew from Urozhaine on August 10, claiming they lacked reinforcements when in reality the unit's personnel were drunk in the rear areas.[3] The milblogger complained that the entire 36th Combined Arms Army (CAA) is unwilling to defend the settlement while the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Kaskad" Operational Tactical Combat Formation and the 40th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) defend Urozhaine.[4] These complaints generated a multitude of responses in the Russian information space, including attempts to deescalate tensions between the implicated Russian formations, doubling down on complaints against the 37th Brigade and 36th CAA, and accusing the initial milblogger who reported a Russian withdrawal from Urozhaine of attempting to inflate the reputation of other defending units at the expense of the 36th CAA's reputation.[5] One milblogger blamed the current situation on the front on the Russian military command's removal of Major General Ivan Popov as commander of the 58th CAA in early July 2023.[6] The milbloggers notably targeted their complaints at the personnel of these units rather than the unit or theater commanders, suggesting that Popov's removal and other rumored command purges may have removed mid-level Russian military commanders as a readily available scapegoat for Russian military failures.[7] Alexander Khodakovsky, commander of the "Vostok" battalion defending near Urozhaine, referenced Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky as saying that Russia cannot win in defense, and Khodakovsky complained that Russia expended its resources too early in the war and now needs to pause to accumulate resources for a new operation, indicating recognition that the Russian elastic defense in this area has its limitations.[8] Teplinsky is reportedly responsible for planning the Russian defense of the Velyka Novosilka area.[9]

A Russian warship forcibly stopped and searched a civilian cargo ship en route to the Izmail port in Odesa Oblast, likely as part of a Kremlin effort to curtail maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports without committing naval assets to fully enforce a blockade. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that the Russian *Vasily Bykov* patrol ship forcibly stopped and searched a dry cargo ship sailing under the flag of Palau after it did not respond to the *Vasily Bykov*'s demand for inspection.[10] The Russian MoD stated that the Russian forces conducted small arms warning fire near the civilian ship before a Ka-29 helicopter landed on the vessel with a group of Russian personnel.[11] The Russian MoD claimed that the Russian personnel conducted an inspection and then allowed the civilian vessel to continue along its route to the Izmail port.[12]

The Russian MoD announced on July 19 that it would consider all ships en route to Ukrainian ports as potential military cargo carriers and the flag countries of such vessels as "involved in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of the Kyiv regime."[13] Russian forces did not stop three civilian ships which openly advertised their destination as Ukraine over their ships' automatic identification system (AIS) on July 30.[14] The reports of the three civilian ships sailing to Ukraine unhindered suggested that Russian forces may be unable or unwilling to forcibly stop and search neutral vessels, and Russian forces likely conducted their first forced inspection to reimpose the threat of escalation against civilian vessels en route to Ukraine.[15] Russian forces also likely conducted the forced stop and inspection to undermine confidence in temporary trading corridors through the Black Sea to Ukrainian ports, which Ukrainian officials announced on August 10.[16] The Russian naval posturing in the Black Sea is likely intentionally ambiguous and seeks to create a chilling effect on civilian maritime traffic to Ukraine without requiring Russian forces to commit Black Sea Fleet assets to the enforcement of a naval blockade.[17] The Russian military is likely less willing to commit the Black Sea Fleet to such a blockade than it was in July following notable Ukrainian strikes on Russian naval targets in the Black Sea and the Novorossiysk naval base in Krasnodar Krai in early August.[18]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 13 and reportedly advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **ISW has not observed confirmation that Russian forces have completely withdrawn from Urozhaine and Russian forces likely currently maintain positions in at least the southern part of the settlement.**
- **The Russian information space is seizing on Ukrainian gains in Urozhaine (in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) to highlight poor Russian morale and command challenges in the area.**
- **A Russian warship forcibly stopped and searched a civilian cargo ship en route to the Izmail port in Odesa Oblast, likely as part of a Kremlin effort to curtail maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports without committing naval assets to fully enforce a blockade.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line and attempted to regain lost positions near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and reportedly advanced in some areas.**
- **Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Kreminna, near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and reportedly advanced in several areas.**
- **The Wagner Group is likely downsizing and reconfiguring to adapt to financial pressure following the June 24 Wagner rebellion.**

- Ukrainian partisans claimed to have attacked a Russian military base in occupied Mariupol on August 13.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 12, 2023

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

Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 12, 2023, 3:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:10pm ET on August 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian milbloggers acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are maintaining a presence on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast in contrast to previous Ukrainian raids, but ISW does not yet assess that these positions constitute a bridgehead. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on the evening of August 11 that Ukrainian forces have established positions west of Kozachi Laheri after several days of limited raids across the Dnipro River.^[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups continue to operate west of Kozachi Laheri, but that the settlement itself is still under Russian control.^[2] The milbloggers also claimed that Ukrainian reconnaissance groups continue to operate near the Antonivsky Bridge and in the Hola Prystan area and conduct raids across the Dnipro River.^[3] Continuing Russian claims that Ukrainian forces maintain a presence on the east bank of the Dnipro River suggest that Russian forces are concerned that Ukrainian forces have established semi-lasting positions across the river.^[4] Russian sources continue to describe Ukrainian groups operating on the left bank as small in size and fighting to be primarily between light infantry units. No Russian sources have indicated that Ukrainian forces on the left bank have the heavy equipment or vehicles likely required to establish a bridgehead that would be necessary to enable wider offensive operations into left bank Kherson Oblast.^[5] An effective Russian mechanized counterattack could threaten this Ukrainian advance position, but it is unclear if Russian forces possess the mechanized reserves necessary to do so. ISW will continue to offer a conservative assessment of the situation on the east bank of Kherson Oblast until or unless ISW observes visual confirmation of an enduring Ukrainian presence on the east bank of Kherson Oblast. ISW has not yet observed visual evidence that Ukrainian forces have established a permanent position or have deployed a substantial number of personnel near Kozachi Laheri.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 12 and reportedly made tactically significant advances along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Berdiansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area) directions.^[6] Geolocated footage published on August 11 indicates that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains near Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area.^[7] Russian milbloggers claimed late on August 12 that Russian forces abandoned their positions in Urozhaine after days of intense fighting, although ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of these claims.^[8]

The "Vostok" volunteer battalion, which is allegedly defending in the Urozhaine area, had earlier expressed concern that Russian forces would lose Urozhaine if the Russian military does not fix persistent issues with Russian counterbattery capabilities.^[9] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are effectively using electronic warfare systems to disrupt Russian communications in western Zaporizhia Oblast and retain large artillery and precision munitions stocks to support interdiction efforts against Russian forces there.^[10] The milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces have significantly reduced the time between target identification and strikes on Russian targets with HIMARS rockets, warning that Russian forces need to move farther than 10km from the frontline in western Zaporizhia Oblast to be safe from Ukrainian strikes.^[11]

Ukrainian forces reportedly launched two missile strikes targeting the Kerch Strait Bridge and a drone attack targeting occupied Crimea on August 12. Russian authorities claimed that Russian air defenses downed up to three Ukrainian ground attack missiles fired from S-200 systems targeting the Kerch Strait Bridge.^[12] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) also reported Ukrainian forces targeted occupied Crimea with 20 drones on the night of August 11–12.^[13] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian air defenses shot down 14 Ukrainian drones and downed another 6 drones with electronic warfare (EW) systems.^[14] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian air defense units of the 31st Air Defense Division shot down one of the Ukrainian missiles near Kerch in occupied Crimea.^[15] Russian sources claimed that Russian authorities stopped traffic on the bridge for several hours following the Ukrainian missile and drone strikes, creating a traffic jam of almost 1,300 cars.^[16] Russian sources claimed that Crimean occupation authorities are initiating tougher criminal liability for publishing photos and videos showing locations of military installations such as air defenses, likely in response to a photo posted today showing the location of a Russian air defense system in occupied Crimea.^[17] Ukrainian strikes targeting Russian logistics in Crimea are a part of a deliberate interdiction campaign aimed at setting favorable conditions for larger counteroffensive operations. Previous Ukrainian strikes on bridges along Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast continue to disrupt Russian logistics.^[18]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian milbloggers acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are maintaining a presence on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast in contrast to previous Ukrainian raids, but ISW does not yet assess that these positions constitute a bridgehead.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 12 and reportedly made tactically significant advances along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly launched two missile strikes targeting the Kerch Strait Bridge and a drone attack targeting occupied Crimea on August 12.

- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 12 and made no confirmed gains.
- The Russian Ministry of Digital Development is preparing an amendment to the law on the conscription age that would increase the military service deferment age for IT specialists from 27 years to 30 years, likely in response to concerns about “brain drain” from Russia.
- Russian authorities are reportedly adjusting propaganda language about the war aimed at Russian schoolchildren in Russia and occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 11, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 11, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces made tactically significant advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 11. Geolocated footage published on August 11 confirms that Ukrainian forces reached the northern outskirts of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast, though the permanence and extent of these positions are currently unclear.^[1] Ukrainian forces have conducted regular ground attacks towards Robotyne for weeks as part of their operations aimed at degrading Russian defenses. The Ukrainian forces' ability to advance to the outskirts of Robotyne — which Russian forces have dedicated significant effort, time, and resources to defend — remains significant even if Ukrainian gains are limited at this time. Geolocated footage published on August 11 shows that Ukrainian forces advanced into Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces back into the settlement on August 10 and 11.^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[3]

Ukrainian counteroffensive operations appear to be forcing the Russian military to laterally redeploy Russian forces defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast, indicating that the Ukrainian effort there may be significantly degrading Russian defenses. Russian milbloggers claimed on August 11 that elements of the 7th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division are involved in heavy fighting near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on August 10 that elements of the “Vostok Akhmat” Battalion are now defending near Robotyne.^[4] Elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army’s 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (Southern Military District) have been the primary Russian formation defending immediately south of Orikhiv since the start of the counteroffensive, with elements of the 22nd and 45th Separate Guards Spetsnaz (Russian General Staff Main Directorate) brigades and the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) supporting Russian defensive operations in the area.^[5] The arrival of the 7th VDV Division and the Akhmat elements to the Robotyne area represents the first explicit commitment of new Russian formations and units to the area.

Kadyrov has consistently deployed Akhmat elements to perceived critical sectors of the frontline in order to earn favor from Russian President Vladimir Putin, and most recently deployed Akhmat Spetsnaz elements to the Klishchiivka area south of Bakhmut in response to Ukrainian advances in the area.^[6] Russian sources claimed that elements of the 7th VDV deployed from east (left) bank Kherson Oblast to the Zaporizhia direction following the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station (KHP) dam on June 6, and ISW later observed elements of the division defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the Staromayorske area along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts in July.^[7]

The 7th VDV Division is now split across at least two and possibly three axes of the front. Russian milbloggers offered diverging accounts on whether elements of the 7th VDV Division withdrew entirely from the Staromayorske area after Ukrainian forces captured the settlement on July 27.^[8] Elements of the division have remained in Kherson Oblast to defend against Ukrainian activity on the left bank of the Dnipro River.^[9] Elements of the 7th VDV division may have arrived in western Zaporizhia Oblast at an earlier date, although this is the first time that Russian sources have claimed that Russian command has committed these elements to fight in the area. Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division continue to defend near Robotyne and ISW has not observed any elements of the division withdrawing from the area, indicating that the arrival of the 7th VDV Division and Akhmat elements likely does not portend a rotation for the main Russian fighting force in the Orikhiv direction.^[10] These likely lateral redeployments suggest that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations have significantly degraded existing defending Russian forces in the area and prompted the Russian command to send these elements to shore up Russian defenses in this critical sector of the frontline. **The lack of Russian operational reserves means that the Russian command will have to conduct more lateral redeployments if they wish to reinforce certain sectors of the front in the future.**^[11]

Russia's practice of conducting lateral redeployments to key sectors of the front will likely further weaken Russian defensive lines in aggregate, as both Russian and Ukrainian operations are fixing Russian units to certain sectors of the front. These lateral reinforcements will likely disrupt Russian offensive and defensive operations in the sectors from which they are drawn and threaten to rapidly degrade the forces that the Russian military is using as reinforcements.^[12] Russia currently does not appear to possess significant available forces that it could draw on for reinforcements without endangering other sectors of the front. Ukrainian counteroffensive operations drew elite Russian formations and units to the Bakhmut area and continue to fix them there.^[13] Russian forces have also committed a significant number of forces to localized offensives operations in the Kupyansk and Svatove areas, which aim to similarly draw Ukrainian forces away from areas of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[14] Even if the Russian command determines to end localized offensive pushes in these areas it would likely take some time for Russian forces to lower the tempo of their operations and withdraw forces for lateral redeployments without opening up areas of the front to successful Ukrainian counterattacks. The limited Russian lateral redeployment of elements of the 7th VDV Division from the left bank of Kherson Oblast in June appears to have

set conditions that allowed Ukrainian forces to more freely operate in the area, and Ukrainian forces will likely similarly exploit weakened Russian groupings in other areas of the front where they are actively conducting offensive operations in the event of further Russian movements.[15]

Ukrainian forces on the other hand maintain reserves that allow them to rotate units instead of relying on redeploying units conducting defensive and offensive operations to other sectors of the line without rest.[16] Ukrainian forces likely therefore can maintain the necessary combat potential needed to continue degrading Russian forces defending southern Ukraine and the Bakhmut area while constraining Russian advances along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line. Russian lateral redeployments will likely increase the likelihood that Russian forces would have to fall back to prepared defensive positions without significant support in the case of a Ukrainian breakthrough.[17] **The further degradation of defending Russian forces thus creates opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially decisive.[18]**

Russian forces appear to be intensifying offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk, likely to draw Ukrainian forces away from more operationally significant areas of the front. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on August 10 that Russian offensives along the front line in the Kupyansk area forced Ukrainian forces to flee to Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and claimed that Russian forces are threatening to collapse Ukrainian defenses in the area.[19] The milblogger predicted that Russian forces will take Petropavlivka in the next two days and continue advancing toward Kupyansk.[20] The milblogger claimed on August 11 that Russian forces have recently captured 30 Ukrainian "strongholds" in the Kupyansk direction along a wide front from Kupyansk to Kyslivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk).[21] Another Russian milblogger claimed on August 10 that Russian forces entered the outskirts of Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) and are less than 10km away from Ukraine's advanced defensive lines.[22] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Russian claims of advances northeast of Kupyansk. Russian milbloggers have repeatedly made claims of extensive Russian advances southwest of Svatove and ISW has additionally not observed visual confirmation of those claims, despite those claims now being weeks old.[23] Russian forces may have increased offensive activity on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line to take advantage of Ukraine's operational focus elsewhere and to draw Ukrainian units away from more critical areas of the front. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Force Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces have significantly strengthened defenses in the Kupyansk direction in recent days, indicating that Russian forces may have been successful in drawing additional Ukrainian forces to the area.[24] Ukrainian officials also announced mandatory evacuations for civilians in 53 settlements near Kupyansk on August 9 due to intensified Russian shelling and airstrikes posing increased risk for civilians, though the evacuations do not necessarily indicate that Ukrainian forces expect Russian forces to make significant advances.[25]

Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes in Ukraine on August 11 and targeted a Ukrainian airfield for the second time in the last week. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched four Kinzhal missiles and that Ukrainian air defenses intercepted one missile over Kyiv Oblast.[26] The Ukrainian Air Force claimed that the other Kinzhal missiles struck near the Kolomyia airfield in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast.[27] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces targeted the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast on August 6 because Ukrainian forces store foreign-supplied missiles including Storm Shadow cruise missiles at warehouses on the base.[28] Russia's targeting of the Starokostyantyniv and Kolomyia airfields in the past week suggests that Russian forces are increasingly concerned about Ukraine's interdiction campaign.

Russian sources claimed that the Wagner Group appears to be maintaining a presence at its facilities in Belarus, though the status of its rumored withdrawal to Russia remains unclear. A Russian milblogger posted satellite imagery captured on August 3 claiming to show that an additional 930 Wagner vehicles and 18 additional low-bed semi-trailers were present at the Wagner camp in Tsel, Asipovichy, Belarus compared to imagery from July 17.[29] The milblogger claimed that the imagery from August 3 shows that 40 shipping containers arrived and that unspecified construction is occurring at the camp.[30] The milblogger also claimed that the number of tents at the Wagner camp has not changed and that the number of cars present at the camp indicates that it is likely fully staffed.[31] Russian rumors about Wagner's withdrawal from Belarus surfaced on August 8, so this additional satellite footage from August 3 does not completely refute those claims.[32] The footage does suggest that Wagner intended to expand its presence in Belarus and believed that elements of the deal ensuring its operations in the country were still in place as of August 3.

The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) is struggling with significant personnel shortages, especially in occupied territories in Ukraine, amid a broader power shift between other Russian internal security organs.[33] Russian Internal Affairs Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev stated on August 10 that the MVD is struggling with a critical personnel shortage and that over 5,000 MVD personnel have left various MVD bodies within the past month.[34] Kolokoltsev stated in October 2022 that the MVD needs 52,000 police officers to adequately staff newly occupied territories in Ukraine by 2026, and stated in November 2022 that the current MVD shortage was 90,000 personnel.[35] Russian insider sources speculated that MVD employees are leaving due to corruption, poor payment, and performing as gendarmerie (military forces acting as civilian law enforcement).[36]

The Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) are likely attempting to deflect blame for Ukrainian shelling in Russian border areas onto mid-level officers. A Moscow court will consider a criminal case against two Russian officers accused of failing to prevent a surprise attack on the Russian Federation, which violates Article 340 of the Russian Criminal Code.[37] Russian authorities have accused the officers of failing to prevent Ukrainian forces from shelling their units and military equipment in Belgorod Oblast in April 2022.[38] This will be the first time that a Russian court will consider such a case since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[39]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces made tactically significant advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reached the outskirts of Robotyne amid continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 11.
- Ukrainian counteroffensive operations appear to be forcing the Russian military to laterally redeploy Russian forces defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast, indicating that the Ukrainian effort there may be significantly degrading Russian defenses.
- Russia's necessary practice of conducting lateral redeployments to key sectors of the front will likely further weaken Russian defensive lines in aggregate, as both Russian and Ukrainian operations are fixing Russian units to certain sectors of the front.
- The further degradation of defending Russian forces creates opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially decisive.
- Russian forces appear to be intensifying offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk, likely to draw Ukrainian forces away from more operationally significant areas of the front.

- Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes in Ukraine on August 11 and targeted a Ukrainian airfield for the second time in the last week.
- Russian sources claimed that the Wagner Group appears to be maintaining a presence at its facilities in Belarus, though the status of its rumored withdrawal to Russia remains unclear.
- The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) is struggling with significant personnel shortages, especially in occupied territories in Ukraine, amid a broader power shift between other Russian internal security organs.
- The Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) are likely attempting to deflect blame for Ukrainian shelling in Russian border areas onto mid-level officers.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast area on August 11 and advanced in some areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 11 and advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian defense industrial base (DIB) has begun producing “Geran-2” drones, a modified version of the Iranian-produced Shahed-131/136 drone that will likely enable Russia’s ability to maintain or potentially increase the frequency of Russia’s drone strikes on Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are taking steps to make the upcoming regional elections in the Russian occupied territories appear to be fair and competitive.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 10, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 10, 2023, 7:00pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Wagner Group continues to maintain a presence at facilities in Belarus and the status of its rumored withdrawal to Russia remains unclear. Satellite imagery collected on August 9 shows a significant number of vehicles at the Wagner camp in Tsel, Asipovichy, Belarus, and may even indicate that more vehicles have arrived at the base between August 1 and August 9.[1] Ukrainian sources continue to report about expanding Wagner activity in Brest Oblast, and a Wagner-affiliated source posted footage on August 10 showing that Wagner instructors continue to train Belarusian military personnel.[2] The Wagner-affiliated source amplified a denial from an alleged Wagner fighter wherein the fighter stated that the speculations are “fantasies,” although he acknowledged that many Wagner fighters themselves often do not learn about their deployments until the last moment.[3] ISW has not observed counter-indicators that would refute recent speculation from August 8 that Wagner bussed 500 to 600 personnel from Belarus to Krasnodar Krai and Voronezh and Rostov oblasts, however.[4] Russian sources speculated that Wagner forces plan to conduct the second stage of their alleged withdrawal from Belarus on August 13 but that a small group of Wagner instructors would remain in Belarus to train Belarusian forces.[5]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has yet to comment on these speculations either directly or through intermediary sources as he has done previously, suggesting that Prigozhin may not be entirely at liberty to comment on the future of Wagner. Prigozhin was last publicly seen on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa Economic Humanitarian Forum in St. Petersburg on July 27 and most recently commented on Wagner's future in an audio recording published on July 30, during which he asserted that Wagner fighters who did not sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would arrive in Belarus by August 5.[6] ISW previously assessed that the speculation about Wagner's withdrawal from Belarus suggested that the Kremlin may be reneging on elements of the agreement brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that brought Wagner's June 24 rebellion to an end.[7] Kremlin-affiliated sources renewed attacks against Prigozhin in early August, and the speculation itself may be a part of an information operation aimed at degrading Prigozhin's position with Wagner fighters or at some other objective.[8]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdiansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[9] Geolocated footage published on August 10 suggests that Ukrainian forces crossed the Mokri Yaly River and advanced eastward into the southwestern outskirts of Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area. [10] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial successes in the direction of Urozhaine and south and southeast of Staromayroske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).[11]

A Russian milblogger accused Russian military personnel of fabricating or embellishing claims of Russian forces destroying Ukrainian vehicles in Ukraine. The milblogger claimed on August 7 that the “Soviet system of military service” encourages Russian servicemen to report false successes on their missions to please their commanders and claimed that commanders and peers actively discourage Russian military personnel from writing honest, but “dull” and negative reports.[12] The milblogger suggested that Russian soldiers have filmed Russian helicopters and artillery firing on the same, previously damaged Western-provided armored fighting vehicle from different angles and on different days and reported them as separate kills at least three times.[13] The milblogger claimed that everyone in the Russian military knows that servicemen do this and that the Russian military leadership has no intention of stopping servicemen from making false or embellished reports.[14] Russian milbloggers have previously accused Russian attack helicopters of striking already destroyed Ukrainian military equipment and

suggested that the Russian MoD may be using these repeated hits to inflate Ukrainian losses.[15] The Kremlin has previously used wildly inflated Ukrainian armored vehicle losses to portray Russian defensive operations as extremely effective.[16]

Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes in Ukraine overnight on August 9-10. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Zaporizhia Oblast officials reported that Russian forces conducted an Iskander missile strike against a residential area in Zaporizhzhia City, injuring 16 civilians. [17] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces targeted Ukraine with 10 Shahed 131 and 136 drones, seven of which Ukrainian forces shot down.[18] Rivne Oblast Regional Administration Head Vitaly Koval reported that a Russian drone struck an oil depot in Dubno Raion, Rivne Oblast.[19]

The Kremlin is likely attempting to crypto-nationalize Russian internet giant Yandex to strengthen control over the Russian information space in preparation for the 2024 Russian presidential election. Yandex has likely been trying to balance between the Kremlin and its foreign governing bodies but now appears to be losing the battle to the Kremlin. The Kremlin appears to be forcing Yandex to sell or distance itself from international subsidiaries, including rideshare service Yango Israel, in order to comply with strict Russian data disclosure laws requiring Yandex to supply all user data – not just data of users in Russia – to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).[20] The Russian government has previously fined Yandex for failing to comply with this law despite Yandex's statements that it is unable to provide the requested data.[21] The Russian government also previously fined Yandex CEO Artem Savinovsky for Yandex's failure to comply with Russian censorship laws, possibly trying to compel Yandex into complying with Russian censorship laws not just in Russia but globally to undermine its global operations and userbase.[22] Yandex officials have previously stated that Yandex aims to follow the laws within each country it operates and have rebuked Russian datamining efforts by claiming it only provides user data to governments of users in that specific country.[23] Some Russian insider sources speculated that Yandex corporate development advisor Alexey Kudrin attempted and failed to turn Yandex into a national private company that Putin's reported personal banker Yuri Kovalchuk would control.[24] Yandex founder and former CEO Arkady Volozh publicly decried the invasion of Ukraine on August 10, and some Russian insider sources speculated that Volozh's statement was a "white flag" showing that he had accepted that the Kremlin would likely go forward with its speculated formal nationalization effort.[25] Reuters reported that its sources within Yandex fear a "brain drain" if the Kremlin nationalizes Yandex, as many Yandex employees left Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[26] The Kremlin is likely aware of this concern as investors affiliated with Kremlin officials rather than Russian government entities have recently made bids to purchase Yandex.[27]

The possible transfer of Yandex to affiliates of Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko suggests that Putin seeks to reward Kiriyenko for his personal loyalty, particularly following the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* previously suggested that Kovalchuk, Kudrin, and Kiriyenko collaborated to propose a deal for investors to purchase Yandex on behalf of Kovalchuk.[28] Kiriyenko and Kovalchuk previously backed Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin; while their current connection to Prigozhin is unclear, Kiriyenko has continued to publicly posture himself as a firm Putin loyalist following the June 24 rebellion.[29] Putin may be rewarding Kiriyenko to further secure Kiriyenko's loyalty headed into the 2024 presidential elections, particularly as Kiriyenko has served as the Kremlin's point person for affairs and elections in occupied Ukraine.[30]

Affiliates of arrested former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin continue to explicitly attack the Kremlin on August 10. "Civic Solidarity" movement leader and Angry Patriots Club member Georgiy Fedorov, amplified by Girkin's Angry Patriots' Club, proposed a platform of radical social and economic policy reforms aimed at decreasing economic inequality and the power of the elite in Russia.[31] The proposed policy changes include reduced funding for the entire state apparatus "starting with the President," the implementation of fair, competitive elections at all levels, and the formation of a "truly independent judiciary." [32] Fedorov notably called for the resignation of the current Russian government and the formation of a new coalition government in its place. [33] Fedorov claimed that these reforms will lead to "democratic socialism" in Russia and will remove oligarchs and the "influence of money on politics." [34]

Key Takeaways:

- The Wagner Group continues to maintain a presence at facilities in Belarus and the status of its rumored withdrawal to Russia remains unclear.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has yet to comment on these speculations either directly or through intermediary sources as he has done previously, suggesting that Prigozhin may not be entirely at liberty to comment on the future of Wagner.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 10.
- A Russian milblogger accused Russian military personnel of fabricating or embellishing claims of Russian forces destroying Ukrainian vehicles in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes in Ukraine overnight on August 9-10.
- The Kremlin is likely attempting to crypto-nationalize Russian internet giant Yandex to strengthen control over the Russian information space in preparation for the 2024 Russian presidential election.
- The possible transfer of Yandex to affiliates of Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko suggests that Putin seeks to reward Kiriyenko for his personal loyalty, particularly following the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion.
- Affiliates of arrested former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin continue to explicitly attack the Kremlin on August 10.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 10 and made some advances.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 10.
- Russian officials continue to highlight the claimed success of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).
- A Ukrainian military official reported that Russian forces are co-opting civilian infrastructure for the repression of local populations in the occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 9, 2023

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August 9, 2023, 6:30 pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Speculations about the Wagner Group's withdrawal from Belarus suggest that aspects of the deal between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24 have collapsed. A Russian insider source claimed on August 8 that Wagner forces are conducting their first stage of withdrawal from Belarus by bussing groups of 500 to 600 personnel from Belarus to Krasnodar Krai and Voronezh and Rostov oblasts and that the second stage will begin after August 13.^[1] The insider source and a Wagner-affiliated source speculated that Wagner forces may be leaving Belarus because Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko refused to finance Wagner when he discovered that Russia would not be paying for Wagner as he had evidently expected.^[2] Putin and Lukashenko allowed Wagner forces and Prigozhin to continue to operate in Belarus after the armed rebellion.^[3] The insider source claimed that a small group of Wagner instructors would remain in Belarus to train Belarusian forces.^[4] ISW has not observed visual evidence of Wagner forces moving out of Belarus, however. The insider source claimed on August 6 that Wagner forces that did not deploy to Libya "urgently" went on leave in Russia, and that Wagner's command called on their fighters to keep in touch because new orders could come at any time.^[5] Wagner-affiliated sources claimed that the main Wagner forces will "activate" at the end of August but did not elaborate on the statement.^[6] Claims that Wagner forces are moving out of Belarus — a relatively safe haven for Wagner and Prigozhin — back to Russia, Wagner command's mentions of new orders, and claims of the future "activation" of Wagner forces at the end of August likely suggest that aspects of the deal that allowed Wagner to move to Belarus and continue operations there and in Africa have collapsed.

The validity of these claims and the future of the Wagner Group remain unclear at the time of publication. ISW offers the following assessments and hypotheses for the potential implications of these claims, if true, on the Russian power composition, Putin's regime, and the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) efforts to integrate Wagner personnel into conventional Russian formations. ISW will continue to monitor and report on indicators and counter-indicators that support, undermine, or inform these hypotheses and assessments.

Putin is likely still concerned about the threat that Prigozhin poses to his long-term goals and continues to focus on definitively separating Prigozhin from Wagner. Putin has previously attempted to present Prigozhin as corrupt and a liar to destroy his reputation among Wagner personnel and within Russian society and to rhetorically separate Prigozhin from Wagner.^[7] ISW assessed on June 27 that the Kremlin would likely continue to attack Prigozhin's character to break Prigozhin's popular support, discourage Wagner personnel from following him to Belarus, and destroy his financial power.^[8] Putin's June 29 meeting with Prigozhin and 35 Wagner commanders further indicated that Putin intends to maintain the Wagner Group as a cohesive fighting force rather than breaking it up while also seeking to separate Prigozhin from Wagner leadership and forces.^[9] Prigozhin's presence at a Wagner base near Asipovichy, Belarus, on July 18 and on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg on July 27 suggests that Prigozhin has maintained his position as the effective leader of the Wagner Group and that Putin has thus far failed to separate Prigozhin from Wagner.^[10] A Russian insider source claimed on August 9 that the Kremlin's rhetorical attacks against Prigozhin decreased dramatically after Putin's meeting with Wagner leadership on June 29, but began to increase again in early August.^[11] An increase in Kremlin attacks on Prigozhin, if true, could indicate that Putin has recommitted to his original goal of destroying Prigozhin and creating a clear separation between Prigozhin and Wagner.

Putin's prioritization of separating Prigozhin from Wagner and attempting to maintain a reconstituted Wagner fighting element appears to be at odds with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's objectives. A Russian insider source claimed that Shoigu has taken over Russia's relationships with African countries from Prigozhin, angering the Wagner leadership and personnel and depriving Wagner of opportunities in Africa.^[12] If true, Shoigu's ambitions in Africa are likely to create issues for Putin's greater goals with Wagner by angering the very people Putin is trying to woo. Putin's and Shoigu's priorities have become periodically misaligned throughout the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, often when Putin prioritizes balancing competing groups and interests while Shoigu attempts to establish full control over the Russian military in Ukraine.^[13]

Alternatively, Putin may intend for Wagner's forces to return to Russia in order to facilitate the destruction or restructuring of Wagner. Putin appealed to Wagner commanders in a speech on July 26 seeking to persuade them to continue to fight in Ukraine by joining the Russian military.^[14] Putin's appeal may have suggested that the Kremlin intended to organize Wagner forces into the Russian MoD. This appeal appears not to have been successful as many Wagner personnel deployed to Belarus and individual Wagner commanders and personnel continued to express loyalty to Wagner and Prigozhin.^[15] The Kremlin has also reportedly attempted to control Wagner's operations in the Middle East and subordinate Wagner's operations there to the Russian MoD following the rebellion on June 24.^[16] Wagner commanders released a statement on August 9 claiming that Wagner fighters have been receiving calls advertising opportunities to work with other private military companies (PMCs) in Africa.^[17] The calls may suggest that the Russian government seeks to lure Wagner personnel away from Wagner with new work opportunities. Putin may intend for Wagner's forces to return to Russia so that he can more easily facilitate Wagner's subordination to the Russian MoD or disband the organization entirely.

There are other possible outcomes that would see Wagner reconstitute as a unitary fighting force reminiscent of its operations in Ukraine, although ISW has observed no indicators for these outcomes, which appear unlikely based on available information. The Kremlin's likeliest courses of action vis-à-vis Wagner will likely lead to an overall decrease in the combat power that Wagner could offer the Russian military, as either approach will likely dissuade some elements of Wagner from continuing to serve, whether in a Wagner without Prigozhin or in some type of entity completely subordinated to the MoD.

The likely collapse of aspects of the Wagner-Putin-Lukashenko deal indicates that Putin has failed to decisively resolve issues posed by Prigozhin and Wagner following Wagner's June 24 rebellion. Putin is unlikely to resolve the Wagner problem as long as tensions remain between Putin's own aim of separating Prigozhin from Wagner and Shoigu's aims to secure full MoD control over Wagner and the other armed forces fighting for Russia. Speculations about Shoigu taking

over Russian military operations in Africa from Wagner, if true, will likely only exacerbate tensions between the MoD and Wagner personnel returning from Belarus or Africa to Russia rather than persuading the Wagner personnel to join conventional Russian military formations in accord with the prior deal.^[18] Pro-Wagner sources have historically coalesced around Prigozhin because of anger at the MoD and likely retain the ability to rally the support of Wagner rank-and-file and supporters regardless of Prigozhin's actual participation in current rhetoric.^[19] Angering Wagner personnel further while bringing them back to Russia poses challenges if Putin seeks to eliminate the Wagner threat. Putin's decision to allow Shoigu to undermine this aspect of the prior deal, if true, then threatens to undermine the careful façade of internal security that Putin has extensively attempted to project following the June 24 rebellion.^[20] This situation is evolving dynamically in an increasingly complicated information environment marked by the absence of direct commentary from Prigozhin or other Wagner leaders. ISW will continue to evaluate these and other hypotheses and assessments as more information becomes available.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attempted to justify the recreation of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts by reamplifying boilerplate rhetoric posturing NATO as an existential threat to Russia. Shoigu opened a meeting of the Russian MoD Collegium on August 9, focusing on issues related to the creation of the two military districts but primarily commented on Western support for Ukraine and NATO's expansion.^[21] Shoigu stated that the NATO countries' attempts to help Ukraine win are creating serious risks for further escalation and that Finland's accession and Sweden's planned accession to NATO are "a serious destabilizing factor."^[22] Shoigu stated that it is likely that NATO will deploy military contingents and strike weapons on Finnish territory that can strike critical targets in Russia, and Shoigu accused NATO of intentionally militarizing Poland as part of America's alleged anti-Russia policy.^[23] Shoigu stated that Eastern European militaries have a combined manpower of 360,000 personnel with 8,000 armored vehicles, 6,000 artillery systems, and 650 aviation units deployed to the immediate vicinity of the borders of the Union State.^[24] Shoigu suggested that the Russian MoD is strengthening the Russian grouping of forces along Russia's western borders to respond to these alleged threats.^[25] Shoigu announced on January 17, 2023, that the MoD will reestablish the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts as part of long-term goals to significantly increase the size of the Russian military.^[26] Shoigu is likely framing the recreation of these military districts as a necessary response to alleged Western aggression towards Russia in order to justify the cost of resources, time, and institutional capacity required for their recreation.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in some areas on August 9. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[27] Geolocated footage published on August 9 suggests that Ukrainian forces advanced northeast of Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast, but the duration and extent of these advances are currently unclear.^[28] Ukrainian Tavriisk Operational and Strategic Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhii Kuzmin stated on August 8 that Ukrainian forces reached the Russian first line of defense in an unspecified area in the Melitopol or Berdyansk directions.^[29] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on August 9 that Ukrainian forces were partially successful south of Velyka Novosilka near Urozhaine and Pryutne and southeast of Orikhiv near Verbove.^[30] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced into Urozhaine in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and suggested that Ukrainian forces may have captured some Russian positions south of Bakhmut.^[31] Malyar stated that the Ukrainian forces are conducting the counteroffensive as expected and are successfully degrading Russian offensive potential as Ukrainian forces did during the summer-autumn 2022 interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.^[32]

The Russian veteran community may be attempting to rehabilitate the nominal Russian deputy theater commander in Ukraine, Army General Sergei Surovikin, following scrutiny over his affiliation with the Wagner Group. Surovikin's former commander, Colonel General Valeriy Marchenkov, told state affiliated *URA.ru* outlet that Surovikin did not and could not ever renege on his oath and praised Surovikin for pioneering a defensive strategy that is slowing down Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.^[33] Marchenkov claimed that Surovikin successfully reduced the frontline length and strategically redistributed Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast. Marchenkov also defended Surovikin's decision to withdraw Russian troops from the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast in November 2022, stating that this decision allowed Russian forces to construct the current defensive lines in Kherson Oblast and prevent military and civilian deaths. Marchenkov also attributed the creation of the Russian military police to Surovikin and boasted about Surovikin's efforts to suppress the August 1991 coup in Moscow. Russian veterans communities were instrumental in rehabilitating and promoting Surovikin's claimed affiliate, Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, in March-April 2023.^[34] Russian VDV veterans appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin on behalf of Teplinsky, after which Teplinsky returned to the frontlines ahead of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[35] Former Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army Major General Ivan Popov has also rallied veteran and army groups, sparking a discussion around his removal from command in mid-July.^[36]

Marchenkov's interview may suggest that Surovikin and the anti-Gerasimov faction believe there is a chance for Surovikin to return to the frontlines. Marchenkov's public defense of Surovikin is in line with previous veteran efforts to secure the reinstatement of commanders who oppose Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov. Marchenkov notably did not publicly disclose Surovikin's whereabouts. One Russian insider source claimed that the Kremlin's agreements with Wagner began to "sag," a claim that accords with ISW's assessments as noted above, which the source claimed can explain the lack of a new appointment for Surovikin.^[37] ISW assessed on April 30 that Putin fails to decisively dismiss commanders and instead demotes them in order to encourage them to seek to regain his favor and to retain options for future appointments.^[38] Surovikin's return to command will likely depend on his ability to convince Putin of his loyalty and usefulness on the battlefield – both narratives presented in Marchenkov's interview.

Russian sources claimed that poor safety regulations led to an explosion near the Zagorsk Optical Mechanical Plant in Moscow on August 9, and notably, most Russian sources did not suggest that Ukrainian actors may have been responsible for the incident.^[39] The explosion caused widespread damage to the plant and surrounding areas, injured at least 60 people, and killed at least one person.^[40] The explosion reportedly occurred at a facility at the plant leased by Russian pyrotechnics company PiroRoss, and the Russian authorities have reportedly opened a criminal case against PiroRoss for the violation of industrial safety requirements.^[41] Russian sources also claimed that Russian authorities have detained PiroRoss Director Sergei Chanakev in connection with the explosion.^[42] Shvabe Holding Company, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, owns the Zagorsk Optical Mechanical Plant, and the plant produces pyrotechnics and precision optical equipment for the military.^[43] Russian media outlet *Agentstvo* reported that the Zagorsk Optical Mechanical Plant has also been participating in the development of a next-generation strategic stealth bomber "Poslannik" since 2019.^[44]

Key Takeaways:

- Speculations about the Wagner Group's withdrawal from Belarus suggest that aspects of the deal between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24 have collapsed.

- Putin is likely still concerned about the threat that Prigozhin poses to his long-term goals and continues to focus on definitively separating Prigozhin from Wagner.
- Alternatively, Putin may intend for Wagner's forces to return to Russia in order to facilitate the destruction or restructuring of Wagner.
- The likely collapse of aspects of the Wagner-Putin-Lukashenko deal indicates that Putin has failed to decisively resolve issues posed by Prigozhin and Wagner following Wagner's June 24 rebellion.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attempted to justify the recreation of the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts by reamplifying boilerplate rhetoric posturing NATO as an existential threat to Russia.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in some areas on August 9.
- The Russian veteran community may be attempting to rehabilitate the nominal Russian deputy theater commander in Ukraine, Army General Sergei Surovikin, following scrutiny over his affiliation with the Wagner Group.
- Marchenkov's interview may suggest that Surovikin and the anti-Gerasimov faction believe there is a chance for Surovikin to return to the frontlines.
- Russian sources claimed that poor safety regulations led to an explosion near the Zagorsk Optical Mechanical Plant in Moscow on August 9, and notably most Russian sources did not suggest that Ukrainian actors may have been responsible for the incident.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line, in the Bakhmut area, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced on the Svatove-Kremenna line, north of Bakhmut, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in some areas on August 9.
- Footage published on August 9 further supports ISW's assessments that the Ukrainian incursion near Kozachi Laheri in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on August 8 was likely a limited raid.
- Russian forces may be moving military equipment through Kazakhstan to Russia, but ISW has observed no geolocated footage confirming these reports.
- Russian officials appear to be setting conditions to justify the possible need to cancel or postpone regional elections in the occupied territories in case of Ukrainian counteroffensive successes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 8, 2023

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Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 8, 2023, 5:30pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces appear to have conducted a limited raid across the Dnipro River and landed on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, although it remains unclear whether Ukrainian troops have established an enduring presence on the east bank. Several Russian milbloggers reported on August 8 that Ukrainian forces landed up to seven boats, each carrying around six to seven people, on the east bank of the Dnipro near the settlement of Kozachi Laheri, broke through Russian defensive lines, and advanced up to 800 meters deep.^[1] A Russian milblogger noted that the Russian command recently redeployed a "prepared grouping" of Russian airborne (VDV) personnel from the Kozachi Lopan area to Zaporizhia Oblast and replaced them with mobilized fighters from an unspecified unit, thereby weakening Russian defensive power in this area.^[2] Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo downplayed reports of the Ukrainian landing and claimed that Russian artillery fire repelled the Ukrainian boats and that there are no Ukrainian troops near Kozachi Lopan.^[3] However, the majority of prominent Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces managed to utilize tactical surprise and land on the east bank before engaging Russian forces in small arms exchanges, and Saldo was likely purposefully trying to refute claims of Ukrainian presence in this area to avoid creating panic in the already-delicate Russian information space.^[4] Hotspots on available NASA Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) data from the past 24 hours in this area appear to confirm that there was significant combat, likely preceded or accompanied by artillery fire. By the end of the day on August 8, many Russian sources had updated their claims to report that Russian forces retain control over Kozachi Laheri, having pushed Ukrainian forces back to the shoreline, and that small arms skirmishes are occurring in shoreline areas near Kozachi Laheri and other east bank settlements.^[5]

ISW will continue to offer a conservative assessment of the situation on the east bank of Kherson Oblast until or unless ISW observes visual confirmation of an enduring Ukrainian presence near Kozachi Lopan or other east bank settlements. ISW has not yet observed visual evidence to suggest that there are a substantial number of Ukrainian personnel or the deployment of Ukrainian vehicles near Kozachi Laheri, and the current pattern of Russian reporting is more consistent with a limited cross-river raid than a wider Ukrainian operation. Ukrainian officials have not commented on operations in this area as of this writing.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[6] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks around Bakhmut.^[7] *The New York Times* reported on August 7 that a Ukrainian battalion commander operating in southern Ukraine described counteroffensive operations as a "marathon" and "not a sprint."^[8]

Talks between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese Communist Party Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi following China's participation in the peace talks in Saudi Arabia suggest that China is increasingly diverging with Russia on proposed settlements to end the war. The Russian and Chinese foreign ministries portrayed the conversation between Lavrov and Wang differently. The Russian Foreign Ministry reported that Lavrov and Wang "touched on a series of 'hot' regional topics including the Ukrainian crisis," while the Chinese Foreign Ministry reported that the Russian and Chinese sides "exchanged views" about the war.^[9] The Chinese Foreign Ministry's description of the talks may suggest that the Kremlin is becoming dissatisfied with China's continued efforts to promote its peace plan in international fora, which is consistent with ISW's previous assessments that China is not interested in a "no-limits partnership" with Russia as the Kremlin desires.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is using the recent coup in Niger and Wagner's continued presence in Africa to maintain relevance in the Russian information space. Several Wagner-affiliated Russian milbloggers and another milblogger posted an audio file on August 8 of Prigozhin discussing US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland's trip to Niger on August 7.^[10] Prigozhin claimed that he is proud of Wagner's actions in Africa and suggested that the threat of future Wagner involvement in Niger prompted Nuland's trip.^[11] Prigozhin is likely attempting to co-opt Nuland's trip to Niger to grandstand on one of the few threats he still has the power to execute after realizing that the fallout of Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24 is making him increasingly irrelevant in the Russian information space.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces appear to have conducted a limited raid across the Dnipro River and landed on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, although it remains unclear whether Ukrainian troops have established an enduring presence on the east bank.
- ISW will continue to offer a conservative assessment of the situation on the east bank of Kherson Oblast until or unless ISW observes visual confirmation of an enduring Ukrainian presence near Kozachi Lopan or other east bank settlements.
- Talks between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese Communist Party Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi following China's participation in the peace talks in Saudi Arabia suggest that China is increasingly diverging with Russia on proposed settlements to end the war.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is using the recent coup in Niger and Wagner's continued presence in Africa to maintain relevance in the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line, in the eastern Donetsk-western Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Donetsk Oblast on August 8 and made advances in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 8 and made advances near Svatove.
- Russia continues to draw from its stock of Soviet-era equipment to compensate for equipment losses in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are preparing for regional elections in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 7, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 7, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.

^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that fighting is ongoing south of Bakhmut and that eastern Ukraine has been the epicenter of hostilities in the past week.^[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged in an interview published on August 6 with Argentine news outlet *La Nacion* that the tempo of counteroffensive operations is slower than expected and stated that patience is necessary in order for Ukraine to win.^[3] Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are in the offensive phase of operations and continue to hold the initiative.^[4]

Russian forces and occupation administrators continue to seek to mitigate the impact of recent Ukrainian strikes on logistics nodes along key Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting occupied Crimea with occupied Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk noted that Ukrainian strikes on the Chonhar and Henichesk bridges were intended to specifically target Russian plans and strategies and inhibit the ability of Russian forces to bring supplies and personnel to the front.^[5] Humenyuk also emphasized that Russian forces must now route supplies and personnel through Armyansk, directly on the border between Kherson Oblast and Crimea and within 80km of the frontline.^[6] Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo reported that his administration has temporarily changed the logistics and vehicle crossing routes between occupied Kherson and Crimea due to damage to the Chonhar Bridge, including the suspension of bus traffic between Simferopol, Crimea and Henichesk, Kherson Oblast.^[7] Russian milbloggers notably did not comment on the aftermath of the strikes on August 7, further supporting ISW's previous assessment that Russian officials may have directed Russian correspondents to not offer commentary on Ukrainian strikes on Russian logistics nodes in Crimea to avoid generating panic within the information space.^[8]

Russian opposition media outlet *Verstka* suggested that the Russian Investigative Committee and its head, Alexander Bastrykin, are directly involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia and the forced placement of Ukrainian children into Russian military training programs.

[9] *Verstka* reported that the Russian Investigative Committee “took patronage” over Ukrainian children living in children’s homes throughout Russia, and sent its employees to 10 such homes with toys, clothes, and school supplies in order to coerce the children to enter the Russian cadet corps. *Verstka* reported that Bastrykin personally visited Ukrainian children in Russia and told them that Russian victory depend on the children and that the Russian Investigative Committee is there to support them. *Verstka* reported that the Investigative Committee previously advertised the cadet corps to Ukrainian children from Donbas and stated that 78 Ukrainian children entered educational institutions, including the cadet corps and academies affiliated with the Investigative Committee, between February 2022 and March 2023. *Verstka* reported that Bastrykin ordered the cadet corps in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Volgograd to prepare to receive Ukrainian children from occupied Donbas as early as February 25, 2022. *Verstka* highlighted statements from Ukrainian children who said they felt compelled to participate in the Russian cadet corps due to the educational opportunity. The coercion of Ukrainian children, who are legally unable to consent to their deportations and participation in such military-patriotic re-education programs, is likely part of an ongoing Russian campaign to eradicate the Ukrainian national identity and militarize youth who have been forcibly deported to Russia.

China's increasing misalignment with Russia on any settlement to end the war in Ukraine was reportedly evident at the talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 5-6. *The Financial Times* reported that the Chinese representatives at the meeting were “constructive” and “keen to show that [China] is not Russia.”[10] *The Financial Times* quoted one European diplomat present at the talks as saying that the “mere presence of China shows Russia is more and more isolated.”[11] The Chinese delegation reportedly indicated its willingness to attend the next meeting of a similar format that will likely also exclude Russia.[12] A Russian insider source alleged that Russia has rejected China's 12-point peace plan for the war in Ukraine from February 2023 (which the Chinese delegation re-introduced during the talks in Saudi Arabia) and that some Chinese elites are secretly expressing their dissatisfaction with the actions of the Russian leadership regarding a peaceful settlement of the war in Ukraine.[13] These reports from the talks in Saudi Arabia and insider allegations, if true, align with ISW's previous assessments that China is not fully aligned with Russia on the issue of Ukraine and that Russia and China's relationship is not a “no limits partnership” as the Kremlin desires.[14]

The Ukrainian delegation at the talks in Saudi Arabia presented a 10-point peace plan that reportedly included calls for global food security, nuclear safety, environmental security, humanitarian aid, and prisoner releases.[15] Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff reported that all of the members of BRICS besides Russia – Brazil, India, China, and South Africa – attended the talks.[16] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova predictably responded to the Ukrainian peace plan, calling it a “meaningless ultimatum, which is aimed at protracting hostilities.”[17] Zakharova thereby repeated a longstanding Russian information operation that absurdly claims that Russia, unlike Ukraine, “has always been and will remain open to a diplomatic solution” to the war in Ukraine.[18]

Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a prisoner-of-war (POW) exchange on August 7. Ukrainian officials reported that 22 Ukrainian soldiers returned to Ukraine and did not state how many Russian POWs returned to Russia.[19] Official Russian sources have not reported on the POW exchange and Russian milbloggers have notably not commented on it either. Russian milbloggers have often criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) when POW exchanges are not carried out on a one-to-one ratio between Ukrainian and Russian personnel.[20]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 7.
- Russian forces and occupation administrators continue to seek to mitigate the impact of recent Ukrainian strikes on logistics nodes along key Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting occupied Crimea with occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian opposition media outlet *Verstka* suggested that the Russian Investigative Committee and its head, Alexander Bastrykin, are directly involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia and the forced placement of Ukrainian children into Russian military training programs.
- China's increasing misalignment with Russia on any settlement to end the war in Ukraine was reportedly evident at the talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 5-6.
- The Ukrainian delegation at the talks in Saudi Arabia presented a 10-point peace plan that reportedly included calls for global food security, nuclear safety, environmental security, humanitarian aid, and prisoner releases.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a prisoner-of-war (POW) exchange on August 7.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 7 and made advances in certain areas.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to portray itself as adequately mobilizing the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war effort.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to use maternity capital benefits to coerce Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories to accept Russian citizenship and increase social control in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 6, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 6, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces struck two key road bridges along critical Russian grounds lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast on August 6, causing Russian forces to reroute road traffic from shorter eastern routes to longer western routes. Kherson Oblast occupation administration head Vadimir Saldo claimed that Ukrainian forces launched 12 missiles at a road bridge across the Henichesk Strait connecting Henichesk Raion to the Arabat Spit and that Russian air defenses intercepted nine of the missiles.^[1] Russian sources amplified images showing significant damage to the bridge and claimed that Ukrainian strikes partially collapsed a section of the bridge.^[2] Russian sources amplified footage showing Ukrainian forces striking the Chonhar road bridge along the M-18 (Dzhankoi-Melitopol) highway connecting occupied Crimea with occupied Kherson Oblast and subsequent minor damage to both sides of the bridge.^[3] Crimean occupation head Sergei Aksyonov claimed that Ukrainian forces launched two missiles at the bridge and that one missile made it through Russian air defenses and damaged the roadbed of the road bridge.^[4] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces used Storm Shadow cruise missiles to conduct both strikes, although ISW has yet to observe confirmation of Russian forces intercepting Storm Shadow cruise missiles.^[5]

Aksyonov announced that repair work is underway at the Chonhar bridge and that Russian officials will reroute all traffic through the Armyansk and Perekop checkpoints along the M-17 (Armyansk-Oleshky) and T2202 (Armyansk-Nova Kakhovka) highways.^[6] The Crimean occupation transport ministry announced that all traffic through the Dzhankoi checkpoint along the M-18 highway is closed but that traffic along the Kerch Strait bridge and the Kerch Strait ferry crossing is operating normally.^[7] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) suspended civilian entry to the Arabat Spit as of July 31, and Russian officials have not commented on the status of traffic along the Henichesk-Arabat Spit GLOC.^[8] The extent of the damage to the bridge across the Henichesk Strait is likely forcing Russian forces to redirect military traffic from the Arabat Spit to longer western routes between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast. The M-17 highway passes through Armyansk before branching at a junction with the T2202 highway to the north and continuing to the northwest, meaning that most if not all Russian road traffic between Crimea and Kherson Oblast will have to pass along or very close to one 20km section of the M-17 between Ishun and Armyansk. This major bottleneck in Russian GLOCs will likely pose significant disruptions to logistics and chances for delays and traffic jams. It is unclear how quickly Russian officials will be able to repair the Chonhar bridge and it is equally as unclear if Russian officials have repaired the Chonhar railway bridge that Ukrainian forces struck on July 29.^[9] The damage to the Henichesk Strait bridge will likely take Russian officials substantially longer to repair. Russian GLOCs along the T2202 northwest of Crimea - especially routes along primary and trunk roads south of Nova Kakhovka - are closer to Ukrainian positions in upper Kherson Oblast and in many cases within artillery range of the Ukrainian-held western bank of the river. Russian forces likely can reduce risks from Ukrainian indirect fire in this area by taking slower and less efficient village roads northeast of Chaplynka, but at the cost of slower and more complicated logistics support.

Ukrainian strikes on bridges along critical Russian GLOCs are a part of the Ukrainian interdiction campaign focused on setting conditions for future decisive counteroffensive operations. A prominent Wagner-affiliated Russian milblogger argued that the Ukrainian strikes on August 6 show that Ukrainian forces are methodically trying to cut off the Russian grouping in southern Ukraine and disrupt its logistics in a way similar to the Ukrainian interdiction campaign during the Kherson counteroffensive.^[10] The milblogger noted that Russian defenses on west (right) bank Kherson Oblast broke down in a matter of days following months of Ukrainian strikes on Russian logistics and expressed concern that the situation could repeat itself.^[11] The Ukrainian strikes on the eastern crossing points will likely disrupt the transport of Russian personnel, materiel, and equipment from occupied Crimea to critical Russian defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area for some, undetermined, time. Ukrainian forces appear to be also expanding their interdiction efforts to target Russian naval targets involved in Russian logistics in the Black Sea as ISW has previously observed.^[12] Ukrainian officials have routinely stated their commitment to a deliberate interdiction campaign against Russian military targets to degrade Russian logistics and defensive capabilities to set favorable conditions for future Ukrainian counteroffensive activity.^[13]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 6. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[14] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian offensive operations near Bakhmut.^[15] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview published on August 5 that Ukrainian forces are advancing faster around Bakhmut than in southern Ukraine.^[16] Budanov also stated that Russian forces have built stationary, fully equipped, concrete-filled defense posts in southern Ukraine, making the Ukrainian offensive there difficult.^[17]

Russian forces conducted one of the largest missile and drone strike series on Ukraine in recent months on the night of August 5-6. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched the first wave of strikes on the night of August 5 consisting of 14 Kalibr cruise missiles and three Kh-47 Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missiles, and that Ukrainian forces shot down 12 Kalibr cruise missiles.^[18] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched a second wave of strikes on August 6 consisting of 27 Shahed-131/136 drones, six Kalibr missiles, and 20 Kh-101/555 air-launched cruise missiles and that Ukrainian forces shot down all 27 Shahed drones, five Kalibr missiles, and 13 Kh-101/555 missiles.^[19] Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported on August 6 that Russian attacks targeted the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast and noted that this is not the first time that Russian forces have attacked the airfield.^[20] Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Russians targeted the Starokostyantyniv airfield because Ukrainian forces store foreign-supplied missiles including Storm Shadow cruise missiles at warehouses on the base and because the Ukrainian aviation unit that operates at the base is the only one with Storm Shadow missiles.^[21] ISW has not observed any evidence to confirm these claims, however. The milbloggers' claims that Russian forces specifically targeted an area where Ukrainian forces allegedly store and launch Storm Shadow missiles suggests that Russian forces are increasingly concerned about Ukraine's interdiction campaign.

Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian air defenses have destroyed 3,500 aerial targets since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on August 6 that Ukrainian air defenses have intercepted and destroyed 3,500 aerial targets, including 350 Russian fixed and rotary wing aircraft, 1,200 cruise missiles, including 13 hypersonic Russian "Kinzhal" Kh-47M2 missiles, and 24 ballistic missiles.^[22] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reported on August 6 that Ukrainian air defenses have intercepted and destroyed over 2,000 Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (types unspecified) and that Ukrainian pilots have conducted over 14,000 sorties since February 24, 2022.^[23]

International talks aimed at drafting the main principles for a future settlement to the war in Ukraine continued in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 6.

Diplomats from 42 countries including the US, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, the United Kingdom, India, and China reportedly agreed that future peace talks

between Ukraine and Russia should be based on principles of international law, such as respect for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[24] Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak reported that the Ukrainian delegation spoke with representatives from each country present at the meeting. [25] Chinese diplomats reportedly reintroduced China's 12-point peace plan from February 2023, prompting European delegations to respond that an unconditional ceasefire would create a frozen conflict and allow Russia to consolidate its control over occupied Ukrainian territories.[26] *The Wall Street Journal* reported on August 6 that most countries in attendance in Saudi Arabia, including China, agreed to meet again in the near future in a similar format that again would not include Russia.[27]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov gave an unclear and contradictory answer to a *New York Times* reporter who asked whether Russia seeks to conquer more Ukrainian territory beyond the four partially occupied oblasts that Russia illegally annexed in September 2022. The *New York Times* reported that Peskov said, "No... We just want to control all the land we have now written into our Constitution as ours," when asked whether Russia seeks to capture more territory in Ukraine.[28] Peskov's seemingly straightforward answer is contradictory, vague, and does not answer the reporter's original question. Russian forces do not fully occupy the four oblasts — Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts — that the Russian government formally claims. Russian forces would have to conduct significant offensive operations to capture over 16,000 square kilometers of land in these four oblasts to bring de facto Russian-occupied territory in line with the Russian constitution as Peskov described. Russia also occupies territory in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and in Mykolaiv Oblast (the Kinburn Spit) — territory that the Kremlin has not formally annexed. Peskov's statement implies that Russian forces should relinquish their territory in Kharkiv and Mykolaiv oblasts, but the Russian government has made no indication that it plans to do so and, in fact, is continuing offensive operations to gain more territory in Kharkiv. The Kremlin likely seeks to continue significant military operations against Ukraine to – at a minimum – capture the remaining parts of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts that Russian forces do not yet occupy. The Kremlin has articulated further maximalist objectives in Ukraine beyond that, including changing the Ukrainian government and constitution.[29]

Peskov also strangely stated that Russia's presidential election is "not really democracy" but rather a "costly bureaucracy" and that Russian President Vladimir Putin "will be re-elected next year with more than 90 percent of the vote," but walked back on this statement the same day it was publicized.[30]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces struck two key road bridges along critical Russian grounds lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast on August 6, causing Russian forces to reroute road traffic from shorter eastern routes to longer western routes.
- Ukrainian strikes on bridges along critical Russian GLOCs are a part of the Ukrainian interdiction campaign focused on setting conditions for future decisive counteroffensive operations.
- Russian forces conducted one of the largest missile and drone strike series on Ukraine in recent months on the night of August 5-6.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian air defenses have destroyed 3,500 aerial targets since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.
- International talks aimed at drafting the main principles for a future settlement to the war in Ukraine continued in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 6.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov gave an unclear and contradictory answer to a *New York Times* reporter who asked whether Russia seeks to conquer more Ukrainian territory beyond the four partially occupied oblasts that Russia illegally annexed in September 2022.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on August 6.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast August 6 and made advances in certain areas.
- Russian military command finally allowed personnel of the Russian "Alga" volunteer battalion – which has been involved in the most combat intense frontlines in Donetsk Oblast since Fall 2022 – to return to Russia on leave.
- Russian occupation authorities in Ukraine continue establishing institutional linkages between Russian and Ukrainian governance structures and social services in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 5, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 5, 2023, 6:30 pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00 pm ET on August 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces struck a Russian oil tanker on August 4 with a naval drone in the second attack on Russian ships in the Black Sea in two consecutive days. *The Moscow Times* identified the tanker as the chemical tanker S/G, which is currently under US sanctions for supplying jet fuel to Russian forces in Syria.

[1] Sources within the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) confirmed to the Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* that the SBU and the Ukrainian Navy struck the ship near the Kerch Strait Bridge using a naval drone.[2] The Russian Federal Agency for Sea and Inland Water Transport (Rosmorrechflot) reported that the strike on the S/G occurred 27 kilometers south of the Kerch Strait Bridge, and Russian milbloggers claimed that the attack caused Russian authorities to suspend traffic on the bridge.[3] Russian news aggregator *Baza* reported that the naval drone punched a two-by-one meter hole in the S/G's engine room, and state Russian outlets claimed that the incident

did not result in an oil spill.[4] A Russian milblogger claimed that the Ukrainian naval drone intentionally targeted the SIG's engine room because targeting the stern creates the least likelihood of an oil spill and is where the most expensive and difficult-to-repair equipment is located.[5] The nature and location on the ship of the attack suggest that Ukrainian forces intended to disable the ship without generating significant ecological consequences. Ukrainian forces have long targeted the Kerch Strait Bridge in order to degrade Russian military logistics in southern Ukraine, and the attack on the SIG is likely part of a wider effort to disable ships involved in supplying Russian military forces and the location of the attack near the bridge suggests that it was part of a larger effort to disrupt Russian logistics along a key Russian ground line of communication (GLOC).[6]

Ukrainian officials issued a notice to mariners that Ukraine may strike vessels near Russia's Black Sea ports – a measured response to continued Russian strikes against Odesa – Ukraine's main port – since July 17.[7] The Ukrainian State Hydrographic Service at the State Service of Maritime and River Transport posted a notice to mariners on August 4 announcing a "military threat" in the vicinity of the internal and external roadsteads at the ports of Taman, Anapa, Novorossiysk, Gelendzhik, Tuapse, and Sochi, until further notice.[8] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense also cryptically tweeted "Two can play that game," without further context on August 5 - likely a reference to the Russian military's continued strikes against Odesa's port infrastructure since July 17.[9] This Ukrainian warning may deter merchant activity and international commercial shipping to and from Russia in the Black Sea.

Ukrainian naval strikes are likely part of a deliberate interdiction campaign aimed at setting favorable conditions for larger counteroffensive operations. A Ukrainian naval drone struck the Russian *Olenegorsky Gornjak* Ropucha-class landing ship on the night of August 3 to 4.[10] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov stated on August 5 that the damage to the *Olenegorsky Gornjak* is very significant and suggested that the ship will not be operational for some time.[11] The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that images of the ship show it listing at 30 to 40 degrees, which suggests either that several watertight compartments were breached by the drone strike or that the crew's efforts to control the damage were ineffective.[12] UK MoD reported that the *Olenegorsky Gornjak* is typically assigned to Russia's Northern Fleet but has lately been ferrying military and civilian traffic between Russia and occupied Crimea following traffic disruptions to the Kerch Strait Bridge caused by previous Ukrainian strikes.[13] Previous Ukrainian interdiction efforts have mainly focused on Russian military targets on land, but it seems that Ukrainian forces are now expanding their efforts to include naval targets as part of these efforts. Ukrainian officials have repeatedly stated their commitment to a deliberate interdiction campaign against Russian military targets in order to degrade Russian logistics and defensive capabilities to set favorable conditions for future Ukrainian counteroffensive activity.[14] **Ukrainian forces are thus continuing to set conditions for future decisive operations via an interdiction campaign as they did before and during counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts in 2022, now striking much deeper into Russian rear areas and incorporating maritime targets.**

Ukrainian forces continue to draw Russian forces to the Bakhmut area and fix them there despite a slower tempo of Ukrainian operations there. Ukrainian offensive operations on Bakhmut's southern and northern flanks have slowed in recent days, and Russian and Ukrainian sources did not report any Ukrainian ground attacks in the area on August 5.[15] The rate of Ukrainian advances in the Bakhmut area has also slowed in recent weeks. Ukrainian operations around Bakhmut have drawn additional Russian units and formations to the Bakhmut area and have kept Russian forces in the area, which was likely one of their primary objectives. Russian forces have deployed elite formations and units to support defensive operations around Bakhmut, including elements of the 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division, the 11th VDV Brigade, the 106th VDV Division, and the 364th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff Main Directorate).[16] ISW has also observed speculation that elements of the 31st VDV Brigade are now defending Bakhmut's southern flank and inconclusive footage suggesting that elements of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Guards Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) recently arrived in the Bakhmut direction.[17] The arrival of these units and formations in the Bakhmut area represents the commitment of a sizable amount of combat power that Russian forces could otherwise have used to support offensive operations in Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts or to reinforce Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine.

Ukrainian counteroffensive operations also appear to be successfully fixing Russian forces in this area, as ISW has yet to observe elements of these forces deploying to other parts of Ukraine. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on August 4 that Russian forces are continuing to commit a large number of forces in the Bakhmut direction in hopes of recapturing recently lost dominant heights north of Bakhmut City.[18]

Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in southern Ukraine on August 5, part of a continuing pattern of limited Ukrainian ground attacks accompanying Ukrainian efforts to interdict Russian logistics and headquarters in rear areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia) directions. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in both areas and are advancing near Orikhiv.[19] Russian sources have routinely characterized Ukrainian attacks in southern Ukraine as up to a company in size with minimal armored vehicle or tank support.[20] These small Ukrainian ground attacks indicate that Ukrainian forces are continuing to conserve uncommitted reserves for larger mechanized attacks. Limited Ukrainian ground attacks can set conditions for larger mechanized attacks when the Ukrainian deep interdiction campaign has generated effects on the battlefield and can also support Ukrainian efforts to achieve an asymmetrical attrition gradient. Larger Ukrainian mechanized offensive operations have been sporadic since the start of the counteroffensive in early June, and ISW did not observe visual evidence or other observable signatures indicating a large assault near Orikhiv that Russian sources claimed occurred on July 26.[21] Russian sources may have exaggerated the Ukrainian attack in order to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive operations as a failure. The *New York Times* reported that two anonymous Pentagon officials said on July 26 the "main thrust" of the counteroffensive had begun, although it was not clear if those officials were referring to the July 26 attack, and other unnamed US officials subsequently walked those comments back.[22] Ukrainian forces are clearly not committing to large, massed mechanized counteroffensive operations in the Zaporizhia direction as their interdiction campaign proceeds, although they continue to conduct a series of variously-sized but relatively small attacks across the front line that are having the effects of fixing Russian forces in place, tiring them, and attriting them, as ISW has previously observed.[23]

Senior officials from reportedly 40 countries, including the US, China, and India, began talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 5 aimed at drafting a set of key principles to guide the future settlement of the war in Ukraine. US National Security Spokesperson John Kirby stated on August 3 that the White House does not expect any "tangible deliverables" from the talks in Saudi Arabia and that the talks are a continuation of the process to promote a peace formula proposed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.[24]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces struck a Russian oil tanker on August 4 with a naval drone in the second attack on Russian ships in the Black Sea in two consecutive days.
- Ukrainian officials issued a notice to mariners that Ukraine may strike vessels near Russia's Black Sea ports – a measured response to continued Russian strikes against Odesa – Ukraine's main port – since July 17.
- Ukrainian naval strikes are likely part of a deliberate interdiction campaign aimed at setting favorable conditions for larger counteroffensive operations.
- Ukrainian forces continue to draw Russian forces to the Bakhmut area and fix them there despite a slower tempo of Ukrainian operations there.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in southern Ukraine on August 5, part of a continuing pattern of limited Ukrainian ground attacks accompanying Ukrainian efforts to interdict Russian logistics and headquarters in rear areas.
- Senior officials from reportedly 40 countries, including the US, China, and India, began talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on August 5 aimed at drafting a set of key principles to guide the future settlement of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk, along the Svatove-Kremminna line, in the Bakhmut area, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced along the Svatove-Kremminna line and the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremminna line, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced along the Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Pardoned Wagner Group convict fighters continue to increase recidivism rates in Russia.
- Russian officials continue to transport Ukrainian children from occupied regions to Russia under the guise of summer vacations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 4, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

August 4, 2023, 6:05 pm ET

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[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted a series of aerial and naval drone strikes against Russian logistics and port infrastructure in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai (a key Russian naval base) on the night of August 3 to 4. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses and electronic warfare units downed up to 13 Ukrainian drones targeting Crimea.^[1] Geolocated footage published on August 4 shows Ukrainian drones striking areas near an oil depot in Feodosia, Crimea, although it is unclear whether the drone strikes damaged Russian targets.^[2] Geolocated footage published on August 3 and 4 shows Russian forces firing on Ukrainian naval drones near a Russian naval base in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, and one of the naval drones striking the Russian *Olenegorsky Gornyyak* Ropucha-class landing ship.^[3] The Russian MoD stated that Russian naval artillery fire destroyed two Ukrainian naval drones near the base in Novorossiysk.^[4] Geolocated footage posted later on August 4 shows the *Olenegorsky Gornyyak* listing and a Russian support vessel towing the landing ship to the Novorossiysk port.^[5] Geolocated footage does not indicate the full extent of the damage to the *Olenegorsky Gornyyak*, and Russian sources claimed that the damage was not critical and that the ship would be operational after an unspecified time of repair.^[6] Russian sources claimed that the Russian navy used the landing ship to transport civilian vehicles across the Kerch Strait amidst widespread disruptions to traffic across the Kerch Strait bridge.^[7]

Russian milbloggers characteristically lambasted the Russian MoD for lying about the naval drone strikes and called on the Russian military to escalate activities in the Black Sea. Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian MoD for originally claiming that the Russian forces had intercepted all drone strikes instead of admitting that the strikes damaged the *Olenegorsky Gornyyak* landing ship.^[8] Russian milbloggers criticized the MoD for previously lying about destroying the Ukrainian drone assembly facilities and claimed that Russian forces must cut Ukraine's access to the Black Sea in order to prevent naval drone attacks from civilian ships.^[9] A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russia needs to create a full-fledged monitoring system for the Black Sea to detect Ukrainian boats, as other tactics like striking Ukrainian port infrastructure have not prevented attacks in the sea.^[10] Some Russian milbloggers argued that the Russian MoD lacks a cohesive information policy, which creates conditions for public outcry in the Russian information space after every Russian military failure.^[11]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 4. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[12] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces continue to advance on the southern flank of Bakhmut.^[13] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi stated that the most important elements of the Ukrainian counteroffensive are unexpectedness and accuracy, not speed.^[14] Skibitskyi noted that Ukrainian actions are aimed at cutting off Russian supply routes, destroying Russian stores of weapons and military equipment, and winning counterbattery battles.^[15] Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brigadier General Pat Ryder stated that Ukraine independently decides when and where to employ its significant combat capabilities.^[16]

The Kremlin continues to express its unwillingness to return to the Black Sea Grain Initiative in the absence of extensive concessions from the West. The Kremlin released a joint statement on August 4 following Russian President Vladimir Putin's July 28 meeting with African leaders regarding their newly formally named African Peace Initiative.^[17] The document stated that the African leaders called for concrete steps to remove obstacles to the export of Russian grain and fertilizers,

and the release and delivery of 200,000 tons of Russian fertilizer stuck in European ports to African countries. These calls suggest that the African leaders support Russia's conditions for revitalizing the Black Sea Grain Initiative.^[18] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on August 4 that the United States would continue to do "whatever is necessary" to ensure that Russia can freely export food on the global market if Russia would be willing to revive the Black Sea Grain Initiative and allow Ukraine to export grain safely through the Black Sea.^[19] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to Blinken's statement by claiming that as soon as the United States fulfills Russia's conditions, "the deal will immediately be resumed."^[20] These statements give no clear indication that Russia intends to rejoin the Black Sea Grain Initiative and seeks to coerce the West to end limitations on its own exports.

Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin reportedly facilitated the reinstatement of the commander of the Russian 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division, Major General Vladimir Seliverstov, after meeting Putin's Chief of Staff Anton Vaino on July 21.^[21] Russian sources previously claimed on July 14 that the Russian military command dismissed Seliverstov for unknown reasons, but speculated that his removal could have been due to his reputation for speaking up on behalf of his forces.^[22] ISW assessed on July 15 that Seliverstov's claimed dismissal may have been a part of an ongoing purge of insubordinate commanders.^[23] An unnamed source told a Russian Telegram channel (reportedly affiliated with the Russian security forces) that Dyumin bypassed the Russian MoD to reinstate Seliverstov via Vaino and the Russian Presidential Administration.^[24] The source added that Dyumin's decision to bypass the military chain of command has already sparked conflicts between the Russian Presidential Administration and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, and that Dyumin is attempting to displace Shoigu from his position. Dyumin reportedly attempted to intervene in Seliverstov's firing during his visit to Moscow on July 14 but was unsuccessful in reversing the dismissal at that time.^[25]

While ISW cannot independently confirm these reports, if true, Dyumin likely advocated for Seliverstov in opposition to Shoigu or Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov or may have simply supported Seliverstov because the 106th VDV Division is headquartered in Tula Oblast. Vaino holds one of the most influential positions within Russian President Vladimir Putin's circle and has reportedly served as an intermediary between Putin and figures such as Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.^[26] Dyumin's successful meeting with Vaino, if true, indicates that select members of the Russian Presidential Administration are able to overrule and undermine decisions made by the MoD. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's chronic disregard for the Russian chain of command is likely hindering Shoigu and Gerasimov in their attempts to suppress insubordination and establish full control over the Russian military in Ukraine.^[27]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of aerial and naval drone strikes against Russian logistics and port infrastructure in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai (a key Russian naval base) on the night of August 3 to 4.
- Russian milbloggers characteristically lambasted the Russian MoD for lying about the naval drone strikes and called on the Russian military to escalate activities in the Black Sea.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of front on August 4.
- The Kremlin continues to express its unwillingness to return to the Black Sea Grain Initiative in the absence of extensive concessions from the West.
- Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin reportedly facilitated the reinstatement of the commander of the Russian 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division, Major General Vladimir Seliverstov, after meeting Putin's Chief of Staff Anton Vaino on July 21.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of front on August 4.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 4 and made advances in certain areas.
- A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that China's "temporary" export restrictions on drones may severely impact the ability of Russian volunteers to supply drones to Russian servicemen fighting in Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are continuing to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of summer camps.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 3, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, George Barros, and Mason Clark

August 3, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 3 and reportedly advanced in some areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions, and Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian forces continued to advance in the Bakhmut direction.^[1] Ukrainian Director of the Department of Planning of the Main Directorate of the National Guard Colonel Mykola Urshalovich stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 650m into Russian defenses along a 1.5km front in the Melitopol direction.^[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Mykilske (27km southwest of Donetsk City) in western Donetsk Oblast.^[3] Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated on August 3 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive does not have a set deadline or schedule.^[4] Danilov added that Russian defensive lines along the front continue to be heavily mined, with some areas having three, four, or five mines per square meter.^[5]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes on August 3, primarily targeting Kyiv. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 15 Iranian-made Shahed-131/136 drones launched by Russian forces on August 3.[6] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed almost a dozen targets near Kyiv on August 3.[7] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces launched the drones from occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Kursk and Bryansk oblasts.[8] Ihnat added that Russian forces have moved many drone launch sites to the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov in Krasnodar Krai due to Ukrainian strike capabilities against Crimea and Russian border regions.[9]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) took down Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky's August 2 speech, possibly due to his disclosure of Russian casualties in Ukraine. Teplinsky claimed on VDV Day (August 2, a holiday celebrating the Russian airborne forces) that at least 8,500 VDV personnel have been wounded in Ukraine since the start of the war, a rare official disclosure of Russian casualties, which Russian officials have largely sought to obscure as the war has progressed.[10] Russian MoD mouthpiece TV Zvezda took down Teplinsky's August 2 speech, and some Russian sources claimed this removal was due to the casualty count.[11] BBC and opposition outlet Medazona have confirmed that at least 1,800 VDV personnel were killed in action in Ukraine as of July 30, and a killed to wounded ratio of 1:3 is on average (if not slightly better) for Russian forces in Ukraine.[12] The Russian MoD may have also sought to censor Teplinsky's disclosure of details regarding new VDV formations, as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and other military officials have previously discussed the establishment of other formations but not specified their names and exact subordination to existing units.[13] Teplinsky previously capitalized on Russia's "Defender of the Fatherland" Day on February 23 to criticize Russian Chief of the General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov about the extent of Russian casualties in Ukraine.[14]

Russian prosecutors reportedly classified the investigation into ardent Russian ultranationalist and former FSB officer Igor Girkin on August 2. Girkin's lawyer Alexander Molokhov stated that materials relevant to Girkin's case have been classified as "top secret" and refused to issue further comments so as to not violate his non-disclosure agreements.[15] Girkin's supporters continued to call for the start of a movement to demand Girkin's release via political means and claimed that Girkin is a political prisoner.[16] Girkin's wife Miroslava Reginskaya appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin directly in a public letter for Girkin's release, noting that Girkin's arrest was either someone's attempt to curry favor with unnamed officials or an effort to censor the truth about the situation on the frontlines.[17]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 3 and reportedly advanced in some areas.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes on August 3, primarily targeting Kyiv.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) took down Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky's August 2 speech, possibly due to his disclosure of Russian casualties in Ukraine.
- Russian prosecutors reportedly classified the investigation into ardent Russian ultranationalist and former FSB officer Igor Girkin on August 2.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 3 and made advances in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 3 and reportedly advanced near Kremenna and Vuhledar.
- The Kremlin is attempting to establish favorable conditions to attract additional volunteers to serve in the Russian Armed Forces.
- A report from Yale University's Conflict Observatory supports ISW's longstanding assessments that Russian and occupation authorities are using forced passportization measures to consolidate social and legal control over occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 2, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov,
Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 2, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A dispute among prominent voices in the Russian information space highlights the Kremlin's sensitivity to Russian reporting about setbacks in Crimea in particular and possibly in Ukraine in general and has further exposed fault lines within the milblogger community. A pro-war milblogger accused other prominent pro-war milbloggers who have been critical of the Russian conduct of the war on August 2 of being "imbeciles" who support "provocative publications" and the "frantic criticism of the [Russian Ministry of Defense]" because the milbloggers posted images reportedly showing the aftermath of recent Ukrainian strikes near Sevastopol and on the Chonhar Bridge, which some sources suggested would irresponsibly spread panic.[1] A notorious Kremlin-backed pro-Russian Ukrainian blogger additionally accused one of the critical milbloggers under attack of stealing crowdsourced collection funds meant for Russian forces.[2] Both these specific critiques drew significant attention from other pro-war Russian commentators, many of whom supported the critical channels being attacked for reporting on the Crimea strikes.[3] One milblogger noted that the crux of the issue lies with the fact that these two channels post pictures of purported Ukrainian strikes on Crimea but

emphasized that the original images came from Ukrainian Telegram channels.^[4] Another prominent milblogger claimed that the dispute over posting images of strikes in Crimea became so intense that it attracted the attention of the Crimean Federal Security Service (FSB) branch and Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov, likely because these entities are interested in preventing panic in Crimea.^[5]

The dispute over these two milbloggers, alongside the accompanying allegations, suggests that the issue of strikes against Crimea is a distinctly neuralgic point in the pro-war Russian information space. ISW previously noted that following an apparent Ukrainian strike on the Chonhar Bridge on July 29 the vast majority of Russian milbloggers stayed silent with a few select channels simply reposting imagery of the resulting damage in the days that followed.^[6] ISW assessed that the lack of milblogger discussion following the Chonhar strike suggests that the Kremlin may have formally directed milbloggers not to cover it.^[7] The criticism of the two critical milbloggers' coverage of the Crimean strikes further supports ISW's previous assessment and underlines the fact that coverage of events in Crimea has created substantial tension in the Russian information space. Russian authorities, including the Crimean occupation administration, have a vested interest in restricting the dissemination of information about the strikes and their implications for Russian logistics through the occupied peninsula due to concerns that this information will cause panic in the population and call into question Russia's ability to effectively secure its occupied territory.

The highest echelons of the Russian military command may have directed milbloggers to stay silent about problems that can be directly blamed on the Russian military command. Russian milbloggers' very muted reactions to recent strikes against Crimea contrast sharply with their reactions to recent drone strikes against Moscow. Milbloggers have been relatively vocal in responding to Ukrainian drone strikes on Moscow City in recent days, with some Russian sources directly blaming Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for the strikes due to his administration's failures to secure Moscow's air space.^[8] The defense of Russian positions in Crimea, by contrast, is clearly the responsibility of Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, who is also the overall theater commander in Ukraine. Gerasimov is ultimately responsible for the security of Moscow as well, but he has neither portrayed himself nor been portrayed as directly involved in defending the capital's airspace whereas he, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and the Russian military high command in general have made much of their control over the war in Ukraine. The Russian General Staff may fear that milbloggers reporting on Ukrainian attacks against Crimea are fueling negative perceptions of Gerasimov's competence as well as risking stimulating panic on the peninsula, whereas Russian authorities may feel comfortable letting more local officials such as Sobyanin take the fall for attacks on Moscow and other Russian cities. If this hypothesis is valid then the Kremlin's pressure on milbloggers to censor themselves may be confined to pressure to avoid reporting on dramatic events that clearly reflect badly on Gerasimov, Shoigu, or Putin rather than to avoid discussing all negative events.

Russian forces conducted a drone strike on the night of August 1-2 that destroyed port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast including 40,000 tons of grain. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted a Shahed drone strike targeting Kyiv and Odesa oblasts and that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 23 drones, but an unspecified number of drones struck port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.^[9] BBC Russia reported that the Russian strike destroyed 40,000 tons of grain intended for shipment to several African countries, China, and Israel at the Izmail port in Odesa Oblast.^[10] The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported on July 31 that Russian forces destroyed 180,000 tons of grain between Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17 and July 26.^[11] The Kremlin has repeatedly pledged to send 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain to six unspecified African countries in the next three to four months free of charge--a fraction of the Ukrainian grain it has destroyed.^[12] Russian forces are likely striking grain storage infrastructure while claiming that they are striking military targets, in an attempt to have Russia supplant Ukraine as the supplier of grain to Africa and other states to ensure that Moscow rather than Kyiv benefits financially. The destruction of Ukrainian grain and the disruption of grain shipments following Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal and Russian posturing and threats to attack neutral shipping going to and from Ukraine are also causing grain prices to fluctuate, and the Russians may hope to benefit from higher prices if they can keep Ukrainian grain largely off the global market.

Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky announced the formation of up two new VDV regiments and the reestablishment of the 104th VDV Division by the end of 2023. Teplinsky announced that the existing 31st Guards Separate VDV Assault Brigade will be subordinated to the 104th VDV Division.^[13] Teplinsky claimed that one battery of a new artillery brigade (presumably of the 104th Division) is already fighting in Ukraine. The Russian military has been attempting to stand up multiple new division and army corps-level formations since the end of 2022 when Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's announced the reconstitution of the Moscow and Leningrad military districts and the establishment of several new formations.^[14] Ongoing Russian force generation efforts will likely staff the new VDV formations with new, untrained personnel rather than recruit experienced personnel more typical of the VDV's historical elite status. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the Russian MoD has likely begun staffing its new formations including the new 25th Army Corps (Central Military District), but that Russia is unlikely to recruit enough personnel to staff even one new army-level formation without conducting a general mobilization.^[15]

Teplinsky's announcement indicates that he maintains his position and the public support of the Russian MoD following rumors of his arrest, possibly as a result of his affiliations with the Wagner Group, in mid-July.^[16] Teplinsky credited Shoigu and Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov for strengthening the VDV by forming new units prior to the start of the 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine in a show of deference.^[17] Teplinsky specifically credited Shoigu with provisioning the VDV with modern equipment and helping develop VDV formations.^[18] Teplinsky has been hostile to Gerasimov and has previously directed forceful complaints against the seniormost Russian military command, setting a precedent for insubordination among other Russian military commanders.^[19] Teplinsky's public appearance and comments in direct support of the MoD command structure indicate that the MoD has coerced Teplinsky into publicly realigning with the MoD following the June 24 rebellion and July rumors of significant military command changes.

The Russian MoD officially provided weapons and vehicles to the Belgorod and Kursk Oblast Territorial Defense forces on August 2, reallocating conventional military assets as a part of the Kremlin's efforts to steadily expand Russia's internal security capabilities following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24. Russian media reported that the Russian MoD provided machine guns, anti-drone guns, and UAZ vehicles to the Belgorod and Kursk Oblast Territorial Defense forces.^[20] Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov stated that Russian authorities provided each of the Belgorod Oblast Territorial Defense's eight battalions with five UAZ vehicles, additional car radios, quadcopters, and anti-drone guns.^[21] Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit also announced that the first batch of weapons arrived in Kursk Oblast and that more weapons will arrive "in the near future."^[22] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reportedly stated that the Kremlin issued the weapons to the Belgorod and Kursk Oblast Territorial Defense forces against the backdrop of attacks from the territory of Ukraine.^[23]

The repeated allocation of additional military assets to Belgorod and Kursk oblasts indicates that the Kremlin is growing increasingly concerned about continued attacks on Russia's border with Ukraine. Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on June 15 that he deployed Chechen "Akhmat" special forces to Belgorod Oblast to protect the border from raids into Russian territory.^[24] Ukrainian officials reported on June 22 that Russian forces transferred several GRU Spetsnaz units to Kursk Oblast to fight pro-Ukrainian Russian partisans.^[25] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian authorities will store the weapons provided to the Belgorod and Kursk Oblast Territorial Defense forces in a centralized location and noted that it is unclear how the territorial defense forces will be able to access the weapons in an emergency if they are stored in a locked storage facility.^[26] The claim that Russian authorities will lock up the weapons provided to the Belgorod and Kursk Territorial Defense forces, if true, indicates that the Kremlin is attempting to balance the need for increased border security with the need to avoid empowering decentralized military formations that might one day be able to launch an armed rebellion similar to Wagner's actions on June 24.^[27] Moscow might also fear the results of large numbers of small arms getting into the hands of poorly trained territorial forces or the general population.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on August 2. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut and in the Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast area) and Melitopol directions (western Zaporizhia Oblast).^[28] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Kurdyumivka in the Bakhmut area.^[29] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks on the Svatove-Kremenna line in the Lyman direction, near Staromayorske on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, and near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[30]

Key Takeaways:

- A dispute among prominent voices in the Russian information space highlights the Kremlin's sensitivity to Russian reporting about setbacks in Crimea in particular and possibly in Ukraine in general and has further exposed fault lines within the milblogger community. This dispute, alongside the accompanying allegations, suggests that the issue of strikes against Crimea is a distinctly neuralgic point in the pro-war Russian information space.
- The highest echelons of the Russian military command may have directed milbloggers to stay silent about problems that can be directly blamed on the Russian military command.
- Russian forces conducted a drone strike on the night of August 1-2 that destroyed port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast including 40,000 tons of grain.
- Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky announced the formation of up two new VDV regiments and the reestablishment of the 104th VDV Division by the end of 2023. Teplinsky's announcement indicates that he maintains his position and the public support of the Russian MoD following rumors of his arrest, possibly as a result of his affiliations with the Wagner Group, in mid-July.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officially provided weapons and vehicles to the Belgorod and Kursk Oblast Territorial Defense forces on August 2, reallocating conventional military assets as a part of the Kremlin's efforts to steadily expand Russia's internal security capabilities following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on August 2.
- The highest echelons of the Russian military command may have directed milbloggers to stay silent about problems that can be directly blamed on the Russian military command.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Kremenna, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and advanced in some areas.
- Russian civilians are increasingly targeting military registration and enlistment centers across Russia as a result of what Russian sources claim are targeted scam calls.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin pushed the Kremlin narrative of "Novorossiya" and announced Russian government initiatives to provide books to occupied territories of Ukraine on August 2.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 1, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Annika Ganzeveld, and Mason Clark

August 1, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on August 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) accused Ukraine of attempting to attack two Black Sea Fleet patrol boats with unmanned semi-submersibles on August 1. The Russian MoD initially claimed that Ukraine launched three unmanned boats at the "Sergey Kotov" and "Vasily Bykov" Project 22160 large patrol ships in the southwestern part of the Black Sea, about 340km southwest of Sevastopol.^[1] The Russian MoD later clarified that the patrol ships were escorting Russian civilian transport ships *en route* to the Bosphorus Strait via the Black Sea and claimed that the patrol ships detected and destroyed all three semi-submersibles.^[2] Russian authorities may be amplifying claims of Ukrainian attacks to frame Ukraine as irresponsibly threatening civilian ships in the Black Sea, thereby setting conditions to further escalate naval activity and consolidate control in the Black Sea, though there is no indication that Ukrainian attacks on Russian military targets have threatened

civilian vessels.^[3] Geolocated images posted on July 31 show the installation of anti-naval drone barriers in Sevastopol Bay, likely as part of the overall Russian effort to increase naval and defensive posturing in the Black Sea.^[4]

Ukrainian actors likely conducted another drone strike on Moscow City in the early hours of August 1. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin claimed that Russian air defense downed several drones flying towards Moscow, and geolocated footage shows that one drone struck the 21st floor of the IQ-Kvartal Tower in central Moscow City.^[5] Russian media reported that the target of the strike was the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, located on the IQ-Kvartal Tower's 21st floor.^[6] Russian sources claimed that drones previously struck the IQ-Kvartal Tower on the night of July 29 to 30.^[7] Social media footage from August 1 additionally shows a drone flying over Moscow suburbs in the Odintsovo district.^[8] Several sources suggested that the drones were Ukrainian-made.^[9] One Russian commentator accused Sobyanin of neglecting to secure Moscow against such continued drone attacks.^[10] Russian authorities will likely struggle to balance the need to quell domestic concern over continuing drone attacks deep within the Russian rear with Russian President Vladimir Putin's continued refusal to fully mobilize Russian society for the war and its corresponding consequences.

The Russian MoD continues to posture Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov as an effective and involved overall theater commander in Ukraine. The Russian MoD posted footage of Gerasimov on August 1 reportedly inspecting a forward command post in western Zaporizhia Oblast and receiving a briefing on Ukrainian operations and Russian defenses in the area.^[11] This footage is one of Gerasimov's first public appearances since Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion and indicates that the MoD continues to publicize Gerasimov's role as theater commander.^[12] Some Russian sources previously claimed that rumored deputy theater commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky replaced Gerasimov as overall theater commander in Ukraine following Wagner's rebellion, but ISW was unable to verify these rumors and assessed that Gerasimov will likely nominally retain his position in the Russian military.^[13] The MoD's footage notably portrays Gerasimov as the architect of Russian defensive operations in one sector of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south, a role that the Russian information space previously attributed to both former deputy commander of the joint grouping of forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin and former 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) Commander Major General Ivan Popov prior to their likely dismissals on June 28 and July 15, respectively, for challenging Gerasimov and the traditional MoD hierarchy.^[14]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may have signaled his intent to use the Wagner Group to create a foundation for an unspecified Belarusian "contract army." Lukashenko stated on August 1 that he seeks to retain the Wagner Group within the Belarusian Armed Forces by using experienced Wagner fighters to "more actively create a contract army."^[15] Lukashenko did not provide details on the "contract army's" organizational structure, planned end strength, or formation timeline, but noted that the Wagner Group currently includes over 30,000 fighters.^[16]

Belarus currently does not have a "contract army" or a structure resembling a "contract army," which in this context likely refers to the Russian term of "kontraktniki," professional volunteer soldiers rather than conscripts. The Belarusian military does not field any formations above the brigade level and Belarus' main combat units are six separate brigades (three mechanized, two airborne, and one spetsnaz) primarily staffed by 18-month conscripts and some contract servicemen.^[17] The creation of a "contract army" would likely require the creation of a new formation or a significant reorganization of Belarus' existing brigades and an overhaul of Belarusian training to create a force of long-serving professional soldiers, as Russia previously (and unsuccessfully) attempted to do in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Then-Belarusian Defense Minister Andrei Ravkov previously stated in 2016 that Belarus should not and does not plan to transition away from the traditional staff and cadre system to have a fully contract army.^[18]

Two Belarusian helicopters reportedly violated Polish airspace on August 1. Polish officials reported that two Belarusian helicopters entered Polish airspace on August 1 and that Poland will increase its troop presence at the Polish-Belarusian border in response.^[19] Lukashenko also dismissed the Polish government for overreacting to news that the Wagner Group deployed a 100-person element closer to the Belarusian-Polish border and claimed that Wagner forces are in Grodno and Brest, rather than near the international border.^[20] ISW continues to assess that Wagner forces in Belarus pose no military threat to Poland (or Ukraine, for that matter) until and unless they are re-equipped with mechanized equipment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on August 1. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued gradually advancing near Bakhmut, and a Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces captured an unspecified height south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka.^[21] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on August 1 that in the past week, Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut direction and 12 square kilometers in southern Ukraine.^[22] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks against Russian forces along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area near Staromayorske and Urozhaine and in western Zaporizhia Oblast near Robotyne.^[23] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) in western Zaporizhia Oblast likely struggles with severe fatigue and that elements of the 5th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) south of Velyka Novosilka likely face a high level of pressure to defend the area and feel that the Russian military command should rotate them from the front line.^[24] The UK MoD also reported that Russian commanders in southern Ukraine largely struggle with artillery ammunition shortages, a lack of reserves, and challenges with securing the flanks of defending units.

Russian companies not under Western sanctions continue to recruit volunteers to fight in the war in Ukraine. Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istoryi* reported that unsanctioned Russian companies Rusal, Novatek, PIK, and Mospromstroy that are affiliated with Russian oligarchs, including Oleg Deripaska, Leonid Mikhelson, Sergei Gordeev, and Mikhail Gutseriev, recruit Russian volunteers to fight in the war in Ukraine.^[25] *Vazhnye Istoryi* reported that both the Russian MoD and Russian "military industrial complex companies" pay recruits' salaries, who then serve in the 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) and the "Sokol" Volunteer Battalion of the 108th Air Assault Regiment (7th Guards Mountain Air Assault Division).^[26] ISW and *Vazhnye Istoryi* previously reported that Russian state-owned companies such as Gazprom, Russian Railways, and Roscosmos have contributed to recruitment efforts.^[27] Gazprom and Russian Railways are under Western sanctions, however.^[28]

Iran is pursuing the construction of drone factories in Belarus and Russia, which will help Russia acquire Iranian drones more readily and provide Iran with numerous economic and military benefits. (*NOTE: This text also appeared in the Critical Threats Project (CTP)'s August 1 Iran Update*) Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri called for greater defense industry cooperation between Iran and Belarus during a meeting with Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin in Tehran on August 1.^[29] Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani signed a military cooperation agreement with Khrenin on July 31.^[30] CTP assessed that Ashtiani and Khrenin may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.^[31] Ukraine claimed in May 2023 that Iranian engineers are exploring how to convert

factories in Gomel, Belarus into drone production facilities.^[32] The Biden administration revealed in June that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, Russia.^[33] Iran opened an Ababil-2 drone factory in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in May 2022. Bagheri notably attended the opening ceremony of this factory.^[34] The production of Iranian drones in Belarus and Russia will benefit both Russia and Iran:

- Russia will benefit by acquiring Iranian drones for its invasion of Ukraine more readily. Israeli and Ukrainian media have noted that the construction of an Iranian drone factory in Belarus would alleviate the “logistical problems” Russia faces in transporting Iranian drones from Iran to Russia via the Middle East.^[35] The Biden administration published a map in June showing Iranian drone transfers from Iran to Russia through the Caspian Sea.^[36]
- Iran will benefit by receiving revenue for the Iranian economy. The British Secret Intelligence Service revealed in July that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones.^[37] Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the rial surpassing 500,000 rials to one US dollar on August 1.^[38] The Iran Statistical Center reported on July 25 that Iran’s inflation rate is approximately 47.5 percent.^[39]
- Russia can also benefit Iran’s military. Western media speculated in late 2022 that Iran might receive Russian Su-35 fighter jets in return for supplying Russia with drones.^[40] Iranian military officials have increasingly expressed skepticism at receiving Su-35s in recent months, however.^[41] Western media reported in March that Russia provided Iran with advanced surveillance software and cyber weapons in exchange for drones.^[42] A high-ranking Israeli military official separately expressed concern in June that Russia is providing Iran with Western weapons captured in Ukraine.^[43]

Iran’s close cooperation with Belarus and Russia may stem, in part, because Iran has signed long-term strategic agreements with these countries. The graphic below depicts which countries Iran has signed or is pursuing cooperation agreements with.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) accused Ukraine of attempting to attack two Black Sea Fleet patrol boats with unmanned semi-submersibles on August 1.
- Likely Ukrainian actors conducted another drone strike on Moscow City in the early hours of August 1.
- The Russian MoD continues to posture Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov as an effective and involved overall theater commander in Ukraine.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may have signaled his intent to use the Wagner Group to create a foundation for an unspecified Belarusian “contract army.”
- Two Belarusian helicopters reportedly violated Polish airspace on August 1.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on August 1.
- Russian companies not under Western sanctions continue to recruit volunteers to fight in the war in Ukraine.
- Iran is pursuing the construction of drone factories in Belarus and Russia, which will help Russia acquire Iranian drones more readily and provide Iran with numerous economic and military benefits.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 1 and made advances in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 1 and advanced near Kremenna and Bakhmut.
- The Russian Cabinet of Ministers granted Russian volunteer fighters and Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic (DNR and LNR) militia fighters (*opocheniye*) veteran status on August 1.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to deport children from occupied regions of Ukraine to Russia under the guise of education and rehabilitation programs

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 31, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Mason Clark

July 31, 2023, 5:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on July 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Wagner Group may be supplanting the Russian military as the Belarusian military’s key training partner. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on July 30 that Wagner personnel conducted company-level training with unspecified elements of multiple Belarusian mechanized brigades.^[1] The training included tactical maneuver for dismounted infantry and focused on force concealment from enemy UAVs and coordination between companies, platoons, and squads.^[2] The training also reportedly featured Belarusian infantry conducting a combined arms assault with tank and artillery support.^[3] The Wagner Group’s new role in

Belarusian company-level training is notable. The Belarusian military typically conducts such exercises with Russian trainers and relies on Russian planners for any multi-brigade exercises, which ISW has not yet observed Wagner Group participating in. ISW previously observed Wagner personnel training with a Belarusian airborne brigade that historically trains with the Russian 76th Airborne (VDV) Division and forecasted that the Wagner Group may seek to supplant legacy Russian–Belarusian unit relationships.[4]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely succeeded in recruiting an unknown number of Wagner personnel following Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed rebellion, though Prigozhin reportedly ordered remaining Wagner fighters to assemble in Belarus by August 5. Prigozhin announced on July 30 that "unfortunately a few [Wagner personnel] agreed to transfer from the Wagner Group" and joined other unspecified Russian security services — likely the Russian MoD).[5] Prigozhin thanked former Wagner personnel for their service, stated that neither he nor Wagner's Council of Commanders banned Wagner personnel from joining different Russian "security structures," and expressed hope that the departed Wagner members would "keep in touch" so that they can rejoin Wagner should there ever arrive a time when the Wagner Group must reform a force.[6] Prigozhin also reiterated known details about how the Wagner Group will continue to train Belarusian forces and operate in Africa.[7] The Ukrainian Resistance Center also noted on July 31 that Prigozhin ordered all Wagner personnel currently on rest and recuperation to arrive at Wagner's field camps in Belarus no later than August 5 to attend unspecified events that Prigozhin will personally lead on August 5.[8] Prigozhin stated that most Wagner fighters are on "vacation" as of July 30.[9]

Prigozhin stated that the Wagner Group stopped recruiting in Russia and claimed that the Wagner Group does not need to recruit more personnel and has sufficient reserves. Prigozhin stated on July 30 that Wagner has sufficient personnel and does not plan to conduct another recruitment drive until it needs more fighters.[10] A Wagner recruitment Telegram page announced on July 30 that Wagner is indefinitely suspending regional recruitment centers in Russia due to Wagner having sufficient reserves.[11] The exact reason the Wagner Group suspended recruitment is unclear, however. The Wagner Group was reportedly still recruiting fighters from across Russia as of early July 2023.[12] The Kremlin may have recently banned the Wagner Group from recruiting within Russia, and Prigozhin may simply be attempting to save face by claiming he voluntarily suspended recruitment efforts. ISW cannot independently confirm the Wagner Group's current strength or depth of reserves.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu made largely boilerplate comments framing the Russian state as adequately supporting long-term force-generation efforts and meeting Russian weapons demand through domestic production and international cooperation.[13] Shoigu claimed that over 15,000 students enrolled at Russian military universities for the coming school year, 10 percent of whom have combat experience fighting in Ukraine. Shoigu announced the resumption of instruction at the Donetsk Higher Combined Arms Command School in occupied Donetsk, one of the combined arms academies the Russian military requires officers to attend before commanding at the brigade or regiment level. Shoigu also reiterated positive rhetoric about the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and actively seeking international military-technical cooperation to support the war effort. Shoigu stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will sign contracts worth over 433 billion rubles (roughly \$4.7 billion) with defense enterprises at the Army-2023 international military-technical forum. The claimed overall value of these contracts is at least 13.4 percent less than the over 500 billion ruble (roughly \$5.45 billion) value of contracts the MoD signed at the Army-2022 and 2021 forums but a substantial increase over the 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, and 2016 forums, the overall contract values of which were roughly 1.16 trillion rubles (\$17.4 billion), 1.03 trillion (\$10.9 billion), 130 billion (\$1.4 billion), 170 billion (\$1.8 billion), and 130 billion, respectively.[14] Shoigu stated that Russia invited the heads of over 108 defense departments to attend the Army-2023 forum.[15]

Imagery posted on July 30 and 31 visually confirms damage to the Chonhar Bridge following a Ukrainian strike on July 29. Satellite imagery posted on July 30 reportedly shows damage to the Chonhar railway bridge.[16] Social media sources additionally circulated an image taken by someone standing on the bridge itself reportedly showing damage to the railway bridge.[17] One source speculated that the pictures taken from the bridge do not match the location of the damage as shown on available satellite imagery, which suggests that the full extent of the damage to the bridge is still unclear.[18] Russian milbloggers maintained their silence on damage to the Chonhar Bridge on July 31, possibly supporting ISW's previous assessment that the Kremlin may have directed Russian commentators to refrain from covering the strike in an effort to exert greater control of the information space.[19]

Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova confirmed on July 31 that Russia has transferred 4.8 million Ukrainians, including over 700,000 children, to the Russian Federation since the beginning of the war.[20] In a report on the activities "authorized by the President of the Russian Federation for children's rights" in 2022, Lvova-Belova claimed that Russia has "received" 4.8 million Ukrainians since February 2022 and noted that the vast majority of the 700,000 children who arrived to Russia did not have parental or guardian supervision.[21] The report carefully frames these activities as humanitarian gestures of goodwill. International humanitarian law, however, defines the forced transfer of civilians to the territory of an occupying power as "deportation." And the circumstances of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the situation in occupied territories are likely sufficiently coercive to mean that most "transfers" of Ukrainian civilians to Russia meet the threshold of forced deportation, which is prohibited under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, regardless of Russia's claimed motive. [22] ISW continues to assess that Russian authorities are conducting a large-scale campaign to deport Ukrainians to the Russian Federation.[23]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 31. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued attacking northwest and southwest of Bakhmut, in the western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. [24] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that over the past week, Ukrainian forces liberated an additional 2 square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut area and 12.6 square kilometers in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[25]

Iran and Belarus are deepening bilateral cooperation over the backdrop of their mutual support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin arrived in Iran on July 31 and met with his counterpart, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, to sign a Memorandum of Understanding and a bilateral military cooperation plan for 2023.[26] Ashtiani is primarily responsible for negotiating military acquisitions and sales in his role as Iranian Defense Minister, so Khrenin and Ashtiani likely discussed arms deals during their meeting. Belarus may have also been seeking to secure an agreement on Iranian production of Shahed drones on the territory of Belarus following initial reports that Iran was seeking to convert a plant in Belarus' Gomel Oblast into a Shahed production plant.[27]

Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak stated on July 30 that Kyiv and Washington will begin consultations on providing Ukraine "security guarantees" as soon as the week of August 6 – 13. Yermak stated that the security guarantees for Ukraine — including "concrete and long-term

commitments that will ensure Ukraine's ability to win now and deter Russian aggression in the future" — will cover the period before Ukraine acquires NATO membership.[28] Yermak described the security guarantees as an "important prerequisite" for Ukraine's recovery and noted that the security guarantees include financial support for Ukraine and sanctions and punitive measures against Russia.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- The Wagner Group may be supplanting the Russian military as the Belarusian military's key training partner.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely succeeded in recruiting an unknown number of Wagner personnel following Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed rebellion, though Prigozhin ordered remaining Wagner fighters to assemble in Belarus by August 5.
- Prigozhin stated that the Wagner Group stopped recruiting in Russia and claimed that the Wagner Group does not need to recruit more personnel and has sufficient reserves.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu made largely boilerplate comments framing the Russian state as adequately supporting long-term force-generation efforts and meeting Russian weapons demand through domestic production and international cooperation.
- Imagery posted on July 30 and 31 visually confirms damage to the Chonhar Bridge following a Ukrainian strike on July 29.
- Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova confirmed on July 31 that Russia has transferred 4.8 million Ukrainians, including over 700,000 children, to the Russian Federation since the beginning of the war, very likely violating the Fourth Geneva Convention.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 31.
- Iran and Belarus are deepening bilateral cooperation over the backdrop of their mutual support for Russia's war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak stated on July 30 that Kyiv and Washington will begin consultations on providing Ukraine "security guarantees" as soon as the week of August 6 – 13.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna and Avdiivka-Donetsk City lines and made claimed gains in Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified a law on July 31 increasing the fine for mobilized personnel's or conscripts' failure to arrive at a military registration office after being summoned.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 30, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 30, 2023, 4:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The lack of Russian milblogger reaction to a Ukrainian strike on the Chonhar bridge represents a notable inflection in Russian reporting on the war in Ukraine and may suggest that the Kremlin has directed Russian milbloggers to refrain from covering certain topics. The Ukrainian Armed Forces announced on July 29 that Ukrainian forces successfully struck the Chonhar bridge on the M-18 (Dzhankoi-Melitopol) highway between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast.[1] ISW has not observed any Russian milblogger discussion about the Ukrainian strike or Russian milbloggers promoting Kherson Oblast occupation administration head Vladimir Saldo's claim that Russian forces intercepted 12 Ukrainian Strom Shadow cruise missiles targeting the bridge.[2] The only other Russian source to comment on the strikes was a local Russian news Telegram channel, which amplified alleged claims from Russian tourists in the area about the bridge being closed to traffic.[3] Russian milbloggers responded to a Ukrainian strike on the Chonhar bridge on June 22 with widespread outrage and concern, and Russian milbloggers routinely comment on both successful and allegedly unsuccessful Ukrainian strikes on Russian logistics.[4] The Chonhar bridge is a notable bottleneck along a critical Russian ground line of communication (GLOC), and it is highly unlikely that Russian milbloggers would voluntarily ignore a successful or unsuccessful Ukrainian strike on the bridge. ISW has previously assessed that select Russian milbloggers may be shaping their coverage of the war in Ukraine in ways more favorable to Kremlin narratives out of fear of Kremlin punishment following the removal of prominent critical voices in the Russian information space, particularly pro-war critic Igor Girkin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.[5] General fear of Kremlin punishment would not likely result in such near-universal lack of coverage of a dramatic event, however, and it is more likely that a specific Kremlin directive not to cover disruptions to critical GLOCs caused this lack of reporting.

Russian President Vladimir Putin disingenuously framed the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive as inhibiting prospects for negotiations. During a press conference at the Russia-Africa Summit on July 29, Putin accused Ukraine of launching a large-scale offensive so that Russia cannot discuss a ceasefire while its troops are defending against Ukrainian attacks.[6] Russian officials have previously weaponized the mention of negotiations in order to accuse Ukraine of being the party unwilling to enter into negotiations discussions, and Putin is likely using discussions of the Ukrainian counteroffensive to undermine reports of Ukrainian battlefield successes and accuse Ukraine of continued lack of interest in a potential negotiations process.[7] Russian forces have been conducting their own attacks in Luhansk and around Donetsk City almost continuously since before the Ukrainian counter-offensive began, moreover, a fact that Putin did not, naturally, mention. Putin also notably lauded the work of Central Military district Commander Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev for repelling Ukrainian attacks and securing advances, likely in Luhansk Oblast.[8]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and made claimed advances in some areas. Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian forces are achieving small successes on the southern flank of Bakhmut and are gradually advancing in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area) and Melitopol (in western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[9]

Key Takeaways:

- The lack of Russian milblogger reaction to a Ukrainian strike on the Chonhar bridge represents a notable inflection in Russian reporting on the war in Ukraine and may suggest that the Kremlin has directed Russian milbloggers to refrain from covering certain topics.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin disingenuously framed the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive as inhibiting prospects for negotiations.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and made claimed advances in some areas.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremina and Avdiivka-Donetsk City lines and did not make any confirmed gains in these areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations southwest and northwest of Bakhmut and made claimed gains in this direction.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast and made claimed marginal advances.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces counterattacked and regained lost positions in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian officials plan to regulate civilian volunteers who take supplies to Russian forces in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian partisans reportedly sabotaged Russian military equipment in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast on July 29.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 29, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 29, 2023, 3:40pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 11:30am ET on July 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Segments of the Russian pro-war ultranationalist information space appear to be coalescing around the Kremlin's narrative effort to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failure, increasingly overstating Ukrainian losses and writing less about Russia's losses and challenges than they had been. Prominent Russian milbloggers have been increasingly presenting Ukrainian counteroffensive operations inaccurately as a series of failed Ukrainian assaults along the entire line of contact.[1] Russian milbloggers widely amplified footage on July 29 claiming that it showed a single Russian tank defeating an entire Ukrainian company with armored vehicles as if the event had occurred recently, but the footage is actually from June 7 and shows Russian artillery units striking the Ukrainian column.[2] Russian sources have previously recirculated old footage to support claims that Ukrainian forces are suffering significant armored vehicle losses, and the amplification of the footage on July 29 indicates that Russian sources are deliberately amplifying old footage to support the Kremlin narrative.[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin recently claimed that Ukrainian forces lost 39 armored vehicles in a few days of fighting in western Zaporizhia Oblast, a notable inflection in his exaggeration of Ukrainian losses during the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[4] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is likely shifting its policy about the coverage of the war to downplay the possibilities of a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive and to promote itself as an effective manager of the war effort.[5] Russian milbloggers continue to report on localized Ukrainian advances and some issues with Russian defensive operations, but the pro-war Russian information space's wider operational framing of the Ukrainian counteroffensive aligns with the likely shift in the Kremlin's portrayal of the counteroffensive.[6]

Select Russian milbloggers may be shaping their depiction of the wider Ukrainian counteroffensive for fear of Kremlin punishment following the arrest of prominent pro-war critic Igor Girkin. A Russian insider source claimed on July 28 that sources within the presidential administration stated that the Kremlin recently encouraged Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers to reduce their coverage of the war in Ukraine in general and to post more positive content on topics of nationalistic pride. [7] ISW has not observed Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers reducing their coverage of the war, although Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers have begun to argue more emphatically that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is a failure.[8] The arrest of notable critics of the Russian war effort in Ukraine such as Girkin along with ongoing Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space may be prompting select milbloggers to align their portrayal of the war with the Kremlin's more than they have normally done.[9]

The Kremlin's ability to establish a more cohesive narrative about the war within the Russian information space remains uncertain, and subsequent Russian failures or significant Ukrainian successes could disrupt the Kremlin's progress in this effort. Segments of the Russian information space do continue to complain about systemic issues within the Russian war effort in Ukraine, and many Russian milbloggers would likely reverse course on their portrayal of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the event of significant Ukrainian gains. The milblogger community continues to be highly reactive and motivated by salient topics of outrage, and many milbloggers would likely abandon efforts to align themselves with the Kremlin's messaging about the war in the event that a controversy about Russian failure prompts renewed intense ire towards the Russian military leadership.[10] A cohesively amplified and unchallenged Kremlin narrative concerning the tactical and operational situation in Ukraine would make accurate coverage of battlefield realities more challenging, particularly in the absence of more detailed reporting from the Ukrainian side.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in some areas on July 29. Geolocated footage published on July 28 confirms that Ukrainian forces have advanced close to the northwestern outskirts of Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut).^[11] Geolocated footage published on July 29 shows that Ukrainian forces advanced to positions near the northern outskirts of Pryutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.^[12] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults near Klishchiivka, Kurdyumivka, and Andriivka south of Bakhmut.^[13] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[14] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks near Rivnopol, Staromayorske, and Urozhaine in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.^[15] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and one milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces captured a forest northeast of Robotyne.^[16] A Russian milblogger stated that Russian defensive fortifications will not matter if Ukrainian forces inflict heavy losses on Russian forces to the point that there are not enough Russian personnel to man the fortifications.^[17] The milblogger also stated that the depth of Ukrainian advances into Russian defensive lines matters less than the degree to which the balance of forces has shifted to favor Ukraine during the course of the counteroffensive.

Ukrainian forces targeted Russian military and logistics assets in occupied Crimea on July 28 and 29. The Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that Ukrainian forces struck the Chonhar bridge between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast on the morning of July 29.^[18] Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo claimed Ukrainian forces launched 12 Storm Shadow missiles at the Chonhar rail bridge, but claimed that Russian air defenses intercepted all 12 missiles.^[19] Some social media sources stated that locals reported explosions in the Chonhar area, but there is currently no visual evidence of the strike or claims about the consequences of the strike at the time of this publication.^[20] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that saboteurs set explosives against a Russian ammunition depot in Kozacha Bay near Sevastopol, Crimea on July 28 and that locals reported primary and secondary detonations.^[21] Sevastopol occupation head Mikhail Razvozhaev claimed on July 28 that any explosions in the Kozacha Bay area were due to Russian military exercises.^[22]

Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Dnipro City, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on the evening of July 28. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces struck a residential building and a Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) building in Dnipro City with two Iskander cruise missiles.^[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Segments of the Russian pro-war ultranationalist information space appear to be coalescing around a Kremlin narrative effort to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failure, increasingly overstating Ukrainian losses and writing less about Russia's losses and challenges than they had been.
- Select Russian milbloggers may be shaping their depiction of the wider Ukrainian counteroffensive for fear of Kremlin punishment following the arrest of prominent pro-war critic Igor Girkin.
- The Kremlin's ability to establish a more cohesive narrative about the war within the Russian information space remains uncertain, and subsequent Russian failures or significant Ukrainian successes could disrupt the Kremlin's progress in this effort.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced in some areas on July 29.
- Ukrainian forces likely targeted Russian military and logistics assets in occupied Crimea on July 28 and 29.
- Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Dnipro City, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on the evening of July 28.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line and the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and made claimed advances along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and advanced around Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and south of Orikhiv and advanced along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and south of Orikhiv but did not make confirmed or claimed advances.
- A Ukrainian report indicates that Russian occupation authorities continue crypto-mobilization efforts in occupied Ukraine to replenish losses from combat casualties.
- Russian authorities continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine to Russia under the guise of rest and rehabilitation programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 27, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, George Barros, and Mason Clark

July 28, 2023, 7:50 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30 pm ET on July 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on July 28. Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the northern and southern flanks of Bakhmut, and Ukrainian Deputy Defense

Minister Hanna Malyar stated on July 27 that Ukrainian forces continued advancing south of Bakhmut.[1] A Russian milblogger claimed on July 28 that Ukrainian forces advanced near Kurdyumivka and Andriivka.[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) and Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), and some milbloggers acknowledged that Ukrainian forces captured Staromayorske on July 27.[3] A Ukrainian source claimed that Ukrainian forces have advanced to within 10-12 kilometers of the main Russian defensive line in the Berdyansk direction.[4] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), Verbove (17km southeast of Orikhiv), and Pyatykhatsky (25km southwest of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[5] Russian "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovskiy stated that Ukrainian forces can conduct strikes against the full depth of defending Russian forces and that these strikes are killing Russian commanders and degrading Russian command and control.[6] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the 247th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) refused to go to combat near Staromayorske due to heavy Russian losses and Ukrainian battlefield victories.[7]

Russian naval posturing in the Black Sea likely aims to impose a de facto blockade on Ukrainian ports without committing the Black Sea Fleet to the enforcement of a naval blockade. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk reported on July 28 that Ukrainian officials have intercepted radio transmissions of Russian forces warning civilian ships in the Black Sea against heading to Ukrainian ports.[8] A Russian milblogger amplified an audio recording purportedly of a Russian warship telling a civilian vessel in the Black Sea that Russian forces would consider the vessel involved in the conflict in Ukraine as a military cargo ship if it sailed towards a Ukrainian port.[9] Russian sources also claimed that Russian authorities announced a nighttime navigation ban for all small vessels near the Kerch Strait due to concerns about Ukrainian naval drones.[10] The Black Sea Fleet conducted exercises on July 27 wherein naval warships launched a missile at a target ship in the Black Sea.[11] The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) recently attempted to soften the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) July 19 announcement about viewing civilian ships in the Black Sea as legitimate military targets by claiming that the announcement meant that Russian forces would inspect ships.[12] The Russian MoD itself has not clarified what actions its announcement will allow the Russian military to take and even the Russian MFA's interpretation would require Russian forces to board and possibly seize foreign civilian vessels. The Russian naval posturing in the Black Sea is likely intentionally ambiguous to generate widespread concern about possible detention by the Russian navy or outright strikes on civilian vessels. The Kremlin likely aims for this posturing to have a chilling effect on maritime activity so that Russian naval assets do not need to enforce an actual blockade of Ukrainian ports. A naval blockade is only mandatory for neutral entities to follow under international law if a belligerent declares the existence of the blockade, and Russia has yet to do so.[13]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure African partner states that Russia will maintain its economic and security commitments during the second day of the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. Putin addressed African heads of state and representatives at the summit's plenary session on July 28 and highlighted military-technical agreements with 40 African countries and plans to expand Russia's diplomatic presence in Africa.[14] Putin stated that Russia aims to help train African partners' military and law enforcement personnel and noted that there are many African personnel at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) academy.[15] Putin also claimed that between 2022 and 2023 Russia wrote off \$23 billion of debt for African countries.[16] Putin claimed that Russia has sent almost 10 million tons of grain to African countries so far in 2023 and reiterated a pledge to send 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain to six African countries in the next three to four months free of charge.[17] Putin pointedly stated that Russia will always be a responsible international supplier of agricultural products, likely aiming to reassure African partners concerned about food security following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative.[18]

African Union Commission Chair Moussa Faki Mahamat stated at the summit that disruptions to energy and grain supplies must end, and both Mahamat and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi explicitly called for the revival of the grain deal.[19] Al-Sissi also promoted a Kremlin talking point that Russia quit the grain deal because the grain corridor was not facilitating grain shipments to the poorest of countries, even though Putin himself cited Russian producers' losses at depressed grain prices as a primary reason for leaving the deal.[20] African countries are likely appealing to Russia without fully backing its position concerning the grain deal in hopes of retaining Russian economic and security commitments, in line with their likely primary objective to mitigate the economic fallout from the war in Ukraine affecting their economies.[21]

The Kremlin continues to display little interest in an unspecific peace plan focused on eliminating disruptions to international trade proposed by African heads of state. Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso, Senegalese President Macky Sall, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, and Mahamat all appealed to Putin to consider a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine.[22] A delegation representing seven African states proposed a generalized peace plan focused on resuming international trade to Putin on June 17.[23] Putin responded to renewed calls to engage with this peace plan at the summit by stating that Russia is respectfully and carefully considering the proposal.[24] Putin has yet to address the feasibility of the peace plan and instead reiterated boilerplate rhetoric that Ukraine and the West are preventing negotiations from taking place.[25] The Kremlin is likely trying to portray itself as considering the peace plan to promote ongoing Russian information operations that feign interest in a negotiated settlement while aiming to slow Western security assistance to Ukraine.[26] The Kremlin is also likely using the proposal to pursue strengthened bilateral and multilateral engagement with African states as part of an overall effort to present itself as a more attractive ally than the collective West.[27] The Kremlin has not demonstrated any intent to engage with any peace process meaningfully.

Russian authorities may be increasingly concerned about how the Russian electorate views the war ahead of regional elections in September 2023 and the Russian presidential election in 2024. A Russian insider source and independent Russian opposition news outlet *Verstka* both claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) initiative to increase the maximum conscription age from 27 to 30 years old caused a heated discussion among Kremlin officials.[28] The sources claimed that the Russian Security Council urged the Presidential Administration not to support the MoD's initiative over concern that the initiative would cause public backlash and affect Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings.[29] The sources reported that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu pushed the initiative through and maintained Putin's support, despite the Security Council's concerns.[30] *Verstka* claimed that Putin supported the MoD's initiative after listening to Shoigu's arguments about the shortage of soldiers in Ukraine.[31] *Verstka* also reported that sources stated that United Russia officials are afraid to use the war in Ukraine in their election campaigns in upcoming regional and local elections because they are concerned about how voters will react to it.[32] *Verstka*'s sources claimed that United Russia intends to highlight and appeal to local issues instead of highlighting the war in Ukraine. *Verstka* claimed that it has reviewed United Russia's election materials and stated that the war is not a main theme.[33] The concern among elements of the Kremlin and United Russia indicates concern over domestic support for the war and fears that the Kremlin's perceived electoral legitimacy could weaken in upcoming elections - though to be sure this loss of support primarily presents United Russia with a greater need to falsify election results and the possibility of local losses to other "managed opposition" parties, not a legitimate threat to its dominance of Russian politics.

Politico reported that the first batch of refurbished US Abrams tanks will likely arrive in Ukraine in September. Politico cited six US officials as saying that the US plans to deliver six to eight Abrams (two platoons) to Germany in August for refurbishment before shipping the tanks to Ukraine in September and that the US will

send a total of 31 Abrams (roughly an understrength armored battalion, at most one-third of a full Ukrainian brigade) to Ukraine.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced near Bakhmut on July 28.
- Russian naval posturing in the Black Sea likely aims to impose a de facto blockade on Ukrainian ports without committing the Black Sea Fleet to the enforcement of a naval blockade.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure African partner states that Russia will maintain its economic and security commitments during the second day of the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg.
- The Kremlin continues to display little interest in an unspecific peace plan focused on eliminating disruptions to international trade proposed by African heads of state.
- Russian authorities may be increasingly concerned about how the Russian electorate views the war ahead of regional elections in September 2023 and the Russian presidential election in 2024.
- Politico reported that the first batch of refurbished US Abrams tanks will likely arrive in Ukraine in September.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on July 28 and made advances in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 28 and have reportedly advanced along the Svatove-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut, and along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border.
- The Russian Federation Council approved measures allowing the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to receive heavy military equipment and increasing the upper limit of the conscription age range from 27 years old to 30 years old.
- Russian authorities continue to deport Ukrainian teenagers to Russia under the guise of summer camp programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 27, 2023

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Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 27, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on July 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 27 and made gains in some areas, although Ukrainian forces appear not to have continued significant mechanized assaults south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky posted footage on July 27 showing that Ukrainian forces liberated Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in western Donetsk Oblast following heavy fighting in the area.[1] Geolocated footage published on July 26 indicates that Ukrainian forces also made marginal advances north of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[2] Geolocated footage published on July 26 suggests that Ukrainian forces made additional advances east of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) during offensive operations on July 26.[3] Ukrainian Director of the Department of Application Planning at the Main Command of the National Guard Mykola Urshalovych stated on July 27 that Ukrainian forces achieved tactical victories in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[4] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults at a lower tempo and with far less manpower near Robotyne on July 27 after Ukrainian forces launched an intense mechanized frontal assault that broke through Russian defensive positions northeast of the settlement on July 26.[5] Geolocated footage published on July 27 suggests that Ukrainian forces may be operating in areas well forward of where ISW assesses Ukrainian advances to be as a result of ISW's intentionally conservative assessments about control of terrain (*covered in more detail in Southern Axis text*).[6]

The Kremlin and the wider Russian information space are intensifying efforts to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed effort. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated to a reporter on July 27 that in recent days Russian forces destroyed 39 armored vehicles out of 50 that Ukrainian forces committed to intensified assaults in the Zaporizhia direction.[7] Putin claimed that Russian forces also killed 60 percent of the Ukrainian personnel that conducted these assaults as well as 40 percent of Ukrainian combat aviation pilots in the area.[8] Putin has previously claimed that Russian forces have destroyed an implausible amount of Ukrainian equipment during Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, although his figures concerning Ukrainian assaults in recent days indicate an inflection in his exaggeration of likely Ukrainian losses.[9] Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that Russian forces destroyed dozens of Ukrainian armored vehicles and celebrated the alleged losses as proof that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is stalling.[10] The Kremlin's and the Russian information space's framing of the Ukrainian counteroffensive notably violates a reported Kremlin manual instructing Russian media not to downplay the potential for successful Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[11] The intensifying portrayal of the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed effort suggests that the Kremlin's policy on the coverage of the war is to bolster efforts to promote itself as an effective manager of the war effort.

A US official expressed caution about assessing that the July 26 uptick in Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast is part of the Ukrainian main effort, tempering July 26 statements to the contrary.[12] The Washington Post cited an unspecified US official as saying that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the Zaporizhia direction may be shaping operations for a later counteroffensive effort, but that US officials do not assess that these operations are part of Ukraine's main effort.[13] CNN cited two US officials as saying that Ukrainian forces have deployed the "main bulk" of their reserve forces to southern Ukraine to capitalize on recent Ukrainian gains.[14] UK Minister for the State of the Armed Forces James Heappey stated that Ukrainian forces are being "appropriately cautious" and are meeting current expectations.[15]

Russian President Vladimir Putin used the Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum in St. Petersburg on July 27 to continue efforts to posture Russia as a more attractive ally to African partner states than the collective West. Putin met with several African leaders at the forum, including Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, President of Zimbabwe Emmerson Dambuzo Mnangagwa, President of the Republic of Burundi Evariste Ndayishimiye, President of Mozambique Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, and President of Comoros Azali Assoumani.[16] During his speech at the plenary session of the forum, Putin emphasized the importance of expanding Russian–African cooperation and Russia's investment in the development of African nations, notably accusing Ukraine and the West of interfering with Russia's supply of grain and fertilizers to the African continent and claiming that Russia will provide between 25 and 50 thousand tons of grain free of charge to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somali, Central African Republic, and Eritrea over the coming months.[17] Putin announced that Russia is helping to develop over 30 energy infrastructure projects in 16 African states and called for an expansion of cultural and social integration between Russia and the African continent, stating that Russia plans to open branches of Russian universities in Africa and increase enrollment of African students in Russian educational institutions.[18]

Beyond the typical diplomatic platitudes and promises of continued cooperation and development, Putin's rhetoric during the Russia–Africa forum does not represent a major inflection in the Kremlin's policy toward the African continent. Putin previously signed an article published on July 24 to posture Russia's commitment to African development and mitigate damage done to Russia's position in Africa and his personal reputation with African leaders.[19] Putin's and the Russian government's reputations likely suffered due to a number of recent factors: Russia's recent withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and strikes on Ukrainian port infrastructure (both of which were critical for grain exports to various African countries) and his inability to attend the upcoming BRICS summit because of the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrant against him.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin was also present in St. Petersburg on July 27 and took the opportunity to informally meet with an unknown number of African leaders, suggesting that the Wagner Group intends to remain a significant player in Africa. Russian milbloggers amplified photos of Prigozhin shaking hands with a Central African Republic official and the "director of Afrique media." [20] A Russian insider source claimed that Prigozhin held private, informal meetings with representatives of an unknown number of African governments in a hotel close to the Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum but did not attend the summit itself.[21] Prigozhin's continued efforts to meet with and message to African leaders are likely part of Wagner's efforts to maintain its profitable military and mining contracts in Africa. An unnamed Wagner commander who recently returned from CAR claimed on July 26 that Wagner is working on increasing its operations in Africa to fund its presence in Belarus.[22] **Prigozhin additionally used the backdrop of the Russia–Africa summit to position Wagner as a viable anti-Western partner for post-coup Niger.** Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels began circulating an audio recording reportedly of Prigozhin on July 27 wherein Prigozhin praised the Nigerien military's removal of Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and lauded it as an act of "gaining independence," while accusing Western nations of deliberately destabilizing the situation in Africa and supporting terrorist organizations.[23] Prigozhin suggested that a "thousand fighters" from Wagner would be able to restore order, presumably in post-coup Niger.[24] Several Russian milbloggers responded to Prigozhin's purported audio recording and suggested that Niger will need "help" from Wagner similar to what Mali needed following its coup in May 2021.[25] Prigozhin is posturing Wagner as a viable security partner for Niger, which is largely consistent with ISW's and the Critical Threats Project's (CTP) previous assessment that Wagner is likely to maintain and even expand its presence in the African continent following its July 24 armed rebellion.[26]

The Kremlin reportedly distributed a manual to Russian state media on framing the anniversary of the Baptism of Rus on July 28, likely as part of continued information operations and propaganda narratives to advance Russian military objectives. Russian opposition news outlet Meduza reported on July 27 that it obtained the manual but did not publish the manual itself, which reportedly directs Russian state media to frame the Baptism of Rus as "a key turning point in Russian history" and "the point of formation of statehood." [27] The manual reportedly emphasized that a "common faith" allowed the "East Slavic tribes" to unify as "one people." [28] The manual reportedly instructs state media to paint Russian President Vladimir Putin as the one who "brought the mission of defending the Orthodox faith back to Russia" and reportedly labels the Ukrainian government an "apostate regime" and a "satanic regime" that is trying to "destroy" Orthodoxy in Ukraine and "the spiritual ties of the fraternal peoples." [29] These Kremlin-dictated religion-based narratives come as Russia is itself committing systematic religious repressions and persecutions throughout Ukraine, including against Orthodox Christians, in an effort to destroy Ukrainian cultural and national identity.[30] The Kremlin reportedly issued a similar manual to state media in May aimed at controlling the narratives about a potential upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive, and the distribution of these manuals demonstrates the Kremlin's use of various information operations to spread propaganda messages and discredit Ukraine in the international arena. [31]

Russia conducted another strike on Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast and rear areas of Ukraine overnight on July 26–27. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched two Kalibr cruise missiles that damaged port infrastructure in Odesa City.[32] Ukrainian military sources also reported that Russian forces launched eight Shahed drones and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all eight.[33]

US President Joe Biden has reportedly ordered the US government in recent days to share evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague.[34] This will be the first time the US will share evidence with the ICC as part of a criminal investigation into a country that is not a part of the ICC.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 27 and made gains in some areas, although Ukrainian forces appear not to have continued significant mechanized assaults south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- A US official expressed caution about assessing that the July 26 uptick in Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast is part of the Ukrainian main effort, tempering July 26 statements to the contrary.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin used the Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum in St. Petersburg on July 27 to continue efforts to posture Russia as a more attractive ally to African partner states than the collective West.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin was also present in St. Petersburg on July 27 and took the opportunity to informally meet with an unknown number of African leaders, suggesting that the Wagner Group intends to remain a significant player in Africa.
- Prigozhin additionally used the backdrop of the Russia–Africa summit to position Wagner as a viable anti-Western partner for post-coup Niger.
- The Kremlin reportedly distributed a manual to Russian state media on framing the anniversary of the Baptism of Rus on July 28, likely as part of continued information operations and propaganda narratives to advance Russian military objectives.
- Russia conducted another strike on Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast and rear areas of Ukraine overnight on July 26–27.

- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on July 27 and did not make any confirmed advances.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 27 and have advanced south of Bakhmut, in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian State Duma approved measures on July 27 aimed at clarifying confusion surrounding the recently updated laws regarding conscripts and reservists.
- Russian authorities are discriminating against Ukrainian refugees in Belgorod Oblast, Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 26, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 26, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces launched a significant mechanized counteroffensive operation in western Zaporizhia Oblast on July 26 and appear to have broken through certain pre-prepared Russian defensive positions south of Orikhiv. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and several prominent milbloggers, claimed that Ukrainian forces launched an intense frontal assault towards Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and broke through Russian defensive positions northeast of the settlement.^[1] Geolocated footage indicates that Ukrainian forces likely advanced to within 2.5km directly east of Robotyne during the attack before Russian forces employed standard doctrinal elastic defense tactics and pushed Ukrainian troops back somewhat, although not all the way back to their starting positions.^[2]

Russian sources provided a wide range of diverging claims as to the scale of both the attack and resulting Ukrainian losses, indicating that the actual results and Ukrainian losses remain unclear. The Russian MoD claimed that up to three battalions engaged in a "massive assault" near Orikhiv, but ISW has not yet observed visual evidence to suggest that such a large number of personnel (a full brigade) were involved in the attack.^[3] One prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces used over 80 armored vehicles, and other milbloggers more conservatively claimed that the number was closer to between 30 and 40.^[4] Various Russian milbloggers additionally made disparate claims about how many armored vehicles Russian forces destroyed.^[5] ISW has also not yet observed a large number of heat anomalies from NASA's FIRMS / VIIRs sensors in this area of the frontline of the sort that have historically accompanied large, mechanized pushes.^[6] The disagreement amongst several prominent Russian sources, who have generally tended to offer more mutually consistent claims about the size of and losses resulting from previous Ukrainian attacks, indicates that the situation remains less than clear and that Ukrainian forces may have been more successful than assessed by Russian commentators.

The battlefield geometry around Robotyne, as well as the force composition of the Russian elements defending there, offer important color to speculation surrounding the Ukrainian attack and gains. Geolocated footage from July 27 shows two Ukrainian Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and a T-72 tank either disabled or abandoned about 2.5km due east of Robotyne, which is a point that is about 2.5km south of the current frontline.^[7] This geolocated point is beyond the forward-most pre-prepared Russian defensive fortifications in this area, indicating that Ukrainian forces managed to penetrate and drive through tactically challenging defensive positions. This kind of penetration battle will be one of the most difficult things for Ukrainian forces to accomplish in pursuit of deeper penetrations, as ISW has previously assessed. The defensive lines that run further south of Robotyne are likely less well-manned than these forward-most positions, considering that Russian forces have likely had to commit a significant portion of available forces to man the first line of defensive positions that are north and east of Robotyne.

Ukrainians appear to have rotated fresh forces into this area for the operation whereas Russian forces remain pinned to the line apparently without rotation, relief, or significant reinforcement in this sector. Russian milbloggers and unnamed Pentagon officials additionally noted that the Ukrainian units that participated in the July 26 attack are reserves that belong to older and more established Ukrainian brigades.^[8] These reports indicate that Ukraine may now be employing fresh and generally more experienced units in the battle, whereas the same Russian 58th Combined Arms Army elements (particularly the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division) have been engaged in defensive operations in this very area continually since the beginning of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in early June without relief.^[9] The introduction of fresh Ukrainian reserves to the effort, together with the geometry of Russian defensive lines and the likely degraded overall state of Russian forces in this area, may allow Ukraine to begin pursuing more successful advances south of Orikhiv in the coming weeks.

Western and Ukrainian officials suggested that the attacks towards Robotyne mark an inflection in Ukraine's counteroffensive effort. The *New York Times* reported on July 27, citing two anonymous Pentagon officials, that the "main thrust" of the Ukrainian counteroffensive has begun in earnest.^[10] The Western officials noted that this is an opportune moment for Ukrainian efforts given recent gradual Ukrainian operations to clear Russian defensive positions, Russian command changes following the dismissal of 58th Combined Arms Army Commander Major General Ivan Popov, and continued Ukrainian artillery strikes against Russian concentration areas in southern Ukraine, which are all elements that are consistent with ISW's assessment on the state of play in southern Ukraine.^[11] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also cryptically stated in his nightly address on July 27 that Ukrainian forces "had very good results today" and that he will provide more details at a later date.^[12]

Today's actions around Robotyne are likely the start of any "main thrust" Ukrainian forces might be launching, if the US officials are correct, rather than the sum of such a thrust. Even accepting the high estimate of three battalions as the Ukrainian force offered by the Russian MoD, three battalions comprise a single brigade, whereas Ukraine is known still to have in reserve multiple uncommitted brigades readied for the counteroffensive.

Western officials are unhelpfully raising expectations for rapid and dramatic Ukrainian advances that Ukrainian forces are unlikely to be able to meet, as well as offering forecasts of the likely Ukrainian avenues of advance that should probably not have been shared publicly. ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian forces can make significant gains in their counteroffensive operations, but that such gains are likely to occur over a long period of time and interspersed with lulls and periods of slower and more grinding efforts as the Ukrainians come to successive Russian defensive lines and themselves require relief and rotation.

Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile strike largely aimed at rear areas in Ukraine on the night of July 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 40 missiles, including three Kalibr cruise missiles and four Kh-47 Kinzhals air-launched ballistic missiles.^[13] Ukrainian air defenses shot down at least 36 missiles, including all three Kalibr missiles.^[14] It is currently unconfirmed if Ukrainian air defenses shot down the four Kinzhals.^[15] The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that missiles were recorded over Kharkiv, Poltava, Kirovohrad, Vinnytsia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Ternopil, Lviv, Kyiv, Zhytomyr, and Khmelnytskyi Oblasts.^[16] Various Russian sources claimed that the strikes hit the Starokostyantyniv Air Base in Khmelnytskyi Oblast.^[17]

The Russian Black Sea Fleet is increasing military posturing in the Black Sea, likely in an attempt to set conditions to forcibly stop and search civilian vessels and exert increased control in the area. The Ukrainian Military Media Center and UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian forces are preparing vessels on the Black Sea to "enforce a blockade on Ukraine."^[18] The Ukrainian Military Media Center reported that the Black Sea Fleet is increasing combat training for its surface forces and naval aviation.^[19] The Black Sea Fleet is unlikely to attempt a full blockade of Ukraine despite increased measures against civilian vessels, however. A full Russian blockade of Ukraine in the Black Sea would mean that Russian forces could fire on all vessels attempting to reach Ukraine. Russia is highly unlikely to attempt to enforce such a complete blockade lest it trigger military conflict with Black Sea littoral countries including NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey that the Kremlin has hitherto worked hard to avoid. Current Russian posturing in the Black Sea more likely suggests that Russia is setting conditions to search civilian and commercial vessels while posturing for a blockade as a means of gaining additional leverage. The UK MoD reported that the Russian corvette "Sergei Kotov" is patrolling the shipping lane between the Bosphorus Strait and Odesa Oblast and that the "Sergei Kotov" corvette may be part of a task group to intercept commercial vessels that Russian forces assess are headed to Ukraine.^[20] The Russian MoD claimed on July 20 that Russian forces would consider all vessels en route to Ukraine as potential carriers of military cargo.^[21] Russian opposition outlet Astra reported on July 24 that the Russian State Security Service (FSB) announced that it searched a foreign cargo ship heading from Turkey to Rostov-on-Don and denied its passage through the Kerch Strait.^[22] The FSB claimed that the ship could be delivering explosives to Ukraine because the ship's crew included 12 Ukrainian citizens and announced that it would search other vessels crossing Kerch Strait.^[23]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced on July 26 that it authorized another presidential drawdown to provide an additional \$400 million of security assistance to Ukraine.^[24] The DoD stated that the package will include ammunition for HIMARS, munitions for Patriot air defense systems and National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS), and other critical military equipment.^[25]

Angry Patriots Club members may be attempting to align their movement to free former Russian officer and prominent ultranationalist milblogger Igor Girkin with outrage at an anti-war sociologist's arrest in order to appeal to a broader audience. Russian opposition news outlet Meduza reported on July 26 that Russian authorities arrested Director of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements (which the Russian Ministry of Justice designated as a foreign agent in 2018) and professor at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences Boris Kagarlitsky on charges of "justifying terrorism" in a post on Telegram about the Ukrainian strike on the Kerch Strait Bridge in October 2022.^[26] The Angry Patriots Club published a Telegram post expressing solidarity with Kagarlitsky and claiming that both Girkin's and Kagarlitsky's arrests were politically motivated.^[27] The Angry Patriots acknowledged that Girkin and Kagarlitsky hold different political views but called for the freedom of political prisoners.^[28] Girkin's supporters may be attempting to frame Girkin's arrest as a fight against political repression in order to galvanize support for Girkin from beyond the narrow confines created by his ultranationalist ideology and difficult personality. ISW continues to assess that the Angry Patriots Club movement is relatively isolated in the Russian ultranationalist information space, and the Angry Patriots Club may be attempting to make Girkin's arrest more palatable to a general audience in order to increase support for the movement to free him.^[29]

Russia continues to find ways to remind Armenia and Azerbaijan that Moscow's military and diplomatic presence in the South Caucasus is necessary. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov met in Moscow for bilateral and trilateral negotiations regarding Nagorno-Karabakh on July 25.^[30] Lavrov walked a careful balance between mediator and participant during the trilateral negotiations, signaling Russia's support for various Armenian and Azerbaijani positions while continuing to delay any real discussion of a long-term, effective peace agreement. A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger highlighted that an assistant was caught on a live microphone, likely intentionally, telling Lavrov not to refer to Nagorno Karabakh as the "former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast" because the Azerbaijanis would not appreciate it.^[31] The milblogger noted that this was a simple, yet effective manipulation tactic that signaled to Armenia Russia's desire to please Azerbaijan.^[32] Lavrov managed to cater to Armenia as well by stating the importance of "direct dialogue between Stepanakert and Baku" and "guaranteeing the rights and security of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh" supporting Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's most recent rhetoric about these issues.^[33] It is likely Lavrov also secured Azerbaijan's approval for the Armenian government to send 400 tons of humanitarian aid to the residents of Nagorno Karabakh through Russian peacekeepers during the July 25 trilateral negotiation.^[34]

The Russian government may have intended for the Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan trilateral meeting to reduce possible Iranian efforts to supplant Russian influence with Armenia by providing Shahed drones to Yerevan.^[35] Israel-based i24News claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan.^[36] The American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project previously assessed that Iran may expand its military support to Armenia in response to Russian "negligence" towards the Caucasus.^[37] The trilateral meeting may have been an attempt to reassert Russia's influence over Armenia vis-à-vis Iran, influence that has become particularly fragile following Russia's redeployment of elements of its "peacekeeping force" from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine in March 2023.^[38]

A prominent Kremlin-linked milblogger expressed his incredulity that the US has not provided Ukraine F-16 fighters yet and did not assess Russian deterrence or escalation cycle dynamics to be a factor. The milblogger expressed surprise at the West's lack of progress in giving Ukraine F-16s, stating it is "not entirely clear why Washington is dragging its feet."^[39] The milblogger laid out at length several hypotheses and potential explanations for the lack of progress in

approving the final policy on giving Ukraine F-16s.[40] The milblogger notably did not include the threat of Russian nuclear escalation or other deterrence factors in his list of hypotheses of why Western policymakers have not yet sent the fighters to Ukraine.[41] ISW continues to assess that the risk of nuclear escalation remains extremely low.[42]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces launched a significant mechanized counteroffensive operation in western Zaporizhia Oblast on July 26 and appear to have broken through certain pre-prepared Russian defensive positions south of Orikhiv.
- Russian sources provided a wide range of diverging claims as to the scale of both the attack and resulting Ukrainian losses, indicating that the actual results and Ukrainian losses remain unclear.
- The battlefield geometry around Robotyne, as well as the force composition of the Russian elements defending there, offer important color to speculation surrounding the Ukrainian attack and gains.
- Western and Ukrainian officials suggested that the attacks towards Robotyne mark an inflection in Ukraine's counteroffensive effort. Today's actions around Robotyne are likely the start of any "main thrust" Ukrainian forces might be launching, if US officials are correct, rather than the sum of such a thrust.
- Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile strike largely aimed at rear areas in Ukraine on the night of July 26.
- The Russian Black Sea Fleet is increasing military posturing in the Black Sea, likely in an attempt to set conditions to forcibly stop and search civilian vessels and exert increased control in the area.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced on July 26 that it authorized another presidential drawdown to provide an additional \$400 million of security assistance to Ukraine.
- Russia continues to find ways to remind Armenia and Azerbaijan that Moscow's military and diplomatic presence in the South Caucasus is necessary. The Russian government may have intended for the Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan trilateral meeting to reduce possible Iranian efforts to supplant Russian influence with Armenia by providing Shahed drones to Yerevan.
- A prominent Kremlin-linked milblogger expressed his incredulity that the US has not provided Ukraine F-16 fighters yet and did not assess Russian deterrence or escalation cycle dynamics to be a factor.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on July 26 and have made advances in certain areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along at least three sectors of the front on July 26 and have advanced in certain areas.
- Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces have begun using Russian-produced Shahed drones against Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to pursue infrastructure projects in occupied areas to facilitate the economic integration of occupied Ukraine into the Russian system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 25, 2023

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

Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 25, 2023, 7:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to manifest concern over potential threats that the Wagner Group and its financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may pose during an impromptu two-day extension of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's visit to St. Petersburg. BBC's Russian Service reported on July 25 that Putin told Lukashenko at the beginning of their July 23 meeting that Putin was ready to adjust his schedule to prolong Lukashenko's visit and "discuss important topics in more detail." [1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reported on July 25 that Putin and Lukashenko intended to "synchronize watches" and exchange views but not sign any agreements during their prolonged meeting. [2] Peskov also reported that Putin and Lukashenko discussed the Wagner Group, the Union State, and external threats on the borders of Russia and Belarus. [3] Putin's decision to prolong his meeting with Lukashenko likely shows Putin's continued concerns about Wagner, which it appears that Lukashenko did not allay.

Lukashenko likely seeks to leverage his power over the Wagner Group to gain concessions from Putin. A Russian insider source claimed that the Wagner Group was the most important topic during the Putin-Lukashenko meeting, and that Lukashenko sought more economic assistance to Belarus through Union State programs. [4] The insider source also claimed that Putin wanted Belarus to be more involved in the war in Ukraine and rejected Lukashenko's compromise offer to have Belarusian forces conduct a show of force on Belarus' border with Ukraine. [5] Lukashenko was likely trying to leverage Putin's concern over the Wagner Group throughout the entire visit to Russia to gain favorable conditions in Belarusian-Russian relations while deflecting Putin's demands for closer integration into the Union State and support for Russia's war in Ukraine.

Russian leadership is attempting to mitigate the security vacuum left by the Wagner Group's departure by creating formalized but decentralized military "enterprises" on the basis of federal subjects (regions). The Russian State Duma adopted the second and third readings of amendments to the federal law regulating the circulation of weapons in constituent entities of the Russian Federation on July 25 that will allow heads of Russian federal subjects to create specialized

state unitary enterprises.[6] Russian opposition media noted that certain intricacies in the amendments allow regional heads to create regionally based militarized state enterprises that are analogous to private military companies (PMCs) during a period of mobilization under martial law.[7] The amendments notably require regional and local budgets to finance the special enterprises, which will be equipped with small arms by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and will assist the Russian State Security Service (FSB), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and other military authorities in ensuring public order and border security.[8] The amendments would allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to create the enterprises on a temporary basis and later abolish them, after which these enterprises would have to transfer all small arms and other weapons back to the Russian MoD within a month.[9]

The Kremlin is likely trying to balance two competing security requirements—the need for combat capable formations that can fulfill roles left by the Wagner Group following their armed rebellion and relocation to Belarus and the desire not to recreate the systemic threats to the Russian state that Wagner's independence posed. The creation of formal militarized state enterprises that will fulfill border security and domestic law enforcement tasks is likely intended in part to remedy the gap left by Wagner. However, the fact that these enterprises are so heavily decentralized and will operate under the auspices of internal security organs on the basis and expense of regional and local governments suggests that the Russian military leadership is very alive to the risk of recreating a powerful Wagner analogue and is therefore trying to limit the scale and power each individual enterprise can obtain. These state enterprises also appear to be a renewed iteration of the failed volunteer battalion model that Russian regions employed throughout the summer of 2022, but these enterprises will operate under formalized and consolidated domestic security organs such as the FSB, likely to mitigate many of the weaknesses in the old volunteer battalion system.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced on July 25.[10] Geolocated footage published on July 25 shows that Ukrainian forces have made tactically significant gains south of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast), and Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area) directions.[12] Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 750 meters in the direction of Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), and Russian sources claimed Ukrainian forces made marginal advances west of Orikhiv.[13] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian forces are dying at a rate eight times higher than Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut area and 5.3 times higher in the Berdyansk and Melitopol directions.[14] ISW has previously assessed that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations aim to create an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment.[15]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes on rear areas of Ukraine overnight on July 24-25. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuryi Ihnat reported on July 25 that Ukrainian forces recorded the launch of about 10 Shahed drones, five of which Ukrainian forces destroyed.[16] Ukrainian military sources reported drones over Kyiv City and Cherkasy, Sumy, Poltava, and Zhytomyr oblasts.[17] The Kyiv City Military Administration noted that this was the sixth drone strike on the capital city in July alone.[18] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that the strikes targeted Ukrainian concentration areas, Western-provided military equipment and other military infrastructure, but Ukrainian sources noted that many of the drones struck open fields and empty hangars.[19]

The Angry Patriots Club continues efforts to cast former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin (Strelkov) as an opposition figure and may be attempting to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin through rhetoric about the illegality of Girkin's arrest. The Angry Patriots Club, known in the Russian information space for its virulent pro-war, ultranationalist rhetoric and willingness to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), the Kremlin, and even Putin himself, has unexpectedly postured itself as an organization concerned about the rule of law following Girkin's arrest.[20] The organization is attempting to cast Girkin as an opposition figure in Russian politics by arguing that his arrest is unlawful and by launching the social media campaign "#FreedomtoStrelkov."[21] The Angry Patriots Club may be employing rhetoric about the illegality of Girkin's arrest as an appeal to Putin, who has historically (and ironically) portrayed himself as a defender of Russian democracy and has seemingly been hesitant to abandon the veil of legitimacy that Russia's democratic institutions provide his authoritarian and corrupt rule.[22] The Angry Patriots Club may believe that the veneer of legality in Russia is personally important to Putin and that Putin might feel compelled to intervene if he believes Girkin's arrest and detention is illegal. It is a further irony that Girkin's statements seem straightforwardly to violate Russia's repressive laws prohibiting criticism of the war and its leaders.[23] Russian opposition figures Alexei Navalny and Mikhail Khodorkovsky amplified the Angry Patriots Club's framing of Girkin as a political prisoner and his arrest as illegal, though it is unclear how Navalny and Khodorkovsky intend for their support to affect Girkin's detention and eventual sentencing.[24]

Putin and the Kremlin reportedly failed to respond promptly to the Wagner Group's June 24 rebellion, leaving local Russian officials to make decisions concerning the group's drive on Moscow. The *Washington Post* reported on July 25 that Ukrainian and European security officials stated that Putin did not issue orders for most of June 24 despite warnings from Russian security services about the likelihood of the rebellion at least two or three days beforehand.[25] Russian security services reportedly increased security at several strategic locations, including the Kremlin, in the days before the rebellion but took no other actions.[26] Regional Russian officials reportedly had to decide how to respond to the rebellion, and regional military and security officials were reportedly the ones that decided not to try to stop Wagner convoys by force.[27] The Kremlin's and Putin's alleged lack of response indicates that the Russian security apparatus had likely not prepared for a direct challenge to the Russian military leadership and likely did not have the capacity to quickly bring the rebellion to an end. The Kremlin is likely aware that its paralysis highlighted a degree of regime instability and appears to be consolidating Russia's internal security apparatus in the Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) to prepare for further internal threats and to signal resolve.[28] Putin's failure to act quickly also suggests that he is uncertain about his ability to rally the Russian elite around him and may indicate how factional internal Kremlin politics have become. A senior NATO official reportedly stated that unspecified senior Russian political figures in Moscow appeared ready to rally behind Prigozhin in the event that Wagner's rebellion succeeded.[29] The Kremlin is likely trying to identify Russian elites who may have been prepared to side with Prigozhin and likely views regional officials' decisions not to stop Wagner's advance as an indicator of disloyalty. Tula Oblast Governor and former head of Russia's Special Operations Forces Alexei Dyumin has likely drawn further suspicion due to his previous affiliations with Prigozhin and his role in the negotiations that ended the rebellion.[30]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to manifest concern over potential threats that the Wagner Group and its financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may pose during an impromptu two-day extension of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's visit to St. Petersburg. Lukashenko likely seeks to leverage his power over the Wagner Group to gain concessions from Putin.**

- Russian leadership is attempting to mitigate the security vacuum left by the Wagner Group's departure by creating formalized but decentralized military "enterprises" on the basis of federal subjects (regions).
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and advanced on July 25.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes on rear areas of Ukraine overnight on July 24-25.
- The Angry Patriots Club continues efforts to cast former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin (Strelkov) as an opposition figure and may be attempting to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin through rhetoric about the illegality of Girkin's arrest.
- Putin and the Kremlin reportedly failed to respond promptly to the Wagner Group's June 24 rebellion, leaving local Russian officials to make decisions concerning the group's drive on Moscow.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Svatove, Kremenna, the Bakhmut area, the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area and made claimed advances near Svatove, Kremenna, and Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Kremenna, the Bakhmut area, the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts, and western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in the Bakhmut area, in some areas along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts, and west of Orikhiv.
- US intelligence officials warned on July 25 that Russia's drone supply will dramatically increase as a result of continued bilateral Russo-Iranian cooperation.
- Russian officials continue efforts to deconflict legal discrepancies as part of the incorporation of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 24, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 24, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on July 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Likely Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike near the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) building in Moscow on July 24. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) claimed that Russian electronic warfare (EW) suppressed two Ukrainian UAVs that detonated, damaging two non-residential buildings.^[1] One drone detonated on Komsomolsky Prospekt within 500 meters of the MoD building and within 200 meters of a reported secret Russian General Staff Main Directorate (GRU) building.^[2] Russian sources reported that the second drone hit a business center on Likhachev Prospekt.^[3] CNN reported that an unspecified Ukrainian intelligence official confirmed that Ukrainian forces conducted the attack.^[4] Ukrainian Digital Transformation Minister Mykhailo Fedorov stated that unspecified UAVs attacked the capital and warned that more UAV attacks against Russia will occur.^[5] Russian opposition source *The Insider* reported that Russian authorities banned Russian television channels from covering the drone strikes, citing sources in Russian state media channels.^[6] Russian milbloggers had a muted reaction to these strikes; some criticized the Russian air defenses for allowing the drones to penetrate that far into Moscow, while others argued that the informational victory of such attacks is minimal and short-lived.^[7]

Likely Ukrainian forces targeted Russian military assets in occupied Crimea, temporarily disrupting Russian logistics through Crimea on July 24. The Russian MFA accused Ukrainian forces of attacking occupied Crimea with 17 UAVs, and the MFA claimed that Russian EW suppressed 14 UAVs while air defenses shot down three UAVs.^[8] Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov claimed that one UAV hit an ammunition depot in Dzhankoy Raion.^[9] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also launched three Storm Shadow missiles at an ammunition depot in Vilne (19km southwest of Dzhankoy) and a repair base in Novostepne (immediately south of Dzhankoy).^[10] Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andyushchenko reported that strikes injured three Russian personnel at the Vesele military airfield (10km southwest of Dzhankoy) and reported additional explosions near Krasnohvardiiske (20km southwest of Dzhankoy).^[11] Aksyonov temporarily suspended road traffic on the Dzhankoy-Simferopol highway as well as rail traffic through Dzhankoy Raion.^[12] Aksyonov also announced the evacuation of all civilians within a five-kilometer radius of the strike area in Dzhankoy Raion.^[13] Crimean occupation advisor Oleg Kryuchkov stated that occupation authorities will strictly monitor social media posts that could help Ukrainian forces identify targets in Crimea.^[14]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an article published on July 24 likely intended to mitigate damage to Russia's position in Africa and his own reputation resulting from Russia's withdrawal from the Ukraine-Russia grain deal, Russian attacks on Ukrainian grain and port facilities, and Putin's inability to attend the upcoming BRICS summit due to the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant issued for him. Putin outlined Russia's goals for establishing partner relationships with Africa and called for the continuation of "traditionally close cooperation on the world stage."^[15] Putin also emphasized Russia's trade with African economic partners and the importance of "uninterrupted food supply" for the "maintenance of the political stability of African states," accusing the collective West of exploiting the grain deal for its own benefit at the expense of Russia and countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia.^[16] Putin's article follows Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal and attacks that have destroyed tens of thousands of tons of Ukrainian grain and Ukrainian facilities essential to transporting the grain to areas of Africa that rely heavily on Ukrainian grain. Putin is also likely attempting to mitigate the opportunity cost and embarrassment of his inability to personally attend the BRICS Summit in South Africa due to the ICC arrest warrant.^[17]

Russia conducted another drone strike on Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast overnight on July 23-24. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched Iranian-made Shahed drones at port infrastructure in Reni, along the Danube River in far western Odesa Oblast, within a few kilometers of

the Romanian border.[18] Odesa Oblast Head Oleh Kiper also stated that the drone strikes damaged 25 architectural monuments in Odesa Oblast, including the Transfiguration Orthodox Cathedral in Odesa City.[19] Russian sources claimed that Ukraine used the port infrastructure in Reni for the export of weapons, equipment, and grain.[20]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along at least three sectors of the front on July 24 and have reportedly advanced in certain areas. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that over the past week, Ukrainian forces have advanced gradually on the southern flank of Bakhmut and in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[21] Malyar also noted that these counteroffensive actions are taking place against the backdrop of continued Russian offensive operations in the Kupyansk, Lyman, Avdiivka, and Marinka directions.[22] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast south of Velyka Novosilka and advanced south of Orishiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[23] The Ukrainian General Staff indicated that Ukrainian troops are continuing offensive actions in the Berdyansk and Melitopol directions but did not specify locations or outcomes.[24]

The Kremlin continues to codify domestic repression into Russian law, generating minimal opposition from select Russian lawmakers. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed laws on July 24 allowing the Russian Ministry of Justice to conduct unscheduled inspections of those classified as “foreign agents” under new Russian laws and requiring Russian citizens, government officials, and organizations to comply with restrictions on foreign agents.[25] Putin also signed a law that would fine citizens up to 50,000 rubles (about \$550), officials up to 100,000 rubles (about \$1,100), and organizations up to 300,000 (about \$3,300) rubles for violating the law on foreign agents.[26] Russian opposition news outlet *Vazhnye Istory* reported on July 24 that the Russian Federation Council proposed a bill that would allow Russian authorities to deprive natural born Russian citizens of citizenship due to certain “political crimes” and “desertion.”[27] *Vazhnye Istory* also noted, however, three senators Olga Bas (representing the Luhansk People’s Republic), Ekaterina Altabayeva, and Sergei Kolbin (both representing Sevastopol in occupied Crimea) withdrew their authorship of the bill, potentially due to nuances and intricacies within the ever-expanding new body of Russian law pertaining to citizenship in occupied areas.[28] Federation Council Constitutional Legislation and State Building Committee Head Andrey Klishas criticized the bill and claimed that it would violate the Russian Constitution, likely referencing Article 6 which states that a Russian citizen may not be deprived of their citizenship or of the right to change citizenship status.[29] *Vazhnye Istory* reported that Russia has already adopted a law that would allow Russian authorities to revoke Russian citizenship from an individual who did not acquire Russian citizenship by birth for posing what the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) deems a “security threat.”[30] ISW has previously reported on measures taken by Russian authorities to intensify domestic repression and encourage self-censorship through various amendments to and manipulations of domestic law.[31]

Key Takeaways:

- Likely Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike near the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) building in Moscow on July 24.
- Likely Ukrainian forces targeted Russian military assets in occupied Crimea, temporarily disrupting Russian logistics through Crimea on July 24.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an article published on July 24 likely intended to mitigate damage to Russia’s position in Africa and his own reputation resulting from Russia’s withdrawal from the Ukraine-Russia grain deal, Russian attacks on Ukrainian grain and port facilities, and Putin’s inability to attend the upcoming BRICS summit due to the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant issued for him.
- Russia conducted another drone strike on Ukrainian port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast overnight on July 23-24.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along at least three sectors of the front on July 24 and have reportedly advanced in certain areas.
- The Kremlin continues to codify domestic repression into Russian law, generating minimal opposition from select Russian lawmakers.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, in the Bakhmut area, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and made marginal gains south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, and in the Bakhmut area and reportedly advanced in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast and did not make any confirmed or claimed gains.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in the Orishiv area.
- Russian officials continue to highlight the claimed successes of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).
- Ukrainian officials continue to reveal the involvement of Belarusian entities in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 23, 2023

[click here to read the full report](#)

George Barros, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Thomas Bergeron, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 23, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed his continuing concern over the potential threats that the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin may pose to him through symbolism and posturing during a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in St. Petersburg, Russia. Putin made several

significant symbolic gestures during his July 23 meeting with Lukashenko, suggesting that Putin sought to project power and confidence in his own supremacy over the Prigozhin-aligned St. Petersburg-based faction. Putin took Lukashenko to visit Kronstadt in St. Petersburg – the historically significant island fortress where Russian soldiers and sailors conducted a famous unsuccessful anti-Bolshevik insurrection in early 1921 that the Soviet government ultimately suppressed.^[1] Putin and Lukashenko toured Kronstadt with St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's younger daughter Ksenia Shoigu.^[2] Both Beglov and Shoigu are personal enemies of Prigozhin, and Putin's public meeting with Beglov, Shoigu's daughter, and Lukashenko on the historic grounds of the failed Kronstadt rebellion was almost certainly intended to signal Putin's and his loyalist cadre's defeat of Prigozhin's armed rebellion and Prigozhin's St. Petersburg-based supporters.^[3] Putin also made an unusual effort to take photographs with crowds of local Russian citizens, including children, while at Kronstadt, likely to present himself as a popular and beloved leader among the Russian people.^[4] These symbolic gestures indicate that Putin is concerned about his perceived popularity, the security of his regime, and the array of factions competing for power within the high echelons of Russian governance.

Lukashenko told Putin that the Wagner Group in Belarus will remain in central Belarus likely subtly reminding Putin of the threat the Wagner military organization still poses to him and underlining Lukashenko's control over that power.^[5] Lukashenko's statements were likely meant to make Putin reflect on the uncomfortable (for Putin) fact that Wagner's new garrison in Belarus puts its forces half as far from Moscow as Wagner's previous base in southern Russia. The Wagner Group's previous base in Krasnodar Krai was about 1,370 km from Moscow, whereas its new base in Belarus is about 720 km along an excellent military highway.

Putin and Lukashenko also amplified information operations targeting the West. The leaders amplified their false claims that Ukraine's counteroffensive has failed.^[6] Senior Western and Ukrainian leaders—and ISW—continue to assess that it is too early to evaluate Ukraine's counteroffensive since Ukraine still has significant uncommitted prepared forces and retains the ability to launch decisive operations at times and places of its choosing.^[7] Lukashenko and Putin also reiterated an information operation that the Wagner Group poses a threat to Poland.^[8] There is no indication that Wagner fighters in Belarus have the heavy weaponry necessary to mount a serious offensive against Ukraine or Poland without significant rearmament, as it was a condition of the Putin-Lukashenko-Prigozhin deal ending the armed rebellion that Wagner surrender such weapons to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Maxar imagery of the main Wagner base in Tsel, Asipovichy, collected at an oblique angle on July 23 indicates that the vehicles currently parked in and around the vehicle storage area are primarily hundreds of cars, small trucks, and approximately 35 semi-trailers.^[9] Wagner forces in Belarus pose no military threat to Poland or Ukraine, for that matter, until and unless they are re-equipped with mechanized equipment. They pose no meaningful threat to NATO even then.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN on July 23 that Ukrainian forces have liberated approximately 50 percent of the territory that Russian forces captured since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.^[10] This figure is largely consistent with ISW's current assessment of control of terrain. Analysts can employ several methods to calculate control of terrain with varying results depending on the cartographical projection used and other factors. An estimate using ISW's control of terrain data and the Mercator projection indicates that Ukrainian forces liberated about 53 percent of the land that Russian forces captured since February 2022. Estimates made using different data sources, measurement methods, or projections will generate different numbers. Factors, such as higher confidence about unconfirmed Russian claimed territorial gains, can impact such estimations as well. ISW appreciates and closely studies government officials' statements about control of terrain geometry to cross-reference, confirm, and where necessary correct assessments.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front line and advanced on July 23. Geolocated footage published on July 22 shows that Ukrainian forces made some advances in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), and some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces also advanced near Pryutne (14km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).^[11] Geolocated footage published on July 22 also shows that Ukrainian forces made marginal advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast near Kamianske, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted additional ground attacks south of Orikhiv near Robotyne (12km south).^[12] The Ukrainian General Staff reported continued Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in both areas of the front.^[13] Some Russian and Ukrainian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued attacking on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks and reportedly made advances near Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut).^[14]

Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes against port infrastructure and the city center in Odesa City overnight on July 22 to 23, severely damaging civilian areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 19 missiles, including five Onyx, five Iskander-K, four Kalibr, two Kh-22, and two Iskander-M missiles, and that Ukrainian forces shot down four Kalibr and five Iskander-K missiles.^[15] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian strikes hit the Odesa Transfiguration Cathedral, and Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the city center strikes injured 19 civilians.^[16] Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that Russian strikes against Odesa City and Oblast intend to disrupt Ukraine's access to the Black Sea and intimidate international partners working to restore the Black Sea Grain Initiative deal.^[17] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitskyi warned that Russian forces are also evaluating Ukrainian energy infrastructure to identify critical infrastructure objects, presumably to target in future strikes.^[18]

Further speculation about former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's arrest and the public posturing of Girkin's affiliates suggests that a limited section of the pro-war community may have been contemplating political action in opposition to the Kremlin. Angry Patriots Club member and leader of the "Civil Solidarity" movement Georgy Fedorov claimed on July 22 that the Club developed a strategy and specific action plan for a campaign to defend Girkin and will be reaching out to grassroots supporters for help.^[19] Fedorov also announced that the Angry Patriots Club will release a political statement sometime next week.^[20] A Russian insider source claimed that Girkin planned to start formal legal procedures to create a political party in the spring of 2024.^[21] The insider source claimed that Girkin had discussed with Angry Patriots members the possibility of holding a founding party congress in fall 2023 and plans to form regional branches for the Angry Patriots Club.^[22] The Angry Patriots Club has opened a St Petersburg regional chapter and published a 17-point political resolution on June 26 that signaled its interest in participating in Russian politics.^[23] The Angry Patriots Club's political resolution explicitly states that it will use legal means to compel Russian leadership to "end the policy of appeasement and behind-the-scenes agreement with the West" and declares its "intention to claim political power."^[24] The Angry Patriots Club's resolution indicates that this section of the pro-war community may have attempted to set conditions for future political actions opposing figures in the Kremlin whom the Angry Patriots Club believes seek to end the war. Girkin previously claimed that there is a faction within the Kremlin arguing in favor of freezing the front line in Ukraine and negotiating with the West, and the Angry Patriots appeared to be preparing to explicitly challenge this faction through a political project.^[25] Factions within the Kremlin are likely aiming to maneuver for more influence against the backdrop of Russia's 2024 presidential elections, and Girkin's alleged plans to explicitly cast himself and his affiliates as political actors ahead of the elections likely threatened some of these factions.

Angry Patriots members likely view Girkin's arrest as an existential threat to the segment of the ultranationalist community he represents and will likely intensify their campaign to cast Girkin as an opposition figure. Angry Patriots Club member Yevgeny Mikhailov continued to criticize the Kremlin, calling Girkin's arrest a "gross mistake" and highlighting the double standards that Russian authorities use for prominent Russian officials who have criticized Russian forces' conduct in the war in Ukraine.[26] Mikhailov noted the hypocrisy of arresting a "Russian patriot" who he claimed "led the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics to victory in 2014" while allowing Russian State Duma Deputy Sergei Morozov to go unpunished for saying that officers who sent mobilized personnel into combat without preparation "should be shot themselves."^[27] Another Angry Patriots member, Vladimir Grubnik, expressed his loyalty to Girkin claiming that he joined at Girkin's invitation and would leave the organization if Girkin chose to leave.^[28] Grubnik claimed that 95 percent of the people joined the Angry Patriots Club because of Girkin's personality and reputation.^[29] The continued support for Girkin despite his arrest suggests that Girkin established a strong personal loyalty among his affiliates reminiscent of other ultranationalist figures, particularly Prigozhin's support among Wagner personnel and affiliated milbloggers.^[30]

The Kremlin may be attempting to censor an isolated segment of the Russian ultranationalist community that is consistently vocally hostile to the Kremlin. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on July 21 that Russian law enforcement is investigating Angry Patriots Club Chair Pavel Gubarev for extremism because of his Telegram posts.^[31] Milbloggers outside of Girkin's relatively isolated Angry Patriots Club have notably not commented on Girkin's arrest, suggesting a fragmentation in the Russian ultranationalist community along factional affiliations and ideological differences on Russia's approach to the war in Ukraine. Continued Russian law enforcement censorship of Angry Patriots members likely indicates that the Kremlin does not intend to censor the wider ultranationalist community at this time and is likely isolating this round of censorship primarily to the Angry Patriots movement and their affiliates.

The head of one of the largest suppliers of surveillance equipment to Russian special services died on July 22. Russian law enforcement found "IKS Holding" Head Anton Cherepennikov dead in his office on July 22 and later claimed that Cherepennikov suffocated during a xenon gas therapy session.^[32] IKS Holding owns the developer of the YADRO data storage system, which Russian authorities reportedly use in efforts to monitor Russian internet users, and the Citadel Group, which produces operational-search measures that Russian special services use to listen to phone calls and monitor internet activities.^[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed his continuing concern over the potential threats that the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin may pose to him through symbolism and posturing during a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in St. Petersburg, Russia.
- Lukashenko told Putin that the Wagner Group in Belarus will remain in central Belarus likely subtly reminding Putin of the threat the Wagner military organization still poses to him and underlining Lukashenko's control over that power.
- Putin and Lukashenko also amplified information operations targeting the West.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN on July 23 that Ukrainian forces have liberated approximately 50 percent of the territory that Russian forces captured since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front line and advanced on July 23.
- Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes against port infrastructure and the city center in Odesa City overnight on July 22 to 23, severely damaging civilian areas.
- Further speculation about former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's arrest and the public posturing of Girkin's affiliates suggests that a limited section of the pro-war community may have been contemplating political action in opposition to the Kremlin.
- Angry Patriots members likely view Girkin's arrest as an existential threat to the segment of the ultranationalist community he represents and will likely intensify their campaign to cast Girkin as an opposition figure.
- The Kremlin may be attempting to censor an isolated segment of the Russian ultranationalist community that is consistently vocally hostile to the Kremlin.
- The head of one of the largest suppliers of surveillance equipment to Russian special services died on July 22.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line and reportedly made tactically significant gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line and in the Bakhmut area, and reportedly made gains near Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas but did not advance.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblasts border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblasts border area.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to recruit prisoners to fight in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are bringing foreign citizens to occupied Ukraine to artificially alter demographics.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 22, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 22, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on July 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast area) and Melitopol directions (western Zaporizhia Oblast).^[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled 14 Ukrainian attacks south of Kreminna, Luhansk Oblast, and in the Bakhmut area.^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff did not publish a situation report about its counteroffensive operations on July 22.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may soon increase in tempo and that the delay in counteroffensive operations was in part due to limited materiel. Zelensky stated at the Aspen Security Forum on July 21 that Ukrainian forces had plans to launch counteroffensive operations in the spring but that a lack of munitions and military equipment, such as mine-clearing equipment, and continued Ukrainian training abroad necessitated a delay.^[3] Zelensky noted that the delay in Ukrainian counteroffensive operations allowed Russian forces to establish minefields and multiple defensive lines.^[4] ISW assessed in January 2023 that the provision of Western weapons and materiel to Ukraine has been essential to Ukraine's previous ability to conduct successful counteroffensive operations and that delays between Western pledges to send higher-end Western systems to Ukraine and the arrival of those systems likely hinder Ukraine's ability to initiate and sustain large-scale counteroffensive operations.^[5] Zelensky stated that counteroffensive operations may soon increase in tempo due to ongoing mine-clearing operations.^[6] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on July 21 at the Aspen Security Forum that it is too early to draw conclusions about Ukrainian counteroffensive operations and that Ukraine will likely "make a profound difference" on the battlefield as Kyiv commits all of the forces that Ukraine prepared for the counteroffensive.^[7]

Ukrainian officials stated on July 22 that Ukraine's interdiction campaign against Russian military targets in rear areas is successfully degrading Russian logistics and counterbattery capabilities, likely contributing to an asymmetrical attrition gradient in Ukraine's favor. Ukrainian Chief of the Main Directorate of Missile Troops and Artillery and Unmanned Systems of the General Staff Colonel Serhiy Baranov stated on July 22 that Ukrainian missile and artillery units are responsible for approximately 90 percent of Russian losses.^[8] Baranov stated that Ukrainian missile and artillery units have created a long-range "fire fist" thanks to Western high-precision missiles and artillery systems and that Ukrainian strikes are so powerful and accurate that Russian forces can no longer conduct effective counterbattery fire.^[9] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on July 22 that Ukrainian attacks on Russian ammunition concentrations in deep rear areas are causing logistical issues for the Russian military.^[10] Humenyuk noted that this trend is reflected in decreased Russian shelling in Kherson Oblast, which indicates that Russian forces are experiencing "shell hunger" in the area.^[11] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi compared Ukraine's counteroffensive to boxing on July 13 and stated that Ukraine intends to "hold the opponent at arm's length" in order to avoid close combat because Ukraine can effectively defeat Russian forces from a long distance, likely referencing Ukraine's continued interdiction campaign in eastern and southern Ukraine.^[12] Baranov's, Humenyuk's, and Tarnavskyi's statements suggest that the Ukrainian military is successfully carrying out this interdiction campaign. This campaign is a central aspect of Ukraine's plan to create an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment.^[13]

Ukrainian forces struck a Russian oil depot and ammunition depot in Crimea as part of this Ukrainian pressure campaign. The Ukrainian Armed Forces reported on July 22 that Ukrainian forces destroyed an oil depot and ammunition depot near Oktyabrsk, Krasnohvardiiske Raion, Crimea.^[14] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces also struck an airfield near Oktyabrsk where Russian forces have reportedly been stockpiling equipment for a month.^[15] Crimea occupation head Sergey Aksyonov confirmed that Ukrainian forces struck an ammunition depot, causing it to explode and prompting occupation officials to evacuate residents within a five-kilometer radius of the depot.^[16] Aksyonov also stated that Russian authorities suspended rail traffic on the Kerch Strait bridge to minimize risk.^[17] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched two Storm Shadow cruise missiles, while other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces used an unspecified number of drones for the strike.^[18] ISW cannot confirm what kind of weapons Ukrainian forces used in this strike. A prominent Russian milblogger tied today's strike to Ukraine's previous strikes on Russian military warehouses in Crimea and the Chonhar and Kerch Strait bridges.^[19] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian strikes are aimed at disrupting Russian logistics and creating "shell hunger" in Russia's forces fighting in southern Ukraine.^[20]

Russian strikes against Ukrainian shipping and agricultural infrastructure in southern Ukraine may be subsiding or entering a temporary lull. The intensity of Russian drone and missile strikes against Ukrainian shipping and agricultural infrastructure in southern Ukraine has steadily decreased since July 19. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched only five Shahed drones from the southeast direction – all of which Ukrainian air defense reportedly intercepted – on July 22.^[21] In comparison, Russian forces launched 19 Shahed drones, four Iskander missiles, and three Kalibr missiles against Ukraine on July 21.^[22] Russian forces launched seven Onyx cruise missiles, four Kh-22 anti-ship missiles, three Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles, five Iskander ballistic missiles, and 19 Iranian-made Shahed drones on July 20.^[23] Russian forces fired even more ordnance at Ukraine on July 18 and 19, respectively.^[24]

Further details about former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's arrest for extremism continue to suggest a shifting balance of power among Kremlin factions and a notable factionalism within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), in which Girkin had served. ISW has consistently assessed that Girkin likely had the backing of an unknown *silovik*, possibly within the FSB since Girkin was a former FSB officer and consistently used passports under fictitious names that he received from the FSB.^[25] Russian sources, including the Angry Patriots Club, amplified a document from Girkin's lawyer, Alexander Molokhov, on July 22 purporting to show that FSB investigators initiated the criminal case against Girkin on July 18 and that the Moscow Department of the FSB's Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order and Combating Terrorism (SZKSBT) provided the materials for the case.^[26] Girkin previously suggested that the head of the SZKSBT's Department for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (UZKS), Lieutenant General Aleksey Zhalo, censored Girkin's July 9 speaking engagement at a bookstore in St. Petersburg.^[27] Zhalo and Girkin have had a longstanding feud after Girkin publicly criticized Zhalo for the arrest of ultranationalist figures in 2018 and for failing to combat the Ukrainian Azov Regiment's recruitment measures.^[28]

The involvement of the SZKSBT in Girkin's case may be indicative of this personal struggle, although it may also suggest a degree of factionalism within the FSB itself. The alleged document also states that the FSB's Center for Criminalistics (TsST) formally assessed on July 17 that Girkin's May 25, 2022 Telegram posts, likely referencing comments he made criticizing a lack of payments to Russian personnel, constituted a crime.^[29] The TsST and SZKSBT may have approved the initiation of Girkin's criminal case because FSB leadership decided to stop protecting Girkin as he increasingly became more adversarial towards the Kremlin. It is also possible that the two FSB entities acted on longstanding desires to arrest Girkin after a potential shift in the balance of power in the Kremlin to the FSB's detriment. FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov reportedly secured security guarantees for Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in negotiations to end Wagner's June 24 rebellion

and may have lost what appeared to be the Kremlin's increasing backing for the FSB.^[30] Girkin himself recently claimed that Prigozhin's rebellion shifted the balance of power within the Kremlin to favor factions hostile to the FSB and other Russian security organs.^[31] Russian authorities' recent initiation of criminal cases against other prominent Telegram administrators and ultranationalist figures with connections to the FSB and Russian security services suggests that select Russian officials may be trying to undermine the reputation of these security structures in the wake of a potential shift in the influence of Kremlin factions.^[32]

Girkin's affiliates have launched a public effort to cast Girkin as an embattled figure in opposition to the Russian leadership. Angry Patriots Club members gathered at the Moscow Meshansky Court on July 21 and denounced the court's charges against Girkin and its decision to remand Girkin at an unspecified pre-trial detention center until September 18.^[33] Angry Patriots Club Chairman Pavel Gubarev stated in front of the court that the group would fight for Girkin's release by any legal means and accused Russian leadership of using all of its resources to knock Girkin out of his "public work."^[34] Angry Patriots member and the coordinator for the Other Russia Party, Eduard Limonov, announced in front of the court that the Angry Patriots Club will launch a public campaign defending Girkin as a "political prisoner."^[35] Russian authorities detained Gubarev, Limonov, and Angry Patriots member Yan Sidorov for their demonstrations in front of the court, but later released them.^[36] Girkin's Telegram channel posted on July 22 a screed against Russian authorities for punishing Girkin, a "patriot... who gave his whole life to the service of the motherland," while allowing those that took part in Wagner's rebellion to escape punishment.^[37] Girkin's Telegram signed the post as "the Russian Movement in Support of Igor Strelkov" indicating that Girkin's affiliates intend to galvanize widespread public support for Girkin.^[38] It is unclear if Girkin's affiliates, specifically those in the Angry Patriots Club, will succeed in this effort given that they represent a small, insular group within the wider Russian ultranationalist community.

Girkin's arrest has not generated widespread outrage in the Russian ultranationalist community as some previous cases have, suggesting an increasing fragmentation within the information space. Russian milbloggers notably did not express anger at Girkin's arrest as they have in previous instances when Russian authorities have attempted to censor ultranationalist figures. Russian milbloggers recently decried Russian authorities charging pro-war Russian military doctor Yuri Yevich with discrediting the Russian military for offering a negative assessment of the state of Russian combat medicine.^[39] The milbloggers defended Yevich and criticized Russian authorities for targeting someone they deemed to be a Russian patriot. Outrage at Girkin's arrest and the subsequent defense of his patriotism was limited to members and supporters of the relatively isolated and small Angry Patriots Club, which Girkin launched in April, by contrast.^[40] Girkin's critics in the Russian ultranationalist information space notably did not celebrate his arrest, however. The lack of widespread outrage among milbloggers suggests that Girkin's arrest is unlikely to deeply agitate the majority of the Russian ultranationalist community and Russian military personnel, contrary to some Western reporting. The tepid response from Russian milbloggers concerning Girkin's arrest and Wagner-affiliated milbloggers' continued support for Prigozhin after the Wagner rebellion likely indicates an increasing fragmentation within the Russian ultranationalist community along factional affiliations and significant ideological differences about Russia's approach to the war in Ukraine.^[41]

Girkin's arrest is likely not an indicator of a wider effort to censor the Russian ultranationalist community, but rather an attempt to excise a specific segment of the community that is vocally hostile to the Kremlin. Russian insider sources claimed on July 22 that Russian Duma Deputy Oleg Matveyev recently submitted a report to the Russian Presidential Administration proposing to recognize Girkin as a foreign agent in support of an overall effort to encourage self-censorship among jingoistic patriots that criticize the Russian leadership.^[42] ISW cannot verify these claims, although they suggest that the Kremlin may have been in active discussions about how it could silence the section of the ultranationalist community that Girkin represents. Putin has routinely sought to maintain relationships with select milbloggers in a bid to leverage their connections to the wider Russian ultranationalist community, and Girkin's arrest does not likely portend a Kremlin effort to reverse course on courting the increasingly prominent ultranationalist milblogger community.^[43] Girkin's arrest does suggest that the Kremlin views those whose criticism passes certain not entirely clear boundaries as a threat, particularly following the Wagner Group rebellion that aimed to replace Russia's military leadership.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 22.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may soon increase in tempo and that the delay in counteroffensive operations was in part due to limited materiel.
- Ukrainian officials stated on July 22 that Ukraine's interdiction campaign against Russian military targets in rear areas is successfully degrading Russian logistics and counterbattery capabilities, likely contributing to an asymmetrical attrition gradient in Ukraine's favor.
- Ukrainian forces struck a Russian oil depot and ammunition depot in Crimea as part of this Ukrainian pressure campaign.
- Russian strikes against Ukrainian shipping and agricultural infrastructure in southern Ukraine may be subsiding or entering a temporary lull.
- Further details about former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's arrest for extremism continue to suggest a shifting balance of power among Kremlin factions and a notable factionalism within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), in which Girkin had served.
- Girkin's affiliates have launched a public effort to cast Girkin as an embattled figure in opposition to Russian leadership.
- Girkin's arrest has not generated widespread outrage in the Russian ultranationalist community as some previous cases have, suggesting an increasing fragmentation within the information space.
- Girkin's arrest is likely not an indicator of a wider effort to censor the Russian ultranationalist community, but rather an attempt to excise a specific segment of the community that is vocally hostile to the Kremlin.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and in the Bakhmut area but did not make gains.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kupyansk and Bakhmut areas and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and made claimed advances in the Kupyansk area.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make advances.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not make any confirmed or claimed advances.
- Prominent Russian Federation Council members opposed a bill aimed at increasing the upper age limit for the conscription age while maintaining the lower limit of 18.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to relocate Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine to Russia.
- The Wagner Group's footprint in Belarus is likely expanding.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 21, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 21, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on July 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The arrest of former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin (Strelkov) on July 21 may be the public manifestation of a shifting balance of power among Kremlin factions, possibly to the detriment of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), in which Girkin had served. The Russian Investigative Committee arrested Girkin on July 21, and Girkin will be held until September 18 on extremism charges.^[1] Girkin's wife, Miroslava Reginskaya, reported that representatives from the Russian Investigative Committee detained Girkin at his home in Moscow, and noted later that the Moscow's Meshansky Court arrested Girkin and that he will be held until September 18 on extremism charges.^[2] Girkin unsuccessfully attempted to argue in the court that he is not a high flight risk due to his sentence at the Hague Tribunal, but the court cited Girkin's notoriety and "connections in law enforcement" as the reasons for his immediate incarceration.^[3] Girkin's lawyer, Alexander Molokhov, argued that Russian law enforcement is prosecuting Girkin for his May 25, 2023 Telegram posts, which reportedly discussed the lack of payments to servicemen of the 105th and 107th airborne (VDV) regiments.^[4] Court documents, however, indicate that Russian authorities opened a case against Girkin on July 18 - the day on which Girkin published several harsh critiques of Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[5] Girkin had been consistently criticizing Putin prior to July 18, however, but his past criticisms had not triggered an arrest.^[6] Members of the Girkin-led "Angry Patriots Club" gathered for a small protest outside of the court demanding Girkin's release.^[7] Some sources claimed that Girkin's arrest followed his conflict with a fellow Angry Patriots Club member about the Wagner Group.^[8] Other sources speculated that Wagner complaints about Girkin may have triggered his arrest.^[9] One source claimed that the arrest is related to Russian authorities targeting Russian "patriots" deemed disloyal to Putin.^[10]

Russian insider sources claimed that Girkin's arrest is part of the Russian Presidential Administration's efforts to crack down on select high-profile Russian ultranationalists following Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 24. A Russian source affiliated with the Russian security services leaked a document – approved after the Wagner rebellion – in which the Russian Presidential Administration purportedly ordered the Russian authorities to "take repressive measures against those who are insane, including Strelkov-Girkin."^[11] The document additionally targeted several high-profile propagandists including Margarita Simonyan, prominent milbloggers, Russian State Duma deputies with extensive online presence, and Prigozhin. Russian insider sources have previously claimed that Kremlin factions have begun a struggle for control over the Russian information space and that First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko has been attempting to undermine Simonyan.^[12] The Russian Investigative Committee – the government organization that reportedly arrested Girkin – is a structure subordinated to Putin. ISW previously reported that Kiriyenko has been notably expanding his control over Russian social media outlets and increasing his reach in the Russian federal government since Prigozhin's rebellion.^[13]

Girkin's arrest follows other criminal charges against ultranationalists with past ties to Russian security services and indicates that unknown Russian officials may be targeting prominent ultranationalists who routinely reveal insider information about the Kremlin. ISW has consistently assessed that Girkin likely has the backing of an unknown *silovik* – possibly within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) – who promoted their interests by using Girkin as a conduit to reveal select information to Russia's online ultranationalist community.^[14] Russian authorities arrested on July 14 former FSB officer Colonel Mikhail Polyakov, who reportedly ran several popular insider Telegram channels that speculated on internal Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) dynamics between different factions.^[15] Russian authorities also initiated a criminal case against Girkin's affiliate, former Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, on charges of discrediting the Russian Armed Forces on July 18 – the same day on which Girkin's criminal charge was opened.^[16] Girkin himself was an FSB officer and had been consistently using passports under fictitious names that he received from the FSB.^[17] Girkin recently accused the FSB's Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (UZKS) of deliberately censoring him by interfering with his presentations at a St. Petersburg bookstore on July 9.^[18] The court publicized Girkin's court proceedings, and the Russian media had been consistently televising Polyakov's arrest and raids of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's property – and it is possible that select Russian officials are trying to undermine the reputation of a security structure or of an affiliated *silovik* who protected Girkin.^[19] One milblogger observed that the media attention around Polyakov's arrest suggests that some unnamed figure is attempting to ruin the FSB's reputation.^[20]

Wagner's rebellion likely shifted the balance of power in the Kremlin, potentially depriving some patrons – including Girkin's patron – of Putin's favor and, therefore, of some of their power. Girkin claimed on July 12 that Prigozhin's rebellion shifted the balance of power within the Kremlin in favor of the group that reportedly includes Kiriyenko.^[21] Girkin claimed that members of the "Ozero Cooperative" – an association unifying the dachas of Putin and several members of his inner circle in Leningrad Oblast – want to oust Putin in favor of one of its own members, such as Prigozhin or Kiriyenko. Girkin warned that the "Ozero Cooperative" members will target the Ministry of Defense, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, the FSB, and other structures outside the control of the presidential administration. While Girkin's specific affiliations remain unknown, the recent crackdowns on ultranationalist figures in connection with the Russian security services are likely a public manifestation of a significant change within the Kremlin's power politics.

Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes against southern Ukraine for a fourth night on July 21 following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two of three Kaliber missiles, three of four Iskander missiles, and 13 of 19 Shahed UAVs launched at areas in southern Ukraine and that Russian forces also launched one Kh-22, one S-300 surface-to-air, and six Onyx missiles.^[22] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that seven of the missiles damaged an unspecified infrastructure facility in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi Raion just southwest of Odesa City.^[23] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command also reported that Russian forces began targeting agricultural infrastructure including

destroying 100 tons of peas and 20 tons of barely in strikes on a granary after three consecutive nights of targeting port infrastructure.^[24] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk and Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reiterated that Russian forces are targeting Ukraine with specific missiles and tactics to complicate Ukraine's ability to detect and intercept the missiles.^[25]

The Kremlin appears to be attempting to soften the Russian Ministry of Defense's July 19 announcement about viewing civilian ships in the Black Sea as legitimate military targets. Russian Deputy Foreign Ministry Sergei Vershinin stated on July 21 that the Russian MoD's July 19 announcement that the Russian military will consider all ships en route to Ukrainian ports as potential military cargo vessels meant that Russian forces will inspect the ships.^[26] The Russian MoD's announcement, however, still indicates that Russian forces intend to treat civilian ships as legitimate military targets, and even Vershinin's interpretation of the announcement states that Russian forces will board and possibly seize foreign civilian vessels.

Russia is maneuvering to retain the option of modifying the current agreement rather than negotiating an entirely new one as it seeks to extract extensive concessions from the West. Vershinin also argued that the July 22, 2022 memorandum underpinning the Black Sea Grain Initiative remains valid because neither Russia nor the United Nations (UN) gave notification about the termination of the memorandum that the UN, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine signed.^[27] Vershinin justified Russia's exit from the grain deal by accusing Ukrainian forces of using grain corridors to conduct "terrorist attacks" against Russia, which is consistent with prior Russian official and milblogger narratives to justify Russia's exit from the deal during periods of its renewal.^[28]

The Russian MFA is likely trying to assert that Russia is still a *de jure* participant in the agreement despite its exit from the grain deal in an effort to leave open a channel for Russia to renegotiate the grain deal on conditions more favorable to Russia rather than negotiating an entirely new one. Ukrainian Ambassador to Turkey Vasyl Bondar reported on July 21 that the Joint Coordination Center in Istanbul, which monitors the grain corridors in the Black Sea, has stopped operating and that all Russian personnel at the center have left.^[29] The Joint Coordination Center's halted operations indicate that Russia is engaging in efforts to further remove itself from the grain deal, although in ways that it could easily reverse.

Putin delivered an array of demands for Russia's return to the agreement on July 19, notably including the lifting of sanctions on Russian grain and fertilizer deliveries and the reconnection of Russian banks servicing food supplies to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) banking system.^[30] The Russian military's intensifying strikes against Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure and threats of maritime escalation in the Black Sea likely aim to pressure the West to acquiesce to these demands among other things.^[31] The Kremlin routinely engages in escalatory rhetoric aimed at prompting Western concessions and often will have some officials promote that rhetoric while having other officials feign willingness to engage in negotiations.^[32]

Putin continued efforts to sow intra-NATO and Ukrainian-NATO divisions likely aimed at supporting the Kremlin's Black Sea Grain Initiative effort and undermining long-term Western support for Ukraine.^[33] Putin's rhetoric heavily drew upon historical parallels meant to evoke fear and distrust between European countries and the United States as well as between Ukraine and Poland. Putin's rhetoric is consistent with prior rhetoric from Russian senior officials meant to sow distrust between Ukraine and its allies, undermine ongoing Western security assistance to Ukraine, and encourage Western states to push Ukraine prematurely into negotiations with Russia.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 21 and made gains in some areas. Geolocated footage published on July 21 indicates that Ukrainian forces made gains northeast of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut) and closer to Pryutne (12km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).^[34] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations north and south of Bakhmut, where heavy fighting continues in the Orikhovo-Vasylivka-Paraskoviivka (up to 8km north of Bakhmut) and the Klischiiivka-Andriivka (7km to 10km southwest of Bakhmut) directions.^[35] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces achieved success in the Novodarivka-Pryutne (13km to 16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) direction in the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area as well as the Novodanylivka-Verbove (up to 16km southeast of Orikhiv) and Novodanylivka-Robotyne (up to 12km south of Orikhiv) directions in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[36] US National Security Spokesperson John Kirby stated on July 20 that Ukrainian forces have started to use US-provided cluster munitions and are using them effectively against Russian defensive formations.^[37] Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns stated on July 21 during a speech at the Aspen Institute that Russian defenses in Ukraine have a number of structural flaws, including low morale and disorder among Russia's political and military leadership.^[38]

Pro-Wagner Group sources continue to express loyalty to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin as the future of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin's role in the organization remains unclear. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger released an interview with an alleged unnamed Wagner platoon commander on July 21. The platoon commander claimed that none of the Wagner personnel he knows signed contracts with the Russian MoD except for fighters whom Wagner fired for drunkenness and looting and a Wagner commander with the surname Troshev (callsign "Seda").^[39] Putin notably claimed that he offered Wagner fighters the option to serve under a Wagner commander with the callsign "Seda" at the June 29 meeting with Prigozhin and Wagner commanders.^[40] The platoon commander claimed that the goal of the Wagner armed rebellion on July 24 was to protest the "lawlessness" of the Russian military command who attempted to disband Wagner by forcing all volunteers to sign MoD contracts by July 1. The platoon commander expressed his dedication to Wagner by stating that he would not care if the MoD killed him, but he would not "disgrace [his] name or the name of Wagner PMC."^[41] He also claimed that Wagner would not have existed without Prigozhin, that all Wagner fighters took an oath to Prigozhin and to an unnamed Wagner commander (likely Wagner Group co-founder and commander Dmitry Utkin), and therefore, that they would remain with them.^[42] ISW has consistently observed Wagner-affiliated sources voicing their support for Prigozhin despite Kremlin efforts to destroy Prigozhin's reputation.^[43] ISW has notably not observed Wagner-affiliated sources refusing to support Prigozhin or attempting to separate Wagner from Prigozhin.

French Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Emmanuel Bonne was likely referring to dual-use technology and non-lethal aid when speaking about Chinese supplied equipment to Russia on July 21. Bonn told a CNN journalist at the Aspen Security Forum on July 21 that China is supplying "massively [sic] military capabilities to Russia."^[44] CNN later quoted unspecified French officials as clarifying Bonne's intent to speak of non-lethal aid, however.^[45]

A Russian milblogger affiliated with the Russian Airborne Forces claimed that recent speculations about the dismissal of 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division Commander Major General Alexander Kornev are false.^[46] The milblogger amplified footage of alleged personnel of the 7th VDV division denying Kornev's dismissal as well as speculations that Russian authorities may intend to arrest VDV commander Mikhail Teplinsky.^[47] ISW cannot confirm Kornev's dismissal.

Key Takeaways:

- The arrest of former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin (Strelkov) on July 21 may be the public manifestation of a shifting balance of power among Kremlin factions, possibly to the detriment of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), in which Girkin had served.
- Russian insider sources claimed that Girkin's arrest is part of the Russian Presidential Administration's efforts to crack down on select high-profile Russian ultranationalists following Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 24.
- Girkin's arrest follows other criminal charges against ultranationalists with past ties to Russian security services and indicates that unknown Russian officials may be targeting prominent ultranationalists who routinely reveal insider information about the Kremlin.
- Wagner's rebellion likely shifted the balance of power in the Kremlin, potentially depriving some patrons – including Girkin's patron – of Putin's favor and, therefore, of some of their power.
- Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes against southern Ukraine for a fourth night on July 21 following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative.
- The Kremlin appears to be attempting to soften the Russian Ministry of Defense's July 19 announcement about viewing civilian ships in the Black Sea as legitimate military targets.
- Russia is maneuvering to retain the option of modifying the current agreement rather than negotiating an entirely new one as it seeks to extract extensive concessions from the West.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued efforts to sow intra-NATO and Ukrainian-NATO divisions likely aimed at supporting the Kremlin's Black Sea Grain Initiative effort and undermining long-term Western support for Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 21 and made gains in some areas.
- Pro-Wagner Group sources continue to express loyalty to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin as the future of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin's role in the organization remains unclear.
- French Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Emmanuel Bonne was likely referring to dual-use technology and non-lethal aid when speaking about Chinese supplied equipment to Russia on July 21.
- A Russian milblogger affiliated with the Russian Airborne Forces claimed that recent speculations about the dismissal of 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division Commander Major General Alexander Kornev are false.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kupyansk, Kreminna, Bakhmut areas, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and reportedly advanced in the Kupyansk and Kreminna areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area, and along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna and Avdiivka Donetsk City lines, and advanced in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast, the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area, and south of Orikhiv, and reportedly advanced south of Orikhiv.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made gains in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area.
- Russian officials announced that they will amend a Russian State Duma bill originally aimed at incrementally raising the conscription age so that there is an immediate increase of the upper age limit for the spring 2024 conscription cycle.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to relocate Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine to Russia.
- A Wagner-linked source reported that Wagner temporarily relocated its headquarters from Molkino, Krasnodar Krai, to Belarus and that Wagner's work to transfer combat experience to the Belarusian military is in full swing.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 20, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, George Barros, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 20, 2023, 7:50pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces launched a third night of missile and drone strikes against port and grain infrastructure in southern Ukraine on July 20 following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched seven Onyx cruise missiles, four Kh-22 anti-ship missiles, three Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles, five Iskander ballistic missiles, and 19 Iranian-made Shahed drones.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 18 targets, including two Kalibrs, three Iskanders, and 13 Shaheds.^[2] Spokesperson of the Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces targeted port infrastructure in Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts and noted that the strikes mainly affected warehouses and logistics facilities.^[3] Humenyuk noted that Russian "blackmail and sabotage" of Ukrainian ports started shortly after Russian began its rhetoric about its conditions for the expansion of the grain deal.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian manufacturing and storage facilities in Odesa City and Chornomorske in Odesa Oblast, and fuel infrastructure facilities and ammo depots in Mykolaiv City.^[5] Ukrainian

military officials reported that Russian forces destroyed the Odesa Seaport Administration building in the center of Odesa City and noted that residential buildings were damaged by the blast wave.[6] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian missile strikes also damaged a Chinese consulate building in Odesa City.[7]

Ukrainian military officials outlined the challenge of defending against Onyx missiles and Russia's shortage of Kh-22 missiles. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Onyx missiles fly at a speed of more than 3,000 kilometers per hour at a high altitude and then quickly change altitude to 10–15 meters above the surface when striking a target, making it difficult to detect and destroy.[8] Ihnat noted on July 19 that Russian forces are using Onyx cruise missiles that are designed to destroy targets located directly on the coastline along the sea.[9] Ihnat also stated on July 20 that Russia does not have the same ability to manufacture Kh-22 missiles that it does to produce other types of high-precision long-range missiles.[10] Ihnat noted that Russia had approximately 250 Kh-22 missiles at the beginning of the war in February of 2022 and has already used approximately 150 missiles against Ukraine.[11]

The Russian military announced that it may consider civilian ships in the Black Sea en route to Ukrainian ports legitimate military targets. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on July 19 that as of midnight Moscow time on July 20 Russian forces will consider all ships en route to Ukrainian ports as potential carriers of military cargo and will consider the flag countries of such vessels as "involved in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of the Kyiv regime."^[12] The Russian MoD declared a number of sea areas in the northern and southern parts of the Black Sea "temporarily dangerous for navigation" and claimed that it issued relevant warnings to sailors in the Black Sea about the withdrawal of safety guarantees.^[13] The Russian MoD specified that these naval measures are connected to the termination of the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the curtailment of the maritime humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea.^[14] The announcement prompted the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to announce on July 20 that as of midnight Kyiv time Ukrainian forces may treat all ships in the Black Sea heading to ports in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories as military cargo vessels.^[15] The Ukrainian MoD similarly stated that Ukrainian officials released relevant navigation information to seafarers.^[16] US National Security Council Spokesperson Adam Hodge stated on July 20 that US intelligence indicates that Russian forces have laid additional sea mines in the approaches to Ukrainian ports.^[17] Hodge added that the White House believes that Russia is engaging in a coordinated effort to justify possible attacks against civilian ships in the Black Sea and blame Ukrainian forces for the attacks.^[18]

The Russian military's intensifying strikes against Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure and threats of maritime escalation are likely a part of a Kremlin effort to leverage Russia's exit from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and exact extensive concessions from the West. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on July 19 that Russia is ready to return to the grain deal immediately if all previously agreed-upon conditions for Russia's participation in the initiative are fulfilled and the parties restore the deal's "original humanitarian essence."^[19] Putin accused Western countries of exploiting the grain deal so that European enterprises could profit at the expense of Russian businesses.^[20] Putin claimed that elements of the grain deal led to a 30 to 40 percent discount on Russian grain on global markets, which caused Russian farmers to lose \$1.2 billion and Russian fertilizer producers to suffer \$1.6 billion in losses.^[21] Putin stated that returning to the deal in its current form is pointless and called for the lifting of sanctions on Russian grain and fertilizer deliveries and the removal of obstacles for Russian banks servicing food supplies to the global market, including their connection to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) banking system.^[22] Putin also called for the resumption of deliveries of components and spare parts for Russian agricultural machinery and fertilizer production, the resolution of issues with Russia ship chartering and insurance of Russian food exports, the renewal of operations for the Togliatti-Odesa ammonia pipeline, and the removal of blocks on Russian agricultural assets.^[23]

The Kremlin likely views the Black Sea Grain Initiative as one of its few remaining avenues of leverage against the West and has withdrawn from the deal to secure these concessions. The Kremlin now appears to be attempting to create a sense of urgency around its return to the Black Sea Grain Initiative by conducting intensifying strikes against Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure and threatening to strike civilian ships in the Black Sea. Ukraine harvests most of its grain between July and August, and Russia's strikes on Ukrainian port and agricultural infrastructure can further complicate Ukraine's ability to free up space for newly harvested grains.^[24] Prolonged disruptions to grain logistics in Ukraine will likely have increasingly cascading effects on grain supplies, adding to the sense of urgency that the Kremlin hopes to create.

The Kremlin routinely engages in escalatory rhetoric surrounding the West's support for Ukraine in an effort to shape Western behavior, although Russia appears notably to be conducting these shaping efforts concerning the grain deal with kinetic operations instead of rhetoric. It is unclear to what extent Russian forces intend to strike civilian ships in the Black Sea, although the Kremlin likely believes the announcement will have a chilling effect on maritime activity in the Black Sea and create conditions reminiscent of the complete blockade of Ukrainian ports at the start of the full-scale invasion.^[25] This attempt to achieve economic concessions from the West may undermine the Kremlin's international outreach efforts by threatening the food supplies of several countries that are the intended targets of the Kremlin's outreach.^[26] Russian strikes against Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure and naval posturing also continue to illustrate that the Kremlin is willing to use naval and precision strike assets to prioritize immediate economic concerns instead of operations in Ukraine that pursue the Kremlin's overall campaign objectives.

The Kremlin may be destroying Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure before renegotiating the Black Sea grain deal to set conditions for the export of stolen Ukrainian grain from Russian-occupied territories that could disproportionately benefit the Russian economy. Ukrainian Minister for Agrarian Policy Mykola Solskyi stated that it would take Ukraine no less than one year to restore the Chornomorsk port in Odesa Oblast, which was used for export of grain.^[27] The destruction of Ukrainian port infrastructure in government-controlled Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts may restrict Ukraine's ability to export grain by sea even if the grain deal is renegotiated, while allowing Russia to offer grain from occupied Ukraine or Russia to fulfill the deal in the meantime.

Russia is also likely attempting to intensify divisions between Ukrainian and Central European governments as Ukraine and the West search for a way to re-route the grain exports. Senior European officials stated that the European Union (EU) is seeking to transport more Ukrainian grain via road and rail to help make up for Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea grain deal.^[28] Five Central European countries — Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria — called on the EU to extend the ban on grain imports from Ukraine until at least the end of the year on July 19.^[29] Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also announced on July 19 that Poland will retain its ban on Ukrainian grain exports on September 15 even if the EU does not agree to the extension.^[30] Polish Agriculture Minister Robert Telus stated on July 18 that Poland is willing to facilitate Ukrainian grain transit through Poland but said that the EU will need to help to establish necessary infrastructure.^[31] Telus added that Poland had only begun its harvest and noted that it cannot facilitate the extra transit immediately. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal condemned Poland's decision to extend the ban as an "unfriendly and populist move that will severely impact global food security and Ukraine's economy."^[32] Exports through Poland and other EU countries bordering Ukraine had previously sparked resistance from local farmers after the EU lifted tariffs and quotas on food exports from Ukraine in June 2022 as Russia blocked Ukraine from transporting grain and other goods by sea.^[33] Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary announced in April 2023 bans on grain and other food exports from Ukraine to protect their agricultural sectors.^[34] The European Commission later announced

restrictions on the imports of Ukrainian wheat, maize, rapeseed, and sunflower seeds in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria until June 5 as a result of farmers' concerns in Central European countries.[35] The Kremlin may be attempting to disrupt Ukraine's future prospects for maritime exports in an effort to sour Ukrainian relations with its Western neighbors.[36]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced on July 20. A Ukrainian commander operating in the Bakhmut area reported on July 19 that Ukrainian forces advanced 1.8km likely on the southern flank of Bakhmut, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces also advanced on Bakhmut's northern flank on July 20.[37] Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces cannot rapidly advance near Bakhmut due to heavy Russian force concentrations in the area.[38] The Russian military command concentrated a high density of forces in the Bakhmut area to defend against Ukrainian attacks in the area, likely an intended effect of those attacks, though Syrskyi and other Ukrainian officials have repeatedly restated their intent to retake Bakhmut.[39] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued advancing in the Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions and are continuing to advance by roughly 100 meters per day south and southeast of Orikhiv.[40] Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak reiterated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will be slow and difficult but will prevent Russian forces from retaking the battlefield initiative.[41] *The Washington Post* reported that Ukrainian forces have begun using Western-provided cluster munitions in southeastern Ukraine and assessed that Ukrainian forces will likely use them near Bakhmut soon.[42] *The Washington Post*, citing an anonymous Ukrainian military official, reported that Ukrainian forces are using the cluster munitions to "break up [Russian] trenches slowing down Ukrainian forces."

The United States and European Union (EU) reiterated their long-term security commitments to Ukraine via security assistance packages and proposals on July 19 and 20. The Pentagon announced on July 19 a new \$1.3 billion security package for Ukraine that includes four National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS), 152mm artillery rounds, mine-clearing equipment, and other munitions and vehicles.[43] The US package also includes electronic warfare, communications, and other security equipment. EU Foreign Affairs Representative Josep Borrell proposed a plan to EU ministers on July 20 to provide Ukraine with security assistance worth up to 20 billion euros (\$22.4 billion), including weapons, ammunition, and other military aid, over the next four years.[44]

Wagner Group personnel are training Belarusian special forces on modern tactics at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense and Wagner-linked sources reported on July 20 that Wagner forces began training unspecified Belarusian special forces elements at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, and that the training will last until July 24.[45] The Wagner trainers are teaching Belarusian forces modern combined arms techniques and tactics, including using drones for tactical reconnaissance, tactical maneuvers, movement under fire, camouflage, and command and control.[46] Wagner-linked sources praised the Belarusian military and Belarusian trainees for their adeptness, agility, and flexibility in training while complaining that the Russian Ministry of Defense did not appreciate the Wagner Group due to Russian command staff's "rigidity of thinking and bureaucratic barriers." [47] A Wagner-linked source specifically praised Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's "old school" style and how Lukashenko managed to preserve the Soviet military's "best traditions." [48]

The Wagner Group may open another base in Belarus in Gomel Oblast near Belarus' international border with Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on July 20 that construction for another Wagner Group base in Belarus began near Naroulia Raion and that Wagner personnel surveyed land near Dyatlik, Naroulia Raion, Gomel Oblast, approximately 2km from Belarus' border with Ukraine on July 19.[49] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of construction in this area as of this publication.

Approximately 400 Wagner convict fighters are reportedly awaiting their criminal pardon paperwork to clear in Anapa, occupied Crimea. Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istoryi* reported on July 19 that about 400 Wagner convict fighters are waiting in hotels in Anapa until the Russian government approves their pardons.[50] The report states that the Wagner Group suspended its effort to recruit Russian convicts (codenamed "Project K") and that Wagner seeks to release these convicts no later than July 29.[51] The report states that the former convicts will have the option to extend their contracts with Wagner to serve in Belarus or Africa.[52]

The Wagner Group reportedly suffered an 80 percent casualty rate and a 28 percent killed-in-action rate in Ukraine. A Wagner-linked source reportedly quoted a senior Wagner commander with the callsign "Marx," who stated that 78,000 Wagner fighters fought in Ukraine (49,000 of whom were convicts), and that that Wagner had suffered 22,000 killed-in-action and 40,000 wounded-in-action as of Wagner's capture of Bakhmut on May 20.[53] These figures — if accurate — indicate that the Wagner Group was likely combat ineffective after fighting in Bakhmut and that the force suffered a 79.5 percent overall casualty rate and a 28.2 percent death rate. Marx reportedly stated that 25,000 Wagner fighters are currently alive and that 10,000 of them are in Belarus and the remaining 15,000 are resting, presumably in Russia.[54]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched a third night of missile and drone strikes against port and grain infrastructure in southern Ukraine on July 20 following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17.
- The Russian military announced that it may consider civilian ships in the Black Sea en route to Ukrainian ports legitimate military targets.
- The Russian military's intensifying strikes against Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure and threats of maritime escalation are likely a part of a Kremlin effort to leverage Russia's exit from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and exact extensive concessions from the West.
- The Kremlin likely views the Black Sea Grain Initiative as one of its few remaining avenues of leverage against the West and has withdrawn from the deal to secure these concessions.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly advanced on July 20.
- The United States and European Union (EU) reiterated their long-term security commitments to Ukraine via security assistance packages and proposals on July 19 and 20.
- Wagner Group personnel are training Belarusian special forces on modern tactics at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus.
- The Wagner Group may open another base in Belarus in Gomel Oblast near Belarus' international border with Ukraine.
- The Wagner Group reportedly suffered an 80 percent casualty rate and a 28 percent killed-in-action rate in Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and advanced on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line as of July 20.

- Ukrainian forces continued limited offensive operations east of Kupyansk, near Kreminna, near Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line and made gains near Bakhmut on July 20.
- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Vuhledar, on the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts, and south of Orikhiv and made limited territorial gains in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts and western Zaporizhia Oblast on July 20.
- Russian forces continued to unsuccessfully counterattack Ukrainian positions on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border on July 20.
- The Russian State Duma approved amendments increasing penalties for draft dodging and for officials and legal entities that fail to assist Russian force generation efforts on July 20.
- Russian authorities continue persecution of non-Russian Orthodox churches in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 19, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, George Barros, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 19, 2023, 8:50pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30pm ET on July 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces launched an extensive missile and drone attack against port and grain infrastructure in southern Ukraine on July 19 likely to further emphasize Russia's objections to the renewal of the Black Sea grain deal and hinder Ukraine's ability to export grain. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted strikes using 16 Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles, eight Kh-22 anti-ship missiles, six Onyx cruise missiles, one Kh-59 guided air missile, and 32 Iranian-made Shahed drones.^[1] Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces predominantly targeted civilian and military infrastructure in Odesa Oblast with Kh-22 and Onyx missiles and that Ukrainian forces shot down 37 air targets including 13 Kalibr, one Kh-59 missile, and 23 Shaheds.^[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Russian forces deliberately targeted the infrastructure necessary for executing the Black Sea grain deal in Odesa, Zhytomyr, and other oblasts.^[3] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces struck grain and oil terminals and damaged tanks and loading equipment.^[4] Ukrainian Minister of Agrarian Policy and Food Mykola Solskyi reported that Russian strikes destroyed 60,000 tons of grain in the Chornomorsk port in Odesa Oblast on the night of July 19.^[5] The Southern Operational Command added that Russian strikes also targeted coastal areas in Mykolaiv Oblast and some infrastructure in Kherson City.^[6] Spokesperson of the Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Captain of the First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the Russian July 19 strikes "happened virtually simultaneously," and that Russian forces likely attempted to overwhelm the Ukrainian air defense systems.^[7] Ukrainian Air Forces Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that this attack was the most intense missile and drone attack on Odesa Oblast since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.^[8]

Russian sources, apart from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian strikes on south Ukraine aimed to dismantle the port infrastructure necessary for the Black Sea grain deal. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian military infrastructure and ammunition depots in Odesa Oblast and the Kanatove Air Base in Kirovohrad Oblast.^[9] Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers and former proxy officials claimed that Russian strikes damaged port infrastructure, grain storage, and industrial facilities in Odesa Oblast.^[10] Some Russian ultranationalists called on the Russian MoD to authorize additional strikes to destroy Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure to ensure that no grain deals can ever be renewed.^[11] One milblogger who has been routinely skeptical of the Kremlin's war effort claimed that the Russian strike campaign is more "retaliatory" than "operationally sound" and blamed the Russian General Staff for wasting Russian efforts (and likely the dwindling stock of Russian precision weapons) on striking Ukrainian civilian infrastructure rather than military infrastructure.^[12]

The South African Presidential Office announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not attend the BRICS summit in-person in Johannesburg in August 2023.^[13] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will represent Russia at the summit, and President Putin will participate by video call.^[14]

An explosion at a Russian training ground in occupied Kirovskyi Raion (Islam Terek Raion), southeastern Crimea, disrupted the Russian use of the Tavrida highway that connects eastern Crimea to Sevastopol on July 19. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian ammunition depots detonated following an explosion at the Starokrymsky Training Ground in Kirovskyi Raion.^[15] Geolocated footage showed explosions at the reported Russian ammunition depot south of Aivazovskie (25km northwest of Feodosia).^[16] Crimean Occupation Head Sergei Aksyonov stated that the explosions caused a landfill to catch on fire and announced that the Russian occupation officials will block movement on the Tavrida highway until the consequences of the fire are managed.^[17] Aksyonov also announced the evacuation of 2,000 residents.^[18] Aksyonov stated that the cause of the explosion is unknown as of the time of this publication, and Russian occupation officials notably did not accuse Ukrainian forces of striking Russian military infrastructure.^[19] A Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Andriy Yusov denied claims that GUR Chief Major General Kyrylo Budanov confirmed Ukraine's involvement in the explosion.^[20] Russian milbloggers, however, accused Ukrainian forces of striking a Russian ammunition depot but did not provide a consistent suggestion of the means Ukraine might have used to conduct this strike.^[21] Some ultranationalist milbloggers claimed that the explosion sparked criticism of Russian military officials within the Kremlin as these officials continued to lie about the situation in Crimea.^[22]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 19 and made gains in these areas. Geolocated footage published on July 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces made gains near Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut). The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations north and south of Bakhmut City and forced Russian forces to retreat from positions northeast of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km

northwest of Bakhmut).[23] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Berdyansk (Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[24] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Major Valerii Shershen stated that Ukrainian forces advanced more than a kilometer in an unspecified area of the Melitopol direction.[25] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces lack rotations and reinforcements on the Zaporizhia front and south of Bakhmut, which is preventing Russian forces from recapturing lost positions.[26] The milblogger forecasted that continued delays in resolving these rotation and reinforcement issues south of Bakhmut threaten serious consequences for the Russian grouping in the area.[27]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin and reportedly Wagner Commander Dmitry Utkin greeted Wagner fighters at the new Wagner base near Asipovichy, Belarus, on July 18. Footage posted on July 19 and likely captured on July 18 shows Prigozhin addressing Wagner fighters at the field camp near Asipovichy, Belarus.[28] Prigozhin welcomed the fighters to Belarus in a ceremony whose symbolism demonstrates that Prigozhin still controls the Wagner Group. [29] Prigozhin handed the Wagner flag that had previously flown at the Wagner Group's main military base in Molkino, Krasnodar Krai, to the local Wagner commander – a man with a first name of Sergey and callsign "Pioneer" – who will command Wagner forces in Belarus.[30] "Pioneer" has reportedly been awarded five Orders of Courage and participated in combat in Syria, Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, and other countries.[31] Prigozhin stated that unspecified current events in Ukraine are a "shame in which [Wagner] does not need to participate" but acknowledged that Wagner may return to Ukraine when Wagner can be sure that Wagner fighters will not be forced to "shame" themselves.[32] Prigozhin also ceremonially presented ribbons of Russian and Belarusian flags so that "no one will think that [Wagner] fights without a flag and without a Motherland as some have said." [33] Prigozhin stated that Wagner personnel will remain in Belarus "for some time" and that they will make "make the Belarusian army the second army in the world" - an insult directed against the Russian Ministry of Defense. Prigozhin also stated that Wagner will embark on a new journey in Africa after regrouping in Belarus. An unidentified man – reportedly Dmitry Utkin (callsign "Wagner") – also thanked the Wagner fighters for their work and for making Wagner a world-famous name. Utkin said that "this is only the beginning of the biggest job that will be carried out soon." ISW is unable to confirm the identity of the man who was presented as Utkin. If the man is indeed Utkin, this ceremony would mark Utkin's first public appearance since 2016.[34] Russian milbloggers reported that several thousand Wagner fighters attended this ceremony, though ISW cannot verify attendance numbers at this time.[35]

Russian sources claimed that Wagner will continue to operate abroad in African countries, although Prigozhin's involvement in these activities remains unclear. A Russian source published on July 19 an apparent audio clip from Prigozhin, in which Prigozhin stated that he has sold part of Wagner's "African assets" to an unspecified buyer to pay off existing liabilities – but that this will not curtail any Wagner programs in African countries.[36] Wagner-affiliated milbloggers amplified statements from Wagner Commander Alexander Ivanov on July 19, in which Ivanov claimed that Wagner is continuing to rotate Wagner instructors in the Central African Republic (CAR).[37] Ivanov reportedly stated that Wagner's employees in CAR are not military personnel and did not sign military contracts with the Russian MoD.[38] Ivanov stated that Prigozhin intends to expand Wagner's presence in Africa despite unspecified change in the structure of Wagner's business in the region and quoted Prigozhin as saying that "concrete negotiations" are occurring on the matter.[39]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to display his knowledge of Russian history at odd moments, this time appearing to warn against the possibility of revolution in Russia. Putin stated on July 19 that Russia already exceeded its "limit on revolutions in the last century" in response to the mention of the Mayevka tourism event that took place in May.[40] Mayevka was an illegal meeting of revolutionary-minded workers held outside of Moscow during the Tsarist period, but the word can also be associated with the arrival of spring.[41] Putin additionally stated that he hoped that the tourism Mayevka event would not "lead to a revolution." Putin had previously made a seemingly unrelated and unprompted allusion to Russian history at a public engagement in October 2022 when he spoke about the causes of the 18th Century Pugachev Rebellion, observing that it began because the center appeared weak and because someone decided that he was tsar – an observation that has since appeared to have been apropos.[42]

Russian authorities opened a case against an affiliate of the ultranationalist Angry Patriots Club for discrediting Russian forces, prompting the Angry Patriots Club to make explicit demands of Russian officials. Russian media reported on July 18 that Russian authorities initiated a criminal case against former Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov under the article for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces.[43] Angry Patriots Club member Viktor Alksnis claimed on July 18 that he talked with Kvachkov and confirmed the initiation of the case.[44] The Angry Patriots Club formally denounced the criminal case and demanded that Russian authorities end their "persecution" of Kvachkov.[45] Kvachkov recently spoke at the Angry Patriots Club's June 25 event in Moscow aimed at espousing longstanding criticisms against Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military leadership.[46] Kvachkov may have drawn the attention of Russian authorities at the event, although it is likely that authorities were aware of his activities given that Kvachkov recently left prison in 2019 after serving a six-year sentence for creating a terrorist group and plotting to overthrow the government.[47] Kvachkov called for violence "against representatives of state power" in a video message in 2017 and admitted to promoting anti-government propaganda among the military.[48] The Federal Security Service (FSB) previously reportedly attempted to censor notable Angry Patriots Club member Igor Girkin.[49]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces launched an extensive missile and drone attack against port and grain infrastructure in southern Ukraine on July 19 likely to further emphasize Russia's objections to the renewal of the Black Sea grain deal and hinder Ukraine's ability to export grain.
- The South African Presidential Office announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not attend the BRICS summit in-person in Johannesburg in August 2023.
- An explosion at a Russian training ground in occupied Kirovskyi Raion (Islam Terek Raion), southeastern Crimea, disrupted the Russian use of the Tavrida highway that connects eastern Crimea to Sevastopol on July 19.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 19 and made gains in these areas.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin and reportedly Wagner Commander Dmitry Utkin greeted Wagner fighters at the new Wagner base near Asipovichy, Belarus, on July 18.
- Russian sources claimed that Wagner will continue to operate abroad in African countries, although Prigozhin's involvement in these activities remains unclear.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to display his knowledge of Russian history at odd moments, this time appearing to warn against the possibility of revolution in Russia.
- Russian authorities opened a case against an affiliate of the ultranationalist Angry Patriots Club for discrediting Russian forces, prompting the Angry Patriots Club to make explicit demands of Russian officials.

- Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Kupyansk area, near Kreminna, in the Bakhmut area, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front and made gains near Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, in the Bakhmut area, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, and in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblast area. They made marginal gains along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front and reportedly made limited advances in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblast area.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia area and western Zaporizhia Oblast and made reportedly made gains in both sectors of the front.
- The Russian State Duma adopted on July 19 a law on the first reading and “in general” that allows the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to have heavy military equipment.
- The Ukrainian Crimean-based “Atesh” partisan group conducted another successful attack on a Russian military convoy in occupied Kherson Oblast on July 14.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 18, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 18, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30pm ET on July 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The July 17 Kerch Strait Bridge attack is likely having immediate ramifications on Russian military logistics in southern Ukraine. Footage and imagery published on July 17 and 18 show extensive traffic jams and accidents reportedly on the E58 Mariupol-Melitopol-Kherson City highway – Russia's current main logistics line connecting Russia to southern Ukraine – at various points between Mariupol and Berdyansk, and in Kherson Oblast.^[1] Russian occupation authorities claimed to have reduced traffic at Crimea-Kherson Oblast checkpoints near Chonhar and Armiansk following significant traffic jams in the morning.^[2] Russian occupation authorities also advertised alternate routes and rest stops along them for tourists to drive from occupied Crimea through occupied Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts – rear areas in a war zone – to return to Russia.^[3] Russian authorities also announced additional measures to mitigate resulting traffic jams and logistics issues, including a temporary road bridge next to the Kerch Strait Bridge, the reconstruction of a 60-kilometer stretch of road between Crimea and Kherson Oblast through Armiansk, and lowering security measures at the Kerch Strait Bridge checkpoints.^[4] Russian authorities reopened one span of the Kerch Strait Bridge to one-way road traffic towards Russia on July 18, and plan to reopen the same span to two-lane traffic on September 15 and the whole bridge to road traffic in November.^[5] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on July 18 that the Russian government is still developing measures to increase the security of the Kerch Strait Bridge, and Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the claimed Russian security failure to adequately protect the bridge.^[6]

Russian forces conducted a strike campaign ostensibly against Ukrainian military objects in southern Ukraine in explicit retaliation for the Kerch Strait Bridge attack. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian retaliatory strikes hit port infrastructure in Odesa City and to have destroyed Ukrainian fuel storage facilities holding a combined 70 thousand tons of fuel near Odesa and Mykolaiv cities.^[7] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all six Russian Kaliber missiles and 31 of 36 Shahed 131/136 drones targeting these areas, but that falling missile fragments damaged port infrastructure and a residential area in Odesa.^[8] Russian milbloggers heavily criticized the Russian MoD for only targeting Ukrainian military assets in retaliation for Ukrainian military “provocations” rather than targeting these assets as part of the war effort.^[9] These complaints are consistent with prior milblogger criticisms to the same effect following other major military events, including the October 2022 Kerch Strait Bridge attack.^[10] The Russian MoD also accused Ukrainian forces of targeting occupied Crimea with 28 drones overnight on July 17 to 18 and claimed that Russian air defenses and electronic warfare systems downed all 28 drones.^[11]

The dismissal of former Russian 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Commander Major General Ivan Popov and the issues he cited continue to have effects on Russian military operations in southern Ukraine and the discourse around these operations. A prominent, Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger accused Ukrainian forces of attempting to exhaust Russian forces defending in southern Ukraine and noted that the Russian military command has not solved the force rotation issues Popov outlined before his dismissal.^[12] Another prominent milblogger supported Popov, noting that the issues Popov outlined seem more important issues for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to address than transferring Popov to Syria or other information mitigation measures.^[13] Some Russian milbloggers amplified reports of several Russian assault groups with forces of up to a platoon simultaneously surrendering to Ukrainian forces in the Zaporizhia direction.^[14] Persistent issues with Russian logistics and operations in southern Ukraine may have contributed to these forces’ inability or unwillingness to fight and reported resulting surrender.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive actions on at least three sectors of the frontline against the backdrop of increased Russian offensive operations and claimed tactical gains along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border on July 18. Russian and Ukrainian sources noted that Russian forces have recently increased offensive operations in the Kupyansk area (between northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and northwestern Luhansk Oblast).^[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 2km along the front and up to 1.5km in depth in an unspecified area in the Kupyansk direction.^[16] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar and Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that Russian forces continue to transfer reinforcements to the Bakhmut direction and are concentrating their main forces in the Kupyansk direction due to Ukrainian advances in the Bakhmut area, supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces aim to draw Ukrainian reserves to the Kupyansk area and away from critical areas of the theater where Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations.^[17] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will not likely make tactically significant advances

or an operationally significant breakthrough between northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and Luhansk Oblast in part due to the poor quality of Russian forces deployed in this area. Russian and Ukrainian sources noted that elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army (Western Military District) and convict-formed "Storm-Z" units are operating in the Kupyansk area.[18] ISW has previously assessed that the elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army are heavily degraded and that "Storm-Z" units suffer from poor morale and discipline.[19]

Russia continues legislative manipulations to repress domestic dissent through introducing fear of criminal liability. Russian State Duma Deputy Vasily Piskarev stated on July 18 that he and several other deputies submitted a bill for consideration to the Duma on "liability for propaganda and justification of the ideology of extremism" that will introduce a 300 thousand ruble (roughly \$3,297) fine and up to five years in prison for violation of the amendment.[20] ISW has previously reported on similar laws and amendments that are meant to set high penalties and criminal liability for anything that Russian authorities assert is "extremist" or "terroristic" behavior in order to encourage self-censorship and facilitate crackdowns against any dissenting parties.[21] Some facets of the Russian information space expressed concern that Russian authorities could use the law to crack down against any expressed viewpoints that contradict those of the Russian state, including support for Russian opposition parties or figures.[22]

The Telegraph concluded that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Belarusian authorities are actively involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children. The *Telegraph* quoted the head of the Belarusian opposition group National Anti-Crisis Management, Pavel Latushka, who alleged that Lukashenko is personally responsible for the forced displacement of Ukrainian children to Belarus and that he gave direct instructions on how to carry out and finance the displacement.[23] The *Telegraph* found that Belarusian authorities actively worked with Russian authorities to transport some Ukrainian children to Belarus and others to far eastern regions of Russia. The *Telegraph* reported that Belarusian and Russian authorities collaborated to forcibly transport at least 2,150 Ukrainian children to Belarus since September 2022 and that the number of Ukrainian children in Belarus will likely reach 3,000 by fall of 2023.[24] The European Parliament Foreign Affairs Council had previously called for an arrest warrant against Lukashenko in early June for actions relating to Ukrainian children and for facilitating other crimes committed in Ukraine.[25] ISW has long assessed that Belarus is involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus and the Russian Federation.[26]

Key Takeaways:

- The July 17 Kerch Strait Bridge attack is likely having immediate ramifications on Russian military logistics in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a strike campaign ostensibly against Ukrainian military objects in southern Ukraine in explicit retaliation for the Kerch Strait Bridge attack.
- The dismissal of former Russian 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Commander Major General Ivan Popov and the issues he cited continue to have effects on Russian military operations in southern Ukraine and the discourse around these operations.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive actions on at least three sectors of the frontline against the backdrop of increased Russian offensive operations and claimed tactical gains along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border on July 18.
- Russia continues legislative manipulations to repress domestic dissent through introducing fear of criminal liability.
- The *Telegraph* concluded that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Belarusian authorities are actively involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, southwest of Kreminna, and in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas and made limited territorial gains in all sectors.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations around Bakhmut and advanced north of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly made limited advances.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblast area and recently made limited advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Some Russian sources suggested that recent measures supporting the development of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) allow it to posture as an alternative Russian military formation.
- Russia continues to formalize methods of social programming targeted at youth in occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 17, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 17, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30pm ET on July 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The July 17 attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge will likely have continuing ramifications on Russian logistics in southern Ukraine. Russian authorities accused Ukrainian special services of conducting an unmanned surface vehicle strike against the Kerch Strait Bridge between Russia and occupied Crimea on the morning of July 17.[1] Footage of the aftermath shows that one Kerch Strait Bridge road span had collapsed and another span suffered damage but remains intact.[2] The

Russian Ministry of Transport claimed that the strikes did not damage the rail bridge or supports of the road bridge, and rail traffic across the Kerch Strait Bridge resumed several hours after the strike.^[3] Russian occupation authorities rerouted heavy civilian traffic from occupied Crimea to Russia through occupied southern Ukraine, and Russian sources reported extensive traffic jams in Crimea's Dzhankoy Raion and occupied Kherson Oblast towards Melitopol.^[4] Russian tourists fleeing occupied Crimea likely exacerbated traffic and likely impeded Russian logistics from Crimea to rear areas in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts. Occupation authorities asked civilians to consider alternate evacuation routes to mitigate the immediate traffic issues.^[5] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andrii Yusov declined to comment on Ukrainian involvement in the incident.^[6] The Kerch Strait Bridge and military areas in occupied Crimea are legitimate military targets for Ukrainian forces in their defense against the full-scale Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, as ISW and Ukrainian officials have previously reported.^[7]

The Russian government's continued failure to put Russian society on a war-time footing will have significant impacts on Russian logistics as traffic from Russian tourism to occupied Crimea jams Russian logistics to southern Ukraine in the midst of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south. The Kerch Strait Bridge is along one of two ground lines of communication (GLOCs) supporting Russia's southern force grouping, with the other route passing through occupied Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson Oblasts. This sole remaining logistics route is now a single point of failure for the supply of the large numbers of mechanized Russian forces in southern Ukraine needed to resist Ukrainian counteroffensives. Russian and occupation officials have nevertheless continued to promote occupied Crimea as a tourist destination, however, urging Russian civilians to drive through and to a warzone rather than advising them to avoid it as a responsible government would.^[8] Russian occupation authorities recently struggled to mitigate traffic issues just from increased Russian tourism across the Kerch Strait Bridge, as ISW has previously reported.^[9] Russian President Vladimir Putin even ordered the use of Russian military assets to ferry tourists across the Kerch Strait.^[10] Some Russian milbloggers also suggested that the attack against the Kerch Strait Bridge should not reduce continued tourist flows.^[11]

Russian logistics to southern Ukraine will likely suffer in the short and medium-term, likely exacerbating recent and significant complaints about inadequate Russian supplies in southern Ukraine. Former Russian 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) Commander Major General Ivan Popov's recent complaints about the Russian military command's mistreatment of Russian forces defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine sparked great ire in the Russian information space.^[12] Many of Popov's complaints indicated that the 58th Combined Arms Army, and likely other Russian formations deployed in Zaporizhia Oblast, suffer from supply shortages that will further worsen if tourist and other civilian traffic slow down logistics routes supporting Russian forces in southern Ukraine.^[13] Further issues with support for this grouping, and further resulting complaints that emerge in the Russian information space, are likely to draw further outrage from the Russian ultranationalist community and undermine confidence in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).^[14]

Russian and occupation authorities appear to be consumed with mitigating the consequences of the attack rather than leveraging the incident to levy heavy informational attacks with rhetorical inflections. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting instructing Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin to lead a headquarters and develop solutions to mitigate traffic issues across the bridge.^[15] Khusnullin and other occupation authorities decided to lift curfews and passport checks along major highways to Russia in occupied territories, which are under Russian martial law, in order to mitigate some of these traffic issues.^[16] Putin's and other senior Russian officials' statements were largely straightforward; the officials accused Ukraine of conducting a "terrorist attack" and promised retaliation, which is consistent with prior official reactions to claimed Ukrainian provocations.^[17] The Russian Foreign Ministry accused Ukraine of conducting the strike in conjunction with American and British intelligence, forwarding a consistent Russian narrative aimed at falsely portraying Russia as at war with the West rather than Ukraine.^[18] Some Russian officials connected the Kerch Strait Bridge attack to the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which expired today.^[19] Senior Russian officials, including Putin, had signaled before the bridge was attacked that Russia was unwilling to renew the grain deal without significant additional concessions, however.^[20] Russia was very unlikely to have engaged in negotiations around the continuation of the grain deal or any other negotiations with Ukraine in good faith, as ISW has previously assessed.^[21]

The Russian milblogger response to the Kerch Strait Bridge attack largely criticized Russian authorities for failing to secure the bridge. Some milbloggers, including former Russian officer and critical pro-war nationalist Igor Girkin, offered the critique that Russian authorities have focused too heavily on road security and not enough on maritime security, thereby allowing the most recent attack on the bridge to occur.^[22] Girkin complained that the Russian border officials have devoted too much time to checking civilian cars entering the bridge and not enough time investing in infrastructure that could protect against attacks launched by sea.^[23] Another prominent milblogger and Kremlin-appointed member of the Russian Human Rights Council blamed Russian authorities for focusing too much on security on the land bridge and neglecting to take into account any maritime threats.^[24] One milblogger emphasized that the strike was caused by poor internal Russian decision making and posed a threat to the stability of Russian domestic peace.^[25] Many Russian sources erroneously claimed that the strike will not impact Russian logistics in occupied Ukraine and called the attack a "terrorist act" to minimize the fact that the Kerch Strait Bridge is a legitimate military target in the rear of an active war zone.^[26] Some Russian sources additionally advocated for retributive and retaliatory actions against Ukraine in the wake of the attack, but this brand of milblogger response closely resembles outcry following previous such events.

The Wagner Group continues to prepare to establish a permanent presence in Belarus. Independent Belarusian monitoring group "The Hajun Project" reported on July 17 that another Wagner vehicle convoy traveled towards the Tsel village tent camp near Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast, Belarus, and that two other Wagner columns had traveled along this same route between July 11 and July 17.^[27] Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels relatedly posted footage on July 17 of a Wagner column moving between Voronezh and Oryel oblasts before arriving at the training ground near Asipovichy.^[28] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that over 700 Wagner fighters have recently settled in the Tsel-Asipovichy area and that Belarusian authorities have formed three Belarusian special-purpose units to train under Wagner leadership in these training areas.^[29] Several Wagner-affiliated milbloggers additionally claimed that Wagner's training ground in Molkino, Krasnodar Krai, will cease operations by July 30 and that Wagner will deploy elsewhere and they posted footage of Wagner fighters ceremoniously lowering Russian and Wagner flags at Molkino.^[30] Wagner fighters will likely continue to redeploy to Belarus from training areas in Molkino and staging grounds elsewhere in Russia over the coming month.

Russia continues efforts to reorganize its domestic security apparatus in the wake of the Wagner Group's armed rebellion. Russian State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtain stated on July 17 that the "Grom" special units of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs) were officially transferred to the control of the Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard).^[31] Khinshtain emphasized that the decision was made to capitalize on Rosgvardia's key role in protecting Russia's internal security.^[32] ISW previously reported on July 4 that the decision to transfer "Grom" to Rosgvardia emphasizes the Kremlin's desire to consolidate an effective anti-rebellion force under Rosgvardia command.^[33] The Russian Duma additionally announced on July 17 that it is considering a bill to allow Rosgvardia to field heavy weapons by amending the federal law "On the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation," which will allow the Rosgvardia to be armed with transport aircraft, combat, transport, and multi-purpose helicopters, infantry fighting vehicles, armored personnel carriers, communications complexes,

boats, engineering equipment, and other military and paramilitary kit.^[34] The transfer of “Grom” units to Rosgvardia, as well as the decision to provide Rosgvardia with heavy combat equipment, supports ISW’s previous assessment that the Kremlin is continuing efforts to consolidate its internal security apparatus around Rosgvardia’s structures. However, several actors within the Russian internal security sphere have voiced their concern and dissatisfaction over the “Grom” transfer, and the reorganization of domestic security organs may cause more tension within Russia.^[35]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front over the backdrop of increased Russian offensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border on July 17. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces have launched active offensive operations and advanced in the Kupyansk area (between northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and northwestern Luhansk Oblast) in the past several days.^[36] Russian forces likely are engaging in offensive operations in this area of the front in an effort to exploit Ukrainian operational focus on other sectors of the front and draw Ukrainian reserves away from critical areas of the theater, namely the Bakhmut and western Donetsk, and western Zaporizhia Oblast areas, where Ukrainian forces are pursuing counteroffensive operations. The poor quality and composition of Russian troops currently deployed on this line, however, will likely hinder Russia’s ability to achieve more than tactically significant gains or make an operationally significant breakthrough. Ukrainian and Russian sources have both reported the deployment of convict-formed “Storm-Z” assault units to the Kupyansk direction, and ISW has previously assessed that “Storm-Z” units have low operational effectiveness due to poor morale and discipline.^[37] Ukrainian forces also continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut, south of Velyka Novosilka, and near Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast throughout July 17.^[38]

Key Takeaways:

- The July 17 attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge will likely have significant and sustained impacts on Russian logistics as traffic from tourism to occupied Crimea jams Russian logistics to southern Ukraine in the midst of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south.
- Russian and occupation authorities appear to be consumed with mitigating the consequences of the attack rather than leveraging the incident to levy heavy informational attacks with rhetorical inflections.
- The Russian milblogger response to the Kerch Strait Bridge attack largely criticized Russian authorities for failing to secure the bridge.
- The Wagner Group continues to prepare to establish a permanent presence in Belarus.
- Russia continues efforts to reorganize its domestic security apparatus in the wake of the Wagner Group’s armed rebellion.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front over the backdrop of increased Russian offensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border on July 17.
- Russian forces conducted active offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line and have likely made marginal tactical gains in this direction.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks southwest and south of Kreminna, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area and advanced near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia administrative border.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued unsuccessful ground attacks in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian opposition outlet Verstka reported that Russian authorities have removed at least eight Russian military commanders without reappointing them to new positions since the start of the war, which is largely consistent with ISW’s previous assessments.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to artificially increase the number of Russian citizens in occupied Ukraine ahead of the September regional elections.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 16, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 16, 2023, 8:55pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian MoD has begun to remove commanders from some of the Russian military’s most combat effective units and formations and appears to be accelerating this effort. The recent dismissal of 58th Combined Arms Army Commander (CAA) Colonel General Ivan Popov and the reported dismissal of 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division Commander Major General Vladimir Seliverstov prompted further discussions of other alleged recent dismissals and arrests.^[1] Russian sources amplified an alleged audio message from personnel of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division on July 15 in which the personnel claimed that the Russian military command dismissed 7th VDV Division Commander Major General Alexander Kornev in early July.^[2] Russian sources also claimed that Russian authorities arrested 90th Tank Division (Eastern Military District) Commander Major General Ramil Ibatullin as well as two unspecified deputies on an unspecified date.^[3] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger suggested that the Russian military command is also planning to dismiss the 31st VDV Brigade Commander, who is reportedly Colonel Sergei Karasev.^[4] Russian sources speculated that the Russian MoD may be preparing to arrest VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky.^[5] ISW has not observed confirmation of Seliverstov’s and Kornev’s dismissals nor of Ibatullin’s arrest, although these claims follow a pattern similar to that of previous claims of command changes that have proven true.^[6]

These formations and units are conducting defensive and offensive operations in key sectors of the front in Ukraine. The 58th CAA has conducted a relatively successful defense against Ukrainian counteroffensives in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and the 106th Division is committed to defending against Ukrainian assaults on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks.^[7] ISW has observed elements of the 7th VDV Division deployed to east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast near the Antonivsky Bridge as well as to unspecified areas of western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[8] Russian milbloggers have claimed that the 31st VDV Brigade is also defending in the Bakhmut direction and that elements of the 90th Tank Division are involved in ongoing limited assaults west of Kremenna, Luhansk Oblast.^[9]

The reported dismissal and arrest of commanders leading combat effective units and formations appears to be associated with cases of insubordination. Popov flagrantly attempted to bypass Russian Chief of the General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov and directly bring his complaints about the frontline in western Zaporizhia to Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[10] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Seliverstov's dismissal was a result of similar insubordination, and Russian sources claimed that Seliverstov had a reputation for speaking up on behalf of his soldiers.^[11] Kornev may have voiced criticism of a host of potential issues on behalf of the 7th VDV Division, including the likely failure to be notified beforehand about the Russian destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station (KHPP) on June 6, reported attritional fighting that failed to eliminate a Ukrainian presence near the Antonivsky Bridge, or conditions in western Zaporizhia Oblast similar to those that Popov complained about.^[12] Ibatullin's arrest may be associated with the 90th Tank Division's resumption of assaults in Luhansk Oblast, where it conducted widespread offensive operations that failed to achieve territorial gains during the Russian 2023 winter offensive campaign.^[13] It is unclear why Ibatullin would have been arrested, if, indeed, he was, when the other commanders were reportedly simply removed from their commands.

Insubordination among commanders appears to be spreading to some of their soldiers. Russian milbloggers shared an audio excerpt on July 16 in which the alleged elements of the 7th VDV Division threatened that they would withdraw from their positions in occupied Kherson Oblast if the Russian MoD arrests Teplinsky or threatens his life.^[14] The elements of the 7th VDV Division also claimed that they would defend Teplinsky against the Russian MoD and asserted that the high command is targeting Russia's most combat effective commanders. This audio appeal, if legitimate, is a threat of mass desertion in the face of the enemy on behalf of Teplinsky. Desertion in the face of the enemy is a capital offense in many militaries. The VDV servicemen are blackmailing the Russian MoD to ensure that Teplinsky continues to command troops in Ukraine, despite Teplinsky's previous affiliation with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin who had led an armed rebellion on June 24 to overthrow Shoigu and Gerasimov.^[15]

Teplinsky himself set the precedent for the acts of insubordination that are currently plaguing the Russian MoD. The Russian MoD had previously attempted to launch wide-scale personnel changes within the Russian Armed Forces in January-February 2023 to replace some commanders who had been insubordinate to Shoigu and Gerasimov throughout the invasion. The Russian MoD announced on January 11 that Gerasimov assumed the position of overall theater commander in Ukraine, which upset a group of commanders and Russian irregular formations such as Wagner that supported Gerasimov's predecessor, Army General Sergei Surovikin.^[16] Teplinsky was one of these commanders, and he reportedly resigned on January 12 following an altercation with Gerasimov over Gerasimov's use of elite VDV forces in human wave attacks.^[17] Teplinsky later recorded a video on February 23 in which he confirmed his resignation and implied that Russian commanders in charge of the Russian winter offensive paid for captured villages with soldiers' lives.^[18] Teplinsky's resignation was not in itself insubordinate--resigning is one of the legal actions an officer can take when he decides that he cannot in good conscience execute a lawful order. Releasing a video criticizing the theater commander, however, was insubordinate and would likely be viewed as conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline, which is a violation of military law in many militaries. Teplinsky's video likely publicly blamed Gerasimov for Russian casualties during the winter offensive in an effort to undermine his command and set informational conditions to signal the need for Gerasimov's replacement to Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[19] Teplinsky later mobilized support within the VDV veteran community and directly appealed to Putin on March 15 regarding the Russian MoD's poor treatment of Wagner forces and poor conduct of the Russian war effort in Ukraine.^[20] Putin rewarded Teplinsky's insubordination by reappointing him as the VDV commander on April 1 instead of punishing him for his public actions undermining the theater commander.

Popov's leaked audio recording demonstrated a striking resemblance to Teplinsky's appeals as it portrayed Popov's insubordination as an attempt to improve conditions for 58th CAA's servicemen. Popov did not claim responsibility for leaking the audio recording, however, he likely intended to evoke similar support for himself as the voice of opposition to the Russian MoD among servicemen and veterans of the 58th CAA. Both Teplinsky and Popov demanded radical changes in the Russian conduct of the war – that, however necessary they might be, are impossible for Gerasimov or Shoigu to execute given Putin's unrealistic demands for the war effort, constraints on Russian mobilization, and the Russian MoD's persistent incompetence. Putin reportedly signed a decree deploying Popov to Syria on July 14 on Gerasimov's recommendation.^[21] ISW assessed on April 30 that the Kremlin demoted several commanders by transferring their responsibilities from combat in Ukraine to Syria or Nagorno-Karabakh and that these apparent demotions leave open the possibility that these commanders could return to Putin's favor.^[22]

The Kremlin's chronic disregard for the Russian chain of command is likely hindering Shoigu and Gerasimov in their attempts to suppress insubordination and establish full control over the Russian military in Ukraine. Putin consistently bypassed or ignored the established chain of command in hopes of securing rapid successes on the battlefield throughout the war, degrading Shoigu's and Gerasimov's authority – especially when military failures on the frontlines also eroded their reputations. Putin had cultivated an environment in which military personnel, officials, and even Russian war correspondents bypassed Shoigu and Gerasimov to present Putin their understandings of the current state of the war and recommendations for what to do.^[23] It is unusual but not unique for a commander in chief to solicit views on the war from outside experts. It is more problematic, although still not unique, for a commander in chief to solicit the views of subordinates opposed to senior leadership directly. But allowing a quasi-military commander such as Prigozhin to conduct his own campaign parallel but not subordinate to the one being executed by the formal chain of command is extraordinarily unusual and badly corrosive of the authority of the formal military leadership.

Putin also established the Russian MoD as the scapegoat for all Russian military failures, which saddled Shoigu and Gerasimov with a reputation for incompetence and failure that they are unlikely to repair.^[24] ISW previously assessed that Putin regularly grants and withdraws his support for different commanders in hopes generating rapid improvements in Russia's military fortunes but without always doing so formally.^[25] Shoigu and Gerasimov likely expected that Putin would restore their full authority over the Russian military's decision-making processes given their loyalty to him after Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24. Putin, however, has clearly not done so. He has instead followed his normal pattern of seeking to divert backlash away from himself and rotating commanders instead of outright dismissing them.^[26] Intensifying insubordination and widespread outrage in response to the ongoing officer purge may force the Kremlin to reconsider its partial backing for Shoigu and Gerasimov in the wake of Wagner's rebellion.

The intensifying dynamic of insubordination among Russian commanders in Ukraine may prompt other commanders to oppose the Russian military leadership more overtly. ISW has previously assessed that Teplynsky and Popov have established precedents for Russian military officers to challenge the authority of senior commanders and for to use their responsibility for key sectors of the front to cajole the Kremlin into supporting them.[27] Insubordinate commanders appear to be more actively emulating this approach to achieving their desired aims and are likely aware of the constraints the MoD faces in punishing them. These commanders present themselves as defenders of their soldiers, tapping into longstanding grievances about the war effort that the Kremlin routinely attempts to avoid exacerbating but has been unable or unwilling to address.[28] The Kremlin's relatively soft reaction to insubordination likely incentivizes strong-willed commanders to engage in these patterns of insubordination, knowing that they offer substantial rewards with relatively low risks. These commanders appear to be deftly drawing a line between themselves and Prigozhin by centering their soldiers in their complaints and avoiding the appearance of promoting their personal ambitions, which had made Prigozhin appear a threat to the Kremlin (they are also, obviously, avoiding leading armed forces in a march on Moscow).[29] As the Kremlin fails to adequately punish commanders who challenge Gerasimov's and Shoigu's authority it becomes more logical for commanders who wish to protect their soldiers (or to appear to be doing so) to engage in this kind of behavior. Shoigu's and Gerasimov's attempts to remove and punish these commanders will likely cause some commanders to intensify their insubordination and draw public attention to their conflicts with the senior Russian military leadership in hopes of making the Kremlin more hesitant about supporting Shoigu's and Gerasimov's efforts. It may cause the fainter of heart to become more pliable yes-men and, thus, likely less effective on the battlefield.

Russian commanders are likely setting information conditions to prevent the Russian MoD from punishing them for their insubordination by promoting narratives among Russian servicemembers along the front and thereby risking widespread demoralization. Teplynsky and Popov may have leveraged Russian military and ultranationalist communities to bring awareness to the Russian MoD's intentions to dismiss military commanders and thus spark backlash within these communities.[30] This effort has the potential to drive the Kremlin to undo or halt the Russian MoD's command changes.[31] Teplynsky's earlier involvement of veteran communities allowed him to reestablish control of the VDV and occupied southern Ukraine, and it is likely that these commanders are aware of their ability to garner support on Russian social media platforms under the guise of attempting to save their troops from the Russian MoD.[32] ISW assesses that some of these commanders, like many Russian officials, likely have personal connections to Russian Telegram channels and social media networks that they use to spread their desired narratives and objectives.[33] Russian servicemembers routinely engage with milblogger content to follow the war in Ukraine, and insubordinate commanders likely rely on servicemembers consuming this content to garner support for their opposition to the Russian senior military leadership.

The Russian veteran and ultranationalist communities appear to be readily defending the commanders' insubordination by amplifying defeatist discussions that may have direct effects on Russian servicemembers' morale. The 7th VDV Division's threat to withdraw in response to the latest speculations about dismissals and arrests of commanders suggests that Russian servicemembers are actively engaging with this content.[34] Russian milbloggers also often amplify videos and letters from servicemen further confirming the interactions between milbloggers and the Russian forces on the frontlines.[35] "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky (who is currently fighting in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast) argued that Russia will lose the war in Ukraine if Russian authorities arrest Teplynsky.[36] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger rhetorically asked who would lead Russian forces to victory if there are only commanders who do not stand up for their soldiers and fear upsetting the General Staff with their "panicked" reports about the situation on the frontlines.[37] Another Russian source, that promotes narratives sympathetic to the insubordinate commanders, claimed that the situation is reminiscent of the demoralization of the Soviet military at the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.[38] One milblogger noted that the degree of speculation and claims about the dismissals and arrests is indicative of widespread concern among the Russian military about this issue.[39] These narratives threaten to cause a widespread loss of confidence in the Russian command and an overall sense of defeatism if Gerasimov and Shoigu continue to remove and/or punish the commanders whom many view as "heroes born of the Special Military Operation." [40]

The apparent crisis in the Russian chain of command and the corresponding morale effects it may produce will likely degrade Russian capabilities to conduct tactical offensive operations that are critical to the Russian elastic defense in southern Ukraine. Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine follow a pattern in which one echelon of Russian forces slows and degrades attacking Ukrainian forces until a second echelon counterattacks from prepared defensive positions to roll back the Ukrainian advances.[41] Tactical counterattacks from prepared (and therefore likely relatively safe and defensible) positions require a degree of motivation and morale that the chain of command crisis may undermine to the point of failure. Elements of the 58th CAA and the 7th VDV Division are engaged in the defense of areas of western Zaporizhia Oblast and are likely already experiencing pronounced morale issues in the wake of the controversies surrounding their dismissed commanders. Ukrainian assaults also appear to be occurring along seams of the Russian defense between different formations and units in some areas, and insubordination and command and control issues may lead to a lack of cohesion between these defending units.[42] ISW has not observed direct indicators of these developments at this time.

The apparent Russian chain of command crisis threatens to demoralize the wider Russian war effort in Ukraine. It is unlikely that the Kremlin will allow the conflict between these commanders and the Russian senior military command to escalate to a point where personnel follow through on threats like the one the 7th VDV division made, although the continued hollowing out of support for the Russian military leadership among field commanders will produce morale issues throughout the theater. Further controversies about insubordination and command changes will likely increasingly reach a wider domestic audience as the Russian ultranationalist milblogger community continues to closely follow and amplify these developments. The Kremlin's failure to appeal to these commanders and their personnel while also failing to fully back Shoigu and Gerasimov may increasingly undermine the Kremlin's desired goal to be viewed as an effective manager of the war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly made limited gains. Geolocated footage published on July 15 shows that Ukrainian forces made limited gains northwest of Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblasts border area.[43] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Major Valerii Shershen reported that Ukrainian forces advanced 1km in an unspecified area in the Berdyansk direction (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia border area).[44] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces also continued counteroffensive operations in the Melitopol direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast area).[45] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continue to advance in the Bakhmut area and are defending new positions on the flanks of Bakhmut against Russian ground attacks.[46] Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces liberated Zaliznyanske (13km north of Bakhmut), parts of heights near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), and a fortified area west of Andriivka (10km south of Bakhmut).[47] Russian President Vladimir Putin denied Ukrainian successes in the counteroffensive and claimed that Ukrainian forces have not been able to break through Russian defenses on July 16.[48] Putin notably told a journalist that he would answer a question about further goals of the war if the journalist turned off the camera.[49] Ukrainian forces have, however, advanced in southern Ukraine where Russian forces have prepared the most extensive fortifications. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on June 4 to July 9, ISW calculated based on its own control of terrain data that Ukrainian forces liberated approximately 253 square kilometers of territory.[50] (Ukrainian official accounts of the area liberated differ from ISW's, almost certainly

because Ukraine calculated its initial control of terrain differently. ISW is presenting its own figure of liberated land to make an apples-to-apples comparison of Russian and Ukrainian gains.)[51]

Ukrainian officials indicated that extensive Russian minefields and shortages of Western mine clearing equipment have slowed the pace of Ukrainian advances in the counteroffensive. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi acknowledged in an interview with *CNN* published on July 14 that the tempo of counteroffensive operations is slower than expected citing “complex and dense minefields” in areas through which Ukrainian forces intend to move.[52] The *Washington Post* reported on July 15 that Russian forces heavily mined areas between five and 16 kilometers behind the frontline in Zaporizhia Oblast, which has slowed Ukrainian advances and forced Ukrainian forces to conduct ground attacks with infantry rather than Western kit.[53] An unnamed Ukrainian officer told the *Washington Post* that Russian forces have prioritized destroying more advanced mine-clearing systems over Leopard tanks.[54] An unnamed senior Ukrainian official told the *Washington Post* that Ukraine received less than 15 percent of the quantity of mine clearing and engineering material it requested ahead of the counteroffensive with some equipment arriving only last week.[55]

The Kremlin is likely attempting to increase its control over Russian social media outlets to set conditions for the 2024 Russian presidential elections. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergey Kiriyenko is brokering a deal to purchase the Russian division of media giant Yandex on behalf of investors heavily affiliated with billionaire Yuri Kovalchuk, a close Kiriyenko ally and reported personal banker to Russian President Vladimir Putin.[56] *Meduza* reported that these investors will likely transfer their shares of Yandex to another entity, such as Kovalchuk or one of his holdings, after a period of time. *Meduza* noted that Yandex corporate advisor Alexey Kudrin and Putin personally approved an earlier deal to sell Yandex to investors with less direct connections to the federal government, but the deal fell through after an investor withdrew under fear of Western sanctions should he proceed with the purchase.[57] *Meduza* reported that Kudrin hoped that the new Yandex buyers would have less explicit federal government ties, but that Kiriyenko’s influence likely swayed Putin to this new deal.[58] A Russian insider source claimed that Telegram channels affiliated with Kiriyenko accused *RT* editor in chief and Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan of spreading fake information to try to take control over Telegram.[59] The source also claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service’s (FSB) recent detention of the Russian Deputy Minister of Digital Development Maxim Parshin and of Russian insider sources is part of a broader Russian federal effort to take more direct control over Russian social media.[60]

Kiriyenko’s role in this consolidation is notable given his increasing reach in the Russian federal government and prior connections to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. ISW reported recently on claims from former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin accusing Kiriyenko and Kovalchuk of directly acting as Prigozhin’s patrons.[61] The degree of Kiriyenko’s and Kovalchuk’s support for Prigozhin in recent months, and especially following Prigozhin’s June 24 rebellion, is currently unclear, however. Some Russian sources continue to postulate that Kiriyenko and Kovalchuk are firm Prigozhin supporters.[62] Other sources have claimed that Kiriyenko and Kovalchuk have distanced themselves from Prigozhin in recent months due to Prigozhin’s escalation of his conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and St. Petersburg Mayor Alexander Beglov prior to the rebellion.[63] Kovalchuk, Kiriyenko, and Prigozhin all reportedly contributed to the effort to elect Beglov to his office in 2019, but the Prigozhin-Beglov relationship deteriorated.[64] Some sources assert that Kovalchuk – and likely Kiriyenko as a result – firmly backed Beglov in his feud with Prigozhin.[65] Kiriyenko has consistently postured himself as a firm Putin loyalist, and his increasing role in the Russian information space reflects both Putin’s trust in him as a result of his labors thus far and Kiriyenko’s desire to further advance his influence with Putin.[66]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian MoD has begun to remove commanders from some of the Russian military’s most combat effective units and formations and appears to be accelerating this effort.
- Insubordination among commanders appears to be spreading to some of their soldiers.
- Teplinsky himself set the precedent for the acts of insubordination that are currently plaguing the Russian MoD.
- The Kremlin’s chronic disregard for the Russian chain of command is likely hindering Shoigu and Gerasimov in their attempts to suppress insubordination and establish full control over the Russian military in Ukraine.
- The intensifying dynamic of insubordination among Russian commanders in Ukraine may prompt other commanders to oppose the Russian military leadership more overtly.
- Russian commanders are likely setting information conditions to prevent the Russian MoD from punishing them for their insubordination by promoting narratives among Russian servicemembers along the front and thereby risking widespread demoralization.
- The Russian veteran and ultranationalist communities appear to be readily defending the commanders’ insubordination by amplifying defeatist discussions that may have direct effects on Russian servicemembers’ morale.
- The apparent crisis in the Russian chain of command and the corresponding morale effects it may produce will likely degrade Russian capabilities to conduct tactical offensive operations that are critical to the Russian elastic defense in southern Ukraine.
- The apparent Russian chain of command crisis threatens to demoralize the wider Russian war effort in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front and reportedly made limited gains.
- Kiriyenko’s role in this consolidation is notable given his increasing reach in the Russian federal government and prior connections to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove line and did not make confirmed advances.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Kreminna and made tactical advances.
- Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian rear areas in occupied Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and reportedly advanced.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources confirmed that some Chechen forces have deployed to the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and did not advance.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia border area and made limited gains.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and did not make confirmed advances in the area.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to operate on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near the Antonivsky Bridge and did not claim any Russian or Ukrainian advances in the area.

- Russian officials accused Ukrainian forces of attempting an aerial and maritime drone strike against unspecified targets in the Black Sea near Sevastopol, Crimea overnight on July 15 to 16.
- Russian “Lancet” drone (loitering munition) producer Zalo Aero Group announced the production of a new generation of drones with automatic targeting systems and the intention to expand production abroad.
- A Ukrainian report indicates that Russian occupation authorities continue persecuting religious minorities in occupied Ukraine as part of a broader cultural genocide aimed at eradicating the Ukrainian national and cultural identity.
- Wagner Group forces will reportedly integrate into the Russian-Belarusian Union State Regional Grouping of Troops (RGV).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 15, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 15, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on July 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources reported on July 15 that the Russian military command dismissed 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division Commander Major General Vladimir Seliverstov.[1] Russian sources stated that the reason for Seliverstov's dismissal is currently unknown but speculated that it could be associated with Seliverstov's reputation for speaking up on behalf of his soldiers.[2] Russian sources claimed that the 106th VDV Division has been operating in the Bakhmut area since January, and ISW has recently observed the 106th VDV Division's 137th Guards VDV Regiment defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut's northern flank.[3] A Russian milblogger has claimed that elements of the 106th VDV Division are also supporting Russian defensive operations south of Bakhmut.[4] Relatives of mobilized personnel serving in the 137th VDV Regiment notably appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin, and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in April about poor conditions and lack of supplies in the unit.[5] Vocal discontent about conditions in areas where Russian forces are defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have prompted Seliverstov to appeal to the Russian military command, which may have contributed to his dismissal. ISW has not observed confirmation of Seliverstov's dismissal, but Russian reporting about the dismissal follows a pattern similar to that of previous claims of command changes that have proven true.[6]

Seliverstov's dismissal may be a part of an ongoing purge of insubordinate commanders by the Russian military command and may suggest that the corrosion of the Russian chain of command in Ukraine is accelerating. The Russian military command recently dismissed 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) Commander Major General Ivan Popov after he reportedly attempted to bypass Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov and bring his complaints about the situation in western Zaporizhia Oblast directly to Putin.[7] Popov's complaints reportedly centered on a lack of rotations for his troops, and in a leaked audio message Popov also complained about heavy losses and a lack of effective counterbattery capabilities.[8] These issues are likely impacting Russian forces throughout the theater in Ukraine, and reports of Seliverstov's dismissal only four days after reports of Popov's dismissal suggest that the Russian command may have fired Seliverstov for similar reasons.[9] ISW assessed that Popov's insubordination is indicative of a pattern of behavior that has developed within the Russian command in Ukraine, in which commanders have challenged the authority of senior commanders and sought to use their responsibility for key sectors of the front to cajole the Kremlin to support them.[10]

Endemic problems within the Russian war effort in Ukraine, exacerbated by poor decisions made by senior political and military leaders, are likely prompting strong-willed commanders to challenge their senior commanders in efforts to preserve their forces and lead combat effective units.[11] The 58th Combined Arms Army's (CAA) and the 106th VDV Division's relatively effective defense against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in their respective areas of the front thus far suggests that they are some of the most combat effective formations committed to the frontline, and Popov and Seliverstov likely contributed to their relative effectiveness by being willing to challenge superiors and the system. Popov's reported actions clearly crossed the line to insubordination. Seliverstov may have followed Popov's example or the Russian military leadership may have dismissed Seliverstov out of the fear that he would do so.

Seliverstov's dismissal suggests that there is a deep concern within the Russian military leadership about the chain of command in Ukraine. Popov's, Russian VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky's, and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's challenges to Gerasimov's and Shoigu's authority have established a precedent for insubordination that can hollow out support for the Russian military command among senior officers.[12] "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky, who leads forces defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives in western Donetsk Oblast, amplified Popov's complaints about the lack of Russian counterbattery capabilities on July 15, suggesting that the controversy with Popov's dismissal may be influencing other commanders to more publicly voice their frustrations.[13] The apparently intensifying pattern of insubordination may prompt the Russian military leadership to replace commanders whom they perceive to be potentially insubordinate with loyal figures, preferring yes-men to competent and strong-willed officers able to maintain the combat capabilities of Russian formations defending in key sectors of the front in Ukraine.

The Russian military leadership is likely attempting to dissuade commanders from emulating recent cases of insubordination by punishing those involved in leaking Popov's message of complaints. Shoigu is also likely attempting to mitigate the aftermath of Popov's leaked audio recording within the Russian government and punish Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev for the leak. Russian sources speculated that Shoigu is demanding that the Russian State Duma Defense Committee expel Gurulev for leaking Popov's audio message.[14] A Russian source close to Russian security officials claimed that the United Russia party is preparing a set of punishments that will include censoring Gurulev from

discussing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[15] One source claimed that Gurulev's fate in the State Duma depends on an upcoming meeting between Secretary of the General Council of United Russia Party Andrey Turchak and Shoigu.[16] Turchak previously publicly accused Gurulev of leaking the audio recording to stage a "political show."^[17] Another source claimed that Gurlev was summoned to meet with Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin on July 17.[18]

Growing insubordination will likely exacerbate existing factional divides within the Russian military and the wider Russian security sphere. A Russian source claimed that Dyumin unsuccessfully attempted to intercede to prevent Seliverstov's dismissal in a trip to Moscow on July 14.[19] Dyumin may have been advocating for Seliverstov in opposition to Shoigu and Gerasimov or simply because the 106th VDV Division is headquartered in Tula Oblast. In either case Dyumin's intervention likely inflamed perceptions within the Russian military that the dismissal was associated with factionalism. Gerasimov and Shoigu may view Dyumin as an anti-MoD establishment figure due to his reported affiliations with Prigozhin, his reported involvement in negotiations that brought Wagner's rebellion to an end, and widespread rumors following the rebellion that Dyumin would replace Shoigu as defense minister.[20] Shoigu and Gerasimov may also view insubordination within the VDV as the result of factionalism since Teplinsky is now the highest profile anti-Gerasimov officer following Prigozhin's apparent denouement.[21] Russian sources notably claimed that the 106th VDV Division closely operated alongside Wagner forces in January 2023 as their offensive on Bakhmut intensified, and Gerasimov and his affiliates may view Seliverstov as an officer in a hostile camp due to his relationships with both Wagner and Teplinsky.[22] Russian forces also claimed that Seliverstov routinely opposed the command of former VDV commander and close Gerasimov affiliate Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov during the Russian offensive on Kyiv in the early stages of the full-scale invasion and may have established himself as a noted anti-Gerasimov commander at that time, since Serdyukov was in Gerasimov's patronage.[23] Teplinsky's and Prigozhin's challenges to Gerasimov and Shoigu likely engendered a view within the MoD establishment that acts of insubordination are likely also factional power plays aimed at weakening their support with the Kremlin.[24] Gerasimov and Shoigu may increasingly view opposition to their decisions as evidence of factionalism and may use perceived factional affiliations as grounds for punishing or firing those they view as presenting a threat of insubordination.

Factions within the Russian security forces and the Kremlin appear to be fighting for control over the Russian insider information space. Russian insider Telegram channels routinely speculate on internal Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) politics and dynamics between Russian political factions. Russian authorities arrested on July 14 former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Colonel Mikhail Polyakov, who reportedly ran several popular insider Telegram channels.[25] A Russian source claimed that Polyakov previously served as the head of the Moscow FSB service for the protection of the constitutional order.[26] Russian insider sources claimed that Polyakov was in frequent contact with the Russian MoD's Department of Military Representatives and used his affiliation with the FSB to advance his personal unspecified objectives - possibly using secret information to defame Russian officials.[27] One source claimed that Polyakov was involved in distributing Popov's leaked audio recording.[28] An insider source also claimed that the recent arrest of Russian Deputy Minister for Digital Development Maxim Parshin for bribery was also related to inter-Kremlin fight for control over the online information space and noted that Presidential Administration officials such as First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko also controls a number of Telegram channels.[29] One source sarcastically observed that the FSB has moved from controlling Russia to fighting for control over Telegram, while another noted that Polyakov's arrest may be the start of a fight for control over insider sources on the Russian internet.[30]

Polyakov's arrest suggests that different factions within the Kremlin and Russian security entities are exploiting the Russian information space and secret information to advance their political and financial objectives against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine. If Polyakov's affiliation with numerous insider Telegram channels is true, then it is evident that Russian officials see the Russian information space as an important source of authority that allows them to promote their interests and discredit their opponents in the eyes of their constituencies. One Russian source, for example, rhetorically asked who would want to discredit the FSB via Polyakov's arrest, while another milblogger observed that such infighting was not as evident prior to 2022.[31] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny may also have impelled Russian officials to seek to discredit or eliminate opponents who control some of the insider Telegram sources to maintain their standings or positions.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on June 15 and reportedly made limited gains. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces made limited gains south of Bakhmut near Andriivka (10km south of Bakhmut) and crossed the Siverskyi Donets Canal in the area.[32] Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces made limited advances in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area southwest of Velyka Novosilka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast northeast of Robotyne (12km south of Orikhiv).[33] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are "constantly" moving reinforcements to the Bakhmut area and recently transferred an unspecified BARS (Russian Combat Reserve) unit from the Kremenna area to near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), indicating that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations continue to trigger transfers of Russian forces to the Bakhmut area.[34] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated in an interview with CNN published on July 14 that the counteroffensive is successful but acknowledged that the tempo of Ukrainian advances is slower than expected.[35] Tarnavskyi stated that Ukrainian forces are effectively defeating Russian forces at longer distances, likely referencing Ukraine's continued interdiction campaigns in eastern and southern Ukraine.[36] Tarnavskyi also reported that Ukrainian forces received cluster munitions that can "radically change [the battlefield]" and have yet to use them.[37]

The New York Times (NYT) reported that the Ukrainian military has adjusted its strategy to minimize Ukrainian casualties while continuing to attrit Russian forces, supporting ISW's previous assessments. NYT reported that unnamed US and European officials estimated that Russian forces destroyed up to 20 percent of Ukraine's Western-provided weaponry in the first two weeks of the counteroffensive.[38] The NYT reported that officials stated that the rate of losses has dropped to 10 percent in the subsequent weeks due to a change in Ukrainian strategy.[39] The NYT reported that the Ukrainian military has changed tactics to focus on wearing down Russian forces with artillery and long-range missiles instead of large-scale assaults, which is consistent with Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's statement on July 14 that increased Ukrainian indirect fire can both pin down Russian forces and minimize Ukrainian casualties.[40] ISW previously assessed on July 4 that Ukrainian forces appear to be focusing on creating an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment.[41] Ukraine's military has likely been refining its counteroffensive strategy for weeks, and the larger effects of those adjustments are only just becoming clear to some observers. Ukraine will likely continue to adjust its strategy and execution throughout the counteroffensive to facilitate continued progress.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that it developed a plan for Wagner Group personnel to train Belarusian forces as Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian sources continue to report that Wagner forces are moving to Belarus. The Belarusian MoD announced on July 14 that it developed a roadmap with "Wagner leadership" for Wagner forces to train Belarusian forces and pledged to provide additional information about the plan.[42] Independent Belarusian monitoring group *The Hajun Project* reported that an anonymous source observed Belarusian traffic police escorting a convoy consisting of at least 60

vehicles with Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' license plates in Belarus on the morning of July 15.[43] *The Hajun Project* stated that the convoy was likely transferring Wagner personnel from Russia to Belarus and may be en route to a tent camp in Tsel (15km northwest of Aspovichy), Mogilev Oblast.[44] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Belarusian partisans confirmed that 240 Wagner personnel, 40 trucks, and a large number of weapons arrived in Aspovichy and that Wagner forces are staying in Tsel, Mogilev Oblast.[45] Several milbloggers also posted footage and photos claiming to show a convoy of Wagner vehicles en route to Belarus.[46] It is unclear if a single Wagner convoy traveled from Russia to Belarus or if multiple convoys are en route to Belarus at this time.

Russian authorities likely continue to forcibly integrate Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses into the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik announced on July 15 the incorporation of the Luhansk, Alchevsk, Severodonetsk, Starobilsk, and Rovenky UOC dioceses into the ROC.[47] The ROC has already seized the Berdyansk and Prymorsk dioceses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, and a Russian news aggregator claimed that the Russian Ministry of Justice recently registered the Donetsk City and Horlivka dioceses as part of the ROC.[48] The new round of forced integration of the UOC dioceses in occupied Luhansk Oblast followed a Ukrainian court ruling that the Head of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra Metropolitan Pavel will go to a detention center instead of remaining under house arrest.[49] Russian sources attempted to portray the integration of UOC dioceses into the ROC as a response to claimed Ukrainian religious suppression of a Kremlin-run ROC. The ROC has explicit links to the Kremlin and has provided material and spiritual support to Russia during the war.[50] This explanation makes little sense, however, as the ROC clearly faces no threats from the Ukrainian government in Russian-occupied territory. The Ukrainian government is not engaging in religious suppression, moreover, but rather acting against religious elements it asserts are linked to the Kremlin's war effort.[51] Russian authorities have conducted systematic religious persecution in occupied Ukraine since the start of the war, however.[52]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources reported on July 15 that the Russian military command dismissed 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division Commander Major General Vladimir Seliverstov.
- Seliverstov's dismissal may be a part of an ongoing purge of insubordinate commanders by the Russian military command and may suggest that the corrosion of the Russian chain of command in Ukraine is accelerating.
- The Russian military leadership is likely attempting to dissuade commanders from emulating recent cases of insubordination by punishing those involved in leaking Popov's message of complaints.
- Growing insubordination will likely exacerbate existing factional divides within the Russian military and the wider Russian security sphere.
- Factions within the Russian security forces and the Kremlin appear to be fighting for control over the Russian insider information space.
- Polyakov's arrest suggests that different factions within the Kremlin and Russian security entities are exploiting the Russian information space and secret information to advance their political and financial objectives against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on June 15 and reportedly made limited gains.
- The New York Times (NYT) reported that the Ukrainian military has adjusted its strategy to minimize Ukrainian casualties while continuing to attrit Russian forces, supporting ISW's previous assessments.
- The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that it developed a plan for Wagner Group personnel to train Belarusian forces as Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian sources continue to report that Wagner forces are moving to Belarus.
- Russian authorities likely continue to forcibly integrate Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses into the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations and made limited territorial gains near Svatove.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly made limited territorial gains on Bakhmut's southern flank, while Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made limited advances on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka line but did not make any territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border and reportedly made limited gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and reportedly made limited advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the completion of Russia's spring 2023 conscription cycle on July 15.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that the Kremlin launched a program to recruit young adults in Russia for service in occupation administrations in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 14, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

July 14, 2023, 4:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:00pm ET on July 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin further indicated he intends to maintain the Wagner Group as a cohesive fighting force rather than breaking it up but seeks to separate Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin from Wagner leadership and forces. Putin confirmed to Russian news outlet *Kommersant* in an interview published on July 13 that he met with Prigozhin and 35 Wagner commanders on June 29.^[1] Putin claimed that he offered Wagner fighters the option to serve under a Wagner commander (callsign "Seda") who has commanded Wagner forces for the last 16 months, further confirming ISW's previous assessment that the Kremlin seeks to retain Wagner as a cohesive fighting force while separating it from Prigozhin.^[2] Putin claimed that "many [Wagner commanders] nodded" in response to his offer, but that Prigozhin, "who was sitting in front of his personnel and did not see them nodding," said that the Wagner commanders did not agree with the decision. Putin likely emphasized Prigozhin's differing response to frame Prigozhin as a problem in contrast to loyal Wagner commanders. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin noted that Putin's retelling of the July 29 meeting portrays Putin as succumbing to Prigozhin's demands, but the final outcome of the July 29 meeting is unclear.^[3] When asked directly by *Kommersant* about Wagner's future as a combat unit, Putin continued to maintain the absurd notion that private military companies (PMCs) do not exist in Russia. Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brigadier General Pat Ryder stated on July 14 that Wagner forces are not participating in military operations in Ukraine in any significant support or combat roles.^[4] ISW has previously observed Russian sources reporting that Wagner forces are not involved in combat operations in Ukraine.^[5]

Belarusian government and independent sources confirmed on July 14 that Wagner Group instructors previously deployed in Africa previously arrived at training grounds in Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on July 14 showing Wagner instructors training Belarusian territorial troops near Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast.^[6] A Belarusian insider source claimed that the Wagner instructors from Wagner's African contingent (which the source described as the "Wagner Africa Corps," though it is unknown if that is a formal designation) arrived in Belarus on July 11 via a convoy from occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[7] The Belarusian insider source suggested that Wagner seeks to rotate troops of their African contingent and that the arrival of some instructors to Belarus is part of a wider troop rotation effort.^[8] A Russian milblogger claimed that only a part of Wagner's Africa contingent has left Africa and that sufficient troops remain in African host nations to perform assigned tasks.^[9] Wagner's internationally deployed commanders are likely arriving in Belarus to prepare training infrastructure and set conditions for the arrival of regular Wagner forces, who are reportedly slated to deploy to Belarus in early August after taking leave and undergoing reorganization following Wagner's June 24 armed rebellion.^[10] Russian milbloggers additionally amplified an image on July 14 reportedly showing Prigozhin himself either in Belarus or en route to Belarus from occupied Luhansk Oblast, but one milblogger noted that Prigozhin's current role in Wagner remains unclear.^[11]

Former 58th Combined Arms Army Commander Major General Ivan Popov's dismissal continues to generate pronounced ire against the Russian military command and the Russian civilian leadership. Russian milbloggers argued that Popov's dismissal shows that the Russian military command is detrimentally suppressing the opinions of commanders about the situation at the front and that Russian command has forgotten that their main priority is preserving their personnel.^[12] A Russian military correspondent argued that Popov's dismissal illustrates a dire issue with both the Russian military leadership as well as Russia's civilian leadership.^[13] The military correspondent accused the civilian leadership of routinely suppressing and ignoring reports from the frontline and of failing to properly mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) for the war effort.^[14] The military correspondent claimed that Russian elites and businessmen have agreements with the Russian military command constraining Russian military action on the ground to avoid damaging economic interests - providing the hypothetical example of Russian forces being denied permission to attack a town to preserve an industrial plant owned by a Russian businessman.^[15] Prigozhin previously accused Russia's oligarchs of deceiving Putin and the Russian public to launch the invasion of Ukraine in order to divide the assets of occupied Ukrainian territories between themselves.^[16] The military correspondent also warned that the Russian chain of command in Ukraine is further degrading and that the situation is "beginning to boil."^[17] Popov's dismissal has exposed a new level of concern about factional dynamics and degraded command structures in the Russian military following Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion, and will likely serve as a point of neuralgia in the Russian information space for the foreseeable future.^[18]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 14 and reportedly made gains in some areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast), and Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) directions.^[19] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success in the Bila Hora-Andriivka direction (9-15km southwest of Bakhmut).^[20] Ukrainian Deputy Director of the Department of Application Planning of the Main Directorate of the Ukrainian National Guard Colonel Mykola Urshalovych stated that Ukrainian forces have advanced over 1,700 meters in unspecified places in the Melitopol direction.^[21] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces achieved a localized breakthrough of Russian defensive lines north of Pryutne (15km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).^[22]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 17 Shahed-131/136 drones from Krasnodar Krai and an S-300 missile at targets in Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 16 of the launched drones.^[23] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces targeted Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.^[24] Russian sources claimed that an unspecified number of Russian Shahed-131/136 drones struck Ukrainian military infrastructure in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.^[25]

Russian authorities detained former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Mikhail Polyakov, who reportedly is the administrator of several popular telegram channels covering internal Kremlin politics. Moscow City police detained Polyakov on accusations that he extorted unspecified Russian politicians and businessmen.^[26] Russian sources claimed that Polyakov runs the "Kremlin Laundress" channel and is either affiliated with or an administrator of the telegram channels "Brief" and "Siloviki."^[27] "Brief" and "Siloviki" denied that Polyakov is affiliated with their channels, however.^[28] These three telegram channels routinely speculate on internal Kremlin politics and dynamics between Russian political factions and have promoted notable rumors within the Russian information space. Channels that speculate about internal Kremlin politics represent a specific niche of the Russian information space, and Polyakov's detention suggests that the Kremlin may intend to suppress speculations about internal politics following Wagner's rebellion.

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are waging an interdiction campaign against Russian military targets in Russia. The *Washington Post* quoted Zaluzhnyi as saying that Ukraine uses domestically produced weapons to strike Russian military targets in Russia due to Western concerns about Ukrainian forces using Western-provided weapons against Russian territory.^[29] Zaluzhnyi also stressed the importance of Ukrainian strikes across the theater in Ukraine. The *Washington Post* reported that Zaluzhnyi also stated that increased Ukrainian indirect fire can pin down Russian forces and minimize Ukrainian casualties, but that Ukraine is currently dependent on munitions from other countries for this aim. Zaluzhnyi also reiterated Ukraine's intent to liberate Crimea.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin further indicated he intends to maintain the Wagner Group as a cohesive fighting force rather than breaking it up but seeks to separate Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin from Wagner leadership and forces.
- Belarusian government and independent sources confirmed on July 14 that Wagner Group instructors previously deployed in Africa previously arrived at training grounds in Belarus.
- Former 58th Combined Arms Army Commander Major General Ivan Popov's dismissal continues to generate pronounced ire against the Russian military command and the Russian civilian leadership.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 14 and reportedly made gains in some areas.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 14.
- Russian authorities detained former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Mikhail Polyakov, who reportedly is the administrator of several popular telegram channels covering internal Kremlin politics.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are waging an interdiction campaign against Russian military targets in Russia.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks and reportedly advanced around Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border and reportedly made limited gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in this direction.
- Russia continues efforts likely aimed at keeping high ranking officers in their positions without needing special exemptions to retirement age limits.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to consolidate administrative control of occupied territories by manipulating residence requirements and forcibly passportizing occupied populations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 13, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, and Mason Clark

July 13, 2023, 8:50 pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on July 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Former Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Major General Ivan Popov claimed in leaked audio that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu dismissed him for expressing persistent grievances about problems on the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline to senior commanders. Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev leaked Popov's audio message on July 12 in which Popov stated that Russian command fired him for expressing grievances over the lack of support for Russian forces and replaced him with Lieutenant General Denis Lyamin.^[1] Popov claimed that he expressed concerns to the "highest level" of Russian command over the lack of Russian counter-battery warfare capabilities, the absence of artillery reconnaissance stations, significant Russian casualties from Ukrainian artillery fire, and other issues.^[2] Popov claimed that Shoigu fired him because his honesty in voicing various problems in the Russian military threatened the Russian command. Popov claimed that he chose to "call a spade a spade" in the name of his dead comrades instead of "remaining in silent cowardice."^[3] Russian sources previously claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov dismissed Popov for expressing concerns over the need for troop rotations in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[4]

Popov was very likely aware that a recipient of his message in the veteran community of the 58th CAA would leak the audio recording. Popov reportedly distributed the recording to various actors including commanders, personnel, and veterans of the 58th CAA.^[5] Gurulev, a former Chief of Staff of the 58th CAA, posted the recording on his Telegram channel on July 12, after which some prominent voices of the Russian ultranationalist community criticized Gurulev for breaking the sanctity of a private chat.^[6] The voices accused Gurulev of leaking the audio in order to politicize the situation and bolster his own public appeal. Popov's choice to distribute the audio to voices within the Russian veteran community suggests that he likely used unofficial or non-secure channels to distribute this message and that he was likely aware of the risk of using such channels for a supposedly limited audience. Popov may have intended for some recipients to leak the audio. Gurulev is a prominent voice in the Russian veteran community who has previously criticized the Russian MoD's conduct of the war, so was likely to distribute such a recording from an insecure channel.^[7] One milblogger claimed that Popov purposefully released the audio to demonstrate that Popov does not fear the wrath of the Russian military command.^[8] A Russian source leaked Popov's grievances and reports of his dismissal on July 11 prior to the leak of the recording, which may suggest that Popov may have coordinated the timing of the July 12 leak.^[9]

Popov equated himself with a rebellion leader less than a month after the Wagner Group rebellion, regardless of whether he intended for the recording to leak. Popov referred to himself as "Spartak" - his longtime callsign - and his subordinates as "gladiators," likely deliberately invoking the memory of Roman slave rebellion leader Spartacus.^[10] Popov may have used this comparison to underscore his self-portrayal as separate from the inept and actively harmful Russian military command. Popov claimed that Russia's "most senior [military] commander" (likely referring to Gerasimov) is attacking Russian forces from the rear as they defend against the Ukrainian counteroffensive on the frontline and painted himself as morally obligated to raise his concerns with the Russian military command. Popov's

portrayal of himself as a rebellion leader with grievances against the MoD - whether intentionally or otherwise - is notably reminiscent of the self-portrayal and rhetoric of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin leading up to and during his June 24 armed rebellion.[11] Popov notably has no known affiliations with Wagner or Prigozhin, however.

Popov likely attempted to appeal to the Kremlin to partially or fully strip Gerasimov of command over operations in Ukraine. Popov's indications that senior Russian command was responsible for the operational decisions he opposed and the absence of Southern Military District (SMD) Commander Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev in the controversy may suggest that Gerasimov is playing a more active role in overseeing operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Russian sources have speculated that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) commander and rumored deputy theater commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky recently assumed Gerasimov's responsibilities for operations in Ukraine, although ISW has not observed confirmation that such a transfer of responsibilities has occurred.[12] Even if Gerasimov is not directly in charge of the Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine, Popov's complaints against the Russian military command suggest that Gerasimov still has significant command over operational decision-making in Ukraine. Popov therefore likely aimed to bypass Gerasimov's responsibilities as overall theater commander by directly asking Putin to overrule Gerasimov, although it is unclear to what extent Popov aimed to depose Gerasimov of his authority.

Popov likely modeled his attempt to secure Putin's favor for his desired goals off of Teplinsky's successful appeal to Putin in March.[13] Teplinsky temporarily resigned in January over a conflict with Gerasimov about the use of VDV forces in human wave attacks around Soledar and reportedly used connections in veteran communities to directly appeal to Putin on March 15 to rally support for the anti-Gerasimov group within the MoD.[14] Popov's message to current and former SMD personnel likely sought to recreate the effect of Teplinsky's outreach after Popov failed to initially bring his complaints directly to Putin. Popov may have more ambitiously sought to seize on possible Kremlin concerns about the widespread disdain for Gerasimov in order to elevate his own standing in a way reminiscent of Teplinsky's alleged rise to deputy theater commander.

Gerasimov may have tried to shield Putin from unwanted criticism to uphold Putin's ignorance by firing Popov before he could appeal directly to the Kremlin. A source reportedly affiliated with the Russian security services claimed that Popov announced that he would appeal to Putin before Gerasimov dismissed him from his position, which may indicate that Gerasimov directly responded to Popov's threat.[15] ISW had previously observed that Putin has ignored complaints from Russian officials who spoke on behalf of Russian servicemen – likely to distance himself from Russian military failures. For example, the Secretary of the United Russia Party's General Council Andrey Turchak delivered a blunt briefing directly to Putin in February 2023 regarding the dire state of the Russian winter-spring offensive but was unsuccessful in triggering a command change.[16] ISW assessed that Teplinsky's appeal to Russian veteran communities, however, forced Putin to respond to the complaints about the need for preparations for Ukrainian counteroffensives as of March.[17] The anecdote showcases that Putin preferred to remain ignorant until he faced potential backlash from military officials and Russian veterans. Putin may have instructed Gerasimov to prevent and resolve similar compromising situations before these incidents reached the Kremlin.

Popov's attempt to directly appeal to Putin for support and his insubordination of Gerasimov's command is indicative of a pattern of corrosive behavior that has developed within the Russian command and the Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. Popov's and Teplinsky's attempts to prompt Putin to act against Gerasimov are reminiscent of Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion, during which Wagner forces attempted to force Putin to remove Gerasimov and Shoigu.[18] Three prominent figures within the Russian war effort in Ukraine (Teplinsky, Prigozhin, and Popov) have now attempted to weaken Gerasimov and Shoigu's authority due to a deep concern about the attrition of their forces and have attempted to use their responsibility over key sectors of the front to go outside of the chain of command to compel the Kremlin to act in their favor. ISW has previously assessed that public disagreements between Russian forces in Ukraine over supplies and combat tasks and the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) apparent need to negotiate with subordinate commanders on these issues suggest that there are severe chain of command problems.[19]

The growing precedent of commanders subordinate to Gerasimov conducting outright insubordination to achieve desired goals may be the result of an incentive for commanders to violate the chain of command. Russian commanders may be increasingly taking the wellbeing of their forces into their own hands in the face of the Russian MoD's continued failures to address endemic issues with the Russian war effort in Ukraine. The increasingly fragile Russian chain of command may prompt a critical command and control crisis in the future, in which field commanders' support for the Russian military command could become increasingly hollow.

Russian milbloggers expressed varied reactions to Popov's dismissal, though none disagreed with Popov's complaints about problems Russian forces experience on the front. Many Russian sources characterized Popov as "intelligent," "competent," and "authoritative" and claimed that he was a good commander who had wide support of his troops.[20] Popov is a respected commander who has followed a promising promotion path similar to that of generals who have gone on to command military districts, and ISW does not have any reason to doubt milblogger characterizations of Popov as an effective and respected commander. Some Russian sources used Popov's firing to express longstanding disdain for the Russian military command and Gerasimov, claiming that the Russian military command never listens to their complaints.[21] Wagner-affiliated sources attempted to co-opt Popov's grievances by likening Popov to Prigozhin and describing their situations as beloved and respected commanders who faced punishment for voicing genuine concerns.[22] Other milbloggers noted that Popov and Prigozhin held many similar unresolved complaints that eventually led to Wagner's armed rebellion, regardless of Prigozhin's personal ambitions.[23] Milbloggers also expressed concerns that continued outspoken dissatisfaction from senior Russian commanders following the Wagner armed rebellion could set a precedent for Russian forces conducting armed protests.[24] Prominent Russian milblogger and former Russian officer Igor Girkin cynically claimed that Russian forces are only one major military defeat away from conventional Russian forces conducting their own march on Moscow.[25] Russian milbloggers notably did not disagree with Popov's list of problems on the frontline, with one milblogger explicitly asserting that ineffective Russian counter-battery fire and artillery reconnaissance result in Russian casualties that diminish Russian forces' long-term ability to hold defensive positions.

Disruptions to the Russian command overseeing Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine will likely have some immediate but marginal impacts on Russian forces. ISW has observed that the 58th CAA's 19th and 42nd Motorized Rifle Divisions are heavily committed to defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[26] Popov's sudden firing may temporarily disrupt Russian command and control in these areas and degrade Russian morale given the widespread support Popov had among Russian servicemembers of the 58th CAA. These impacts will likely be marginal and ISW continues to assess that Russian forces in the area are conducting a sound doctrinal defense.[27]

Popov's dismissal over the issue of Russian casualties and reported complaints about lack of force rotations further supports ISW's assessment that Russian defenses in Ukraine are likely brittle. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces lack the reserves to rotate frontline units and that without

operational reserves Russian forces would have to fall back to prepared defensive positions without significant support in the case of a Ukrainian breakthrough.[28] Popov's complaint about Russian casualties from artillery fire likely indicates that Russian forces need rotations and reinforcements to sustain their defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Russia's lack of reserves likely made it impossible for Gerasimov to seriously consider Popov's appeal, and Popov's dismissal has further illustrated that Russian forces are unable to conduct force rotations. The apparent theater-wide lack of force rotations suggests that Russian forces would have to rely on existing and already degraded forces in the event of any Ukrainian breakthrough. Popov's complaints about Russian forces' poor counterbattery capabilities and significant Russian casualties from Ukrainian artillery fire are likely a result of what ISW assesses to be a Ukrainian effort to attrit Russian forces defending in southern Ukraine.[29]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 13 and made gains in some areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast), and Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) directions.[30] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success in the Novodanylivka-Shyroka Balka (roughly 3km south of Orikhiv) and Mala Tokmachka-Novopokrovka (6-13km southeast of Orikhiv) directions.[31] Ukrainian officials also reported that Ukrainian forces advanced on Bakhmut's southern flank.[32] Geolocated footage published on July 11 shows that Ukrainian forces recently made limited advances north of Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka).[33]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 20 Shahed-131/136 drones from Kursk Oblast and the Sea of Azov, two Kalibr missiles from the Black Sea, and one Iskander-M missile from occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea.[34] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces targeted Mykolaiv, Kirovohrad, and Kyiv oblasts.[35] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 20 Shahed drones and both Kalibr missiles.[36] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces constantly use combined missile and drone strikes and seek opportunities to bypass Ukrainian air defenses to inflict maximum damage.[37] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that they conducted a successful group strike with sea-based long-range high-precision weapons and destroyed Ukrainian ammunition storage facilities.[38]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated boilerplate Russian rhetoric to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine following the NATO summit. Lavrov claimed that Russia would recognize the appearance of F-16s in Ukraine as a nuclear threat because F-16s are technically capable of carrying nuclear warheads.[39] The US and other NATO states are extremely unlikely to provide F-16s to Ukraine with the specific modifications necessary to carry nuclear weapons, and the notion of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons is preposterous. Many airframes and other common weapons systems are capable of carrying tactical nuclear weapons if the weapons or warheads have the correct modifications.[40] Lavrov also claimed that Ukraine rejected multilateral negotiations frameworks from China, Brazil, and African states.[41] ISW has consistently assessed that Russia is currently highly unlikely to meaningfully engage in any negotiations framework despite efforts to signal falsely otherwise.[42] ISW has assessed that the Kremlin routinely amplifies information operations about nuclear escalation with the West over the war in Ukraine or Russia's willingness to negotiate in an effort to weaken Western support for Ukraine.[43]

The Kremlin continues to navigate the aftermath of Wagner's armed rebellion, as the future of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin continues to be unclear. Geolocated footage published on July 13 purportedly shows Wagner forces driving along the M4 highway in Voronezh Oblast redeploying from field camps likely in the rear of Russian occupied Ukraine.[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that the footage showed Russian police escorting the convoy and buses with Belarusian license plates, possibly indicating the convoy's destination.[45] The Russian military continues to express concerns over the security of the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don after Wagner forces surrounded the building during the armed rebellion. Images published on July 13 show that Russian forces placed gabions filled with sand around the headquarters, and milbloggers claimed that unspecified Spetsnaz personnel and an armored car equipped with a machine gun are stationed outside the building.[46]

Russian outlet RTVI reported on July 12 that companies associated with Prigozhin have received nine contracts with Russian businesses amounting to 1.064 billion rubles (about \$11.8 million) since Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24.[47] The largest contract is reportedly between the company Produtservis and the Ministry of Education of Mytishchi in Moscow Oblast for over 705 million rubles (about \$7.8 million) to supply meals to public schools from 2023 to 2025.[48] Other customers include Russian government linked entities such as the hospitals subordinate to the Moscow Department of Health and the Medical and Health Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which claimed that it had not received complaints over catering services and therefore had no grounds to terminate the contract. It is unclear if Prigozhin is still linked to these companies, however.

The Kremlin reportedly ordered the detention and suspension of several senior military officers following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24, supporting ISW's prior assessment that the Kremlin likely intends to purge the MoD of figures viewed as disloyal.[49] The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on July 13 that Russian authorities detained at least 13 senior military officers and suspended or fired around 15 senior officers following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24.[50] Russian authorities reportedly detained Wagner-affiliated Deputy Commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin, former Russian Deputy Defense Ministry for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, and other unnamed senior officers. Russian authorities also reportedly detained and later released Surovikin's deputy Colonel General Andrey Yudin and deputy head of Russian General Staff's Main Directorate (GRU) Lieutenant General Vladimir Alexeyev. The WSJ reported that one source claimed that the detentions are intended to "clean ranks" of those Russian President Vladimir Putin no longer sees as trustworthy.[51]

Russian authorities arrested the Russian Deputy Minister for Digital Development Maxim Parshin for allegedly accepting bribes. The Russian Investigative Committee announced the arrest on July 13, and Russian State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtein claimed that Russian law enforcement witnessed Parshin accept a bribe of 3.5 million rubles (\$33,350), after which law enforcement detained him.[52] Russian authorities also arrested the Director of the Budget and Financial Technologies LLC, Alexander Monosov, for attempting to bribe Parshin.[53]

The Russian Ministry of Digital Development and the Union of Journalists expressed support for measures that would grant Russian military correspondents some type of veteran status. Russian Union of Journalists Head and state propagandist Vladimir Solovyev announced that the Union of Journalists and the Russian Ministry of Digital Development mutually support an effort to officially designate Russian military correspondents as "veterans of military journalism."[54] Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Head Leonid Slutsky stated on July 5 that the LDPR aims to pass legislation that will grant military correspondents the status of combat veterans, which would afford these milbloggers state guarantees and payments in cases of injury or death in Ukraine.[55] ISW

assessed that Russian ultranationalist figures are likely supporting these measures to court the Russian milblogger community as a key constituency.[56] The Kremlin could use such measures to exert more control over milbloggers and determine who qualifies as a recognized milblogger, however.

Key Takeaways:

- Former Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Major General Ivan Popov claimed in leaked audio that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu dismissed him for expressing persistent grievances about problems on the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline to senior commanders.
- Popov likely attempted to appeal to the Kremlin to partially or fully strip Gerasimov of command over operations in Ukraine.
- Gerasimov may have tried to shield Putin from unwanted criticism to uphold Putin's ignorance by firing Popov before he could appeal directly to the Kremlin.
- Popov's attempt to directly appeal to Putin for support and his insubordination of Gerasimov's command is indicative of a pattern of corrosive behavior that has developed within the Russian command and the Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers expressed varied reactions to Popov's dismissal, though none disagreed with Popov's complaints about problems Russian forces experience on the front.
- Disruptions to the Russian command overseeing Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine will likely have some immediate but marginal impacts on Russian forces.
- Popov's dismissal over the issue of Russian casualties and reported complaints about lack of force rotations further supports ISW's assessment that Russian defenses in Ukraine are likely brittle
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 13 and made gains in some areas.
- The Kremlin reportedly ordered the detention and suspension of several senior military officers following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion on June 24, supporting ISW's prior assessment that the Kremlin likely intends to purge the MoD of figures viewed as disloyal.
- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 13.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources engaged in positional battles near Kremenna.
- Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks and reportedly advanced around Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continue to conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces reported conducting limited offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast and continued counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts border area.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and made some gains in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of July 13.
- Russia may not be fulfilling some of its commitments to Iran in their bilateral security partnership, even as the Russian military continues to rely heavily on Iranian-made drones in Ukraine.
- The Associated Press (AP) reported on July 13 that Russian forces and occupation administrations are conducting a wide scale campaign to detain and abuse civilians and are planning to build additional internment infrastructure in the occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 12, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 12, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on July 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Group of Seven (G7) Coalition and NATO signed agreements to offer Ukraine long-term security commitments during the NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 12. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO has agreed on a three-part package that will give Ukraine a multi-year program of practical assistance, create a NATO-Ukrainian coordination council, and commits NATO to allow Ukraine to join the alliance without going through a Membership Action Plan (MAP).[1] G7 members Germany, Japan, France, Canada, Italy, Britain, and the United States signed a general framework document called the "Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine" aimed at offering the Ukraine military, financial, and intelligence support and stated that each member of the G7 will enter into bilateral security negotiations with Ukraine regarding the document.[2] Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated that other countries would have the opportunity to join the declaration at a later stage.[3] The general framework document also reportedly promises immediate steps to swiftly provide Ukraine with all necessary support in the event of a new attack but did not specify what that support would look like.[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the agreements reached at the NATO summit mean that Ukraine would receive formal security guarantees, although neither the NATO nor the G7 agreements currently provide such guarantees. [5] Ukraine did secure notable agreements that will strengthen long-term Western support for Ukraine at the NATO summit, and these agreements will likely serve as the framework for potential increases in Western security assistance to Ukraine.

Ukraine secured additional bilateral security and defense agreements during the second day of the NATO summit on July 12. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov signed agreements with Swedish Defense Minister Paul Jonsson on cooperation in the field of defense procurement and with the French Defense Ministry on increasing French military assistance to Ukraine by 170 million euros.[6] The Ukrainian Presidential Office announced that Australia will send an additional

30 Bushmaster armored vehicles to Ukraine.^[7] The UK government stated that the UK will provide Ukraine with an additional 50 million pounds in security assistance, including additional ammunition for Challenger tanks.^[8] Norwegian Defense Minister Bjorn Arild Gram stated that Norway will provide an additional NASAM (Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System) support package, including two additional fire control centers, two launch units, and spare parts.^[9] Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida noted that Japan will provide Ukraine with \$30 million in non-lethal equipment including drone detection systems.^[10]

The Russian information space continues to exhibit a generally muted response to the NATO summit. Many Russian sources claimed that they have long had access to planning documents for the summit and that none of the resulting agreements come as a surprise, and many milbloggers claimed that the summit has been a “failure” for Ukraine because Ukraine did not secure immediate NATO membership.^[11] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev emphasized that participants of the summit are acting in “predictable ways” and that the West will continue to provide Ukraine with military aid, and Russia will therefore continue to pursue the same goals in Ukraine.^[12] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov delivered boilerplate Kremlin rhetoric by stating that the G7’s provision of “security guarantees” to Ukraine is “potentially very dangerous” and an encroachment on Russian security interests.^[13]

The muted Russian response belies the reality that the summit demonstrated the degree to which the 2022 Russian invasion has set back the goals for which the Kremlin claims it launched the war. The aim of preventing NATO expansion and, indeed, rolling back earlier rounds of NATO expansion and pushing NATO back from Russia’s borders was one of the Kremlin’s stated demands before the invasion.^[14] The Kremlin has repeated this aim continually throughout the war. The lack of general outcry within the Russian information space regarding developments at the NATO summit, as well as Finland’s NATO accession and Turkey’s agreement to forward Sweden’s accession protocol, likely indicates that the Kremlin has internalized these defeats and desires to avoid dwelling on them. Many Russian sources are reporting on the NATO summit in a dispassionate and muted manner that is not commensurate with the wider defeat that the summit actually represents for Russia’s pre-war aims.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 12 and reportedly made gains in some areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast), and Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) directions.^[15] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success along the Bila Hora-Andriivka and Bila Hora-Kurdyumivka lines (up to 13km southwest of Bakhmut).^[16] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Major Valerii Shershen stated that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success and advanced along the frontline in the Berdyansk direction.^[17] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces also advanced near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut) southwest of Velyka Novosilka, Donetsk Oblast, and south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[18]

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 12. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russia launched 15 Shahed drones from Kursk Oblast and that Ukrainian air defense forces shot down 11 of the launched drones.^[19] Russian forces have notably not conducted missile strikes aimed at Ukrainian infrastructure over the past few days as the NATO summit is ongoing in Vilnius, behavior that diverges somewhat from previous Russian patterns of conducting missile strikes to correspond with major international political events that are relevant to the war in Ukraine.^[20]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that the Wagner Group has almost completely handed weapons and military equipment over to the MoD. Russian MoD spokesperson Igor Konashenkov announced on July 12 that the Wagner Group transferred more than 2,000 pieces of equipment and weapons to the Russian MoD.^[21] Konashenkov stated that the transferred weapons include T-90, T-80, and T-72 tanks, multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), anti-aircraft missile systems, howitzers, anti-tank guns, mortar systems, armored tractors, armored personnel carriers, vehicles, and small arms.^[22] Konashenkov stated that the Russian MoD transferred all the equipment and armaments to rear areas where Russian repair and recovery units will maintain and prepare the equipment for use.^[23] Konashenkov also claimed that dozens of units of the transferred equipment had never been used in combat conditions.^[24] A Russian milblogger challenged Konashenkov’s claims about the equipment and claimed that a RU MoD employee stated that while Wagner’s equipment was in good condition, it had clearly seen combat and that there was no unused equipment.^[25] The Russian MoD announcement, following the Kremlin’s acknowledgment of Putin’s June 29 meeting with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, is likely part of the Kremlin’s wider narrative effort to portray itself as fully in control and the Wagner rebellion as a settled affair.^[26]

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin claimed that certain members of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s inner circle may push Putin to end the war in order to depose him. Girkin claimed that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s rebellion succeeded, resulting in a power redistribution according to the plans of Prigozhin’s patrons, whom Girkin suggested include Presidential Administration First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko, billionaire and Putin’s reported personal banker Yuri Kovalchuk, and energy executives Arkady and Boris Rotenberg.^[27] Girkin claimed that the power structure including Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Moscow Oblast Governor Andrei Vorobev, and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has been weakened following the rebellion. Girkin claimed that members of the “Ozero Cooperative” – an association unifying the dachas of Putin and several members of his inner circle in Leningrad Oblast – want to oust Putin in favor of one of its own members, such as Prigozhin or Kiriyenko. Girkin claimed that the “Ozero Cooperative” first aims to sabotage Russian military operations, the defense industrial base (DIB), and control of rear areas to make Putin realize he must accept defeat in the war. Girkin warned that the “Ozero Cooperative” members will target the Ministry of Defense, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and other structures outside the control of the presidential administration.

Girkin’s claims are likely part of his ongoing effort to diminish Russian political and domestic support for a potential ceasefire in the war in Ukraine, but his targeting of specific members of Putin’s inner circle is notable. Girkin has repeatedly accused Prigozhin of being part of the faction arguing in favor of freezing the lines in Ukraine while Girkin has argued in favor of a grinding, protracted war effort, as ISW has previously reported.^[28] Kiriyenko in particular is a prominent Kremlin mouthpiece for domestic policy and occupation matters. Kiriyenko has reportedly positioned himself to expand his political reach in recent years, including into education development, oversight of regional elections, development of the Russian internet and information bloc, and political nongovernmental organizations.^[29] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza*, citing sources within the presidential administration, previously reported that Kiriyenko is attempting to position himself as a possible successor to Putin.^[30] *Meduza*’s sources saw Kiriyenko’s lack of connection to regional governments or businesses as undermining his prospects but noted that Kiriyenko is likely able to overcome these issues. Girkin is most likely attempting to portray Prigozhin as a direct threat to Putin’s regime in order to encourage harsher Kremlin action against Prigozhin and discourage any efforts to freeze the front in Ukraine. Girkin may be trying to discredit Kiriyenko and other claimed Prigozhin patrons to undermine any support that Prigozhin may have among any possible remaining prominent patrons.^[31]

Key Takeaways:

- The Group of Seven (G7) Coalition and NATO signed agreements to offer Ukraine long-term security commitments during the NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 12.
- Ukraine secured additional bilateral security and defense agreements during the second day of the NATO summit on July 12.
- The Russian information space continues to exhibit a generally muted response to the NATO summit. The muted Russian response belies the reality that the summit demonstrated the degree to which the 2022 Russian invasion has set back the goals for which the Kremlin claims it launched the war.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the frontline on July 12 and reportedly made gains in some areas.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed drone strikes across Ukraine on July 12.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that the Wagner Group has almost completely handed weapons and military equipment over to the MoD.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin claimed that certain members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle may push Putin to end the war in order to depose him.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued skirmishes in the Kreminna area, where Russian forces reportedly made limited gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited mechanized assault operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continue to grapple with the issue of securing Russia's international borders.
- Russian occupation authorities are using the promise of medical treatment to coerce residents of occupied territories to receive Russian passports and relocate to Russian territory.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 11, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 11, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:00pm ET on July 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed 131 and 136 drone strikes across Ukraine on July 11, likely in a demonstrative response to the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius and to threaten the Black Sea grain deal. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 26 of the 28 Russian Shahed 131 and 136 drones launched from the Primorsk-Akhtarsk (Krasnodar Krai) direction.^[1] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces tried to strike the grain terminal in Odesa Oblast, and that two drones struck an administrative building at a port facility.^[2] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces targeted port infrastructure to disrupt the Black Sea Grain deal.^[3] Russia's drone strikes on port infrastructure also coincide with the first day of the NATO summit in Vilnius and are likely intended to discourage NATO members from providing more military aid to Ukraine. Russia may be threatening the Black Sea grain deal to message the deal's original broker, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, that his recent statement of support for Ukraine's NATO membership and the return of the five Ukrainian Azovstal commanders on July 7 has not gone unnoticed and is not appreciated by the Kremlin.^[4]

Germany and France pledged to provide Ukraine more weapons systems during the first day of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated that Germany will provide Ukraine with two Patriot air defense launchers, 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles, 25 Leopard 1A5 main battle tanks, and five Bergepanzer 2 armored recovery vehicles over an unspecified time period.^[5] France will reportedly send Ukraine Storm Shadow missiles. French President Emmanuel Macron stated that he decided to send Ukraine weapons to allow Ukrainian forces to conduct deep strikes.^[6] Reuters reported that a French diplomatic source said that France will provide Ukraine with about 50 SCALP missiles (the French name for Storm Shadow missiles) with a range of 250km.^[7]

A coalition of 11 states signed a memorandum with Ukraine outlining the terms for training Ukrainian pilots on the F-16 aircraft at the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov announced on July 11 that 11 partner states signed a memorandum on the terms for the coalition to train Ukrainian pilots on the F-16.^[8] Reznikov noted that the training program may include other fighter aircraft types and expressed his thanks to Denmark and the Netherlands for their "outstanding leadership" in the process.^[9]

The Kremlin's and Russian milbloggers' reactions to the first day of the NATO Summit were relatively muted. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov took a predictably dim view of the NATO Summit's first day, complaining that the summit has a "pronounced, concentrated anti-Russian character."^[10] Peskov reiterated boilerplate rhetoric about how the West's continued security assistance to Ukraine and Ukraine's promised future membership in NATO would result in grave

consequences.[11] Russian milbloggers expressed general discontent about new weapons deliveries to Ukraine but have not voiced any major reactions at the time of this publication.[12] The milbloggers are likely waiting to react to the main events that will occur on the summit's second day when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will meet with US President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on July 12.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attempted to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed effort against the backdrop of the NATO Summit. Shoigu implausibly claimed on July 11 that Ukrainian forces have lost 26,000 servicemembers and 1,244 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles since starting counteroffensive operations on June 4.[13] Shoigu also tried to present possible Ukrainian interdiction efforts in southern Ukraine as similarly ineffective by claiming that Russian air defenses have intercepted 176 HIMARS rockets and 27 Storm Shadow cruise missiles since the start of the counteroffensive.[14] ISW assesses that Russian MoD reporting on Ukrainian losses is likely highly inflated, and even Russian milbloggers have recently accused the MoD of counting strikes on already damaged and destroyed vehicles as new Ukrainian equipment losses.[15] Shoigu's rhetoric about the Ukrainian counteroffensive notably contradicts the Kremlin's reported media guidance instructing Russian state media not to downplay the counteroffensive or overstate Russian successes.[16] Shoigu may be increasingly ignoring established Kremlin guidance on covering the counteroffensive in a renewed effort to portray the MoD as an effective manager of the war in Ukraine following the Wagner Group's rebellion.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 11 and made gains in some areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Berdyansk directions (Zaporizhia Oblast-Donetsk Oblast border area), and Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing counteroffensive operations around Bakhmut.[17] Geolocated footage published on July 10 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced northeast of Robotyne (15km south of Orikhiv).[18] A Russian milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces established control over new positions northwest of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and advanced up to 1.5km near Rozdolivka (19km northeast of Bakhmut).[19]

A Ukrainian Storm Shadow missile strike reportedly killed Deputy Commander of the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Oleg Tsokov at the command post of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) in occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.[20] Russian milbloggers and Ukrainian sources reported Tsokov's death on July 11, and social media users reported that Tsokov died in a strike on a local hotel according to preliminary information.[21] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov published footage purportedly showing smoke plumes resulting from Ukrainian missile strikes on Berdyansk but did not offer any information regarding Tsokov's death.[22] Tsokov was previously wounded during a Ukrainian strike on Svatove, Luhansk Oblast, in late September 2022 when he commanded the 144th Motorized Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army of the Western Military District (WMD).[23] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that locals knew about Tsokov's arrival and noted that Ukrainian forces have been systematically targeting Russian-occupied infrastructure in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblast – specifically recreation centers that Russian forces use as headquarters and command posts.[24] Ukrainian military officials have repeatedly signaled that Ukrainian forces are conducting an interdiction campaign as part of their counteroffensives to disrupt Russian logistics and command.[25] ISW has observed the 58th CAA's 42nd Motorized Rifle Division operating south of Orikhiv and the 58th CAA's 19th Motorized Rifle Division operating southwest of Orikhiv.[26] Tsokov's presence at the reported command post of the 58th CAA suggests that he was personally overseeing the army responsible for repelling Ukrainian counteroffensives in key sectors of western Zaporizhia Oblast stretching from near Polohy (90km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City) to the Kakhovka Reservoir.

Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for failing to defend against Ukrainian strikes on Russian headquarters. One milblogger claimed that Russia lacks professional military analysts who would improve the Russian military command's decision-making processes and adequately analyze information to develop risk assessments.[27] Another milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue to underestimate Ukrainian intelligence capabilities that set conditions for the strike.[28] The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger complained that Russian officers have poor operational security procedures despite knowing about the dangers of operations in occupied southern Ukraine.[29]

Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov reportedly fired Commander of the 58th CAA Major General Ivan Popov after Popov voiced his concerns over the need for troop rotations in western Zaporizhia Oblast amidst Ukrainian counteroffensives.[30] A source reportedly affiliated with the Russian security services claimed that Popov notified Gerasimov that elements of the 58th CAA – which are attempting to prevent Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast – are in need of rotation after fighting in combat for a long time and suffering significant casualties.[31] Gerasimov reportedly accused Popov of alarmism and blackmailing the Russian military command. The source added that Gerasimov dismissed Popov and sent him to forward positions after Popov threatened to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin with his complaint. Another Russian source who appears to be in contact with Russian forces in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast stated that his sources confirmed Popov's dismissal after he raised a "real" question about the lack of rotations in Polohy Raion on the Orikhiv frontline.[32] These reports, if true, may support ISW's previous assessments that Russian forces lack operational reserves that would allow them to carry out rotations of personnel defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives and that Russian defensive lines may be brittle.[33]

An unknown actor killed the Krasnodar City Deputy Head for Mobilization, Captain Stanislav Rzhitsky, on July 10.[34] Russian media reported that an unknown person shot Rzhitsky several times in Krasnodar and then fled the scene.[35] The Investigative Committee of Russia posted footage of Russian authorities detaining a man in Kurban, Krasnodar Krai on July 11 on suspicion of murdering Rzhitsky.[36] A Russian citizen previously attempted to kill a Russian officer at a recruitment office in Irkutsk shortly following the start of partial mobilization in Russia in late September 2022.[37] Rzhitsky's killing could be associated with continued discontent with mobilization, but ISW cannot definitively identify the motivation behind his killing at this time. Russian milbloggers claimed without offering evidence that Ukrainian operatives conducted the killing and compared it to previous high-profile killings of Russian ultranationalist figures in Russia.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed 131 and 136 drone strikes across Ukraine on July 11, likely in a demonstrative response to the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius and to threaten the Black Sea grain deal.
- Germany and France pledged to provide Ukraine more weapons systems during the first day of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11.
- A coalition of 11 states signed a memorandum with Ukraine outlining the terms for training Ukrainian pilots on the F-16 aircraft at the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11.
- The Kremlin's and Russian milbloggers' reactions to the first day of the NATO Summit were relatively muted.

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attempted to portray the Ukrainian counteroffensive as a failed effort against the backdrop of the NATO Summit.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 11 and made gains in some areas.
- A Ukrainian Storm Shadow missile strike reportedly killed Deputy Commander of the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Oleg Tsokov at the command post of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) in occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for failing to defend against Ukrainian strikes on Russian headquarters.
- Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov reportedly fired Commander of the 58th CAA Major General Ivan Popov after Popov voiced his concerns over the need for troop rotations in western Zaporizhia Oblast amidst Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- An unknown actor killed the Krasnodar City Deputy Head for Mobilization, Captain Stanislav Rzhitsky, on July 10.
- Russian forces are conducting offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line and made territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut's northern and southern outskirts.
- Russian forces launched assaults on Ukrainian positions on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues measures to gradually mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) to meet Russian military demands in Ukraine without conducting a wider economic mobilization.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on July 11 that the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) is struggling to establish regional branches in occupied territories in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 10, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 10, 2023, 7pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials stated on July 10 that Ukrainian forces have fire control over Bakhmut and Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) around the city.^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces have taken control of unspecified heights around Bakhmut, allowing Ukrainian forces to establish fire control over Bakhmut itself.^[2] Ukrainian officials have recently signaled that Ukraine seeks to trap Russian forces within the city, and it appears that Ukrainian operations in the Bakhmut area in recent days have been intended to slowly envelop Russian troops in Bakhmut and on its flanks.^[3] ISW was previously conservative when assessing claims of Russian fire control and general interdiction of Ukrainian lines of communication in and around Bakhmut as Russian forces gradually took control of the settlement, but Ukrainian claims of establishing fire control may be more credible. ^[4] Both Ukrainian and Russian sources have indicated in recent days that Ukraine is gaining ground in the Bakhmut area and on its southwestern flanks including specific terrain features that can give Ukrainian forces fire advantage. The fear of Ukrainian fire control and imminent threats to Bakhmut is also permeating the Russian information space, and Russian milbloggers have repeatedly expressed fear over Ukrainian forces encircling Russian forces in Bakhmut.^[5] Russian sources claimed at least since February that Russian forces maintained fire control over critical Ukrainian GLOCs around Bakhmut, while Ukrainian officials and sources did not express concern over these Russian claims, in contrast, and withdrew their forces in good order in the face of the Wagner Group's expensive frontal assaults.^[6] The persistent signaling of Ukrainian officials about Ukrainian operational intent in Bakhmut, alongside the clear concern of milbloggers over exactly what this intent may be, suggests that Ukrainian counteroffensive actions in this direction may be credibly threatening the Russian hold on Bakhmut, although it is far too early to forecast the liberation of the city.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 10. Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukrainian troops continued offensive actions in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblasts), and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces have liberated four square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut direction over the past week, and a total of 24 square kilometers since starting counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut direction (likely around early June).^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian troops advanced up to one kilometer in the Berdyansk and Melitopol directions, and a total of 8.6 kilometers since Ukrainian troops initiated counteroffensive operations in these directions.^[9] Since the beginning of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on June 4, ISW has calculated based on its own control of terrain data that Ukrainian forces recaptured approximately 253 square kilometers of territory. (Ukrainian official accounts of the area liberated differ from ISW's, almost certainly because Ukraine calculated its initial control of terrain differently. ISW is presenting its own figure of liberated land to make an apples-to-apples comparison of Russian and Ukrainian gains.) Russian forces have captured a total of 282 square kilometers in the entire theater since January 1. **In five weeks, Ukrainian forces have liberated nearly the same amount of territory that Russian forces captured in over six months.**

Russian Chief of the General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov's first public appearance since Wagner's rebellion supports ISW's previous assessment that he will likely retain his official position within the Russian military. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage on July 10 showing Gerasimov receiving reports about alleged Ukrainian attempts to strike Russian military targets in occupied Crimea and Rostov and Kaluga oblasts.^[10] ISW previously assessed that Gerasimov's past long periods of public absence have not been indicators of his official position within the Russian military

leadership and that Putin will likely not remove Gerasimov as the overall theater commander or Chief of the General Staff, as doing so would be too damaging to the Kremlin's and the MoD's reputation.^[11] The Kremlin has previously responded to speculations about Gerasimov's public absences by affirming his role as Chief of the General Staff and appears to be currently publicizing Gerasimov's presence at the meeting to respond to a new bout of rumors about his absence following Wagner's rebellion on June 24.^[12] ISW has previously observed Russian speculations that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky has recently assumed Gerasimov's responsibilities for Russian operations in Ukraine, although there continues to be no confirmation of these speculations.

^[13] Gerasimov's first public appearance since the rebellion was notably focused on alleged Russian internal security issues and not necessarily on Russian operations in Ukraine that the overall theater commander oversees.

The Kremlin and Western intelligence officials reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on June 29 (and/or July 1) following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24.^[14] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Putin met with Prigozhin and all of the Wagner commanders (35 people in total) in a three-hour meeting in the Kremlin. Peskov claimed that Putin gave an assessment of Wagner's actions during the "special military operation," gave his assessment of the armed rebellion, and listened to commanders' explanations.^[15] Putin also reportedly offered Wagner commanders "further employment options," while the Wagner commanders assured Putin that they are loyal supporters and soldiers of the state and Putin. Peskov refused to answer a question about whether Russian MoD officials were present at the meeting. French outlet *Liberation* previously reported on July 7, citing Western intelligence officials that Prigozhin and Wagner's top commanders met with Putin, Head of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) Viktor Zolotov, and Head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin on July 1.^[16] It is unclear if *Liberation* is referring to the claimed June 29 meeting or an additional meeting in the Kremlin.

Putin's decision to meet with Prigozhin is inconsistent with the Kremlin's prior rhetoric about Prigozhin and his role within the Wagner private military company (PMC). Peskov stated on June 29 that he did not have information about Prigozhin's whereabouts.^[17] Putin had also claimed in his speech on June 27 that "the owner of Concord company" (the Concord company is the parent company of Prigozhin's catering company) provided catering services for the Russian army, while the Russian state fully funded and supplied Wagner forces.^[18] Putin was clearly referring to Prigozhin in this statement given that Prigozhin is the owner of the Concord company and previously served as Putin's caterer in an effort to deliberately deprive Prigozhin of the title of Wagner financier and undermine his role in the Wagner PMC. Putin's meeting with Prigozhin and the later acknowledgment erodes these efforts and contradicts Putin's condemnation of the rebellion's organizers.^[19] The Kremlin may have sought to publicize the meeting to address the number of questions arising regarding Prigozhin's ability to freely move around Russia without facing legal action.

A Kremlin-affiliated war correspondent characterized the Putin-Prigozhin meeting as the Kremlin's attempt to "gently" replace Prigozhin and restructure Wagner.^[20] The milblogger claimed that the Kremlin is very dependent on Prigozhin's structures within Wagner and that their destruction would seriously damage the Wagner PMC, confirming ISW's previous assessment that the Kremlin is gradually attempting to separate the Wagner PMC from Prigozhin.^[21] ISW also previously assessed that the Kremlin relied on irregular armed formations and their patrons to outsource reservist recruitment and crowdfunding efforts, which may be one of many forms of the Kremlin's structural dependencies on Prigozhin-lead Wagner PMC.^[22] The milblogger noted that the meeting aimed to close out any issues that were not discussed during the negotiations between Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov that ensured security guarantees for Prigozhin. The milblogger noted that some of these issues included the fate of Wagner PMC as well as Prigozhin's businesses and personal affairs. The milblogger added that Prigozhin is still allowed to operate his businesses and not face charges in Russia but had lost access to his media companies and faces a smear campaign in the state media, as ISW has also assessed.^[23]

Gerasimov's public reemergence and the acknowledgment of the Putin-Prigozhin meeting is likely a part of the Kremlin's wider narrative effort to portray itself as fully in control following Wagner's rebellion while also reaching out to those who lean toward loyalty toward Wagner and especially Prigozhin himself. The MoD published the footage of Gerasimov on the same day that the Kremlin acknowledged Putin's June 29 meeting with Prigozhin, likely signaling a rejection, at least officially, of the rebellion's call to replace senior Russian military leadership. A notable Russian milblogger argued that Gerasimov and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's media appearances show that there will be no command reshuffles and observed that Putin never fires people under external pressure.^[24] Acquiescence to Prigozhin's demands to remove Shoigu and Gerasimov would have likely damaged Putin's regime security by creating a precedent that resistance and outright rebellion are legitimate means to achieve desired goals. The public backing of Shoigu and Gerasimov and the acknowledgment of Putin's meeting with Prigozhin indicates that the Kremlin likely aims to portray the rebellion, its potential fallout, and the calls to replace disdained MoD establishment figures as a settled affair. The Kremlin may have chosen to portray itself as solving this issue now because of Lukashenko's apparent attempt on July 6 to distance himself from the deal he mediated between the Kremlin and Prigozhin.^[25] The meeting and the publicized support for Shoigu and Gerasimov are in line with what ISW continues to assess to be the Kremlin's attempt to balance a desire to mitigate the widespread disdain for MoD establishment figures that fueled Wagner's rebellion while also trying to disempower those who sympathized or supported the rebellion.^[26]

It is unclear whether any agreements between the Kremlin and Prigozhin will prompt significant numbers of Wagner personnel to agree to sign contracts with the MoD. A Russian milblogger interviewed a Wagner assault group commander on July 10 and claimed that the commander stated that no personnel in his unit have signed the contract with the MoD.^[27] The Wagner commander reportedly stated that Wagner is united around Prigozhin and a common ideology of fighting for the motherland instead of a military contract.^[28] The commander reportedly stated that he will either continue serving with Wagner or demobilize.^[29] It is unclear what proportion of Wagner fighters has this deep ideological loyalty to Prigozhin and Wagner as an independent organization, although such an ideological commitment will likely prove a significant obstacle for MoD efforts to subordinate Wagner. Prigozhin ramped up efforts to disseminate Wagner's militarism and ideology throughout Russia in March, and Prigozhin may have similarly intensified internal ideological messaging within Wagner itself at the time.^[30]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen Akhmat Special Forces have deployed to the Bakhmut direction, but a local Ukrainian commander denied having encountered Chechen forces, suggesting that these Chechen elements are not making significant frontline contributions to Russian operations in Ukraine. Kadyrov claimed on July 9 that Akhmat Special Forces (Spetsnaz) Commander Apty Alaudinov recently visited Akhmat Spetsnaz near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian forces recently decided to transfer Akhmat Spetsnaz to the Bakhmut direction, allegedly reflective of the Russian General Staff's trust in Akhmat's combat capabilities.^[31] A Ukrainian battalion commander operating in the Bakhmut direction stated on July 10 that Ukrainian personnel have yet to encounter any Akhmat units near Bakhmut, however.^[32] A Russian source claimed on July 6 that "bearded mountain men" were taking pictures at the Bakhmut Raion welcome sign, likely hinting that Chechen forces were coming to the Bakhmut area for propaganda purposes.^[33]

Kadyrov recently claimed on May 31 that Akhmat Spetsnaz assumed responsibility for the Russian offensive to capture Marinka southwest of Donetsk City.

[34] Kadyrov also reportedly deployed Akhmat Spetsnaz to border areas in Belgorod Oblast to defend against limited all Russian pro-Ukrainian cross-border raids.

[35] ISW has observed Akhmat Spetsnaz elements fighting near Bilohorivka south of Kremenna and operating in Zaporizhia Oblast.[36] Kadyrov has previously claimed that 7,000 Chechen servicemen are operating in Ukraine but that there are 70,000 active Chechen personnel in the entire Russian military.[37] If Akhmat forces are deployed across five different sectors of the front, it is likely that each grouping lacks significant manpower and provides limited combat capabilities to ongoing Russian operations in each sector. Akhmat forces have allegedly been fighting in Marinka for over a month and have yet to produce the significant breakthroughs that they promised. Akhmat forces have been engaged in Russian offensives south of Kremenna since at least February 2023 with a similar lack of Russian advances in the area.[38] Akhmat Spetsnaz thus appears unlikely to make even a tactically significant impact in their alleged deployment to the Bakhmut area. Kadyrov is likely promoting Akhmat as a heavily involved force in Ukraine in order to curry favor with the MoD and with Putin. It is unclear how involved Akhmat forces are in Russian operations in each sector that they are reportedly deployed to, and Kadyrov may be intentionally shielding these forces from combat and degradation in a bid to retain the influence these paramilitary structures provide.

Former Russian officer and prominent critical nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin claimed on July 10 that he managed to deliver a speech in St. Petersburg despite efforts by law enforcement to censor him and prevent the speech from happening. Girkin previously accused the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) of fabricating a bomb threat at the Listva bookstore in St. Petersburg to prevent him from speaking about the Wagner Group rebellion.[39] On July 10, Girkin posted an update claiming that he still delivered the lecture in St. Petersburg, and the Listva bookstore reported that Girkin spoke in a pre-prepared spare room while the law enforcement raid was ongoing.[40] Girkin stated that the only thing that law enforcement accomplished during the raid was making a stronger point against itself and its resort to censorship than even he could.[41] Girkin went on to complain that he is preparing to leave St. Petersburg for Moscow as it is clear he is no longer welcome in the city.[42] ISW previously assessed that the FSB-fabricated bomb threat at Girkin's event is likely part of a long-standing feud between the FSB and Girkin and the larger ultranationalist community, and the fact that Girkin supposedly went ahead with his speech despite the censorship attempts is likely to exacerbate the feud.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials stated on July 10 that Ukrainian forces have fire control over Bakhmut and Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) around the city.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 10.
- Russian Chief of the General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov's first public appearance since Wagner's rebellion supports ISW's previous assessment that he will likely retain his official position within the Russian military.
- The Kremlin and Western intelligence officials reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on June 29 (and/or July 1) following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24.
- Putin's decision to meet with Prigozhin is inconsistent with the Kremlin's prior rhetoric about Prigozhin and his role within the Wagner private military company (PMC).
- A Kremlin-affiliated war correspondent characterized the Putin-Prigozhin meeting as the Kremlin's attempt to "gently" replace Prigozhin and restructure Wagner.
- Gerasimov's public reemergence and the acknowledgment of the Putin-Prigozhin meeting is likely a part of the Kremlin's wider narrative effort to portray itself as fully in control following Wagner's rebellion while also reaching out to those who lean toward loyalty toward Wagner and especially Prigozhin himself.
- It is unclear whether any agreements between the Kremlin and Prigozhin will prompt significant numbers of Wagner personnel to agree to sign contracts with the MoD.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen Akhmat Special Forces have deployed to the Bakhmut direction, but a local Ukrainian commander denied having encountered Chechen forces, suggesting that these Chechen elements are not making significant frontline contributions to Russian operations in Ukraine.
- Former Russian officer and prominent critical nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin claimed on July 10 that he managed to deliver a speech in St. Petersburg despite efforts by law enforcement to censor him and prevent the speech from happening
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and in the Bakhmut direction.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast on July 10.
- Russian forces are continuing to suffer significant casualties on the battlefield.
- Russian occupation officials acknowledged widespread utility service disruptions in occupied Donetsk Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 9, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 9, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:00pm ET on July 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 9. Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces successfully continue to advance in the Bakhmut direction. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the Berdyansk and Melitopol directions. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are attacking Russian positions in small groups and are targeting Russian rear positions, warehouses, and infrastructure. Ukrainian military officials also reiterated that Ukrainian forces are continuing their interdiction campaigns in southern and eastern Ukraine.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported that Ukrainian forces are attempting to soften Russian defenses before liberating territory, accepting a slower pace of advance. The WSJ also reported that Ukrainian forces are focusing on dislodging Russian forces from fortifications and minefields, which are over 24km deep in some areas of Russian occupied territory. Lieutenant Colonel Oleksiy Telehin of Ukraine's 108th Territorial Defense Brigade told the WSJ that Russian forces are continually able to bring in replacements even if Ukrainian forces destroy entire units. ISW has assessed that Russian forces lack operational reserves. Telehin's statement likely refers to locally available tactical reserves. Another unit commander in the 108th Territorial Defense Brigade stated that the shortage of armored vehicles makes it difficult for Ukrainian forces to advance on well-prepared positions. WSJ sources also cited the lack of Ukrainian air superiority as one of the factors slowing down Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW continues to assess that the current pace of the Ukrainian counteroffensive is reflective of a deliberate effort to conserve Ukrainian combat power and attrit Russian manpower and equipment at the cost of slower territorial advances.

US President Joe Biden stated that Ukraine cannot join NATO until Russia's war in Ukraine is over. Biden told CNN on July 9 that it is premature to vote on Ukraine's NATO membership and that the alliance should "lay out a rational path for Ukraine to be able to qualify to be able to get into NATO." Biden's statement follows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's July 7 statement that Ukraine "deserves NATO membership" and precedes the NATO summit in Vilnius on July 11 and July 12.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discussed Turkey's decision to allow the release of five Ukrainian commanders involved in the defense of the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan on July 9.^[12] Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey previously agreed in September 2022 that Azovstal commanders would remain in Turkey for the duration of the war after Russia freed some Azovstal defenders in an Ankara-brokered prisoner exchange. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky brought five Azovstal commanders home to Ukraine on July 8. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) announced that Lavrov and Fidan discussed the situation regarding the release of Azovstal defenders in a phone call initiated by the Turkish side but did not provide additional details regarding the discussion. Lavrov reportedly emphasized to Fidan that further deliveries of military aid to Ukraine are "destructive" and "can lead to negative consequences," likely in an effort to discourage further military support for Ukraine. The Turkish MFA also noted that Fidan and Lavrov discussed the United Nations-brokered grain export deal, while the Russian MFA predictably blamed the West for its "inability to take necessary steps" to implement the agreement. The grain deal expires on July 17, and it is likely that the Kremlin will threaten to not extend the deal to advance its objectives.

The Russian ultranationalist community continued to blame the Kremlin for trusting Turkey to uphold the deal and to keep Azovstal defenders in Turkey. Russian ultranationalists have been consistently criticizing the Kremlin's decisions to free Azovstal defenders in other prisoner exchanges because the Kremlin had portrayed these Ukrainian fighters as "Nazis" during the Battle of Mariupol. One Russian milblogger observed that the release of Azovstal defenders undermines Russia's aim to "denazify" Ukraine, while another milblogger implied that Russia should not have trusted Turkey to uphold the deal given that Turkey is Russia's "historical enemy." A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russia could have avoided this release by not organizing the initial prisoner of war (POW) exchange in 2022, and another Russian milblogger stated that Russia was once again misled because Russian officials irresponsibly prioritized the release of Kremlin-affiliated former Ukrainian MP Viktor Medvedchuk - who is a godfather to one of Putin's children - from Ukrainian captivity. Another milblogger stated that the news of the Azovstal commanders' release had upset Russian military personnel on the frontlines and urged people to reevaluate the reasons for Wagner Group's armed rebellion – implying that the rebellion's goals of changes within the Russian military command and information space are still needed in Russia. The milblogger added that this incident is one of many incidents since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that are dividing Russian society.

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service's (FSB) Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (UZKS) is deliberately censoring him. Girkin reported that his talk about the Wagner Group armed rebellion was canceled at the Listva bookstore in St. Petersburg on July 9 after St. Petersburg law enforcement responded to a claimed bomb threat at the bookstore. Girkin and Listva complained on July 8 that St. Petersburg police warned Listva not to host the event, but Listva claimed it would host the event despite the warning. Russian police routinely cancel events under the premise of bomb threats to censor public figures. Girkin claimed that someone attempted to censor his event and discussed three potential culprits. Girkin sarcastically hypothesized that the government perceives him as a greater threat than Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and 15,000 Wagner military personnel. Girkin also noted that Prigozhin may own and fully control the Listva bookstore. Listva has notably promoted Girkin and hosted many prior events with him, and it is unclear why a Prigozhin-owned bookstore would first try to host such an event and then cancel it. Girkin also suggested that UZKS Head Lieutenant General Aleksey Zhalo may have censored his event, either because he had gone crazy or because he is under Prigozhin's influence. Girkin's mention of Zhalo stands out as the only serious theory Girkin offered.

The FSB's possible soft censorship of Girkin may be part of a longstanding feud between Girkin and Zhalo. Zhalo previously orchestrated FSB crackdowns on Russian ultranationalist groups and charged their leaders with terrorism and fraud. Girkin, who led an ultranationalist movement, publicly criticized Zhalo and the FSB in 2018 for further arrests of individuals in the ultranationalist pro-separatist movement and for failing to combat the Ukrainian Azov Regiment's recruitment measures. Girkin claimed in 2018 that he personally knew Zhalo, criticized Zhalo as a "thief" and a "hypocrite," and claimed that Zhalo is one of multiple Russian officials who stand against him.

Central African Republic (CAR) Presidential Spokesperson Albert Yaloke Mokpem stated on July 8 that Wagner Group personnel leaving CAR are conducting rotations and are not withdrawing. Reuters reported that a CAR military source claimed that several hundred Wagner forces recently left CAR, and ISW observed footage published on July 6 purportedly showing 600 Wagner personnel departing from an airport in Bangui, CAR. ISW previously assessed that some Wagner personnel in CAR may be leaving after refusing to sign contracts with the Russian MoD given similar reports of Wagner personnel departing Syria. Wagner personnel may be attempting to remain in CAR to maintain control over Wagner-owned natural resource extraction operations in CAR.

Unknown persons leaked an image of what appears to be the Wagner Group's founding charter on July 9, possibly to present the Wagner Group as a professional organization. The document, dated May 1, 2014, commits Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner Group commander Dmitry Utkin to follow a set of rules for their new private military company's participation for combat in eastern Ukraine. Prigozhin's duties as "director" include the responsibility to provide weapons and funding; provide guarantees for the killed and wounded; provide permanent work; protect personnel against criminal charges for mercenaryism (article 359 of Russia's Criminal Code); resolve all issues "collegially"; participate in person; and not go against the Russian nation. Utkin's responsibilities as "commander" were to select and train personnel; get rid of deserters; prohibit alcohol and drugs; resolve issues "collegially"; implement lessons learned and complete tasks to the end; not go against "VVV" (Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin); and not lie or deceive and always tell the truth as it is. It is unclear who leaked this document or why. Russian law enforcement, which raided Prigozhin's home, and pro-Prigozhin actors likely had access to the document. The leak may be part of an effort to rehabilitate Wagner's image following Prigozhin's June 24 rebellion. The document reiterates that Wagner's founding principles are to fight Russia's war in Ukraine in loyal service to Russian President Vladimir Putin and "the Russian nation."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to not rapidly dispose of the Wagner Group and prosecute rebellion participants is placing himself and his subordinates in an awkward position. It remains unclear who benefits from the leak of Wagner's alleged founding document as the document makes the Wagner Group look professional and appealing in comparison with the regular Russian military. Wagner is still reportedly recruiting within Russia while the Russian MoD is reportedly conducting a competing effort to recruit Wagner fighters to sign contracts with the MoD. Putin's decision to not dispose of the Wagner Group – previously Russia's most combat capable force – is making it difficult for Putin and other Russian power players to know how to interact with the Wagner Group and its leaders and fighters.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 9.
- The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported that Ukrainian forces are attempting to soften Russian defenses before liberating territory, accepting a slower pace of advance.
- US President Joe Biden stated that Ukraine cannot join NATO until Russia's war in Ukraine is over.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discussed Turkey's decision to allow the release of five Ukrainian commanders involved in the defense of the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan on July 9.
- The Russian ultranationalist community continued to blame the Kremlin for trusting Turkey to uphold the deal and to keep Azovstal defenders in Turkey.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service's (FSB) Service for the Protection of the Constitutional Order (UZKS) is deliberately censoring him.
- Central African Republic (CAR) Presidential Spokesperson Albert Yaloke Mokpem stated on July 8 that Wagner Group personnel leaving CAR are conducting rotations and are not withdrawing.
- Unknown persons leaked an image of what appears to be the Wagner Group's founding charter on July 9, possibly to present the Wagner Group as a professional organization.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to not rapidly dispose of the Wagner Group and prosecute rebellion participants is placing himself and his subordinates in an awkward position.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Svatove and south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and Russian forces advanced as of July 9.
- Ukrainian forces continued to advance in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts administrative border area, and continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces reportedly continued to reestablish previously flooded positions on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of targeting the Kerch Strait Bridge.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly accepting Wagner Group mercenaries for contract service with the Russian MoD in Molkino, Krasnodar Krai.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 8, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 8, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Five hundred days ago Russia launched an unprovoked war of conquest against Ukraine. The Russian military intended to take Kyiv within three days but failed to accomplish any of its intended objectives in Ukraine. Determined and skillful Ukrainian resistance has forced the culmination of multiple Russian offensives including the one aimed at Kyiv and has liberated Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts, as well as the parts of Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson oblasts that Russian forces had

temporarily seized. Ukrainian forces have secured and retained the initiative and are conducting counteroffensive operations along most of the frontline with Russian forces focused almost entirely on trying to hold on to the Ukrainian lands they still occupy. With Western assistance, Ukraine has ensured its independence but faces the critical task of liberating the strategically vital territory still under Russian control.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 8. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on July 7 that Ukrainian forces advanced more than 1km on the southern flank of Bakhmut, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops attacked Russian positions southwest and northwest of Bakhmut.^[1] Russian sources additionally claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.^[2] Ukrainian military sources confirmed that Ukrainian forces are continuing offensive operations in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions and are having partial success in unspecified areas of these directions.^[3]

US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl noted on July 7 that current Ukrainian operations across the front are the “beginning of the middle” of the wider counteroffensive and that it is therefore “too early to judge” how the counteroffensive is going.^[4] Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President’s Office Mykhaylo Podolyak also emphasized on July 8 that Ukrainian forces are focusing on the destruction of Russian manpower as part of the first phase of counteroffensive operations and noted that the initial phase of the counteroffensive is focused on shaping the battlefield.^[5] ISW continues to assess that the current pace of Ukrainian counteroffensives is reflective of the deliberate and strategic effort to create an asymmetrical attrition gradient to conserve Ukrainian combat power and attrit Russian manpower and equipment at the cost of slower territorial advances.^[6]

The United States announced a new military aid package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions on July 7. The \$800 billion aid package includes dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICMs), and more ammunition for Patriot air defense systems and HIMARS MLRS systems.^[7] US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl stated that the US is providing cluster munitions to Ukraine due to the “urgency of the moment” to equip Ukrainian forces with artillery ammunition to use against Russian military targets during the counteroffensive.

Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed 131/136 drone and missile strikes against Ukraine's industrial and infrastructure facilities overnight from July 7 to 8. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched an unspecified number of Shahed drones, of which Ukrainian forces shot down five. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the rest of the drones struck industrial and infrastructure facilities in Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad oblasts.^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces also used S-300 ground-to-air missiles against unspecified facilities.^[9] A Russian milblogger claimed that some of the Russian drones struck storage facilities in Kryvyi Rih.^[10]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Ukraine “deserves NATO membership” ahead of the July 11 to 12 NATO summit in a press conference on July 7 in Istanbul with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.^[11] Erdogan also noted Turkey’s support for extending the Black Sea grain deal between Ukraine and Russia and stated that he would discuss prisoner-of-war (POW) exchanges with Russian President Vladimir Putin during Putin’s visit to Turkey in August.^[12] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on July 8 that there is no confirmed date for the meeting between Putin and Erdogan.^[13]

Zelensky returned to Ukraine from Turkey with five Ukrainian commanders involved in the defense of Azovstal Metallurgical Combine in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast whom Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey had previously agreed would remain in Turkey until the end of the war.^[14] Peskov claimed that both Ukraine and Turkey violated agreements by returning the five commanders to Ukraine and insinuated that the West forced Turkey into releasing the commanders due to claimed Ukrainian failures in the war.^[15] Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian government questioning why Russia would allow POWs to reside in a third country that is not sympathetic to Russia and why the Russian government would exchange defenders of the Azov Metallurgical Combine for former Ukrainian politician and Kremlin ally Viktor Medvedchuk.^[16] Erdogan’s statements regarding the Ukrainian bid for NATO membership in addition to the release of Azovstal defenders is a notable shift in the Russia-Turkey relationship, although the depth and permanence of Erdogan’s apparent support for Ukraine are not clear at this time.

Ukrainian intelligence indicated that Russian authorities are capitalizing on the fear of a provocation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to drive out Ukrainian personnel and increase the Russian presence at the ZNPP ahead of the upcoming NATO summit. Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko and Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky discussed providing Russian ZNPP personnel with housing seized from Ukrainians who fled occupied Enerhodar. The GUR also noted that Kiriyenko and Balitsky aim to increase the Russian presence in occupied Enerhodar by 4,500 Russian personnel.^[17] The GUR reported that Russian occupation authorities continue to mine various areas of the ZNPP, including technical and machine rooms.^[18] The Kremlin may seek to take additional physical control over the ZNPP operations to falsely portray Russia as the only safe operator of the ZNPP and Ukraine as a threat to the security of the plant to discourage Western support for Ukraine at the NATO summit.

A Wagner commander stated that the Wagner Group will go to Belarus after completing rest and recuperation through August 2023. A Russian milblogger published an interview with Wagner Group commander Anton “Lotos” Yelizarov on July 7, who stated that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin had personally ordered all Wagner personnel in Ukraine to take leave to rest until an unspecified period in early August before the Kremlin may be attempting to ensure that it has control over Wagner leadership and personnel in Africa and the Middle East. The implications of the Wagner armed rebellion for Wagner forces and Prigozhin remain unclear, but Ukraine has already benefited from the rebellion and may gain further benefits. Wagner Group has to undertake “big work”—the move to Belarus.^[19] Yelizarov stated that Wagner’s Commanders’ Council needs to rotate Wagner personnel in “distant directions” (presumably meaning Wagner Group forces in Africa and the Middle East) to prepare and organize logistics for its new bases in Belarus. ISW previously reported that the status of the Wagner Group’s reorganization and possible redeployment to Belarus may not be clear until fall 2023.^[20]

The status of the deal between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prigozhin is unclear, and the deal may be in flux. Yelizarov stated that Putin promised that Russian law enforcement would not prosecute the Wagner Group, though it remains unclear why the Kremlin has not either aggressively integrated Wagner forces into the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or immediately exiled them to Belarus.^[21] Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s July 6 confirmation that Wagner forces are not in Belarus ran contrary to the public understanding that Wagner fighters should already be signing contracts with the Russian MoD, going home to retirement, or moving to Belarus.^[22] Yelizarov’s interview suggests that Wagner fighters and commanders are still able to move about freely within Russia and associate with each other and that Russian authorities are not otherwise interfering with Wagner affairs beyond conducting an information operation to separate the Wagner Group from Prigozhin. The rotation of Wagner’s non-Ukraine expeditionary forces could give Prigozhin access to a cadre of loyal and capable lieutenants,

presumably within Russia, if Prigozhin is controlling the rotation. ISW has seen no evidence that Russian authorities are exiling or detaining Wagner commanders or fighters who participated in the rebellion.

Putin continues to allow Wagner and Prigozhin to operate in Russia and potentially pose a threat to his regime. Allowing Prigozhin, his commanders, and as many as 25,000 Wagner fighters who led and participated in the armed rebellion apparent full freedom of movement and communication in Russia shows that Putin has either remarkable (and unwarranted) confidence in their renewed loyalty, desperation to lure as many as possible to his side, or an inability to take action against them.

The Kremlin may be attempting to ensure that it has control over Wagner leadership and personnel in Africa and the Middle East. *Reuters* - citing Syrian security officials, sources based near deployed Russian forces, and regional officials – reported that Syrian and Russian military commanders undertook swift measures to prevent the Wagner armed uprising from spreading among the Wagner forces in Syria.^[23] Syrian and Russian officials reportedly cut phone lines, summoned around a dozen Wagner commanders to the Russian military base at Hmeimim in western Latakia Province, and ordered Wagner forces to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or leave Syria. A regional military source close to Damascus and two Syrian sources noted that a group of Russian military officers was quickly dispatched to Syria to take charge of Wagner forces after Prigozhin announced the start of the armed rebellion. Three sources indicated that the Russian MoD cut pay for Wagner personnel and noted that dozens of Wagner personnel were flown out to an unspecified location on Russian planes when they refused to sign contracts with the Russian MoD. Syrian officials noted that they expected more Wagner personnel to refuse to sign contracts with the Russian MoD. ISW previously reported on unconfirmed reports that Russian military police detained four Wagner commanders and visited Wagner forces in Syria.^[24] The Kremlin's swift action in Syria may indicate that the Kremlin is not confident that Wagner personnel would not pose a security risk to the Russian forces in Syria.

NBC News obtained footage that appears to show more than 600 Wagner forces departing from an airport in Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR).^[25] NBC News observed that a regional newspaper also reported the departure of hundreds of Wagner personnel on July 6 and noted that it is unclear if these departures are part of a routine rotation of troops or a Kremlin-orchestrated purge of Prigozhin loyalists. A CAR official claimed that there has been no change in Wagner's presence in the country, and senior Wagner representative Dmitry Sytii implied that Wagner forces have not been ordered to return to Russia at this time. It is possible that some Wagner personnel in CAR may be leaving after refusing to sign contracts with the Russian MoD given reports of similar departures of Wagner personnel from Syria.

The implications of the Wagner armed rebellion for Wagner forces and Prigozhin remain unclear, but Ukraine has already benefited from the rebellion and may benefit even further. Putin's handling of the Wagner Group – Russia's most effective fighting force at this time – following the June 24 rebellion will likely keep them from fighting in Ukraine for the duration of the current Ukrainian counteroffensive and may permanently degrade Russia's overall capability to wage war in Ukraine. The Wagner Group's hasty withdrawal from Bakhmut disrupted Russian positions in the area and has facilitated the tactically significant gains that Ukrainian forces have been making around Bakhmut.^[26]

A prominent Russian milblogger speculated that the Russian military leadership may be in the process of making the decision to replace Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, suggesting that the implications of the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion may still be having ramifications on the highest echelons of military command. The milblogger claimed on July 7 that several factors suggest that Shoigu may be replaced, specifically citing the fact that Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyashenko met with Vietnamese Deputy Defense Minister Hoang Xuan Tien in Moscow on July 6 instead of Shoigu.^[27] The milblogger suggested that it is "unprecedented" for the Russian MoD to not send a representative to such negotiations, which, the milblogger asserts, suggests that the Russian military leadership may be moving to sideline Shoigu.^[28] The milblogger noted, however, that it is unlikely that the final decision has been officially made yet due to Shoigu's personal ties with regional leaders and powerful oligarchs, including within the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations.^[29] ISW cannot independently confirm rumors of Shoigu's replacement and has, in fact, previously assessed that it is unlikely that Putin will replace Shoigu or Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov soon, and the Russian MoD appears to be actively interested in presenting Shoigu as an effective defense minister and posted footage of Shoigu visiting Russian contract servicemen at Southern Military District (SMD) training grounds on July 8.^[30] Milblogger speculation about Shoigu's fate indicates that the Kremlin will have to continue to balance widespread discontent with Shoigu's and the MoD's leadership and conduct of the war with the desire to avoid seeming to capitulate to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's demands following Wagner's armed rebellion.

Russian authorities reportedly prevented former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin from holding a talk about the Wagner Group rebellion. St. Petersburg bookstore Listva claimed on July 8 that St. Petersburg police illegally raided the bookstore to prevent Girkin's talk on the rebellion and gave the store an official warning for hosting the talk without coordinating the event.^[31] Listva claimed that this raid was illegal because Russian law does not require registering events of fewer than 50 people.^[32] Listva claimed that St. Petersburg authorities frequently target the bookstore, including arresting an employee for an altercation on July 7 that the bookstore describes as protecting "a Russian man who was threatened by a crowd of Tajik migrants."^[33] Girkin briefly condemned the law enforcement action, sarcastically asking whether authorities would criminally charge him for condemning the Wagner rebellion or calling for Russian victory in the war in Ukraine.^[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Five hundred days ago Russia launched an unprovoked war of conquest against Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 8. US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl noted on July 7 that current Ukrainian operations across the front are the "beginning of the middle" of the wider counteroffensive and that it is therefore "too early to judge" how the counteroffensive is going.
- The United States announced a new military aid package for Ukraine that includes cluster munitions on July 7.
- Russian forces conducted another series of Shahed 131/136 drone and missile strikes against Ukraine's industrial and infrastructure facilities overnight from July 7 to 8.
- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Ukraine "deserves NATO membership" ahead of the July 11 to 12 NATO summit in a press conference on July 7 in Istanbul with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Zelensky returned to Ukraine from Turkey with five Ukrainian commanders involved in the defense of Azovstal Metallurgical Combine in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast whom Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey had previously agreed would remain in Turkey until the end of the war.

- Ukrainian intelligence indicated that Russian authorities are capitalizing on the fear of a provocation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to drive out Ukrainian personnel and increase the Russian presence at the ZNPP ahead of the upcoming NATO summit.
- A Wagner commander stated that the Wagner Group will go to Belarus after completing rest and recuperation through August 2023. The status of the deal between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prigozhin is unclear, and the deal may be in flux.
- The Kremlin may be attempting to ensure that it has control over Wagner leadership and personnel in Africa and the Middle East.
- A prominent Russian milblogger speculated that the Russian military leadership may be in the process of making the decision to replace Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, suggesting that the implications of the June 24 Wagner Group rebellion may still be having ramifications on the highest echelons of military command.
- Russian authorities reportedly prevented former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin from holding a talk about the Wagner Group rebellion.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and south of Kremenna, and Ukraine likely continues to conduct strikes on Russian concentration areas deep within the rear of occupied Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted ground attacks around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts on July 8.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly observed combat training of Russian contract servicemen at the Southern Military District (SMD) training grounds on July 8, likely in an attempt to favorably portray Russian formalization efforts and incentivize personnel recruitment.
- The Ukrainian government has indicated that Russian occupation authorities struggle to compensate staff in critical industries, resulting in staffing shortages that could hinder the Russian war effort.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 7, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 7, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on July 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces made tactically significant gains in the Bakhmut area and continued counteroffensive operations in at least three other sectors of the front on July 7. Geolocated footage published on July 6 indicates that Ukrainian forces have made tactically significant gains near Yahidne (2km north of Bakhmut). The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations north and south of Bakhmut, and Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syryskyi reported that Ukrainian forces established control over unspecified previously lost positions in the Bakhmut area. Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Andriy Kovalev reported that Ukrainian forces also achieved partial success near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut). The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kremenna direction along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.

Russian forces have reportedly committed almost the entirety of the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces to southern Ukraine. Ukrainian military observer Konstantin Mashovets stated on July 5 that the Eastern Grouping of Forces is comprised of the 5th Combined Arms Army (CAA), the 35th CAA, the 36th CAA, and the 29th CAA (all of the Eastern Military District). ISW cannot confirm the exact composition of the Eastern Grouping of Forces, although it continues to appear that this operational direction command structure is largely coextensive with the Eastern Military District (EMD). Mashovets claimed that the 5th CAA's 127th Motorized Rifle Division and 60th Motorized Rifle Brigade are operating along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts and that the CAA's other main unit, the 57th Motorized Rifle Brigade, is operating south of Bakhmut. ISW has observed the 5th CAA's 127th Division and 60th Brigade in the Zaporizhia Oblast-Donetsk Oblast border area along with previous Russian claims that the 57th Motorized Rifle Brigade has been operating on Bakhmut's southern flank. Mashovets stated that the 35th CAA's 38th Motorized Rifle Brigade, 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade, and 69th Separate Cover Brigade are deployed to western Zaporizhia Oblast and that the 36th CAA's 37th Motorized Rifle Brigade and 5th Separate Tank Brigade are deployed to areas south of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast. ISW previously assessed that the 35th CAA's Chief of Staff's alleged death from a Ukrainian missile strike on June 13 in Zaporizhia Oblast suggested that significant elements of the 35th CAA are likely operating along the Zaporizhia front. The Ukrainian General Staff previously reported on March 19 that elements of the 37th Motorized Rifle Brigade would deploy to western Donetsk Oblast. Mashovets also stated that the 29th CAA, the smallest combined arms army in the EMD, is the only formation of the Eastern Grouping of Forces in reserve. Mashovets added that the 58th and 49th CAAs and 22nd Army Corps of the Southern Military District (SMD) are committed to operations in Southern Ukraine. Mashovets stated that elements of the 68th Army Corps (EMD) are also deployed to southern Ukraine, but suggested that the 68th Army Corps is not a part of the Eastern Grouping of Forces, making it the only higher-level EMD formation separate from the Eastern Grouping of Forces. ISW has also observed elements of the EMD Pacific Fleet's naval infantry brigades (40th and 155th) continuing to serve in western Donetsk Oblast after suffering heavy losses during the Russian winter spring 2023 offensive. Mashovets' reporting and ISW's current observation of the Russian order of battle (ORBAT) in southern Ukraine indicates that almost the entirety of the EMD's combat power is committed to defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives, primarily in southern Ukraine.

The deployment of almost the entirety of the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces and extensive SMD elements to the frontline in southern Ukraine suggests that Russian defenses in southern Ukraine may be brittle. Mashovets' report suggests that the only reserve that the Russian military maintains in

southern Ukraine consists of elements of the 29th Combined Arms Army – the Eastern Military District's smallest combined arms army that has only one maneuver brigade: the 36th Motorized Rifle Brigade. Elements of the 36th Motorized Rifle Brigade participated in the Battle of Kyiv in early 2022 and fought near Vuhledar in early 2023 and are thus likely degraded.

Russian defenses in southern Ukraine, while formidable, are not insurmountable. Russian forces in southern Ukraine would likely have to fall back on prepared defensive positions without significant support from operational reserves if Ukrainian forces achieved an operational breakthrough. Withdrawal in contact is an exceedingly difficult military task, and it is unclear that Russian forces in contact would be able to successfully withdraw from their first lines to other prepared lines in good order, especially if those forces - and the forces behind them in echelon - are worn-down and unsupported. ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a gradual effort to systematically degrade Russian combat power in southern Ukraine over time, increasing the brittleness of the Russian defenses.

Russia temporarily disconnected at least partially from the global internet during a test of its “sovereign internet” system overnight on July 4-5. Russian state affiliated media outlet RBK cited telecommunications sources that claimed that Russia successfully conducted a test of the Sovereign Internet system overnight. The test reportedly prevented Russians from accessing common Western services including Google and Wikipedia while retaining access to Russian-hosted web services. The test likely disconnected some Russian government services, however, including Russian Railways and the Russian federal veterinary and agricultural oversight body Rosselkhoznadzor. Russian telecommunications operators Megafon and Beeline also reported outages during the test. Continued tests and development of the “sovereign internet” indicate that the Kremlin continues long term efforts to be able to isolate Russia from Western influence and the global sphere, and this effort will likely have ramifications that spread beyond the information space. Russia’s economy would likely significantly suffer from protracted internet isolation, for example, because so much international commerce relies on the global internet.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against rear areas in Ukraine on June 6 to 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 12 of 18 Shahed-131/136 drones and seven of 11 Kalibr cruise missiles.[22] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched the drones from areas near Primorsk-Akhtarsk in Krasnodar Krai and that Russian missiles struck Lviv City, an infrastructure facility in Zaporizhzhia City, and a residential building in Cherkasy Oblast. Ukrainian Permanent Representative to the UN Serhiy Kyslytsya stated that Russian forces have launched over 1,000 Iranian Shahed-131/136 and Mohajer-6 drones against Ukraine since September 2022.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces made tactically significant gains in the Bakhmut area and continued counteroffensive operations in at least three other sectors of the front on July 7.
- Russian forces have reportedly committed almost the entirety of the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces to southern Ukraine.
- The deployment of almost the entirety of the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces and extensive SMD elements to the frontline in southern Ukraine suggests that Russian defenses in southern Ukraine may be brittle.
- Russia temporarily disconnected at least partially from the global internet during a test of its “sovereign internet” system overnight on July 4-5.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against rear areas in Ukraine on June 6 to 7.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border. Ukrainian forces made tactically significant gains in the Bakhmut area between July 6-7.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces launched a renewed wave of counterattacks in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on July 7.
- The Russian occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) continues to restrict international monitors’ access to the facility.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly drafted a law that would expand the list of gross disciplinary offenses within the Russian Armed Forces.
- Russian authorities continue to portray themselves as responsible custodians of Ukrainian children in an effort to discredit Ukraine while continuing to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia.
- A Belarusian military official stated that Wagner Group forces have not yet decided to deploy to Belarus while giving a press tour of the speculated Wagner Group base in Asipovichy on July 7.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 6, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 6, 2023, 8:25pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on July 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner forces are not in Belarus as of July 6, indicating that Prigozhin may be failing to uphold the deal Lukashenko mediated between Prigozhin and Russian President Vladimir Putin following Wagner’s armed rebellion on June 24. Lukashenko and the Kremlin previously announced that Prigozhin, Putin, and Lukashenko reached an agreement that offered Prigozhin and the Wagner forces that participated in the rebellion unspecified security guarantees in Belarus.[1] The full contents of this agreement have not been revealed, but it appears that Wagner is not fulfilling its end of the deal. Lukashenko stated on July 6 that Wagner forces are currently at their permanent camps (either

in Russia or in Ukraine) to which they withdrew following the Battle for Bakhmut.[2] Lukashenko added that Prigozhin is in St. Petersburg or may have even flown to Moscow on the morning of July 6. Lukashenko denied the reports that Belarus is constructing new training camps for Wagner forces and noted that Belarus offered Wagner several former Soviet military camps including some near Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast.[3] Lukashenko implied that Wagner had not yet agreed to deploy to these bases and that Wagner "has a different vision for [their] deployment," the details of which Lukashenko refused to share.[4] Lukashenko, however, denied that the deal has been terminated and noted that the question of Wagner forces' transfer and setup "has not been decided" at the moment.[5]

Russian sources also indicated that Prigozhin is in Russia, although ISW cannot confirm Prigozhin's whereabouts at this time. A Russian opposition outlet reported that Prigozhin's plane landed in Rostov Oblast after flying from Moscow Oblast on the morning of July 6.[6] A St. Petersburg outlet reported on July 5 that Prigozhin personally picked up several small arms seized by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) from the FSB building in St. Petersburg on July 4.[7] The outlet also reported that Prigozhin was in Moscow over the weekend on July 1 and July 2.[8] ISW had not observed any visual confirmations in the open source that Wagner personnel deployed to Belarus at this time. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov also claimed that the Kremlin does not follow Prigozhin's movements, noting that the Kremlin cannot and does not want to follow Prigozhin.[9] Peskov's statement is absurd given that the Kremlin and Russian security forces have the ability to detain Prigozhin or restrict his movements in Russia. It is particularly absurd if Prigozhin was actually able to collect his weapons from an FSB facility.

Lukashenko appears to be distancing himself from the deal he reportedly mediated while continuing to tout his ability to mediate between Putin and a formerly loyal lieutenant in the first place, thus still highlighting Putin's weakness. Lukashenko demonstratively stated that Wagner and Prigozhin are Russian, and the questions about their whereabouts should not be directed to him. Lukashenko appears to be distancing himself from Wagner, and his rhetoric may suggest that he is pinning the responsibility on the Kremlin to enforce the deal. Lukashenko also continued to boast about his skillful negotiations with Prigozhin after stating that Putin's authority was not weakened during the armed rebellion in response to a journalist's question.

Prigozhin's ability to freely operate in Russia suggests that Prigozhin is still protected by some security guarantees and/or that the Kremlin continues to prioritize undermining his reputation in Russia over targeting Prigozhin physically or legally. Lukashenko noted that neither he nor Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted to assassinate Prigozhin, and dismissed suggestions that Putin might attempt to kill Prigozhin in the future.[10] ISW assessed on June 27 that Putin has likely decided that he cannot directly eliminate Prigozhin without making him a martyr for causes concerning the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) mishandling of the invasion.[11] ISW also observed on June 27 that the Kremlin launched an information operation aimed at presenting Prigozhin as corrupt and a liar, and Russian state outlets have maintained this narrative since. Russian propaganda networks are extensively covering FSB's raids of Prigozhin's mansion and his wealth, and one journalist sarcastically called Prigozhin's house a "palace belonging to the fighter against corruption" on Russian state TV channel *Rossiya 1*.[12]

Select Russian ultranationalists criticized Russian state propaganda for attempting to villainize Prigozhin, however, suggesting that the Kremlin's attempt to alienate the ultranationalist community from Prigozhin is not succeeding. A Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel accused the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs of deliberately leaking footage of the FSB raids to the media in order to portray Prigozhin as a traitor who is only interested in a lavish lifestyle.[13] Another Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel attempted to disprove *Rossiya 1*'s suggestion that the FSB may have found narcotics at Prigozhin's mansion.[14] It is not necessarily surprising that Wagner-affiliated milbloggers are attacking Kremlin efforts to blackguard Prigozhin, but a Kremlin-affiliated milblogger also condemned the Russian media's efforts to portray Prigozhin as a corrupt individual, noting that Prigozhin's home is consistent with that of a wealthy individual and that Prigozhin appears to showcase his military awards throughout his mansion.[15] Another milblogger noted that Prigozhin's house did not appear that lavish when compared to other Russian billionaires.[16]

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 6 and are continuing efforts to gradually degrade Russian manpower and logistics assets. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive activities in the Bakhmut, western Donetsk, and western Zaporizhia directions.[17] Geolocated footage posted on July 6 shows that Ukrainian troops have advanced towards the western outskirts of Klishchiivka, about 5km southwest of Bakhmut.[18] Russian and Ukrainian sources continued to discuss Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast south of Velyka Novosilka and in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[19] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged the generally slower pace of Ukrainian counteroffensive gains in an interview with CNN on July 5 and stated that Ukrainian operations have "slowed down" against entrenched Russian defensive positions, remarking that he believes Ukraine still needs certain Western weapons systems before launching new attacks along the front.[20] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar emphasized that the Ukrainian efforts to strike Russian concentration areas are imperative for the wider counteroffensive and contribute to the slower rate of ground attacks across the theater. Malyar noted that Ukrainian forces destroyed six Russian ammunition depots in the Tavriisk (Zaporizhia) direction alone in the past day and confirmed that the July 4 strike on Makiivka was an effective example of the destruction of Russian artillery and equipment assets.[21]

Ukrainian and Russian officials largely de-escalated their rhetoric regarding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 6. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on July 6 that the danger of a man-made disaster at the ZNPP is "gradually decreasing," following warnings by various Ukrainian officials on July 4 that Russian forces may have placed objects resembling explosive devices on the roofs of two of the ZNPP's reactor buildings.[22] First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko and Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky also notably visited the ZNPP on July 6 and posted images reportedly near the plant's dry nuclear waste storage facility.[23] Kiriyenko and Balitsky noted that the plant continues to "operate normally" under Russian control, thus downplaying previous Russian claims that Ukrainian actions were imminently threatening the safety of the ZNPP.[24] Kiriyenko and Balitsky may have visited the plant to portray Russia as a capable custodian of the ZNPP, and their rhetorical posturing during the visit suggests that Russian officials may be stepping back from harsh warnings of imminent disaster at the plant. ISW continues to assess that Russian rhetoric surrounding the ZNPP is meant to discourage Western support for Ukraine by accusing Ukraine of nuclear irresponsibility, as well as to dissuade Ukrainian forces from conducting counteroffensive operations into occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[25]

Russian political actors continue attempts to court or control Russian milbloggers, indicating that many view the milblogger community as a critical constituency. Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) head Leonid Slutsky met with select milbloggers on July 5 to discuss a series of proposals to grant benefits and protections to military correspondents and bloggers covering the war in Ukraine.[26] Slutsky stated that the LDPR will aim to pass legislation that will grant military correspondents the status of combat veterans and provide state guarantees and payments in cases of injury or death.[27] Slutsky claimed that the LDPR sent relevant proposals about Russian military correspondents and bloggers to the Russian MoD and the Ministry of Digital Development.[28] Slutsky added the LDPR and select milbloggers will launch an educational program to teach youth about the "informational realities" of the war in Ukraine.[29] Russian pundits on the Kremlin-affiliated

show Solovyov Live recently discussed milbloggers' potential violation of operational security in Ukraine and urged them to engage in some degree of self-censorship.
[30] The Kremlin has routinely sought to appeal to select Russian milbloggers in a bid to win the favor of the community and leverage their connections to the wider Russian ultranationalist community, although the Russian MoD has recently indicated that it once again seeks to curb select milblogger activity.[31] It is unclear what backing the LDPR proposals have from the Kremlin, although the Kremlin could use such measures to exert control over milbloggers and determine who qualifies as a recognized milblogger.

The growing prominence of the milblogger community within the Russian information space and in certain accepted Russian civil society movements is likely creating a competition amongst various political actors vying for control over what is viewed as a critical constituency, either through winning their favor or by establishing authority over their activities. These political actors, both those firmly within the Kremlin's orbit and those further outside of it, likely believe that it has yet to be decided who will control the political influence of this constituency. Milbloggers, with their own diverging interests and allegiances, have yet to indicate how the overall community will respond to this growing competition for their influence.

Russian opposition media outlet *Vertska* reported that Russian forces and occupation authorities are conducting a campaign of systematic religious persecution in occupied Ukraine. *Vertska* found that Russian forces and occupation authorities have committed at least 109 acts of religious persecution and destroyed nearly 600 places of worship in Ukraine since February 24, 2022.[32] *Vertska* uncovered the stories of people whom Russian forces and occupation authorities kidnapped, arrested, captured, tortured, and killed over their faith.[33] The investigation found that Orthodox and Protestant Christians are the most repressed group in the occupied territories, but that Catholics, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses have also been persecuted.[34] *Vertska* cited at least 43 cases in which clergymen were targeted for their faith, including eight who were kidnapped and five who were killed.[35] *Vertska* reported that at least 66 places of worship have been confiscated or destroyed by Russian forces and turned into warehouses, police departments, National Guard offices, or 'United Russia' offices.[36] *Vertska* noted that the primary purposes of religious oppression in the occupied territories are to suppress the Ukrainian language, which services are commonly conducted, to discourage or punish congregants who refuse to support occupation authorities, and to pressure congregations and priests into supporting the Russian Orthodox Church.[37] ISW previously reported that Russian occupation authorities were likely conducting a campaign of religious persecution in occupied Ukraine to systematically eradicate "undesirable" religious organizations and promote the Moscow Patriarchate.[38] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces would likely intensify their campaign and that Russian authorities are conducting religious persecution in a way that is entirely at odds with efforts to frame Russian President Vladimir Putin as the true protector of the Christian faith.[39]

Russian milbloggers claimed that aspects of Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine have severe limitations and may not be as effective as Russian sources have previously portrayed them. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian mobilized service members operating in Zaporizhia Oblast have been on the frontlines since October 2022 without any rotations.[40] The milblogger stated that Russian forces have not been able to rotate these mobilized personnel out of these positions because there are no available personnel to replace them with.[41] The milblogger's description of acute rotation issues supports ISW's previous assessment that Russian forces likely lack combat-ready reserves.[42] The failure to conduct any rotations will likely result in a quicker rate of degradation for Russian formations defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives in southern Ukraine. Other Russian milbloggers accused Russian attack helicopters of striking already destroyed Ukrainian military equipment and suggested that the Russian MoD may be using these repeated hits to report inflated Ukrainian losses.[43] The Kremlin has previously used reports of wildly inflated Ukrainian armored vehicle losses to portray Russian defensive operations as extremely effective.[44]

Key Takeaways:

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner forces are not in Belarus as of July 6, indicating that Prigozhin may be failing to uphold the deal Lukashenko mediated between Prigozhin and Russian President Vladimir Putin following Wagner's armed rebellion on June 24.
- Russian sources also indicated that Prigozhin is in Russia, although ISW cannot confirm Prigozhin's whereabouts at this time.
- Lukashenko appears to be distancing himself from the deal he reportedly mediated while continuing to tout his ability to mediate between Putin and a formerly loyal lieutenant in the first place, thus still highlighting Putin's weakness.
- Prigozhin's ability to freely operate in Russia suggests that Prigozhin is still protected by some security guarantees and/or that the Kremlin continues to prioritize undermining his reputation in Russia over targeting Prigozhin physically or legally.
- Select Russian ultranationalists criticized Russian state propaganda for attempting to villainize Prigozhin, however, suggesting that the Kremlin's attempt to alienate the ultranationalist community from Prigozhin is not succeeding.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on July 6 and are continuing efforts to gradually degrade Russian manpower and logistics assets.
- Ukrainian and Russian officials largely de-escalated their rhetoric regarding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 6.
- Russian political actors continue attempts to court or control Russian milbloggers, indicating that many view the milblogger community as a critical constituency.
- Russian opposition media outlet *Vertska* reported that Russian forces and occupation authorities are conducting a campaign of systematic religious persecution in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that aspects of Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine have severe limitations and may not be as effective as Russian sources have previously portrayed them.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Visual evidence confirms that Ukrainian forces have advanced southwest of Bakhmut as of July 6.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continue efforts to create territorial defense units in Russian border oblasts.
- Occupation officials continue efforts to forcibly assimilate Ukrainian legal and cultural traditions into the Russian system in occupied territories.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claimed on July 6 that Russia will transfer all planned tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by the end of 2023, if not earlier.

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 5, 2023, 8:25pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on July 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted counteroffensive operations in five sectors of the front on July 5 and made gains in some areas. Geolocated footage posted on July 5 shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced southwest of Berkhivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), west of Yahidne (2km north of Bakhmut), and southwest of Bakhmut.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations south and north of Bakhmut, and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces are advancing in an unspecified area on Bakhmut's southern flank.^[2] Ukrainian MP Yury Mysyagin stated that Ukrainian forces established a new position north of Opytne (6km northwest of the outskirts of Donetsk City) along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.^[3] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults in the Lyman direction, the Bakhmut direction, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, on the border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[4] Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff General Oleksii Hromov reported on July 5 that Ukrainian forces have advanced 7.5km into Russian-controlled territory in western Zaporizhia Oblast and along the administrative border between the Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.^[5] Hromov stated that Ukrainian forces have liberated nine settlements and 160 square kilometers of territory since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on June 4.^[6]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a series of missile strikes targeting Russian rear positions along the entire front overnight and during the day on July 5. Geolocated footage published on July 4 indicates that Ukrainian forces struck an ammunition depot in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast (6km northeast of Donetsk City).^[7] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian fuel and lubricants depot in Makiivka and that Ukrainian forces are regularly launching missile strikes against rear Russian targets in Ukraine.^[8] Geolocated images published on July 5 also show apparent Ukrainian strikes on Russian positions near Debaltseve (52km northeast of Donetsk City).^[9] Geolocated footage published on July 5 also shows the aftermath of an alleged Ukrainian strike on a railway station in Yasynuvata (6km northeast of Donetsk City).^[10] Geolocated images published on July 5 shows the aftermath of an alleged HIMARS rocket strike on a Russian occupation administration building in Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast (35km southwest of Donetsk City).^[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Russian positions near Yakymivka (16km southwest of Melitopol) and attempted to strike Berdyansk in Zaporizhia Oblast with Storm Shadow Cruise missiles.^[12] Russian sources claimed that Russian air defense systems shot down a Ukrainian missile in the vicinity of Berdyansk.^[13] A local Kherson Oblast Telegram channel also claimed that Russian air defenses were activated near Skadovsk, Kherson Oblast (60km southeast of Kherson City).^[14]

The footage and claims of these Ukrainian strikes suggest that Ukrainian forces launched a coordinated series of strikes aimed at degrading Russian logistics and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) throughout the theater. United Kingdom Chief of the Defense Staff Admiral Sir Antony David Radakin stated on July 4 that Ukrainian forces are conducting an operation to "starve, stretch, and strike" Russian forces to break down Russian defensive lines.^[15] A widespread strike series targeting Russian GLOCs and logistics would be an appropriate element of such a strategy and is partially reminiscent of the interdiction campaign that Ukrainian forces conducted as a part of the Kherson counteroffensive.^[16] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian forces appear to be focusing on creating an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment.^[17] A possible Ukrainian interdiction campaign supporting this effort would have cumulative effects, and its results would not be immediately evident.

Ukrainian and Russian officials maintained their heightened rhetoric regarding the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 5 following significant claims of a possible attack against the plant overnight on July 4-5.^[18] Russia likely continues setting informational conditions for a possible false flag attack against the ZNPP but remains unlikely to cause a radiological incident at this time. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russia may attack the ZNPP to either accomplish its military goals in the area — presumably deterring any possible Ukrainian counteroffensive near the Kakhovka Reservoir — or to intimidate and blame Ukrainian forces for any attacks against the ZNPP.^[19] Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the General Staff's Main Operational Department, Oleksii Hromov stated that the situation at the ZNPP is not new and that Ukrainian forces have the necessary equipment to handle radiological incidents.^[20] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that there is a "great threat" that Ukraine may sabotage the ZNPP with "catastrophic consequences."^[21] ISW continues to assess that Russian statements accusing Ukraine of imminent sabotage against the ZNPP are likely part of a broader information operation aimed at undermining support for Ukraine ahead of the upcoming NATO summit and dissuading Ukrainian forces from counteroffensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.^[22]

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi stated on July 5 that IAEA experts at the ZNPP have requested access to nuclear reactors no. 3 and 4 and other areas at the ZNPP following Ukrainian statements that Russian forces placed explosives on the reactors' outer roofs.^[23] Grossi's statement on the importance of accessing certain areas of the ZNPP — along with consistent prior statements to the same effect — indicates that Russian authorities are denying the IAEA contingent access to various critical areas at the ZNPP and are unlikely to allow access in the future.^[24] Russian authorities may refuse access to reactors no. 3 and 4 to prevent the IAEA from investigating the Ukrainian reports on these reactors. Satellite imagery published on July 5 shows unknown objects on the roofs of one of the ZNPP reactor containment units, reportedly reactor no. 4, placed there after July 3.^[25] Though the exact nature of these objects is unknown, their presence on the reactor containment unit roof, recent Ukrainian reports, and significant alarm over the ZNPP underscore the importance of Russia's refusal to give the IAEA access to critical ZNPP areas to investigate possible threats to the plant.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russia continues to procure Iranian-made Shahed drones and is setting conditions to manufacture these drones in Russia with Iran's assistance. Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff General Oleksii Hromov stated that Russia received up to 1,800 drones from Iran - of which 1,600 are of the Shahed-type and 200 of unspecified types.^[26] Hromov added that Iran consistently replenishes Russian stocks of Iranian drones, and that Russia reached an agreement with Iran to produce drones in the Republic of Tatarstan. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian and Iranian officials are planning to set up the production of Iranian Shahed drones on the territory of Yelabuga in the Republic of Tatarstan given that this settlement is the provisional headquarters of the Yelabuga Free Economic Zone.^[27] Russia previously used Yelabuga Free Economic Zone exclusively for civilian industrial and economic projects before turning the project into a key focus of Russia's military industry. The Resistance Center reported that Iran will provide Russia with necessary components that will then be assembled in Russia. The Resistance Center, citing open-source intelligence, reported that Russian leadership intends to train Yelabuga specialists in Iran to assemble Shaheds and transfer the production of some Shahed components to the territory of the Yelabuga Free Economic Zone. The Resistance Center added that Russia wants to establish an automated production line.

The Kremlin continues to show concern over the risk of a potential armed rebellion in Russia after Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24. A pro-Kremlin online outlet reported that the Moscow Oblast police will train in urban combat tactics, light machine gun shooting, grenade throwing, and tactical medicine to improve skills in the aftermath of Wagner's armed rebellion.^[28] Such training indicates that the Kremlin is attempting to improve the ability of security forces in Moscow to defend the regime against potential future threats. Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs is unlikely to adequately prepare the Moscow Oblast police for urban combat given that some police elements are already expressing disinterest with the new training plans among many other problems with this plan. The outlet stated that Moscow Oblast's female police officers are also trying to avoid the training.

The Financial Times (FT) reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping personally warned Russian President Vladimir Putin against threatening to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine during his visit to Moscow in late March.^[29] FT reported, citing unnamed former Chinese government officials, that Xi told Putin not to use nuclear weapons and noted that China's stance against the use of nuclear weapons was included in its position paper on peace in Ukraine. FT reported that Xi's warning to Putin was likely part of China's efforts to bolster its relationships with the European Union. Western security officials also noted that Putin was disappointed after Xi's visit to Moscow did not secure any important gains for Russia such as the approval of the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline. ISW previously assessed that Xi may have played a role in pressuring the Kremlin to reduce its nuclear threats in November 2022 and that Putin was unable to secure the desired no-limits bilateral partnership with China during Xi's visit to Moscow.^[30]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin dismissed Sergei Mikhailov from his position as General Director of TASS state newswire and replaced him with Andrey Kondrashov.^[31] Mikhailov took over TASS in 2012 and rebranded the news agency into the modern publication it is today.^[32] Kondrashov has previously made documentaries about the annexation of Crimea and Putin's life and was the press secretary for Putin's campaign headquarters in 2018.^[33] Ukrainian sources suggested that Kondrashov's appointment might indicate that the Kremlin is unhappy with the media coverage of the Wagner Group's armed rebellion and highlights the continued importance of loyalty to Putin over professional achievement.^[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted counteroffensive operations in five sectors of the front on July 5 and made gains in some areas.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a series of missile strikes targeting Russian rear positions along the entire front overnight and during the day on July 5.
- Ukrainian and Russian officials maintained their heightened rhetoric regarding the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 5 following significant claims of a possible attack against the plant overnight on July 4-5. Russia likely continues setting informational conditions for a possible false flag attack against the ZNPP, but remains unlikely to cause a radiological incident at this time.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russia continues to procure Iranian-made Shahed drones and is setting conditions to manufacture these drones in Russia with Iran's assistance.
- The Kremlin continues to show concern over the risk of a potential armed rebellion in Russia after Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24.
- *The Financial Times (FT)* reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping personally warned Russian President Vladimir Putin against threatening to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine during his visit to Moscow in late March.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin dismissed Sergei Mikhailov from his position as General Director of TASS state newswire and replaced him with Andrey Kondrashov.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, and Russian and Ukrainian forces continued skirmishing around Kreminna.
- Ukrainian forces conducted successful offensive operations in the Bakhmut area, and Russian milbloggers reported that Ukrainian forces liberated an important height near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in the western Donetsk Oblast-eastern Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- A Ukrainian official confirmed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russia's hybrid cryptomobilization and contract service recruitment campaigns have failed to produce large numbers of recruits, contrary to Russian claims.
- Russian officials are setting information conditions to postpone regional elections in occupied Ukraine likely out of concerns for successful Ukrainian counteroffensives.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 4, 2023

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Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 4, 2023, 8:35pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on July 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces appear to be focusing on creating an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov reported on July 4 that Ukrainian forces are performing their main task of destroying Russian manpower, equipment, fuel depots, artillery, and air defenses and that a “war of destruction is equal to a war of kilometers.” Danilov’s assessment underlines the prioritization of Ukraine’s ongoing campaign to attrit Russian manpower and assets over attempting to conduct massive sweeping mechanized maneuvers to regain large swaths of territory rapidly. NATO Military Committee Chair Admiral Bob Bauer reported on July 3 that Ukrainian forces are correct to proceed cautiously and avoid high casualties in the counteroffensive and acknowledged that the counteroffensive is difficult due to landmines and other obstacles up to 30km deep into Russian-occupied territory. Bauer stated that Ukrainian forces should not face criticism or pressure for moving slowly.

Ukrainian forces have liberated territory in multiple areas of the front since the start of the counteroffensive in early June. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on June 3 that Ukrainian forces have liberated a total of 37.4 square kilometers in eastern and southern Ukraine in the past week. Ukrainian forces are continuing to make steady, gradual advances.

The current pace of Ukrainian operations is not indicative of a stalemate or evidence that Ukraine cannot retake large areas. Ukrainian forces conducted slow and gradual interdiction campaigns against Russian concentration areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and limited ground attacks on the west (right) bank between August and November of 2022, before finally forcing the Russian withdrawal from the right bank in mid-November. The situation in southern Ukraine is different, of course, because there is no natural bottleneck of the sort created by Russian reliance on the two bridges over the Dnipro. The Ukrainian counter-offensive in Kherson nevertheless alternated phases of relatively rapid advance with long periods of preparation, combat focused on attriting Russian forces, and limited gains that ultimately made Russian positions on the west bank of the river untenable. By contrast, the Russian winter-spring offensive culminated in just over one month without making significant gains along the Luhansk-Kharkiv Oblast border. The current Ukrainian counter-offensive is less dramatic and rapid than the one that liberated much of Kharkiv Oblast, more successful than the failed Russian winter offensive, and generally most like the slower but ultimately successful Kherson counteroffensive in its pace and initial progress.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least four sectors of the front and advanced on July 4. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks in the Lyman direction. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area, in the western Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukrainian forces have made some unspecified advances on Bakhmut’s northern and southern flanks, and a prominent Russian milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Bakhmut. Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Valery Shereshen stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to two kilometers in the western Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and a Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces reached Pryutne, 15 kilometers southwest of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast. Geolocated footage confirms that Ukrainian forces made additional advances south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian and Ukrainian officials escalated their rhetoric surrounding the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 4, but Russia is likely focused on accusing Ukraine of irresponsible actions around the ZNPP including setting conditions for a possible false flag attack. Russia remains unlikely to generate a radiological incident at the ZNPP at this time. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on July 4 that Ukrainian officials have begun preparations for a potential Russian provocation at the ZNPP “in the near future” and warned that Russian forces placed objects “resembling explosive devices” on the outer roofs of the ZNPP’s third and fourth reactors in order to blame damage to these areas on Ukrainian shelling. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky echoed this statement in his nightly address on July 4, and other Ukrainian military sources warned of possible Russian provocations at the plant. As ISW has previously reported, it is unlikely that limited Russian sabotage at the ZNPP that Russia could hope to blame on Ukraine would be able to generate a massive radiological incident, as the ZNPP’s reactors were constructed to withstand considerable damage. Ukrainian military sources reiterated this assessment and noted that even if the purported explosive devices detonate, the damage would not harm the reactor but would rather create the false impression that Ukrainian forces had shelled the reactors. Advisor to the head of Russian nuclear energy operator Rosenergoatom, Renat Karchaa, also claimed on July 4 that Ukraine is planning to strike the ZNPP overnight on July 4-5. ISW has previously assessed that such provocative Russian statements, and even the possibility of a tangible provocation at the plant, are likely part of a Russian wider information operation meant to accuse Ukraine of irresponsibility at the ZNPP ahead of the upcoming NATO summit and dissuade Ukrainian forces from conducting counteroffensive operations against occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

The reported reorganization of Russian internal security organs suggests that the Kremlin has not yet concluded that it has effectively neutralized the threats of future armed rebellions following the Wagner Group’s June 23-24 rebellion. Russian outlet *Vedomosti* reported on July 3, citing internal law enforcement sources, that Russian law enforcement authorities are considering reassigning the “Grom” special units of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs) to Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard). *Vedomosti* noted that this reported change follows Russian President Vladimir Putin’s meeting with heads of various Russian law enforcement agencies on June 26 in the wake of the Wagner armed rebellion. Several Russian sources spoke out against the reported transfer of “Grom” to Rosgvardia, citing overall poorer equipment, training, and leadership quality. *Vedomosti* claimed that Alexander Khinstein, former advisor to Rosgvardia Head Viktor Zolotov, warned that the assignment of “Grom” units to Rosgvardia would be a “dangerous experiment.” The alleged restructuring of Russia’s internal security forces suggests that the Kremlin is working to build an effective anti-rebellion force following Wagner’s armed rebellion. The fact that these purported changes are happening following the rebellion indicates that the Kremlin was correctly dissatisfied with the performance of security forces, which failed to stop or even contest Wagner’s march on Moscow, and suggests that the Kremlin has not ruled out the risk of future such rebellions.

Russian authorities are absolving Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of financial responsibility for damages caused by the Wagner Group rebellion and reportedly returned significant liquid assets to Prigozhin, possibly as part of the deal negotiated between Putin, Prigozhin, and Belarusian

dictator Alexander Lukashenko. The Rostov-on-Don administration claimed that the total damages from Prigozhin's rebellion amounted to 92.5 million rubles (roughly \$1 million), and that the administration will not recover damages from Prigozhin or the Wagner Group. St. Petersburg news outlet *Fontanka* claimed, citing internal sources, that Russian authorities returned over 10 billion rubles (roughly \$111 million) in cash, five gold bars, and hundreds of thousands of US dollars in cash to Prigozhin on July 2 that authorities had seized from Prigozhin-affiliated facilities in St. Petersburg on June 24. *Fontanka* claimed that authorities only reversed their decision to hold onto Prigozhin's liquid assets on July 2 but did not specify a reason for the reversal. The legal basis that Russian authorities would have had for seizing Prigozhin's assets remains unclear in any case, as Russian authorities dropped criminal charges against Prigozhin for the rebellion. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that part of Prigozhin's liquid assets were supposed to be compensation to the families of Russian pilots whom Wagner forces killed during the rebellion, but it is now uncertain whether Wagner will make those payments. The milblogger assessed that Wagner will likely use at least part of the returned assets to support transferring Wagner Group personnel to Belarus.

The official Chechen response to an attack against a Russian opposition journalist in Chechnya may impact Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's standing in the Russian ultranationalist information space. Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta* reported on July 4 that unspecified, masked actors in Grozny, Chechnya intercepted a car containing one of its journalists, Yelena Milashina, severely assaulted Milashina, destroyed her equipment and documents, and warned Milashina against writing "anything." Milashina traveled to Chechnya in order to cover the trial of Zarema Musayeva, the mother of an exiled Chechen opposition activist, and the attackers also assaulted Musayeva's lawyer, Alexander Nemov, who was in the car with Milashina. Chechen courts sentenced Musayeva to five and a half years in prison on July 5 for alleged fraud and attacking Chechen authorities, but some Russian opposition voices claimed that Chechen authorities prosecuted Musayeva due to her son's activism. Prominent Russian ultranationalist voices seized on Milashina's attack despite its lack of relevance to the war in Ukraine likely out of concern for broader press censorship. The voices condemned attacks against journalists – including Milashina – as unacceptable even though they disagree with Milashina. The Russian Union of Journalists and the Russian Human Rights Council both issued statements of condemnation and opened investigations into the attack.

Kadyrov's prominence in the broader Russian information space will likely force Kadyrov to choose between preserving his regime and his support in the ultranationalist information space, however. Kadyrov's response was a brief acknowledgment that the relevant Chechen authorities are investigating the "incident" - a response inconsistent in tone and content with Kadyrov's usual flamboyant, long-winded messaging. Kadyrov previously condemned Milashina as a "terrorist" and demanded her detention, which is largely consistent with his overall effort to retain his authoritarian rule in Chechnya. If Kadyrov supports the investigation into Milashina's attack, he risks undermining his domestic regime and crackdowns against Chechen opposition voices. But if Kadyrov refuses to support the investigation, then he risks undermining his standing within an information space that is hypersensitive to the prospect of increased censorship. Kadyrov already struggles to balance these dual aims in his force arrayment in Ukraine; Kadyrov portrays Akhmat forces as capable fighters against Ukraine but has simultaneously largely avoided committing them intensive and attritional combat, and some Russian milbloggers have complained that Chechen forces are distracted posing online while other Russian forces actually fight. Chechen forces notably failed to engage Prigozhin's rebels despite ostentatiously mobilizing and moving ostensibly to fight them, although Putin might have directed Kadyrov to avoid combat with Wagner forces.

Russia is reportedly forming a new combined arms army as part of the Northern Fleet, likely in order to posture its preparedness against NATO. Russian news outlet *Izvestia* reported that Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) sources claimed that the existing 14th Army Corps of the Northern Fleet will be reformed into the new combined arms army with motorized rifle brigades, divisions, and regiments subordinate to it. *Izvestia* suggested that the 14th Army Corps' 200th and 80th Brigades will be reorganized into a division under the new combined arms army. Russian army corps before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine existed only within fleets and largely performed the same functions as combined arms armies. The reported decision to form a new combined arms army is thus likely posturing ahead of the NATO summit on July 11-12 intended to show Russia's military response to the accession of Finland and possibly Sweden to the alliance. The promotion of the 14th Army Corps to a combined arms army level will not by itself increase Russian combat capacity, and it is unclear where the Russian military leadership could find the personnel and equipment that would be needed for the new organization to generate a material difference.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a drone attack on Moscow Oblast and Novaya Moskva on July 4. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian air defenses shot down and electronic warfare suppressed five of five Ukrainian drones. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian air defenses destroyed two drones near Valuevo, electronic warfare suppressed one in the Odinstovo Raion, one drone fell near Krivosheino, and one flew toward a military unit in Kubinka - likely the Russian airbase there. One Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces may have intended to strike Vnukovo Airport, and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced that Russian authorities temporarily redirected some flights from Vnukovo Airport in response to the drones. Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces may have conducted the drone attack in retaliation for an alleged Russian strike on a Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) building in Sumy Oblast.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces appear to be focusing on creating an asymmetrical attrition gradient that conserves Ukrainian manpower at the cost of a slower rate of territorial gains, while gradually wearing down Russian manpower and equipment. The current pace of Ukrainian operations is not indicative of a stalemate or evidence that Ukraine cannot retake large areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least four sectors of the front and advanced on July 4.
- Russian and Ukrainian officials escalated their rhetoric surrounding the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on July 5, but Russia is likely focused on accusing Ukraine of irresponsible actions around the ZNPP including setting conditions for a possible false flag attack. Russia remains unlikely to generate a radiological incident at the ZNPP at this time.
- The reported reorganization of Russian internal security organs suggests that the Kremlin has not yet concluded that it has effectively neutralized the threats of future armed rebellions following the Wagner Group's June 23-24 rebellion.
- Russian authorities are absolving Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of financial responsibility for damages caused by the Wagner Group rebellion and reportedly returned significant liquid assets to Prigozhin, possibly as part of the deal negotiated between Putin, Prigozhin, and Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko.
- The official Chechen response to an attack against a Russian opposition journalist in Chechnya may impact Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's standing in the Russian ultranationalist information space.

- Kadyrov's prominence in the broader Russian information space will likely force Kadyrov to choose between preserving his regime and his support in the ultranationalist information space, however.
- Russia is reportedly forming a new combined arms army as part of the Northern Fleet, likely in order to posture its preparedness against NATO.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a drone attack on Moscow Oblast and Novaya Moskva on July 4.
- Russian conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and south of Kremenna.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces escalated ground attacks in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on July 4.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russia continues efforts to mobilize its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of providing pediatric healthcare.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 3, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 3, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30pm ET on July 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the front made marginal advances on July 3. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces also conducted counteroffensive operations in the Lyman direction.^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations the Bakhmut area, the western Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[2] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces recaptured nine square kilometers of territory in eastern Ukraine, and geolocated footage shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced southwest of Bakhmut.^[3] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces also recaptured 28.4 square kilometers in southern Ukraine in the past week for a total of 158.4 square kilometers in southern Ukraine during an unspecified time period.^[4] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces made limited gains south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[5]

Russian milbloggers have seized on recent Ukrainian activity on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast to call for an increased presence of small river vessels and equipment in the Dnipro River to prevent further Ukrainian advances. Russian milbloggers appealed on July 2 to the heads of the Dagestan and Tatarstan republics, Astrakhan Oblast, Krasnodar Krai, and Primorsky Krai to send boats confiscated from poachers to the Kherson Oblast frontline, specifying that 10 regiments and brigades of the Southern Military District's "Dnepr" (the Russian word for Dnipro) Grouping of Forces sorely need the vessels.^[6] ISW previously reported on July 2 that milbloggers are accusing the Russian MoD of failing to provide Russian forces on the east bank with requisite boats and other equipment, and it appears that milbloggers outsourced their requests for additional logistical support to Russian regional heads.^[7] Dagestan Republic Head Sergey Melikov responded to the milblogger appeal on July 3 and ordered Dagestan to solve the issue of transferring confiscated poaching boats to Russian forces.^[8] One Russian milblogger called for the resurrection of the "Dnepr" flotilla, a special military river unit that was active in the 1735-1739 and 1787-1792 Russo-Turkish wars, the Russian Civil War, and World War II.^[9] The milblogger claimed that a resurrected "Dnepr" flotilla could significantly ameliorate the position of Russian troops in the Kherson direction and that this grouping could be reinforced with simple, civilian-use boats.^[10] Several other milbloggers, including former Russian officer Igor Girkin, claimed that Russian forces in Kherson Oblast need small boats and equipment in order to keep Ukrainian troops as far back from the Dnipro delta as possible.^[11] The overall anxious milblogger response to recent Ukrainian activity across the Dnipro River suggests that many Russian milbloggers fear Ukraine's ability to cross the river and believe that the current command of the "Dnepr" grouping has not sufficiently prepared its troops for that potentiality.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev published an essay that reamplified inflammatory Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine and the West, likely to undermine support for Ukraine at the upcoming NATO summit.^[12] Medvedev's July 3 essay paints his usual alarmist rhetoric in new colors; he again portrayed the war in Ukraine as part of a broader existential conflict against the West, restated many of Putin's extreme pre-war demands that transcended Ukraine, and implied that Russia is prepared to engage in this broader conflict for "decades" if these demands are not met.^[13] Medvedev claimed that "armageddon" is "probable" if the West does not agree to negotiate a new world order with Russia, absurdly claiming that the nuclear "taboo" is broken (presumably by the US use of atomic weapons in 1945—it is otherwise entirely unclear to what he might be referring) to falsely imply that nuclear war is a certainty.^[14] Medvedev attempted to portray Russia as connected to partners outside of the West despite Western sanctions, and that states not aligned with the West actively stand against it. Medvedev's essay is consistent with his and other senior Kremlin officials' prior attempts to scare Western states, organizations, and media prior to significant international discussions about military, political, and economic support for Ukraine and its effort to liberate Russian-held territories.^[15] Medvedev's essay is a restatement of existing Russian narratives and does not represent a true inflection in Russian political, military, or nuclear rhetoric.^[16]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric about the current state of the war in Ukraine and the Wagner Group rebellion on July 3.[17] Shoigu notably did not directly name the Wagner Group or its financier Yevgeny Prigozhin while discussing the “provocation,” opting instead to denounce the rebellion and credit the loyalty of the Russian military as the reason for the rebellion’s failure. Shoigu also claimed that Ukrainian forces have lost 2,500 pieces of military equipment since June 4, likely intending to undermine Western support for the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Shoigu’s speech did not present any new rhetorical arguments and is likely continued projection of claimed internal stability following the rebellion and portraying the Russian military as capable of defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Russian forces continued drone and missile strikes against rear areas in Ukraine overnight and during the day on July 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 17 Shahed drones at unspecified areas of Ukraine overnight on July 2-3, and Ukrainian forces shot down 13 of the drones. [18] The Ukrainian General Staff reported in its evening situational report that Russian forces targeted civilian infrastructure with three S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and 20 Shahed drones in Sumy, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia Oblast during the day on July 3, and Ukrainian forces shot down 16 of the UAVs.[19] The Sumy Oblast Military Administration reported that Shahed drones struck a residential building in Sumy City, killing two and injuring 19 civilians.[20]

The Kremlin continues to use tools of digital authoritarian to surveil Russia’s domestic population and aim to expand domestic production of surveillance technology. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on June 3 that the Kremlin has given Russian law enforcement, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), more tools to monitor the location of phones, break into personal accounts, and track activity in encrypted applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and Signal. [21] According to Russian internal records that *NYT* reportedly obtained, the Russian government reportedly aims to expand its surveillance technology tools by supporting the transition of Russian technology firms into producing advanced tools for Russian intelligence services. Russian technology firms may be experiencing a shortage of skilled employees given the number of skilled workers that left Russia after the start of the war in February 2022.[22] ISW has previously reported on the Kremlin’s use of automated technology to censor the Russian information space and trading of surveillance tools in exchange for weapons to use in Ukraine.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the front made marginal advances on July 3.
- Russian milbloggers have seized on recent Ukrainian activity on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast to call for an increased presence of small river vessels and equipment in the Dnipro River to prevent further Ukrainian advances.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev published an essay that reamplified inflammatory Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine and the West, likely to undermine support for Ukraine at the upcoming NATO summit
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric about the current state of the war in Ukraine and the Wagner Group rebellion on July 3.
- Russian forces continued drone and missile strikes against rear areas in Ukraine overnight and during the day on July 3.
- The Kremlin continues to use tools of digital authoritarian to surveil Russia’s domestic population and aim to expand domestic production of surveillance technology.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued limited attacks on the Svatove-Kremenna line and south of Kremenna.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut area.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast, near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts administrative border, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Official Russian sources continue to claim that Russian forces repel all Ukrainian assaults on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast near the Antonivsky Bridge.
- The Wagner Group is reportedly suspending regional recruitment on a temporary basis.
- Russian officials continue efforts to portray Russia as a safe custodian of Ukrainian children while inadvertently confirming that Russia is facilitating mass deportations of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 2, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 2, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on July 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted counteroffensive operations in six sectors of the front on July 2 and made gains in some of these areas. The Russian Ministry of Defense and other Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Lyman direction, in the Bakhmut area, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, in western Donetsk Oblast, on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported on July 2 that Ukrainian forces are continuing to make unspecified advances on the flanks around Bakhmut.[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces made unspecified gains southwest of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[3] Geolocated footage published on July 1 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced northeast of Volodymyrivka (12km southeast of Vuhledar) in western Donetsk Oblast.[4] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations south and southwest of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast. [5] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced towards Russian trench positions near Robotyne (12km south of

Orikhiv) and that there is ongoing close combat in these trenches.[6] Some Russian sources continue to describe these Ukrainian counteroffensive operations as smaller tactical operations than earlier Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[7]

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine and Kyiv on July 2. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 11 missiles and eight Shahed drones at Ukraine, including three Kalibr missiles at Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts.[8] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted all three Kalibr cruise missiles and eight Shahed drones.[9] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all Russian Shahed drones targeting Kyiv, and Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two drones over Mykolaiv Oblast.[10]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is attempting to consolidate control over the Russian information space by undermining select Russian milbloggers who did not repeat the MoD's desired framing regarding the claimed defeat of a Ukrainian presence on the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on July 1. The Russian MoD claimed on July 1 and July 2 that Russian forces successfully repelled Ukrainian landings near the Antonivsky Bridge and disproportionately celebrated defeating a small Ukrainian landing on the eastern (left) bank of the Dnipro River.[11] Some Russian milbloggers, however, contrary to the MoD's reports noted that fighting is still ongoing and that Ukrainian forces maintained some positions near Antonivsky Bridge as of July 2.[12] A prominent Russian milblogger amplified a post on July 1 from an unspecified Telegram channel, which criticized several prominent Kremlin and Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels for contradicting the Russian MoD's official narrative.[13] The post accused select milbloggers of spreading false information about the situation around the Antonivsky Bridge and other Russian MoD claims - ultimately accusing these channels of assisting Ukrainian "psychological operations".[14] Russian milbloggers who contradicted the MoD's report responded in turn by accusing the Russian General Staff of launching an attack on the Russian milblogger community.[15] These defiant milbloggers claimed that the Russian General Staff and the MoD previously attempted to open a criminal case against milbloggers in 2022 and claimed that milbloggers' accurate coverage of frontline realities greatly undermines defense officials' efforts to exaggerate Russia's successes.[16] Some of these defiant milbloggers directly interact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and it is likely that the Russian MoD seeks to censor some Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers out of a concern that these ultranationalists may expose Russian military failures to Putin during their monthly "special military operations" milblogger working groups within the Kremlin.[17]

The Russian MoD's conflict with the milblogger community over a trivial combat operation may indicate that the Russian military command does not think it has any other successes to report to Putin amidst the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive. One milblogger noted that Russian defense officials worry that milbloggers' coverage of the war endangers their official positions and implied that the Russian MoD may be attempting to recover from the Wagner Group's rebellion on June 24.[18] ISW previously reported that the Russian MoD may have exaggerated its victory in east Kherson Oblast to repair the reputation of the Russian "Dnepr" Group of Forces and the Southern Military District (SMD), whose headquarters in Rostov-on-Don the Wagner Group surrounded a week before.[19] The Russian MoD has consistently exaggerated Ukrainian losses since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and may not be confident that such tired narratives are sufficiently offsetting the lack of any Russian progress on the battlefield as Ukrainian forces continue to make limited but steady advances in eastern and southern Ukraine.

The Russian MoD's attempt to overstate a potential tactical Russian victory near the Antonivsky Bridge and its efforts to restrict opposing information has backfired. Russian milbloggers began to blame Russia's military command for failing to provide Russian servicemen in east bank Kherson Oblast with boats and other supplies and generally accused the Russian MoD of lying about the situation on the frontlines for its own self-interested reasons.[20] One milblogger observed that the Russian MoD failed to provide Russian forces with more boats despite the fact that an acute and persistent Russian lack of patrol boats for littoral security has been widely known since at least April 2023, while another milblogger claimed that Russia should authorize the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) to create a parallel control system over the Russian MoD to resolve bureaucratic problems.[21] The Russian pro-war community thus continues to criticize the Russian MoD even after Wagner's failed rebellion and even as Prigozhin loses his platform in Russia.

Putin continues to face the choice of either siding with the Russian MoD to defend its weakened reputation or maintaining his support among pro-war ultranationalist milbloggers and their patronage networks. The Russian MoD had launched similar organized attacks against hostile milbloggers in July and October 2022 that did not result in milbloggers' arrests or punishments for their criticism of the Russian military command.[22] ISW assessed that Putin was not interested in restricting the milblogger community as he valued its support for the invasion of Ukraine and instead increasingly co-opted select milbloggers by bringing them into the pro-Kremlin fold - likely in part to check the Russian MoD.[23] Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin had extensively used Russian milbloggers to promote his efforts to replace Russian MoD leadership with Wagner-affiliated officials prior to his rebellion, and Putin now faces the choice of censoring or appeasing Russian milbloggers in the aftermath of the rebellion.[24] Putin will need to restrict Russian milbloggers from criticizing the Russian MoD if he seeks to reestablish and reinforce the MoD's credibility, but the MoD's failures, struggles, and apparent pervasive dishonesty may make that task infeasible. Putin may thus instead decide to continue appeasing the milblogger community and scapegoating the Russian MoD for military failures in Ukraine, a far easier undertaking. That course of action could let Putin retain support for the war among the Russian ultranationalist camp at the expense of the Russian MoD. But that course of action also carries risk for Putin: the continued erosion of the MoD's credibility could enable other ambitious Russian figures to promote their interests at its expense, as Prigozhin tried to do.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted counteroffensive operations in six sectors of the front on July 2 and made gains in some of these areas.
- Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine and Kyiv on July 2.
- The Russian MoD's conflict with the milblogger community over a trivial combat operation may indicate that the Russian military command does not think it has any other successes to report to Putin amidst the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- The Russian MoD's attempt to overstate a potential tactical Russian victory near the Antonivsky Bridge and its efforts to restrict opposing information has backfired.
- Putin continues to face the choice of either siding with the Russian MoD to defend its weakened reputation or maintaining his support among pro-war ultranationalist milbloggers and their patronage networks.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to engage in positional battles along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna frontline.

- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted limited offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast and have advanced as of July 2.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia oblasts border area.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain limited positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near the Antonivsky Bridge as of July 2.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian officials plan to create regional centers for the development of drones in Nizhny Novgorod as well as in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, and Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Belarusian sources reported that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials and citizens are actively involved in the deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 1, 2023

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

July 1, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30 pm ET on July 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the frontline on July 1. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults in the Bakhmut area and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains near Rozdolivka (18km north of Bakhmut) and unspecified gains near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[2] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts and made gains southwest of Velyka Novosilka.[3] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations south and southwest of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast, with one milblogger claiming that Ukrainian forces made gains up 1.5km deep and 6km wide in the direction of Robotyne (12km south of Orikhiv).[4] Other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are still at least 1.5km north of Robotyne as of July 1, consistent with ISW's current assessment of the control of terrain in the area.[5]

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley acknowledged that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations will take longer than some Western observers had expected. Milley stated that Ukrainian forces are deliberately working through difficult minefields and advancing from 500m to 2,000m a day.[6] Milley reiterated that he expects Ukrainian counteroffensive operations to last up to 10 weeks and urged people to realize that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will be a long and likely costly operation.[7] Russian sources are increasingly claiming that Ukrainian forces are currently conducting assaults in southern Ukraine with smaller infantry groups and fewer armored vehicles than during earlier counteroffensive operations.[8] Russian sources also claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations in southern Ukraine in even smaller groups, some of them allegedly with seven to nine personnel.[9] These claims about Ukrainian operations suggest that Ukrainian forces are not currently attempting the kind of large-scale operations that would result in rapid territorial advances. Ukrainian officials have routinely indicated that Ukrainian forces have yet to commit a substantial portion of their forces to counteroffensive operations and have yet to launch the main phase of the counteroffensive.[10]

Russian officials and sources celebrated claims that Russian forces defeated small-scale Ukrainian landings in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on July 1 as if they had won a major victory. Kherson Oblast Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo claimed that servicemen of the Russian "Dnepr" Group of Forces cleared areas near the Antonivsky Bridge on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River after special forces elements conducted a surprise landing on Ukrainian forces' rear positions overnight.[11] Saldo claimed that elements of a "Storm" detachment, the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade (Northern Fleet), the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade (22nd Army Corps, Black Sea Fleet), the 127th Reserve Brigade (likely a new reserve unit), and the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District [SMD]) participated in the operation that decisively repelled Ukrainian forces from their position near Antonivsky Bridge. Saldo also claimed that Ukrainian forces no longer have any "bridgeheads" on the eastern bank, and a Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces were able to advance to the dacha areas near the Antonivsky Bridge after launching an Iskander ballistic missile at the bridge on June 30.[12] A Crimean-based Russian blogger also claimed that elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Air Assault (VDV) Division using T-72 tanks also participated in an attack against Ukrainian positions near the Antonivsky Bridge.[13] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces eliminated a Ukrainian sabotage group that attempted to land on the island north of Oleshky (9km southeast of Kherson City) - likely referring to the Antonivsky Bridge area.[14] The Russian MoD also demonstratively awarded servicemen of the 80th Arctic Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) - a unit within the Russian "Dnepr" Group of Forces - for destroying Ukrainian military equipment in Kherson Oblast.[15] The Russian MoD also published an interview with the commander of the 80th Arctic Motorized Rifle Brigade who claimed that Russian forces fully restored their positions along the coast of the Dnipro River and along the islands and repelled all Ukrainian attempts to cross the river.[16] Russian sources notably did not provide any evidence that Russian forces regained control over coastal areas and many Russian sources reported that clearing operations near the dacha areas adjacent to the Antonivsky Bridge are still ongoing as of July 1.[17]

The exaggerated Russian praise for defeating a small Ukrainian landing suggests either that the Russian military command sincerely fears a Ukrainian attack on east bank Kherson Oblast or that it is desperate for an informational victory following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion or both. Russian sources previously claimed that a grouping of around 70 Ukrainian servicemen held positions near the Antonivsky Bridge and that the Russian "Dnepr" Group of Forces' military command had been consistently ordering Russian forces to eliminate the Ukrainian "bridgehead" despite significant personnel and equipment losses.[18] The Russian "Dnepr" Group of Forces is reportedly headquartered in Rostov-on-Don likely within the SMD headquarters.[19] Wagner forces notably surrounded the SMD headquarters during the armed rebellion on June 24, and the Russian MoD is likely trying to recover the headquarters' reputation. A Kremlin-affiliated

milblogger also expressed concern that Ukrainian forces will continue to conduct small unit sorties across the Dnipro River and will launch a large-scale attack to reach Oleshky to break through to southwestern Kherson Oblast.[20] ISW makes no effort to forecast Ukrainian operations, but the milblogger's statements suggest that the Russian military command may be increasingly concerned over a potential Ukrainian landing on east bank Kherson Oblast.

Russian forces are likely responding to Ukrainian operations around Bakhmut by pulling forces from elsewhere in Ukraine. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported on July 1 that Russian forces recently transferred an unspecified Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) regiment from the Lyman direction (the area west of Kreminna) to the Bakhmut direction.[21] Geolocated footage published on June 30 shows the 137th Guards Airborne Regiment (106th Airborne Division) operating south of Rozdolivka (18km north of Bakhmut).[22] A Russian milblogger also claimed that elements of the 98th VDV Division are now operating in the Bakhmut direction.[23] ISW has previously observed elements of the 237th Air Assault Regiment (76th VDV Division) and the 331st Airborne Regiment (98th VDV Division) operating in the Lyman direction, although ISW has not seen any visual confirmation of elements of either formation near Bakhmut recently.[24] Cherevaty reported that Russian forces replaced the VDV regiment in the Lyman direction with unspecified territorial defense forces, indicating that Russian forces may be redeploying more elite units to the Bakhmut area and replacing the elite units with inferior formations.[25] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar previously stated that Russian forces transferred some of their most-combat capable units from the Kherson direction to the Bakhmut and Zaporizhzhia directions in the week following the start of Ukrainian counteroffensives on June 4.[26] Cherevaty stated that Bakhmut continues to offer Russian forces more propaganda value than military benefits and suggested that Russian forces may be concentrating elite forces in the Bakhmut area to preserve the perceived informational victory resulting from the capture of Bakhmut on May 21.[27] If Russian reinforcements already sent to Bakhmut are insufficient to hold Russian gains in the area the Russian command may face difficult choices about whether to risk creating serious vulnerabilities in Kherson or Luhansk oblasts or to begin drawing forces away from southern Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Russians might initiate an intentional radioactive leak at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) as part of a potential Russian strategy to freeze the war. Zelensky stated in an interview with Spanish news outlet *El Mundo* published on June 30 that Russian forces may attempt to remotely detonate the ZNPP if Ukrainian authorities are able to pass control of the ZNPP to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[28] Zelensky stated that Russian forces may cause a radiological incident to halt maneuver warfare and buy more time for Russia to recruit more personnel and produce more military equipment.[29] Zelensky also reported that about 5,000 Russian forces remain at the ZNPP with military equipment. ISW continues to assess that Russia remains unlikely to cause a radiological incident at the ZNPP since Russia would not be able to control the impacts of the incident, which would degrade Russia's ability to operate and govern in occupied southern Ukraine.[30] Russian forces could conduct various possible man-made radiological incidents at varying levels of severity; however, ISW continues to assess that the consequences of a Russian radiological incident would outweigh any benefit for Russian forces at this time.[31] Russia is likely continuing to use the threat of a radiological incident to constrain Ukrainian counteroffensive actions and degrade Western military assistance support for Ukraine.

Russian propagandists are likely conducting an information campaign to destroy the Wagner Group's reputation as a uniquely effective fighting force in support of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to dismantle the Wagner Group and integrate former Wagner fighters into MoD structures. Russian state TV channel *Rossiya-1* aired a segment on June 30 trivializing the Wagner Group's effectiveness in Ukraine, calling into question the "constructed myth about the Wagner Group's [high level of] effectiveness."^[32] The segment implied that there is a popular misconception in Russia that Wagner forces are extraordinarily effective and argued that regular Russian forces are more effective than the Wagner private military company (PMC). *Rossiya-1* argued that regular Russian forces captured a geographically larger and more important city of Mariupol (in 71 days) much faster than Wagner Group forces were able to capture Bakhmut (in 224 days). Many Russian milbloggers – including Wagner-linked milbloggers – decried the report as a shameless rewriting of history and part of a "vile agenda" designed to "consign [Wagner PMC] feats to oblivion."^[33] The Kremlin media apparatus is likely targeting Russian public perception of the Wagner PMC to decrease the group's popularity as the MoD may seek to effectively disband the Wagner Group in Ukraine and reorganize its elements within the Russian MoD.^[34] This segment is likely a supporting effort within Russian President Vladimir Putin's assessed campaign to destroy Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's personal reputation.^[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the frontline on July 1.
- US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley acknowledged that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations will take longer than some Western observers had expected.
- Russian officials and sources celebrated claims that Russian forces defeated small-scale Ukrainian landings in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on July 1 as if they had won a major victory.
- The exaggerated Russian praise for defeating a small Ukrainian landing suggests either that the Russian military command sincerely fears a Ukrainian attack on east bank Kherson Oblast or that it is desperate for an informational victory following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion or both.
- Russian forces are likely responding to Ukrainian operations around Bakhmut by pulling forces from elsewhere in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Russians might initiate an intentional radioactive leak at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) as part of a potential Russian strategy to freeze the war.
- Russian propagandists are likely conducting an information campaign to destroy the Wagner Group's reputation as a uniquely effective fighting force in support of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to dismantle the Wagner Group and integrate former Wagner fighters into MoD structures.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct ground attacks around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks in and transfer airborne (VDV) elements to the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued to counterattack recently-liberated Ukrainian positions on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Russian security procedures on the Kerch Strait bridge are likely slowing down Russian logistics from Russia to occupied Crimea.

- Iran may be sending materiel and personnel to Russia to help construct a factory in the Republic of Tatarstan that will reportedly make Iranian combat drones.
- Ukrainian and Western sources continue to report on the abductions of Ukrainian children and adults in the occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 30, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 30, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on June 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the July 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the frontline on June 30. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) and Berdyansk (eastern Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff added that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success on the Levadne-Pryutne line on the administrative border of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and on the Mala-Tokmachka-Ocheretuvate line in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian forces also reportedly consolidated newly reached lines in the Pryvillia-Zalizanske direction north of Bakhmut and are continuing to exert pressure on Bakhmut's flanks. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces are confidently advancing on Bakhmut's flanks and that Russian forces have transferred a large number of troops to the area.^[2] Malyar added that Ukrainian forces are advancing with varying degrees of success in southern Ukraine, advancing one kilometer on some days and advancing less on others.^[3] Select Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked around Kreminna and on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline.^[4]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on June 30 that Ukrainian forces continue to advance in eastern and southern Ukraine despite lacking essential resources.^[5] Zaluzhnyi said that the Ukrainian forces are still making battlefield gains even if they advance only 500 meters per day. Zaluzhnyi also stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to use Western-provided armored vehicles and tanks in combat instead of saving them for "parades" when responding to a question about military equipment losses. Zaluzhnyi noted that Ukraine needs aircraft in order to support its counteroffensive efforts, which are hindered by the lack of air superiority.

The Russian information space is reacting disproportionately to the Russian military's failure to drive a small Ukrainian force from east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Russian milbloggers have complained for nearly two weeks that Russian forces have failed to push a very small Ukrainian force – reportedly of up to 70 personnel – from their entrenched positions underneath the eastern span of the Antonivsky Bridge.^[6] The milbloggers complained that the Russian military command blindly ordered Russian forces to retake the area under a span of the Antonivsky Bridge on the east bank, resulting in significant losses among Russian personnel and armored vehicles due to Ukrainian artillery fire and remotely laid mines.^[7] The milbloggers called on Russian forces to conduct "accurate" strikes against both the spans of the bridge on each riverbank to prevent Ukrainian forces from using the bridge's approach spans as cover against Russian air and artillery fire, which the milbloggers previously criticized as inaccurate and ineffective. Russian forces launched an Iskander ballistic missile strike against the east bank span of the Antonivsky Bridge on June 30, though the extent of the damage is currently unclear.^[8] Some milbloggers claimed that the strike damaged enough of the standing bridge span to prevent Ukrainian forces from using it as cover, while other milbloggers complained that the strike only partially damaged the bridge and that Russian infantry has resumed attempts to clear Ukrainian positions elsewhere in the area.^[9] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on June 1 that Russian forces are conserving Iskander missiles due to a shortage, underscoring the oddity of Russian forces using one of these missiles against a 70-person light infantry element under the approaches to an already destroyed bridge.^[10] Some milbloggers claimed that Russian forces used TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems – a scarce military district-level asset – to strike the Ukrainian positions under the bridge after the Iskander strike.^[11] One milblogger complained that the Russian 8th Artillery Regiment (22nd Army Corps, Black Sea Fleet) does not have enough ammunition to strike the Ukrainian positions.^[12] Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded the "guards" honorific to the 8th Artillery Regiment on June 30, which will not help the regiment dislodge the Ukrainian forces.^[13]

The severe milblogger response to the Russian military command's decision making demonstrates that Russian milbloggers have not rallied around the Russian military command in the aftermath of Wagner's armed rebellion. Some milbloggers claimed that the Ukrainian presence is limited and that there is no significant threat of Ukrainian forces breaking out of their foothold on the east bank.^[14] Milbloggers complained that the Russian military command is unnecessarily impaling Russian forces on Ukrainian remotely laid mines and compelling Russian forces to put heavy military equipment in range of Ukrainian artillery fire.^[15] One milblogger explicitly blamed Russian "Dnepri" Group of Forces (Kherson Oblast) Commander Colonel General Oleg Makarevich, reportedly headquartered in Rostov-on-Don, for these operations, implying that there is no relevant commander closer to the front line responsible for east bank Kherson Oblast.^[16] Wagner Group forces notably surrounded the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, which appears to include the "Dnepri" Grouping headquarters, during its armed rebellion.^[17] The rebellion and surrounding of the grouping headquarters notably did not stop Russian milbloggers from criticizing the Russian military command, with one milblogger calling for someone to travel to Rostov to beat up Makarevich.^[18] The harsh tone of this Russian information space response is reminiscent of the response to the Russian military command's failed efforts to take Vuhledar in western Donetsk Oblast in November 2022 and February 2023.^[19]

Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces and officials are gradually leaving the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) possibly in preparation for an intentional "accident" at the facility. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on June 30 that the Russian contingent at the ZNPP is gradually leaving the facility and that three employees of Russian state nuclear energy company Rosatom who managed the facility have recently left for Russian

occupied Crimea.[20] The GUR reported that Ukrainian employees at the ZNPP who have signed contracts with Rosatom received instructions that they must evacuate the facility by July 5.[21] The GUR reported that Russian forces are decreasing patrols around the ZNPP itself and in neighboring Enerhodar and that workers at the ZNPP have also received instructions to blame Ukrainian forces in the event of an emergency.[22] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Russian units leaving the ZNPP or the immediate area as of June 30. GUR Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated on June 30 that Russian forces have prepared for an artificial disaster at the facility.[23] Ukrainian officials in Mykolaiv, Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts oversaw emergency preparation exercises for a possible "accident" at the ZNPP on June 29.[24] Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko reported that Ukrainian officials lack the ability to monitor the ZNPP closely enough to become instantly aware of an "accident" at the ZNPP.[25] The president of Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom, Petro Kotin, stated that the closest radiation censors on the right (west) bank of the Kakhovka Reservoir would alert Ukrainian officials within a few hours of a potential release of radiation at the ZNPP.[26]

Russian forces remain unlikely to cause an intentional "accident" at the ZNPP, and Russia is likely continuing to use the threat of an intentional radiological incident to attempt to constrain Ukrainian counteroffensive actions and Western support for Ukraine ahead of the upcoming NATO summit. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces would not be able to control the consequences of an intentional radiological incident at the ZNPP and that a radiological incident could further degrade Russia's ability to cement its occupation of southern Ukraine by leaving areas uninhabitable and ungovernable.[27] The likely Russian destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam also adversely impacted Russian forces, however, and possible Russian plans to sabotage the ZNPP cannot be ruled out. Russian forces could conduct several possible radiological man-made incidents at the ZNPP, some more serious than others. Russian forces could discharge irradiated water from the ZNPP into the Kakhovka Reservoir to disrupt a potential Ukrainian crossing of the now largely drained reservoir. Russian forces could also attempt to create a radiological plume to cover a larger area of southern Ukraine, although the reactors are designed to make doing so difficult. The prevailing winds in Zaporizhia Oblast are most often from the north from June 9 to September 3, although forecasted wind directions in the area following the reported July 5 evacuation deadline include days of predominantly easterly winds.[28] A radiation plume from the ZNPP would most certainly affect the Russian forces in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts and possibly in Crimea and would likely impact the Russian forces to a greater degree than the Ukrainian forces given the usual direction of the wind in the area. Russian forces could conduct a man-made "accident" that creates a smaller radiological radius immediately focused on preventing Ukrainian advances near the ZNPP itself. None of these options provide more military benefit for Russian forces than the likely consequences they would create. Ukraine, for its part, would derive no benefits from causing a radiological incident at the ZNPP remotely consonant with the enormous price it would pay in irradiating lands and peoples it seeks to liberate and hindering its own ability to advance in the area, making Russian informational efforts to set conditions for blaming Ukraine for such an incident entirely implausible even if it could do so without physically occupying the plant.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated on June 30 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's previous statements that Russia was preparing an attack at the ZNPP could actually be an indication that Ukrainian officials are preparing an attack on the facility to pull NATO into the war in Ukraine. [29] Zakharova's preposterous speculations are typical for the Kremlin's information operations alleging threats to the safety of the ZNPP. The Kremlin has routinely employed threats of nuclear escalation and have warned of largely Russian created threats to the ZNPP in attempts to pressure Ukraine to constrain its military actions and to prevent further Western support for Ukraine.[30] The Kremlin is likely attempting to signal a feigned intent to create a radiological incident at the ZNPP in hopes of creating fears over a Ukrainian crossing of the Kakhovka reservoir in the area so that Russian forces will not have to defend a larger section of the front. The Kremlin's nuclear blackmail rhetoric has also heavily targeted Western audiences, and the reemergence of escalatory signals and rhetoric around the ZNPP is likely meant in part to shape Western decision-making vis-a-vis Ukraine ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania on July 11.

The Wagner Group is reportedly still actively recruiting personnel within Russia, although it is unclear if new recruits are signing Wagner contracts or military contracts with the MoD. BBC reported that Wagner Group recruitment centers are still open and are continuing to accept recruits in Russia. [31] BBC reported that several recruiters stressed that new members are still signing contracts with the Wagner Group and not with the Russian MoD.[32] One recruiter confirmed that Belarus is now a possible destination for new recruits while other recruiters said that recruits are still being sent to Molkino, a Wagner training center in Krasnodar Krai, "as usual." [33] Russian military officials have previously used coercive and deceptive means to compel Russian citizens to sign contracts with the MoD, and it is entirely possible that Russian citizens who sign supposed Wagner contracts are actually signing contracts with the MoD.[34] It is also possible that Russian officials have not yet coordinated their intentions for Wagner with the more than 42 Wagner recruitment centers in Russia.[35] Russia citizens may also be signing contracts with Wagner to serve in Wagner operations abroad. ISW previously assessed that the agreement brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to end Wagner's armed rebellion will very likely eliminate Wagner as the independent actor that it was before the rebellion but that elements of the organization may endure.[36]

The Wagner Group reportedly will operate three large field camps in Belarus. Russian and apparent Belarusian sources reported on June 30 that the Wagner Group in Belarus will operate out of three large field camps, including the previously observed field camp in Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast.[37] The sources reported that the locations of the other two field camps have not yet been determined but that they will be in western Belarus postured against Poland.[38] The other two unidentified Wagner Group field camps may be located nearby Belarus' large combined-arms training grounds, such as the Gozhsky Training Ground in Grodno Oblast, the Brest Training Ground near Brest City, or the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground near Baranavichy. Wagner fighters in Belarus would likely need access to such training facilities to serve in the training and advisory role that Russian sources continue to ascribe to them.[39]

An apparent Belarusian milblogger reported that Wagner Group personnel will deploy to Asipovichy, Belarus, soon. An apparent Belarusian source reported on June 29 that the construction for the Asipovichy camp is complete and that Wagner Group personnel will deploy to the camp on an unspecified nearby date. [40] New high resolution satellite imagery collected on June 30 shows that at least 303 tents, each of which can accommodate between 20 – 50 people, have appeared at the formerly abandoned Belarusian military base between June 24 and 30.[41] There is no evidence of heavy equipment at the Asipovichy camp or that the camp is occupied as of June 30.

Assessing the footprint of the Wagner Group in Belarus may help assess the number of Wagner fighters who opt to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). A Russian source stated that it will be possible to estimate how many Wagner Group personnel sign contracts with the Russian MoD by assessing the size of the Wagner Group personnel that go to Belarus (presumably by subtracting the estimated Wagner presence in Belarus from Wagner's assessed pre-rebellion strength).[42]

A Kremlin-affiliated news outlet reported that the Wagner Group will continue operating in Africa, although the details of its operations remain unclear. Kremlin-affiliated news outlet *Vedomosti* reported that sources close to the Russian MoD claim that the Wagner Group's pre-existing projects for "the provision of security services in Africa" are ongoing and that there are no plans to transfer Wagner personnel to other departments.[43] *Vedomosti* claimed that another source familiar with the Wagner Group's operations in Mali said that Wagner employees have no reason to fear that a supply disruption will interfere with their current tasks. [44] A Russian milblogger claimed that this is the correct approach and that Yevgeny Prigozhin's armed rebellion should not affect Russia's long-term plans in Africa. [45] The Kremlin may allow the Wagner Group to continue operating abroad in some capacity, likely in name only and will be subsumed under the Kremlin's authority.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly dissolved his domestic media company Patriot. Russian media outlet *Mash* reported that Yevgeny Prigozhin dissolved the Patriot Media Holding, the St. Petersburg based media company that Prigozhin founded in 2019.[46] Russian sources claimed that Prigozhin personally announced the dissolution of Patriot Media Holding and laid off all its employees.[47] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger confirmed the report and claimed that according to unconfirmed information the Russian MoD is also dissolving Prigozhin's St. Petersburg-based company "Concord" and selling its assets.[48] Russian opposition news outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* reported that Russian state media censor Roskomnadzor blocked access to several of Patriot's websites, including *RIA FAN*, *Politika Segodnya*, *Ekonomika Segodnya*, *Narodnye Novosti* and others.[49] The future of Prigozhin's other companies remains unclear but some Russian sources claimed that the Russian Presidential Administration will likely assume control over Prigozhin's media assets.[50]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the frontline on June 30.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on June 30 that Ukrainian forces continue to advance in eastern and southern Ukraine despite lacking essential resources.
- The Russian information space is reacting disproportionately to the Russian military's failure to drive a small Ukrainian force from east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces and officials are gradually leaving the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) possibly in preparation for an intentional "accident" at the facility.
- Russian forces remain unlikely to cause an intentional "accident" at the ZNPP, and Russia is likely continuing to use the threat of an intentional radiological incident to attempt to constrain Ukrainian counteroffensive actions and Western support for Ukraine ahead of the upcoming NATO summit.
- The Wagner Group is reportedly still actively recruiting personnel within Russia, although it is unclear if new recruits are signing Wagner contracts or military contracts with the MoD.
- The Wagner Group reportedly will operate three large field camps in Belarus and an apparent Belarusian milblogger reported that Wagner Group personnel will deploy to Asipovichy, Belarus, soon.
- A Kremlin-affiliated news outlet reported that the Wagner Group will continue operating in Africa, although the details of its operations remain unclear.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly dissolved his domestic media company Patriot.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to engage in battles along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to counterattack and reportedly made some gains in the Bakhmut area.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued to skirmish on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and Ukrainian forces advanced as of June 30.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to improve monetary and educational benefits to servicemen in order to retain loyalty and incentivize military service.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities are attempting to explain away the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 29, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 29, 2023, 7:20pm 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on June 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces seized the "strategic initiative" in the Bakhmut direction and are currently conducting a broad offensive in the area.[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar similarly stated that Ukrainian forces seized the "operational initiative" in the area and reported that Ukrainian forces advanced 1,200m in the direction of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and 1,500m in the direction of Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut).[2] Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi also stated that Ukrainian forces have the "strategic initiative" in a phone conversation with Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley on June 29.[3]ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian forces had gained the initiative

at every level of war across almost the entire front following the Russian capture of Bakhmut on May 21.[4] Ukrainian officials are likely now acknowledging that Ukrainian forces possess the initiative in order to signal that Ukrainian forces intend to leverage it to a greater degree.

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two other sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 29. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts. [5]The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces achieved partial success along the Rivnopol-Volodyne line (up to 16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[6]

The Kremlin may intend to assume formal control over the Wagner Group following its armed rebellion and turn it into a state-owned enterprise, although it is not clear if the Kremlin has committed itself to such a course of action. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Russian authorities decided to assume control over Wagner's activities abroad.[7] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin reportedly flew to Damascus to tell Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that Wagner will no longer operate as an independent organization in Syria and that Wagner personnel reported to the Russian military base in Latakia. Russian Foreign Ministry representatives also reportedly told Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadera and Malian leadership that Wagner will continue operations in their respective countries.[8] Putin claimed on June 27 that the Kremlin "fully funds" and "fully supplies" Wagner, and Russian officials may use Wagner's existing status as a state-financed and -supplied organization to complete its formal nationalization.[9]The nationalization of Wagner would likely aid in the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to subsume existing Wagner personnel into the regular Russian Armed Forces through contracts. The nationalization of Wagner would not likely dramatically disrupt its foreign activities, and the Kremlin may be interested in assuming *de jure* responsibility for Wagner's operations abroad to deprive the group of a remaining source of influence and independent cash flow. ISW has previously assessed that the agreement brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will very likely eliminate Wagner as the independent actor that it is in its current form but could allow elements of the organization to endure.[10] The Kremlin has not indicated that it intends to nationalize Wagner, and it is possible that Putin has yet to determine what course of action to take in subordinating the group more firmly under the Kremlin's control.

Recent satellite imagery may have detected active construction of a speculated new Wagner Group base in Asipovichy, Belarus. Mid-resolution imagery collected between June 15 and 27 shows new activity at an abandoned Belarusian military base (formerly used by the Belarusian 465th Missile Brigade) 15km northwest of Asipovichy.[11] This activity could be construction for a rumored new Wagner Group base. This site is within 15km of a large Belarusian combined arms training ground — a facility that Wagner Group personnel would need to access to service the Belarusian military in a training and advisory role that Belarusian officials have suggested Wagner will fulfill.[12] Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* previously reported on June 26 that Belarusian authorities are constructing a base for 8,000 Wagner Group fighters near Asipovichy.[13]Polish Deputy PM Jaroslaw Kaczynski stated that Poland anticipates that around 8,000 Wagner Group fighters will deploy to Belarus.[14] Further study of this area of interest with higher resolution collection instruments may provide additional clarity on the nature of the activity in the area and the size of the force that may be based there.

Wagner Group personnel may deploy elsewhere in Belarus, however. There is nothing particularly unique or interesting about a potential Wagner Group base in Asipovichy. *Verstka*'s original report indicated that the Wagner Group would have multiple camps in Belarus. Belarus hosts many training grounds and field camps that accommodated 30,000 Russian soldiers in early 2022 — many of which were on the border with Ukraine in Gomel and Brest oblasts.[15] The Wagner Group in Belarus could use some of these facilities as bases as well as or instead of the rumored base in Asipovichy.

Kremlin-affiliated businessmen may be acquiring Prigozhin's domestic media empire, likely as part of ongoing effort to destroy his reputation in Russia. Russian independent outlet *The Bell*, citing sources who cooperate with Prigozhin's companies, reported that the Russian presidential administration will likely have direct control over Prigozhin's media assets.[16] Sources noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin's "personal banker" Yuriy Kovalchuk may acquire assets of Prigozhin's "Patriot" media holding group and the RIA FAN news outlet for his "National Media Group."[17] *The Bell* also noted that some Russian Telegram channels claimed that president of the "Herst Shkulev Media" holding group Viktor Shkulev may purchase Prigozhin's media assets for one ruble with a commitment to retain the media editorial teams for three months and to pay salary arrears to staff. Sources expressed confidence that the Russian Presidential Administration will likely directly control Prigozhin's media assets regardless of the identity of the future owner of these companies.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to address Army General Sergei Surovikin's whereabouts on June 29, prompting more speculations in the Russian information space. Peskov could have denied ongoing speculations about Surovikin if there were no investigation of him. Peskov's refusal suggests that Russian officials may be investigating Surovikin since Russian officials usually refuse to comment on ongoing investigations.[18] Russian news aggregator *Baza* reported that Surovikin's daughter, Veronika Surovikina, claimed that Russian authorities did not arrest Surovikin and that he continues to work.[19] Russian sources claimed that Surovikin's deputy, Colonel General Andrey Yudin, denied claims that Russian officials were holding him and Surovikin at the Lefortovo pre-trial detention center in Moscow.[20] A Russian milblogger denied Surovikin's detention but claimed that the Kremlin is continuing to investigate members of the military leadership with close ties to Prigozhin.[21] Russian opposition news outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* reported that two of their sources close to the Russian General Staff and Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that Russian authorities questioned Surovikin and released him.[22] It would be logical for Russian officials to question Surovikin or any other military officials with ties to Prigozhin after Wagner's armed rebellion.

Western observers continue to speculate about the whereabouts of Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov following Wagner's rebellion, although his lack of public appearance is not necessarily indicative of his current official standing within the Russian military leadership. [23] Gerasimov has previously not appeared in public for long periods of time, particularly between the summer of 2022 and his reemergence in the winter of 2023 in the weeks leading up to his appointment to overall theater commander.[24] These stretches of absence prompted speculations that the Kremlin either had replaced him or intended to replace him as Chief of the General Staff.[25] The Kremlin and the Russian MoD carefully responded to these previous bouts of speculation by routinely affirming Gerasimov's role as Chief of the General Staff, although they have yet to respond to the most recent round of speculation fueled by Wagner's armed rebellion.[26] ISW recently assessed that the Kremlin will likely attempt to balance a desire to mitigate widespread disdain for MoD establishment figures like Gerasimov that fueled Wagner's rebellion with trying to disempower those who may have sympathized with the rebellion.[27] Russian speculations that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplyansky recently assumed Gerasimov's responsibilities for Russian operations in Ukraine would be in line with this effort, although there continues to be no confirmation that such a transfer of responsibilities has occurred.[28] It is possible that Putin has yet to decide how to fully respond to Wagner's rebellion, including decisions on a potential overhaul of the Russian military's command cadre or changes in whom among the military leadership Putin favors. Until the Kremlin's response to the rebellion becomes clearer Gerasimov's public absence alone is not an indicator of his position within the

Russian military leadership. ISW has previously observed that Gerasimov's involvement, or lack thereof, in public meetings with Putin indicated the likely degree of favor that Gerasimov has enjoyed with Putin during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine but not his retention or loss of his formal position.[29]

Russian sources claimed that the Kremlin replaced the head of the Kaliningrad Oblast Rosgvardia (National Guard) on June 28. Russian sources reported that Murmansk Oblast Rosgvardia Head Viktor Galiy assumed the position of the Kaliningrad Oblast Rosgvardia head.[30]

Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces seized the “strategic initiative” in the Bakhmut direction and are currently conducting a broad offensive in the area.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two other sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 29.
- The Kremlin may intend to assume formal control over the Wagner Group following its armed rebellion and turn it into a state-owned enterprise, although it is not clear if the Kremlin has committed itself to such a course of action.
- Recent satellite imagery may have detected active construction of a speculated new Wagner Group base in Asipovichy, Belarus.
- Kremlin-affiliated businessmen may be acquiring Prigozhin’s domestic media empire, likely as part of ongoing effort to destroy his reputation in Russia.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to address Army General Sergei Surovikin’s whereabouts on June 29, prompting more speculations in the Russian information space.
- Western observers continue to speculate about the whereabouts of Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov following Wagner’s rebellion, although his lack of public appearance is not necessarily indicative of his current official standing within the Russian military leadership
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian forces intensified counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area and reportedly made advances.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- Russian forces in early May constructed a dam on the outskirts of Tokmak in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast ahead of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- A Russian BARS (Russian Combat Reserve) affiliated source claimed that Russian forces are moving military equipment to unspecified areas on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Crimea-based Atesh partisan group stated that Russian forces are increasing their presence in Armyansk to defend key infrastructure in northern Crimea.
- Russian Cossack armed formations are reportedly signing contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as part of a larger formalization effort to integrate irregular forces into MoD structures.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 28, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Kita Fitzpatrick, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 28, 2023, 5:45pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on June 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Continued reporting about the deal mediated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko to end the Wagner Group’s armed rebellion suggests that involved parties may still be negotiating the specifics of the agreement. Independent Belarusian monitoring group The Hajun Project cited flight tracking data on June 27 suggesting that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s jet took off from the Machulishchy airfield in Belarus towards Russia, flew to Moscow, and then immediately took off for St. Petersburg.[1] Former Russian officer and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin claimed that Prigozhin returned to Russia to negotiate with unspecified Russian officials and the Wagner Commander’s Council.[2] ISW cannot independently confirm if Prigozhin did in fact return to Russia, nor the details of the purported visit, but Prigozhin may have returned briefly to work out further details of the deal negotiated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

Russian sources continued to speculate on the specifics of this deal on June 28. A Wagner-affiliated Russian milblogger posted an interview with a Belarusian Wagner fighter wherein the fighter claimed that Wagner has opened a “new combat direction” in Belarus and that some Wagner fighters will “work in Russia” while some “work in Belarus.”[3] Russian opposition outlet Meduza, citing a source within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that only 1,000 Wagner fighters went to Belarus with Prigozhin, however.[4] Belarusian opposition channel Belamova additionally claimed that satellite imagery from June 27 shows the construction of a new military object in the Osipovichy raion that was not visible as of June 13, suggesting that the imagery could show the construction of a Wagner training camp in Belarus.[5] It is unclear if construction of the military object appeared before the announcement of the Prigozhin-Lukashenko deal on June 24, and ISW cannot independently confirm if the object is in any way related to Wagner.[6] However, the pervasive speculation surrounding Wagner’s position in Belarus suggests that certain aspects of the deal are still being worked out.

Russian sources speculated that Wagner's rebellion is already having widespread impacts on the Russian command structure. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner's rebellion has prompted "large-scale purges" among the command cadre of the Russian armed forces and that the Russian MoD is currently undergoing a "crash test" for loyalty.[7] The milblogger claimed that the Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO) is conducting a review of the Russian military leadership as well as the individual unit commanders.[8] The milblogger claimed that Russian officials are using the MoD's "indecisiveness" in suppressing the rebellion and "support for paramilitary companies (PMCs)" as pretexts to remove "objectionable" personnel from their positions. The milblogger notably claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) commander and rumored deputy theater commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky assumed responsibilities as overall theater commander in Ukraine from Chief of the General Staff and current overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov on an unspecified date, but likely after the rebellion. The milblogger emphasized that Gerasimov will retain his post as Chief of the General Staff but will no longer have responsibilities for Russian operations in Ukraine. Another Russian source claimed that an "atmosphere of suspicion has enveloped the General Staff" and that affiliates of Gerasimov are accused of indecision and failure while the affiliates of deputy commander of the joint grouping of forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovkin are accused of complicity in the rebellion.[9] The sources publishing these speculations have largely been accurate in previous reporting on Russian command changes, although the ongoing disruption to human networks and the severe potential consequences related to Prigozhin's armed rebellion may affect these sources' accuracy. ISW cannot confirm any of these speculations about the command changes at this time, but it is evident that the armed rebellion is continuing to have substantial ramifications in the information space.

Russian authorities reportedly arrested Army General Sergei Surovkin on June 28, possibly indicating that the Kremlin intends to purge the MoD of figures viewed as disloyal. Russian opposition source *The Moscow Times* reported on June 28 that two sources close to the MoD confirmed that the Russian authorities had arrested Surovkin because he chose to side with Prigozhin during the rebellion.[10] *The New York Times* reported on June 28 that US officials briefed on US intelligence stated that Surovkin had advance knowledge of the rebellion, but that US intelligence is still trying to ascertain if Surovkin directly supported Prigozhin's effort.[11] It is unclear what transpired that would have forced Surovkin to call on Prigozhin to end the rebellion only several hours after its start, although it is possible that he did so under duress instead of out of support for the Russian military leadership. If Russian authorities did arrest Surovkin then the Kremlin will likely use Surovkin and his affiliates as scapegoats to publicly explain why the Russian military and Russian internal security apparatuses responded poorly to the rebellion and to justify a potential overhaul of the Russian military leadership. ISW has previously reported on Surovkin's notable Wagner affiliations and alleged support for Wagner, and Surovkin is a prime candidate for a scapegoat regardless of the actual level of support he gave to the rebellion.[12]

The Kremlin will likely attempt to balance a desire to mitigate the widespread disdain for MoD establishment figures that fueled Wagner's rebellion while also trying to disempower those who may have sympathized with the rebellion. Segments of the pro-war ultranationalist community and the Russian military have routinely criticized Gerasimov and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu for their management of the war in Ukraine, and Prigozhin's avowed goal of forcibly removing the two generals suggests that the Kremlin may view Gerasimov's and Shoigu's unpopularity as a direct threat to Putin's ability to retain support among key constituencies and the military.[13] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is likely attempting to signal that Shoigu will maintain his position, but the Kremlin has yet to promote Gerasimov in a similar way in the days following the rebellion.[14] The Kremlin may attempt to placate disdain for the MoD establishment by reducing Gerasimov's role in operations in Ukraine, although he is highly likely to maintain, at least nominally, the position of overall theater commander and his long-term role as Chief of the General Staff. ISW has previously assessed that Gerasimov's removal from either position would be too damaging to Putin's and the MoD's reputation. Putin could attempt to avoid the fallout from future command changes by increasingly rewarding commanders with responsibility beyond their official positions. [15] Putin is likely further incentivized not to publicly replace Gerasimov out of fears of legitimizing rebellion as a successful means of blackmail. The speculations that Gerasimov's role is diminishing in Ukraine may suggest that Putin is diverting Gerasimov to another effort instead of completely demoting him. Putin likely values Gerasimov for his loyalty above all else, and he may task Gerasimov with staff changes within the MoD focused on loyalty should the Kremlin decide to overhaul the Russian military leadership.[16]

The Kremlin may have chosen Teplinsky as a *de facto* overall theater commander because he is reportedly widely popular among the Russian rank-and-file and the Russian ultranationalist community.[17] Teplinsky previously commanded forces alongside Wagner around Bakhmut in the winter of 2023, but it is not immediately clear if Teplinsky supported Wagner more generally as Surovkin reportedly did, and Teplinsky remained silent during the armed rebellion.[18] Teplinsky reportedly expressed dissatisfaction with the current military command directly to Putin in late February and assumed a leading military command position in April 2023, becoming one of the most notable anti-Gerasimov commanders aside from Surovkin.[19] Teplinsky is allegedly in charge of sectors of the front where Russian forces are currently defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, and speculations of his *de facto* appointment to overall theater commander may indicate that the Kremlin sought to reward Teplinsky for overseeing doctrinal Russian defensive operations in these areas of the front or to find a public face for the war effort who can claim credit for showing at least basic military competence to offset or distract from the attention Prigozhin had received for the seizure of Bakhmut.[20] The Kremlin may choose to assign responsibilities for command in Ukraine in such a way that Russian military officials privately recognize that an anti-Gerasimov figure controls the war effort in Ukraine without the Kremlin having to acknowledge that fact publicly. The Kremlin will likely struggle to balance between appeasing discontent with the MoD and purging it of disloyal figures without contradicting its rhetoric and actions. Should it find that balance too hard to strike it may choose to pursue only one of the goals. In that event, the Kremlin will almost certainly choose the effort of purging disloyal figures regardless of continued ire towards the MoD leadership.

Russian sources claimed that the Kremlin is punishing Russian forces that it perceives to have failed in their response to the rebellion. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian pilots who refused to strike the Wagner convoys and Russian border guards who refused to open fire on Wagner are now facing unspecified criminal prosecution.[21] The Kremlin may punish lower-ranking Russian servicemen to create additional scapegoats for their response to the rebellion, although refusal to obey legal and direct orders would be grounds for courts martial in any military, and an order to fire on forces engaged in armed rebellion would very likely be legal. ISW cannot confirm these milblogger claims at this time.

The Russian Duma is considering additional measures to increase control over the information space and promote self-censorship within broad internet communities. First Deputy Chairperson for the State Duma Education Committee Yana Lantratova stated on June 27 that the State Duma will propose to appoint a body "authorized to monitor the activities of bloggers".[22] Lantratova also stated that Duma deputies will submit an additional bill on the registration of bloggers as "mass media" and that defines the rights and obligations of bloggers.[23] While reporting on this bill does not specify military correspondents or milbloggers, it is likely that milbloggers will fall into the broad category of "bloggers" and will be subject to increased regulation and control by the proposed monitoring body and resultant bill. ISW has previously reported on the efforts of Russian authorities to increase censorship of milbloggers and military commentators.[24] The Duma may have suggested this law using the broad category of "blogger" to avoid drawing specific ire from milbloggers, who largely did not comment on these updates on July 28.

Belarus formally ratified an agreement on the establishment of joint Russian-Belarusian training centers in Belarus on June 28. Belarusian media reported that Belarusian deputies adopted a draft law on the ratification of an agreement between Russia and Belarus on the "establishment and operation of combat training centers for joint training of military personnel" of Belarusian and Russian military personnel.[25] Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin noted that the main tasks of these combat training centers is the "unification of combat training" by Russian and Belarusian forces.[26] ISW previously assessed in April of 2021 that Russia opened such training centers in Belarus to set conditions for further permanent military basing as part of the wider Russian effort to entirely subordinate Belarus under Kremlin control.[27] The agreement on joint training centers was previously signed on March 28, 2023, on the basis of an October 31, 2022, draft treaty law.[28] The ratification of the pre-existing agreement is the next step in the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to secure the military subordination of Belarus and is not related to the reported deal between Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko on Wagner's exile to Belarus following the June 23-24 armed rebellion.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a phone conversation with the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran Major General Mohammad Bagheri on June 28. Russian media reported that Shoigu and Bagheri discussed issues of bilateral military and military-technical cooperation, regional security, and the wider international situation and announced their intention to deepen bilateral dialogue and develop additional defense contracts.[29] Bagheri is responsible for Iranian military policy and strategic guidance and previously met with Shoigu in Moscow in October 2021.[30] Bagheri's senior role within Iran's security apparatus suggests that he could be discussing arms sales with Shoigu. Iranian officials have previously expressed interest in receiving Russian fighter jets and air defense systems in return for Iran's support for the Russian war effort, though these sales have not yet materialized.[31] ISW and the Critical Threats Project had previously assessed that Iran is seeking to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.[32]

Unconfirmed reports claim that Russian military police allegedly detained Wagner Group commanders in Syria. Saudi Arabian TV channel Al Hadath reportedly stated on June 27 on air that Russian military police detained the head of Wagner's branch in Suwayda, Syria, and three other "high-ranking" Wagner commanders at the Hmeimim Air Base and visited Wagner offices in Damascus, Hama, and Deir ez Zor.[33] Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported that Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin later denied these claims of Wagner personnel arrests in Syria on his Telegram channel.[34] Another Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel also denied the arrests.[35] ISW is unable to independently verify these claims at this time.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the front. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction, along the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia administrative border, and in western Zaporizhia.[36] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks south of Kreminna.[37] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated in an interview with *Financial Times* published on June 28 that the "main event" of the Ukrainian counteroffensive has not yet started.[38]

Key Takeaways

- Continued reporting about the deal mediated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko to end the Wagner Group's armed rebellion suggests that involved parties may still be negotiating the specifics of the agreement.
- Russian sources speculated that Wagner's rebellion is already having widespread impacts on the Russian command structure.
- Russian authorities reportedly arrested Army General Sergei Surovikin on June 28, possibly indicating that the Kremlin intends to purge the MoD of figures viewed as disloyal.
- The Kremlin will likely attempt to balance a desire to mitigate the widespread disdain for MoD establishment figures that fueled Wagner's rebellion while also trying to disempower those who may have sympathized with the rebellion.
- The Russian Duma is considering additional measures to increase control over the information space and promote self-censorship within broad internet communities.
- Belarus formally ratified an agreement on the establishment of joint Russian-Belarusian training centers in Belarus on June 28.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a phone conversation with the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran Major General Mohammad Bagheri on June 28.
- Unconfirmed reports claim that Russian military police allegedly detained Wagner Group commanders in Syria.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four sectors of the front.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near Kreminna, Bakhmut, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a strike on civilian infrastructure in Kramatorsk in Donetsk Oblast on the night of June 27.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and conducted limited probing attacks on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River near the Antonivsky Bridge in Kherson Oblast on June 27 and 28.
- Russian sources reported on continued Russian efforts to clarify terms and conditions for military service.
- Russian and occupation officials continue efforts to deconflict legal discrepancies as part of the incorporation of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 27, 2023

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George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 27, 2023, 8:50 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to present Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin as corrupt and a liar to destroy his reputation among Wagner personnel and within Russian society. Putin implied on June 27 that “the owner of Concord company” (the Concord company is the parent company of Prigozhin’s catering company) lied about the Wagner Group private military company’s (PMC) independence from the Kremlin and the lack of state compensation for Wagner personnel.[1] Putin publicly claimed for the first time since Wagner’s founding that the Kremlin “fully funds” and “fully supplies” the Wagner PMC and claimed that the Kremlin made various payments to Wagner personnel and their families from Russia’s federal budget. Putin added that “the owner of the Concord Company” received 80 billion rubles (about \$936 million) between May 2022 and May 2023 for delivering and catering food to the Russian military, and that the Kremlin will investigate whether the company stole anything during its work for the Kremlin. Putin was clearly referring to Prigozhin, who is the owner of the Concord Company Group and previously worked as Putin’s personal caterer, but Putin continues to refuse to say Prigozhin’s name.[2] Putin’s insinuation that the Kremlin will investigate the Concord Company may be preparation to justify the Kremlin’s confiscation of Prigozhin’s assets via corruption charges.

Putin is rhetorically separating Prigozhin from the Wagner PMC and is deliberately depriving Prigozhin of the title of Wagner financier to undermine his role in the Wagner PMC. The Kremlin launched an ongoing domestic information campaign in Russia to forgive Wagner fighters and commanders in an effort to lure Wagner personnel to sign contacts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[3] The deliberate effort to separate Prigozhin from the Wagner Group is likely intended to set informational conditions so that the Kremlin can accuse Prigozhin of corruption or conspiring with Ukraine or the West and alienate Prigozhin from Wagner personnel whom the Kremlin seeks to retain to fight in Ukraine as part of the regular Russian military.[4] Prigozhin had built his personal brand on criticizing the Russian military command and bureaucrats for corruption and ties to Western countries, and Putin is likely attempting to shatter Prigozhin’s populist appeal by accusing him of the same sins.

Putin has likely decided that he cannot directly eliminate Prigozhin without making him a martyr at this time. Prigozhin still retains some support within Russian society and the Russian regular forces, and the Kremlin will need to ensure that these groups become disillusioned with Prigozhin to effectively deprive him of his popular support in Russia. Prigozhin campaigned for military command changes by accusing the Russian MoD of mistreating regular Russian military personnel in combat – a message that likely appealed to many servicemen and their families disillusioned with mobilization, casualties, supply shortages, and great loss of life with little to show for it. The Kremlin needs to separate Prigozhin’s cause from his persona, lest an attack on Prigozhin be perceived as a Kremlin attack on his popular narrative and his stated objectives of punishing the criminally incompetent Russian MoD leadership. The Kremlin will likely continue to attack Prigozhin’s character to break Prigozhin’s popular support, discourage Wagner personnel from following him to Belarus, and destroy his financial power.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s account of his mediation between Putin and Prigozhin on June 24-25 in tandem with Putin’s June 26 speech indicates that Putin promised Lukashenko and Prigozhin that Prigozhin and the Wagner Group would have “security guarantees” in Belarus. Lukashenko indicated on June 27 that Putin “promised” both Lukashenko and Prigozhin that Prigozhin and the Wagner Group would enjoy unspecified “security guarantees” in Belarus.[5] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officially dropped charges against Prigozhin on June 27.[6] Lukashenko has thus likely managed to secure a degree of safe haven for Prigozhin in Belarus at this time. This is a change in ISW’s June 26 assessment that the offer of safe haven in Belarus was likely a trap.[7] ISW has altered its assessment based on the pattern created by Putin’s and Lukashenko’s speeches.

It is unclear whether Prigozhin’s safety will survive Putin’s effort to destroy Prigozhin’s reputation, however, especially since the threat of corruption investigations against Prigozhin opens the possibility of new charges against Prigozhin that Putin’s promise presumably does not cover. Putin thus likely decided to destroy Prigozhin’s reputation and possibly strip him of his financial resources for offenses technically independent of the armed rebellion while abstaining from punishing Prigozhin directly for the rebellion.

Lukashenko likely seeks to use the Wagner Group in Belarus to buy maneuvering space to balance against the Kremlin campaign to absorb Belarus via the Union State. Lukashenko described at length how he inserted himself into the Putin-Prigozhin conflict in a way that - if Lukashenko’s account is true - demonstrates that Lukashenko is a politically savvy actor capable of exercising influence within the upper echelons of Russian politics. Lukashenko described how he managed to broker the deal between Putin and a livid Prigozhin, who refused to answer Putin’s phone calls, by skillfully engaging both parties directly and through Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Russian FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov.[8] Lukashenko’s elaborate account suggests that Lukashenko successfully mediated a crisis within Putin’s own inner circle that Putin could not.[9] Lukashenko intervened to mediate likely in part to signal to Putin and other senior Kremlin officials that Moscow should not trifle with Lukashenko and that Lukashenko has the ability to operate successfully and independently within Russian politics. Lukashenko’s boasting about his ability to manipulate power brokers within Putin’s innermost circle is humiliating for Putin, whether or not it is true. The fact that Putin has not challenged Lukashenko’s presentation of events and has in fact publicly thanked Lukashenko is even more humiliating.

Lukashenko likely seeks to closely control any Wagner Group forces that move into Belarus. Lukashenko stressed that the Wagner Group will not open recruitment centers in Belarus as it did in Russia but that Belarusians - and presumably other nationals- will be allowed to join the Wagner Group in Belarus.[10] Lukashenko’s description suggests that the Wagner Group will primarily act as a training and advisory partner for the Belarusian military. Lukashenko stated that Wagner forces have more training than the Belarusian military and that the Belarusian military could benefit from the Wagner Group’s extensive combat experience. [11] Lukashenko denied claims that Belarusian authorities have already begun establishing field camps for Wagner Group fighters but said Belarus would create camps if Wagner requested them.[12]

Lukashenko may seek to use the Wagner Group in Belarus to reduce the Belarusian military’s accumulated structural dependency on the Russian military for higher operational functions. Lukashenko may seek to use the Wagner Group to help rebuild lost capability within the Belarusian military that the Belarusian military largely delegated to the Russian Western Military District. The Belarusian military’s dissolution of its unified ground command in 2011 effectively subordinated Belarus’ military to the Western Military District.[13] Belarus has no recent experience in conducting large-scale operations or organizing exercises above the battalion level. Belarus’ main source of knowledge and experience for higher operational activity is from Russian-organized exercises, such as the recurring Zapad, Union Shield, and Unbreakable Brotherhood exercises.[14] The Wagner Group has experience conducting combined arms operations with formations larger than the combat services of the Belarusian military.[15] It is unclear how successful this assessed effort may be, however. The Belarusian military’s operational subordination to the Russian General Staff has been a de facto reality for many years, and reversing such deep institutional linkages will be difficult, if even possible. Russia’s new regime stability crisis may provide novel opportunities for Minsk, nonetheless.

Lukashenko also announced on June 27 that Belarus had received an unspecified number of Russian nuclear weapons on a previous date – a development that Lukashenko may also use to balance against the Kremlin's campaign to absorb Belarus via the Union State. Belarusian opposition railway workers claimed on June 27 that Russian nuclear weapons will be delivered to the base of the 2631st Missile and Air Ammunition Storage Base in Prudok, Vitebsk Oblast.^[16] Lukashenko observed on June 27 that nobody has gone to war with a nuclear power and insinuated that Belarus will use nuclear weapons if a hostile state attacks Belarus.^[17] This development is more interesting for how Lukashenko may use the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus to posture against Russia than because of any threat nuclear weapons in Belarus pose to NATO or Ukraine. Lukashenko may use the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus in tandem with a new Wagner Group presence in Belarus to argue that Belarus has a new capacity to defend itself independent of Russia and that additional Russian basing in Belarus is therefore unnecessary. An indicator of this course of action will be whether Lukashenko allows more Russian military personnel to train at Belarusian training grounds. Ukrainian officials stated that there were approximately 1,000 Russian military personnel in Belarus as of early June 2023 – a sharp decrease from spring 2023 when Ukrainian officials reported that about 9,000-10,000 Russian troops were in Belarus as of March 30.^[18] Another indicator would be an explicit promise or rejection of permanent Russian ground forces bases in Belarus.

The ongoing Putin-Lukashenko-Prigozhin powerplay is not yet over and will continue to have short-term and long-term consequences that may benefit Ukraine. Director of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) Viktor Zolotov announced on June 27 that Rosgvardia will receive heavy weapons and tanks.^[19] The announcement indicates that the Kremlin is attempting to address regime security issues that transpired during Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 24 – such as Russia's security forces' inability or unwillingness to repel a mechanized drive on Moscow. The transfer of heavy military equipment to Rosgvardia for internal security will tie up weapons that could otherwise be used in Ukraine. The Russian MoD also announced on June 27 preparations to transfer the Wagner Group's heavy military equipment to unspecified elements of the Russian Armed Forces.^[20] This transfer will deprive Wagner forces of organic heavy mechanized equipment and suggests that the Russian MoD seeks to dissolve previously separate Wagner units, atomize Wagner Group fighters, and integrate them into regular Russian units to minimize the risk of any repeated Wagner-driven mutiny attempts. The announced transfer of Wagner's equipment to MoD elements also suggests that Wagner forces are unlikely to imminently deploy to reinforce frontlines in Ukraine before undergoing reorganization.

It remains unclear whether the Russian MoD will dissolve Wagner detachments and reassign Wagner personnel to pre-existing regular units. Such a drastic reorganization would be tantamount to the dissolution of the Wagner Group in Ukraine as a distinct organizational entity and would eliminate the unique combat power that the Wagner Group developed for itself in Ukraine. A Russian MoD decision to maintain separate Wagner units within the MoD structure would pose stability risks when subordinating previously independent and overindulged Wagner forces under the MoD highly bureaucratic military command. Separate Wagner forces would likely continue to pose an internal threat to Russia due to their dissatisfaction with the Russian military command – the reason why Wagner forces followed Prigozhin into the armed rebellion in the first place.

The Kremlin campaign to destroy Prigozhin's reputation and possibly dissolve the Wagner Group's Ukraine force decreases the probability of Putin announcing a new round of reserve mobilization in the near term. The Russian MoD will be preoccupied with subordinating Wagner forces if many of them elect to sign contracts with the MoD. Putin, who is a cautious decisionmaker and has clearly signaled his concern for his regime, is also unlikely to aggravate Russian society with a highly unpopular mobilization announcement on the heels of the armed rebellion. The Kremlin's response to the aftermath of Prigozhin's armed rebellion points to more advantageous conditions for Ukraine compared with the pre-June 24 situation.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least four sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 27. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reported that Ukrainian forces advanced in all active sectors of the front from Donetsk to Zaporizhia oblasts.^[21] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks near and south of Kremenna.^[22] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the northern and southern flanks of Bakhmut.^[23] Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Andriy Kovalev stated that Ukrainian forces conducted successful offensive operations south of Velyka Novosilka near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts administrative border and south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[24] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks south and southeast of Velyka Novosilka, and one prominent milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces made further gains south of Rivnopol (10km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) after capturing the settlement on June 26.^[25] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks south of Orikhiv to regain lost positions.^[26]

Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the Ukrainian main counteroffensive effort on June 27, possibly signaling his own defensive priority. Putin claimed that Ukraine considers the Orikhiv direction in western Zaporizhia Oblast as "the main direction of attack."^[27] ISW offers no assessment of the accuracy of Putin's statement or of which sector Ukraine has prioritized or plans to prioritize as the main counteroffensive effort. Putin may have instead identified the sector of the front that he perceives as most critical to hold, however. ISW has observed the most extensive Russian defensive fortifications erected in the western Zaporizhia Oblast south of Orikhiv.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to present Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin as corrupt and a liar to destroy his reputation among Wagner personnel and within Russian society.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's account of his mediation between Putin and Prigozhin on June 24-25 in tandem with Putin's June 26 speech indicates that Putin promised Lukashenko and Prigozhin that Prigozhin and the Wagner Group would have "security guarantees" in Belarus.
- Lukashenko likely seeks to use the Wagner Group in Belarus to buy maneuvering space to balance against the Kremlin campaign to absorb Belarus via the Union State and likely seeks to closely control any Wagner Group forces that move into Belarus.
- Lukashenko also announced on June 27 that Belarus had received an unspecified number of Russian nuclear weapons on a previous date – a development that Lukashenko may also use to balance against the Kremlin's campaign to absorb Belarus via the Union State.
- The ongoing Putin-Lukashenko-Prigozhin powerplay is not yet over and will continue to have short-term and long-term consequences that may benefit Ukraine.
- The Kremlin campaign to destroy Prigozhin's reputation and possibly dissolve the Wagner Group's Ukraine force decreases the probability of Putin announcing a new round of reserve mobilization in the near term.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least four sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 27.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the Ukrainian main counteroffensive effort on June 27, possibly signaling his own defensive priority.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks northwest of Svatove and south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian officials are signaling that Ukrainian forces are capitalizing on the armed rebellion in Russia and intensifying counteroffensive operations in the Bakhmut area as of June 27.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts' administrative border area.
- Russian milbloggers expressed concern at Ukrainian attempts to advance south of Kherson City.
- Russian officials expressed varied opinions on the future of private military companies (PMCs) in response to the armed rebellion.
- The UN reported that Russia has detained hundreds of Ukrainian civilians since the start of the war in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 26, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

June 26, 2023, 10pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4pm ET on June 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech on June 26 seeking to persuade as many Wagner fighters and leaders as possible to join the Russian military and continue fighting against Ukraine and to cause individuals most loyal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to self-identify. Putin continued to denounce the organizers of the armed rebellion as traitors.^[1] Putin thanked Russian society and the Russian security forces for defending Russia's sovereignty and expressed gratitude to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for brokering negotiations with the perpetrators of the rebellion. Putin did not name Prigozhin specifically, but Putin's speech leaves little room for any rapprochement with Prigozhin.

Putin stated that Russia's true enemy is Ukraine and distinguished between the Wagner Group fighters and the armed rebellion's organizers, presumably Prigozhin and Prigozhin loyalists, and offered Wagner Group fighters three choices. Putin gave the Wagner Group commanders and fighters space to distance themselves from Prigozhin's armed rebellion, stating that "we know that the overwhelming majority of Wagner Group fighters and commanders are also Russian patriots, devoted to their people and state."^[2] Putin stated that Wagner fighters who seek to continue "serving Russia" can sign a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or other Russian security services, retire and go home, or go to Belarus (presumably to be with Prigozhin).^[3] Putin praised the work of Wagner Group commanders likely in an effort to retain them as the Wagner Group integrates into the MoD. The MoD's ability to retain as many of Wagner's current commanders as possible during the integration and subordination process is likely critical to maintaining the Wagner Group's combat effectiveness and morale.

The Kremlin indicated that Russia aims to retain Wagner forces in order to sustain its operations in Ukraine and other international engagements. Putin could have arrested the Wagner commanders for treason but instead offered to forgive and integrate Wagner forces – which indicates his need for trained and effective manpower. Putin is also likely attempting to finalize the Russian MoD-initiated formalization effort. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reassured his foreign counterparts on June 26 that Wagner will continue operations in Mali and the Central African Republic.^[4] Putin's and Lavrov's rhetoric supports an ongoing domestic information campaign in Russia to forgive and retain Wagner fighters.^[5] Local Russian sources also reported that Wagner employees continue to recruit personnel in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, and Tyumen.^[6]

Some Wagner Group forces may follow Prigozhin to Belarus. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on June 26 that Belarusian authorities are constructing several new camps to house the Wagner Group fighters in Belarus and that the construction of a 24,000 square kilometer base for 8,000 Wagner Group fighters is already underway in Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast.^[7] The location of a Wagner Group base in Asipovichy does not pose an immediate threat against Ukraine; Asipovichy is about 200 kilometers from Belarus' international border with Ukraine, and the establishment of new Wagner Group bases in Gomel or Brest oblasts on the border with Ukraine would be much more alarming. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may seek to use the Prigozhin and Wagner Group fighters to balance against a longstanding Russian effort to establish a permanent military presence in Belarus, though the extent to which Lukashenko can successfully co-opt Prigozhin or refuse a potential Russian extradition demand for Prigozhin or Wagner fighters in Belarus remains unclear. Prigozhin's personal whereabouts remain unclear as of June 26, though some unconfirmed reports suggest that he is in the "Green City Hotel" in western Minsk City.^[8]

Belarus will not offer Prigozhin or Wagner fighters a true haven if the Kremlin pressures Belarus, however. Putin may be presenting Belarus as a haven for Wagner fighters as a trap. The Kremlin will likely regard the Wagner Group personnel who follow Prigozhin to Belarus as traitors whether or not it takes immediate action against them. Putin notably stated in his June 26 speech that Wagner Group fighters are permitted to go to Belarus and that Putin will keep his unspecified "promise" about Wagner fighters who choose to do so.^[9] Putin's acknowledgement that he made a personal promise, presumably that Wagner personnel who went to Belarus would be safe there, was remarkable. The long-term value of that promise, Putin's speech notwithstanding, is questionable. Wagner Group personnel in Belarus are unlikely to remain safe from Russian extradition orders if Putin reneges and charges them with treason. Lukashenko previously turned over 33 Belarusian-detained Wagner personnel to Moscow after using them as leverage against the Kremlin in 2020, and there is no apparent reason why he would not do so again.^[10]

Prigozhin attempted to downplay his armed rebellion on June 26 in his first statement since the rebellion failed, likely in an attempt to shield himself from accusations of attempting a coup against Putin. Prigozhin stated that Wagner forces did not intend to overthrow the government, but instead attempted to raise awareness about the Russian MoD's efforts to destroy Wagner forces.[11] Prigozhin accused the Russian MoD of first attempting to dissolve the Wagner PMC on July 1 via its formalization order and then of striking Wagner's rear areas on June 23. Prigozhin claimed that the Wagner PMC sought to demonstratively turn in their military equipment to the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) on June 30 to appease the Russian MoD's inventorization requirements until the Russian MoD struck a Wagner camp. Prigozhin reiterated that the Wagner PMC decided to stop its advance 200 kilometers south of Moscow because Wagner realized that advancing further would result in casualties among Wagner and Russian security forces. Prigozhin acknowledged that Lukashenko extended his assistance to help the Wagner PMC legally continue operating as Wagner forces and decided to return to their training camps.

Prigozhin's efforts to convince Putin of his loyalty clearly failed as Putin characterized the armed rebellion as a blackmail attempt and denounced its organizers as traitors following Prigozhin's statement.[12] Putin stated that Russian society showed that "any blackmail, any attempt to stage domestic turmoil is doomed to fail." Putin's use of the word "blackmail" indicates that Putin perceived that Prigozhin was attempting to coerce him into accepting Prigozhin's demands rather than intending to directly attack the Kremlin. ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin likely sought to blackmail Putin into firing Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov rather than intending to stage a coup in Moscow.[13] Both Putin and Prigozhin sought to reject the framing of the rebellion as a coup, with Putin attempting to preserve the image of the solidity of his regime. Putin also stated that "organizers of the armed rebellion" deliberately staged the rebellion and misled Wagner forces into criminal action. Putin emphasized that Russian forces and officials conducted all necessary measures to avoid bloodshed under his "direct orders," which undermines Prigozhin's claims that Wagner decided to deescalate the situation. Putin added that the armed rebellion could have benefited Ukraine and the West, and Lavrov earlier announced that Russia is investigating whether Western intelligence were involved in the rebellion.[14] The Kremlin may be setting information conditions to try Prigozhin and his loyal subordinates as traitors conspiring with external enemies, and such criminal charges would force Lukashenko to surrender Prigozhin and Wagner forces regardless of these Lukashenko-brokered negotiations.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to signal that Shoigu will maintain his position for now and that Putin will not give into Prigozhin's blackmail attempt. The Russian MoD reported that Shoigu visited an unspecified forward command post of the Russian Western Group of Forces in Ukraine on June 26 – his first public appearance since Prigozhin's drive on Rostov-on-Don and Moscow.[15] The Russian MoD previously identified that the Western Group of Forces operates on the Kupyansk-Svatove line in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts. Shoigu reportedly met with Western Group of Forces commander Colonel General Yevgeny Nikiforov and tasked the grouping with preventing Ukrainian advances on the frontline. Shoigu notably did not visit the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don after Wagner's occupation of the city ended and or otherwise connect with SMD forces in southern Ukraine after the armed rebellion concluded. It is currently unclear if the Kremlin will replace Shoigu and Gerasimov, but it is unlikely that the Kremlin would make such drastic command changes immediately since doing so would seem to be conceding to Prigozhin's demands. ISW has previously assessed that Putin values loyalty, and Shoigu and Gerasimov have demonstrated their allegiance to Putin.[16]

Russian sources, however, continued to speculate about Russian military command changes following Prigozhin's armed rebellion. Russian milbloggers began a campaign promoting Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin to replace Shoigu as Russian defense minister by amplifying a video in which Dyumin visited a Tula volunteer battalion on June 25.[17] Other milbloggers claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is currently investigating Dyumin's connection to Prigozhin and Wagner's reported access to Pantsir missile systems.[18] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger suggested that the Kremlin may reshuffle Head of the Russian General Staff's Main Operational Directorate Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy, Chief of the Russian Armed Forces' Main Combat Training Directorate Lieutenant General Ivan Buvaltsev, and Head of the General Staff's Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate Colonel General Yevgeny Burdinsky soon.[19] The milblogger claimed that the Kremlin may replace Burdinsky for his inability to account for convicts within "Storm Z" units who were then recruited by other armed formations, and could replace Rudskoy for failing to implement a Kharkiv operational plan – the objectives of which are unknown.

The future of the Wagner Group is unclear, but it will likely not include Yevgeny Prigozhin and may not continue to exist as a distinct or unitary entity. Putin's appeal to Wagner commanders and servicemen indicates that the Kremlin aims to lure Wagner forces to the Russian MoD, but it is unclear how the Kremlin will organize Wagner into its military structure. The Kremlin may break up Wagner forces operating in Ukraine to reinforce existing military formations, or get Wagner forces to sign up for Russian MoD-affiliated PMCs.[20] The Russian MoD has previously lied to volunteers about keeping their formations together to ensure that recruits sign military contracts, after which the Russian military command dissolved the units.[21] The Kremlin may choose to keep the Wagner entity solely to sustain operations in Africa or the Middle East and break up Wagner's group of forces in Ukraine. Such scenarios may impact Wagner forces' morale and combat effectiveness. Prigozhin claimed that Wagner commanders and personnel categorically opposed Wagner's subordination under the Russian MoD and noted that the Russian military command would misuse experienced Wagner fighters as cannon fodder.[22] Wagner forces, who had previously enjoyed their autonomy, will likely face hostility from Russian military commanders in retaliation for Wagner's efforts to undermine regular forces. *The Telegraph*, citing British special services, reported that Russian special forces threatened to harm the families of Wagner commanders during the armed rebellion, which may further trigger tensions and low morale.[23]

Putin's June 26 speech likely signaled a decisive break between Prigozhin and Putin, and it is likely that the Kremlin will attempt to replace the Wagner leader to distance the PMC from Prigozhin's betrayal – if the Kremlin decides to keep Wagner as a distinct entity. The Kremlin has not yet made any announcements regarding Wagner's fate at the time of this publication. Some Russian sources began to mention Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin even though Utkin has remained out of the public eye throughout Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[24] Commander of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion Alexander Khodakovsky, for example, recalled a time when Utkin saved a Wagner employee from Prigozhin and his henchmen's beatings.[25]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced on at least two sectors of the front as of June 26. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces cleared a Russian bridgehead across the Siverskyi-Donets Donbas canal in the Bakhmut direction, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced southwest of Bakhmut.[26] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar, other Ukrainian officials, and geolocated footage confirmed that Ukrainian forces captured Rivnopol near the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts as of June 26.[27] Russian sources additionally confirmed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblast administrative border area.[28] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks near Robotyne, south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[29] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Valeriy Shershen stated that Ukrainian forces advanced one and a half kilometers in an unspecified area of the Tavriisk (Zaporizhia) direction.[30] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces have recaptured 130 square kilometers of territory in southern Ukraine since the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[31] The UK MoD indicated on June 26 that Russian forces likely lack operational-level reserves that could reinforce against simultaneous Ukrainian threats on multiple areas of the front hundreds of kilometers from each other, chiefly Bakhmut and southern Ukraine.[32]

Russian forces conducted a missile and drone strike on Ukraine on the night of June 25 to 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two of three Russian Kalibr cruise missiles and seven of eight Shahed 131 or 136 drones.^[33] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that one missile struck a storage facility in Odesa Oblast.^[34] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk reported that strong storms over the Black Sea made it difficult for Ukrainian air defenses to intercept targets.^[35]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech on June 26 seeking to persuade as many Wagner fighters and leaders as possible to join the Russian military and continue fighting against Ukraine and to cause individuals most loyal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to self-identify.
- The Kremlin indicated that Russia aims to retain Wagner forces to sustain its operations in Ukraine and other international engagements.
- Prigozhin attempted to downplay his armed rebellion on June 26 in his first statement since the rebellion failed, likely in an attempt to shield himself from accusations of attempting a coup against Putin.
- Prigozhin's efforts to convince Putin of his loyalty clearly failed as Putin characterized the armed rebellion as a blackmail attempt and denounced its organizers as traitors following Prigozhin's statement.
- The Kremlin is likely attempting to signal that Shoigu will maintain his position for now and that Putin will not give into Prigozhin's blackmail attempt.
- The future of the Wagner Group is unclear, but it will likely not include Yevgeny Prigozhin and may not continue to exist as a distinct or unitary entity.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations and advanced on at least two sectors of the front as of June 26.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Svatove and south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, and Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced as of June 26.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued to skirmish in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia oblasts administrative border area and Ukrainian forces made gains as of June 26.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Geolocated footage confirmed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions near the Antonivsky Bridge in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast as of June 26.
- The Russian State Duma passed a law prohibiting private military companies (PMCs) from recruiting prisoners.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 25, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

June 25, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on June 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources speculated on the specifics of the deal mediated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko to end the Wagner Group's June 23-24 armed rebellion, including the possible involvement of Russian President Vladimir Putin's chief of staff. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza*, citing unnamed internal Kremlin sources, reported that Prigozhin initially tried to get in touch with the Russian Presidential Administration midday June 24 as Wagner fighters moved north from Rostov-on-Don towards Moscow, but that Putin refused to speak with Prigozhin.^[1] *Meduza* noted that, once Prigozhin observed the lack of widespread military support for Wagner's actions and changed his mind on Wagner's prospects, the Kremlin turned to negotiations involving Lukashenko, Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Office Anton Vaino, and Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov. Vaino and Gryzlov's possible involvement was not reported on June 24. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger also questioned whether the deal will hold Wagner or Prigozhin accountable in any way for the deaths of at least 13 Russian airmen on June 24.^[2] Prigozhin's whereabouts cannot be verified beyond his departure from Rostov-on-Don late on June 24. Russian outlet *RTVI* claimed that Prigozhin's press service told *RTVI* that Prigozhin "sends his regards" and will answer all questions "when he is on normal communication," and a prominent Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel shared an AI-generated image of Prigozhin holding a finger to his lips and stating "plans love silence," a copy of the phrase commonly used in Ukraine about operational security.^[3] As ISW noted on June 24, the specifics of the deal are still unclear in the open source beyond speculation and rumor. The fallout of Wagner's armed rebellion has not yet concluded, and it remains to be seen how the deal will be implemented, if all involved parties will comply fully, how the Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) intend to do with Wagner personnel - and if Wagner fighters will cooperate, regardless of Prigozhin's wishes.

The implications of the Lukashenko-Prigozhin deal for the leadership of the Russian MoD also remain ambiguous. Some Russian sources, including internal Kremlin sources cited by *Meduza*, suggested that the Kremlin may be considering changes to MoD leadership as part of the deal.^[4] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov have not been seen or heard from since before Prigozhin announced the beginning of the armed rebellion on June 23. Some Russian sources suggested that Alexei Dyumin, the current governor of Tula Oblast, former security officer to Putin, and former

head of Russia's Special Operations Forces, may replace Shoigu as the Defense Minister, although ISW cannot confirm these speculations.^[5] Any changes to the MoD leadership would notably represent a significant victory for Prigozhin, who justified his armed rebellion by directly accusing Shoigu and Gerasimov of the deaths of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers in Ukraine.^[6]

Wagner forces continued to withdraw from positions in Rostov and on the road to Moscow to their bases on June 25, and the Kremlin's intended structure for leveraging Wagner fighters remains unclear. Geolocated footage published on June 25 shows armed Wagner forces driving south away from Moscow near Voronezh City.^[7] Footage published on June 25 purportedly shows Wagner forces returning to training camps in southern Russia.^[8] The fact that Wagner is returning to their training camps with military equipment indicates that the Kremlin intends to maintain at least certain elements of Wagner's manpower rather than seek to immediately demobilize them, although the future of Wagner's command and organizational structure are unclear. Russian State Duma Defense Committee Head Andrei Kartapolov announced on June 25 that the State Duma is working on a law that would regulate private military companies (PMCs) but emphasized that it is not necessary to ban the Wagner Group as it is "the most combat-ready unit in Russia."^[9] Kartapolov further noted that the future of the Wagner Group is undetermined and emphasized that the personnel of the Wagner Group in Rostov-on-Don were "following orders of their command" and "did nothing reprehensible."^[10] Kartapolov's efforts to absolve Wagner personnel of responsibility for taking part in an armed rebellion and separate them from Prigozhin may indicate the Russian government's desire to continue to use Wagner personnel in some capacity, and as ISW assessed on June 24, the Russian leadership could redeploy Wagner to Ukraine or instead commit them to international missions. Russian state-affiliated news outlets reported on June 24 that the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Rozkomnadzor) blocked Prigozhin's official press service on Russian social media site VKontakte, indicating the Kremlin's efforts to restrict Prigozhin's organizational actions.^[11]

Further details emerged on the composition of the Wagner units approaching Moscow on June 24, indicating Prigozhin would likely have struggled in an active conflict in Moscow without additional support. Russian sources claimed on June 25 that the first Wagner column that began moving towards Moscow on June 24 consisted of 350 pieces of equipment, including nine tanks, four Tigr infantry fighting vehicles, a Grad MLRS system, and a howitzer.^[12] Russian sources claimed that the three other Wagner columns that moved towards Moscow had 375, 100, and 212 pieces of equipment respectively, the majority of which were non-armored trucks, cars, and buses.^[13] Russian milbloggers claimed on June 24 that the columns moving towards Moscow were comprised of 4,000 personnel with 40 to 50 pieces of equipment, including MRAPs, T-90M main battle tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, Pantsir air defense systems, and Grad MLRS systems.^[14] CNN reported on June 24 that US and Western intelligence officials observed Wagner amassing equipment and ammunition for the rebellion for several weeks, indicating that the columns likely comprised Wagner's greatest available strength.^[15] ISW cannot confirm the exact composition of the Wagner columns at this time, although current reporting suggests that Prigozhin's force would have struggled to fully occupy Moscow or conduct prolonged engagements with elements of the Russian Armed Forces, if they deployed. ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin likely sought and failed to win military support for his rebellion, and Wagner's move on Moscow was likely predicated on the assumption that military support would strengthen the rebellion's forces and capabilities.^[16] Prigozhin may have become more amenable to the alleged negotiations with Lukashenko as these insufficient forces drew nearer to Moscow and that time was running out to garner the necessary military support for a potential armed conflict with the MoD.

The Russian ultranationalist information space fractured on June 25 between those who want to move past the rebellion and those demanding solutions to the internal security flaws that the rebellion had exposed. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger praised all of the parties for bringing the rebellion to an end and avoiding bloodshed, ignoring the fact that Wagner forces killed at least 13 Russian pilots and airmen during the rebellion.^[17] Other Russian sources continued to characterize the rebellion as solely Prigozhin's doing and called on Russian authorities to show clemency towards the Wagner fighters who have fought for Russian interests in Ukraine.^[18] A Russian milblogger specifically accused Moscow Oblast officials and the MoD of failing to stop the Wagner advance towards Moscow.^[19] The milblogger questioned how the MoD would be able to respond to external incursions if it was unable to stop Wagner's movement towards Moscow.^[20] A former Russian occupation official criticized how the internal Russian structures were slow in publicly addressing the rebellion.^[21] Several other Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian elites for failing to publicly support Putin and for fleeing Russia.^[22] Another Russian ultranationalist bemoaned that Prigozhin's rebellion indicated that Russia is one step closer to its final and irrevocable death.^[23] A prominent milblogger asked how Russian authorities will punish those involved in the deaths of Russian servicemen, indicating that clemency for the Wagner fighters that participated in the rebellion may become a longstanding grievance for elements of the Russian military and the ultranationalist community.^[24]

The ultranationalist Angry Patriots Club held a pre-scheduled event in Moscow on June 25 and espoused longstanding criticisms against Putin and the Russian military leadership, suggesting that the Kremlin will not immediately begin cracking down on antagonistic ultranationalist groups in the aftermath of Prigozhin's rebellion.^[25] The Angry Patriots Club is a pro-war social movement that aims to correct perceived issues in the war-effort in Ukraine so that Russian forces can achieve victory, and the club's members have used that mission to launch routine scathing criticisms of the MoD, the Kremlin, and Putin himself.^[26] The Angry Patriots Club has also notably called for "revolution" if the Kremlin freezes the war in Ukraine or pursues negotiations.^[27] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin spoke at the livestreamed event in Moscow and delivered a set of longstanding theses on what Russia needs to do to win the war in Ukraine.^[28] Girkin publicly reiterated that Putin needs to legally transfer certain presidential authorities to other parties if Putin is unwilling to assume control over the war in Ukraine as the supreme Commander-in-Chief.^[29] The Angry Patriots Club had promoted the event for several weeks, and Russian officials were likely aware of it to some extent.^[30] If the Kremlin intends to use Prigozhin's rebellion as pretext to start immediately suppressing antagonistic ultranationalists, then this event would have likely been a prime candidate to start that effort. The Kremlin likely risks Prigozhin's armed rebellion expanding the window of acceptable anti-Kremlin criticism, particularly if the Kremlin does not intend to retaliate further against Prigozhin. The Kremlin's continued careful response to the armed rebellion will likely prompt other Russian nationalists to test Russian official reactions to more explicitly critical rhetoric.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on June 25. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks around Bakhmut, along the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[31] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced southwest of Velyka Novosilka, although ISW is unable to confirm this claim.^[32] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated in an interview with Fox News published on June 25 that the main assault of the counteroffensive has not yet started.^[33]

Russian forces' ability to conduct offensive and defensive operations in Ukraine does not appear to have been substantially impacted by Wagner's June 23-24 armed rebellion. Russian and Ukrainian sources both reported that fighting continued as usual along the entire frontline, with Russian forces conducting a relatively higher number of ground attacks near Bakhmut than over the past few days.^[34] Some Russian sources used the armed rebellion as a rhetorical device to preemptively exculpate Russian forces from any Ukrainian gains made on June 24 and 25.^[35]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov warned on June 23 that Russia has finished preparations for an attack on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).[36] Budanov stated that Russian forces have mined the ZNPP's cooling pond and have moved vehicles loaded with explosives to four of the six ZNPP power units.[37] As ISW previously assessed, intentional Russian sabotage of the ZNPP resulting in a radiological catastrophe would potentially be more detrimental to Russian forces on the southern bank of the Kakhovka Reservoir than to Ukrainian forces on the opposite bank.[38] Russia has frequently invoked threatening rhetoric surrounding the ZNPP in order to dissuade potential Ukrainian counterattacks into occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, and Russian forces may be disseminating information about mining of the cooling pond and power units to discourage Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. However, Russia demonstrated a willingness to put its own troops in harm's way after the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP), so ISW cannot rule out the potential that Russian forces may be setting conditions to sabotage the ZNPP.

Key Takeaways

- Russian sources speculated on the specifics of the deal mediated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko to end the Wagner Group's June 23-24 armed rebellion, including the possible involvement of Putin's chief of staff.
- The implications of the Lukashenko-Prigozhin deal for the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) also remain ambiguous.
- Wagner forces continued to withdraw from positions in Rostov and on the road to Moscow to their bases on June 25, and the Kremlin's intended structure for leveraging Wagner fighters remains unclear.
- Further details emerged on the composition of the Wagner units approaching Moscow on June 24, indicating Prigozhin would likely have struggled in an active conflict in Moscow without additional support.
- The Russian ultranationalist information space fractured on June 25 between those who want to move past the rebellion and those demanding solutions to the internal security flaws that the rebellion exposed.
- The ultranationalist Angry Patriots Club held a pre-scheduled event in Moscow on June 25 and espoused longstanding criticisms against Putin and the Russian military leadership, suggesting that the Kremlin will not immediately begin cracking down on antagonistic ultranationalist groups in the aftermath of Prigozhin's rebellion.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front.
- Russian forces' ability to conduct offensive and defensive operations in Ukraine does not appear to have been substantially impacted by Wagner's June 23-24 armed rebellion.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov warned on June 23 that Russia has finished preparations for an attack on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- A Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted to cross the international border into Sumy Oblast.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks near Svatove, Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions near the Antonivskyi Bridge in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials continue to report that Russia relies on sanctions evasion schemes to acquire foreign components for weapons production.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to weaponize policy regarding children to consolidate social and administrative control of occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 24, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

June 24, 2023, 10pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4pm ET on June 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. Due to their coverage of an armed rebellion in Russia, many Russian sources did not discuss the situation on the battlefield in Ukraine, and ISW's coverage of kinetic activity on the frontlines is therefore relatively limited today.

The Kremlin announced late on June 24 that Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko negotiated a deal under which Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin will travel to Belarus without facing criminal charges in Russia; some portion of Wagner Group fighters will sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD); and no Wagner personnel will be charged for their involvement in an armed rebellion. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced that Russian authorities will drop the criminal case against Prigozhin and that Prigozhin will go to Belarus, thanking Lukashenko for his role in mediating the deal with the "higher goal to avoid bloodshed."^[1] Lukashenko's press service earlier broke the news about the deal, reporting that Lukashenko negotiated with Prigozhin and claiming that Lukashenko and Putin agreed to undertake "bilateral actions" to resolve the crisis earlier in the day.^[2] Lukashenko stressed the importance of avoiding a "bloody massacre" and ensuring security guarantees for Wagner fighters.^[3] Prigozhin released an audio message after the initial Belarusian report, claiming his "march for justice" achieved its goal and that he ordered Wagner forces back to their training grounds to prevent the situation from turning bloody (after Wagner forces already killed over a dozen Russian personnel).^[4] Prigozhin notably did not mention Lukashenko's involvement or the details of any negotiated deal in his own statement. The specifics of the deal, how and on what timeline it will be implemented, the expected outcomes for each party, and the extent to which all involved parties will follow the agreement, remain unclear at this time.

The Wagner Group encircled the Russian Southern Military District (SMD)'s headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and drove to within 330km of Moscow City on June 23 and 24, prior to the announcement of the deal. Wagner forces will reportedly soon begin withdrawing to their bases, and footage reportedly depicts Prigozhin departing Rostov-on-Don. Widely circulated social media footage posted in the early hours of June 24 depicted Wagner forces establishing a cordon around SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, and Wagner-affiliated sources later posted footage showing Prigozhin walking around the headquarters with Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev while demanding to see Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.[5] Geolocated footage posted around 1030 Moscow time confirms that Wagner personnel crossed the administrative border of Voronezh Oblast at the Burgaevka checkpoint, where Russian personnel laid down their arms and surrendered to Wagner.[6] Footage posted a few hours later depicted a column of Wagner vehicles and equipment traveling through a checkpoint on the M4 Rostov-on-Don-Voronezh-Moscow highway near the Ikorets River, about 85km south of Voronezh City.[7] Geolocated footage showed a Wagner contingent with two Pantsir-1 air defense systems moving through Buturlinovka, about 135km southeast of Voronezh City.[8] Russian sources claimed that this Wagner convoy split off from the main convoy in order to seize an airbase near Buturlinovka, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation that any Wagner fighters did so.[9] Russian sources posted footage reportedly of Russian Ka-52 helicopters striking claimed Wagner targets on the highway in Voronezh.[10] Wagner forces may have shot down up to three Mi-8 MTPR electronic warfare helicopters, one Mi-8 helicopter, one Ka-52 helicopter, one Mi-35 helicopter, one Mi-28 helicopter, and one An-26/I-28 transport aircraft, resulting in the deaths of at least 13 pilots and airmen - and one of the single deadliest days for the Russian air force of the war in Ukraine to date.[11]

Geolocated footage posted in the early afternoon Moscow time on June 24 showed Wagner troops reaching Lipetsk Oblast and continuing north on the M4 highway towards Moscow.[12] Russian forces began digging up sections of the M4 in Lipetsk Oblast in order to inhibit Wagner's movement.[13] By nearly 1800 Moscow time, available visual evidence placed Wagner forces in Krasnoe, northern Lipetsk Oblast, about 330km south of Moscow.[14] Russian security forces reportedly began preparing defensive lines on the southern bank of the Oka River in Moscow Oblast, and unverified reports claim that locals spotted Wagner fighters in Kashira, 95km south of Moscow.[15] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Wagner fighters closer to Moscow than Krasnoe, despite claims they reached Kashira. Kremlin newswire RIA Novosti posted footage following the announcement of the deal on the evening of June 24 depicting columns of Wagner equipment and personnel departing Rostov-on-Don.[16] ISW has not observed additional visual evidence of Wagner withdrawals as of the time of this publication.

Wagner Group columns on the M4 highway possessed a substantial amount of heavy equipment. Various milbloggers claimed that the Wagner column was comprised of up to 4,000 personnel and between 40 to 50 pieces of equipment, including MRAPs, T-90M main battle tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, Pantsir air defense systems, and Grad MLRS systems.[17] One milblogger remarked that Wagner's apparent combination of a fast-moving convoy protected by a layered mobile air defense umbrella (comprised of Pantsirs and MANPADs) that effectively defended ground forces from Russian government aircraft was reminiscent of Wagner's tactics during previous operations in Libya, though the Wagner Group's theoretical ability to sustain independent operations in Russia is unclear.[18]

The Kremlin struggled to cohere an effective rapid response to Wagner's advances, highlighting internal security weaknesses likely due to surprise and the impact of heavy losses in Ukraine. As ISW reported on June 23, Russian authorities mobilized Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) special police (OMON) and special rapid response (SOBR) units in response to Prigozhin's initial announcement of the armed rebellion.[19] Several Russian milbloggers reported that Rosgvardia columns were activated and were seen in Moscow Oblast and *en route* to Rostov Oblast.[20] However, ISW has not observed any reports or footage suggesting that Rosgvardia units engaged with Wagner at any point. Rosgvardia's founding mission is to protect internal threats to the security of the Russian government such as an advance on Moscow, and it is notable that Rosgvardia failed to engage even as Wagner captured critical military assets in Rostov-on-Don and destroyed Russian military aircraft.[21] Some Russian commentators additionally noted that the majority of personnel activated for domestic defense were conscripts and Rosgvardia units, and questioned why Russian authorities decided to mobilize conscripts instead of activating wider and more specialized security forces.[22] Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen forces, also theoretically specialized in domestic security, claimed to have activated in response to Wagner advances but never actually met or engaged Wagner - unsurprisingly, and in line with Kadyrov's paramount objective of maintaining his own internal security force.[23] **The Kremlin's dedicated internal security organs failed to respond to an independent military force capturing the headquarters of the SMD and advancing on Moscow - and Wagner likely could have reached the outskirts of Moscow if Prigozhin chose to order them to do so.**

Russian sources were quick to emphasize that Wagner's armed rebellion did not impact Russian forces in Ukraine, but Wagner's actions demonstrated Russia's lack of reserves in rear areas. The Russian MoD immediately blamed Prigozhin's armed rebellion for presenting Ukrainian forces with opportunities, claiming that Ukrainian forces began launching assaults in the Bakhmut direction to exploit the internal upheaval.[24] Russian sources widely voiced concerns that the rebellion could disrupt Russian forces' ability to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensives, but many milbloggers asserted that Russian forces are continuing to repel Ukrainian attacks.[25] A prominent milblogger specifically applauded elements of the SMD serving along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front for continuing necessary work at the front despite the "mess" with the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don.[26] Another prominent milblogger argued that Wagner's armed rebellion did not disrupt Russian frontline combat or aviation operations.[27] Prigozhin indicated that he did not want to disrupt ongoing Russian operations in Ukraine or impede Russian military aircraft flying out of airfields in Rostov Oblast likely to avoid further criticism of his effort.[28] Prigozhin may have also intended to hold the potential to storm SMD headquarters and disrupt Russian operations in Ukraine as leverage in his conflict with the MoD and demands to Putin, and therefore did not launch attacks on the headquarters or MoD personnel that could have led to severe tactical impacts in Ukraine. However, Prigozhin's rebellion has illustrated that Russian forces lack reserves in many rear areas and almost certainly will degrade the morale of Russian personnel in Ukraine, knowledge that Ukrainian forces may use to adjust attempts at breaking through Russian defenses.

Putin unsurprisingly elected to back the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and its ongoing efforts to centralize control of Russian irregular forces (including Wagner) over Prigozhin. Prigozhin attempted to justify his armed rebellion by accusing the Russian MoD - namely Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov – of causing irreversible Russian losses on the battlefield and for striking a Wagner base, but notably did not criticize Putin.[29] Prigozhin may have deliberately designed his justification to allow Putin to publicly use Shoigu and Gerasimov as scapegoats for his invasion of Ukraine. Putin, however, denounced Prigozhin (without explicitly naming him) during his televised speech the morning of June 24, indirectly accusing Prigozhin of initiating an armed rebellion and committing treason due to "exorbitant ambitions and personal interests."[30] Putin's harsh stance indicated that he remains aligned with the Russian MoD institution - which has consistently proved loyal to him despite numerous military failures and has previously appeared to have Putin's support - and its efforts to formalize Russian irregular units, rather than relying on independent actors like the Wagner Group, as Prigozhin desired.[31]

The Lukashenko-brokered agreement will very likely eliminate Wagner Group as a Prigozhin-led independent actor in its current form, although elements of the organization may endure under existing and new capacities. The Lukashenko-brokered deal notably strips Prigozhin of control of Wagner Group in exchange for dropping criminal charges for rebellion and treason. The deal will, if executed as framed by Peskov, subordinate some portion of the Wagner Group under the Russian MoD, as Defense Minister Shoigu has long desired. However, it is unclear how the Kremlin will define Wagner personnel as having not participated in the rebellion, and Peskov's announcement does not specify the fate of Wagner personnel who *did* participate, other than receiving a pardon. These personnel could potentially sign contracts with the MoD on an individual basis; demobilize in Russia (a likely dangerous course of action for Kremlin internal security), travel to Belarus in some capacity, or deploy abroad to support Wagner's previous main effort of operations in Africa or the Middle East. It is unclear if Wagner forces will willingly cooperate in their integration under the Russian MoD, or if the Russian Armed Forces will willingly serve alongside Wagner Group personnel in the future. Putin's stance on Shoigu and Gerasimov remains unclear at this time, and Peskov specified that any military reshuffles are exclusively Putin's prerogative and were "hardly" discussed during the negotiations.[32]

Prigozhin likely gambled that his only avenue to retain Wagner Group as an independent force was to march against the Russian MoD, likely intending to secure defections in the Russian military but overestimating his own prospects. Prigozhin likely viewed the MoD's July 1 deadline to formalize control over all irregular formations, including Wagner, as an existential threat to his political (and possibly personal) survival. He likely therefore elected to risk using his forces in a bid to change the MoD's leadership rather than lose Wagner Group entirely, and as ISW assessed on June 23, his only real hope for lasting success was to secure MoD defections, and he did not do so.[33] Prigozhin almost certainly planned this effort in advance due to the observed coordination and speed of Wagner movements, but ISW cannot confirm this hypothesis from the open source.

Prigozhin's rebellion further eroded his existing support base in the ultranationalist community, Russian government, and within elements of Wagner Group itself. Prigozhin's armed rebellion likely further eroded existing support for Wagner by forcing Wagner-affiliated regional authorities and recruitment organizations to denounce Prigozhin's effort. Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoyt called on Prigozhin to stop his plans and to prevent an internal conflict. [34] Starovoyt acknowledged that Kursk Oblast previously cooperated with Wagner to train personnel for local militias.[35] "Union of Donbas Volunteers" Head Alexander Borodai also denounced Wagner's armed rebellion as a stab in the back against Russia.[36] Prigozhin has likely previously relied on the "Union of Donbas Volunteers" to access the Russian ultranationalist community's recruitment pool.[37] Prigozhin also likely angered many Wagner personnel and Wagner-sympathetic ultranationalists by not following through with his attempted march on Moscow. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Wagner prepared for the march on Moscow in advance and intended to provoke the evacuation of top officials and leadership from the city.[38] The milblogger decried that Prigozhin, "a politician with dubious prospects," destroyed the whole effort.[39] The notable criticism of Prigozhin from a Wagner-affiliated milblogger is likely reflective of widespread discontent among the pro-Wagner information space that previously applauded the rebellion.[40] One prominent Russian milblogger noted that many Russian milbloggers who have supported Wagner in the past ignored the rebellion or made neutral statements about it.[41] The alleged agreement that Prigozhin reached with Lukashenko and the Kremlin is likely to upset Wagner personnel as it represents the end of Prigozhin's effort to insulate Wagner from subordination to the MoD. It is unclear at this time if Prigozhin secured buy-in from Wagner commanders or rank-and-file personnel before making the alleged agreement, and many Wagner personnel will likely be displeased with the potential of signing contracts with the MoD, demobilizing, or deploying away from Ukraine.

The optics of Belarusian President Lukashenko playing a direct role in halting a military advance on Moscow are humiliating to Putin and may have secured Lukashenko other benefits. The Belarusian Presidential Press Service announced that Putin informed Lukashenko about the unfolding situation in southern Russia the morning of June 24, suggesting Putin approached Lukashenko to resolve the armed rebellion, though the Belarusian government often spins interactions with the Kremlin to its advantage and this framing is unconfirmed.[42] Lukashenko reportedly used his own "existing channels" to clarify the situation on the ground and negotiate with Prigozhin.[43] Lukashenko's reported access to previously established channels and successful negotiation with Prigozhin likely indicates Lukashenko has unspecified influence over Prigozhin he could leverage to de-escalate the situation.[44] Lukashenko previously used Wagner forces to advance his election campaign after Belarusian authorities arrested 3 Russian citizens who allegedly belonged to the Wagner Group in late July 2020.[45] Lukashenko accused the alleged Wagner operatives of planning to interfere with Belarusian elections despite Wagner forces openly using Belarus as a transit country for their missions in the past. [46] The incident resulted in Lukashenko initiating a call with Putin on August 15, 2020, and releasing 32 Wagner personnel.[47] Lukashenko will likely seek to use the de-escalation of the armed rebellion to advance his goals, such as delaying the formalization of the Russia-Belarus Union State or preventing Putin from using Belarusian forces in Ukraine.

The Kremlin now faces a deeply unstable equilibrium. The Lukashenko-negotiated deal is a short-term fix, not a long-term solution, and Prigozhin's rebellion exposed severe weaknesses in the Kremlin and Russian MoD. Suggestions that Prigozhin's rebellion, the Kremlin's response, and Lukashenko's mediation were all staged by the Kremlin are absurd. The imagery of Putin appearing on national television to call for the end of an armed rebellion and warning of a repeat of the 1917 revolution – and then requiring mediation from a foreign leader to resolve the rebellion – will have a lasting impact. The rebellion exposed the weakness of the Russian security forces and demonstrated Putin's inability to use his forces in a timely manner to repel an internal threat and further eroded his monopoly on force. Prigozhin's rapid drive towards Moscow ridiculed much of the Russian regular forces – and highlighted to any and all security figures, state-owned enterprises, and other key figures in the Russian government that private military forces separate from the central state can achieve impressive results. Wagner's drive also showcased the degradation of Russia's military reserves, which are almost entirely committed to fighting in Ukraine, as well as the dangers of reliance on inexperienced conscripts to defend Russia's borders. The Kremlin struggled to respond quickly in the information space and residents in Rostov-on-Don residents did not oppose Wagner and in some cases greeted them warmly – not inherently demonstrating opposition to Putin but at minimum acceptance of Prigozhin's actions. [48] Finally, the Kremlin's apparent surprise at Prigozhin's move does not reflect well on Russia's domestic intelligence service, the FSB. Prigozhin consistently escalated his rhetoric against the Russian MoD prior to his armed rebellion and Putin failed to mitigate this risk.[49] We cannot and will not speculate on the concrete impacts of Prigozhin's rebellion and the Kremlin's weak response and are not forecasting an imminent collapse of the Russian government, as some have done. Nonetheless, Prigozhin's rebellion and the resolution of the events of June 23 and 24 - though not necessarily the Prigozhin/Kremlin struggle writ large - will likely substantially damage Putin's government and the Russian war effort in Ukraine.

Russian forces launched their largest series of missile strikes against Ukraine in recent months on June 24, despite the armed rebellion within Russia. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 40 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from ten strategic Tu-95 bombers from the Caspian Sea, nine Kh-22 cruise missiles from eight strategic 22M3 bombers from the northern direction, and two Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles from the Black Sea as well as two S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and three Shahed-131/136 drones.[50] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 40 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles, two Shahed-131/136 drones, and one Kalibr cruise missile.[51] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces struck residential areas in Kyiv as well as

Dnipro City and Kryvyi Rih in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[52] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian electronic intelligence centers and aviation equipment at an airfield in Kirovohrad Oblast and fuel storage facilities in Dnipro City.[53] Prigozhin stated earlier in the day that Russian aviation units operating in Ukraine were flying according to their schedules and that Wagner's control over military infrastructure in Rostov Oblast, including the Rostov airfield, would not disrupt Russian operations.[54] If Prigozhin was able to disrupt operations connected to the large strike series from the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, he likely refrained from doing so to avoid criticism that he was undermining the Russian war effort.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front and reportedly made advances on June 24. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on June 24 that Ukrainian forces launched simultaneous assaults and made progress north and southwest of Bakhmut. [55] Malyar also stated Ukrainian forces continue to engage in heavy fighting along the Zaporizhia front.[56] Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi reported on June 23 that Ukrainian forces achieved successes and advances in an unspecified area of the Tavrisk (Zaporizhia) direction.[57] Russian milbloggers claimed that intensified Ukrainian assaults and decreased Russian artillery fire contributed to Ukrainian advances south of Orikhiv during the night of June 23 and on June 24.[58] The Russian MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces also conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the South Donetsk and Lyman directions.[59] Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky stated on June 24 that Ukrainian forces will likely continue active offensive and defensive operations for the next two to three months.[60]

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin announced late on June 24 that Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko negotiated a deal under which Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin will travel to Belarus without facing criminal charges in Russia; some portion of Wagner Group fighters will sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD); and no Wagner personnel will be charged for their involvement in an armed rebellion.
- The Wagner Group encircled the Russian Southern Military District (SMD)'s headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and drove to within 330km of Moscow City prior to the announcement of the deal. Wagner forces will reportedly begin withdrawing to their bases soon, and footage reportedly depicts Prigozhin departing Rostov-on-Don.
- The Kremlin struggled to cohere an effective rapid response to Wagner's advances, highlighting internal security weaknesses likely due to surprise and the impact of heavy losses in Ukraine.
- Putin unsurprisingly elected to back the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and its ongoing efforts to centralize control of Russian irregular forces (including Wagner) over Prigozhin.
- The Lukashenko-brokered agreement will very likely eliminate Wagner Group as a Prigozhin-led independent actor in its current form, although elements of the organization may endure under existing and new capacities.
- Prigozhin likely gambled that his only avenue to retain Wagner Group as an independent force was to march against the Russian MoD, likely intending to secure defections in the Russian military but overestimating his own prospects.
- The optics of Belarusian President Lukashenko playing a direct role in halting a military advance on Moscow are humiliating to Putin and may have secured Lukashenko other benefits.
- The Kremlin now faces a deeply unstable equilibrium. The Lukashenko-negotiated deal is a short-term fix, not a long-term solution, and Prigozhin's rebellion exposed severe weaknesses in the Kremlin and Russian MoD.
- Russian forces launched their largest series of missile strikes against Ukraine in recent months on June 24, despite the armed rebellion within Russia.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front and reportedly made advances on June 24, and regular fighting continued on other sectors of the line.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 23, 2023

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Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

June 23, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: Due to rapidly evolving events, the data cutoff for the portion of this update covering Prigozhin's actions was 6:00pm ET, while the cutoff for the rest of this product was 3:00pm ET on June 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, but events will likely have developed further between the drafting and publication of this update.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to have launched an armed rebellion on June 23 to force a leadership change within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) which is unlikely to succeed. Prigozhin amplified a video from a Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel on June 23 which reportedly shows the aftermath of a missile strike on a rear-area Wagner camp and accused the Russian MoD of conducting that strike.[1] ISW cannot independently verify the veracity of the video, and it may have been manufactured for informational purposes. Prigozhin used the video to then justify his most explicit rhetorical escalation against the Russian MoD to date and a call for action against the Russian MoD. Prigozhin claimed that the Wagner Commanders' Council made the decision to stop "the evil brought by the military leadership" who neglect and destroy the lives of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers.[2] Prigozhin urged the Russian people not to resist, to remain calm, remain in their homes, and warned that Wagner will "deal" with those who destroyed Russian soldiers before returning to the frontlines in Ukraine after restoring justice for all. Prigozhin also notably accused Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu of personally planning an operation to destroy Wagner and claimed

that 25,000 Wagner personnel are prepared to act.[3] Prigozhin later posted an audio message qualifying his previous statements and claiming that there is no "coup," only a "march for justice."[4]

Early reports following Prigozhin's statements suggest that Russian internal security forces are activating in response to Prigozhin's statements and possible Wagner moves, primarily in Moscow and Rostov, and the Kremlin appears opposed to Prigozhin's actions. Kremlin newswire TASS reported that security measures have been strengthened in Moscow and that Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) special police (OMON) and special rapid response (SOBR) units have been alerted of the situation.[5] Russian sources posted footage reportedly showing military equipment moving through the streets of Moscow.[6] TASS also reported that Russian military personnel and law enforcement have set up military posts and checkpoints near the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, and BBC's Russia Service reported that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) employees and SOBR units have set up roadblocks along the Moscow-Voronezh-Rostov highway.[7] A Russian milblogger also claimed that the "Grom" special forces detachment of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has additionally activated.[8] The FSB and Russian Anti-Terrorism Committee have both opened cases against Prigozhin.[9] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov notably stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin has been informed and is aware of the situation.[10] The emergency activation of the domestic security forces and the Kremlin's direct response suggest that the Kremlin was very likely not aware of, and is explicitly opposed to, Prigozhin's actions.

Prigozhin has established the informational conditions for this effort earlier in the day by accusing the Russian MoD and unnamed oligarchs of deceiving Putin and the Russian public in order to launch the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prigozhin released an interview in which he stated that the Russian MoD intentionally deceived the Russian public and Putin about an impending Ukrainian offensive with NATO support in 2022 and about the increase in Ukrainian aggression before the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[11] Prigozhin asserted that the situation in eastern Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was no different than the previous eight years of hostilities.[12] Prigozhin suggested that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was prepared to negotiate with the Kremlin but that the Russian leadership refused to abandon their maximalist positions.[13] Prigozhin accused the Russian military leadership of launching the full-scale invasion for self-promotion and claimed that Shoigu advocated for the invasion in order to achieve a higher rank and state awards.[14] Prigozhin accused Russia's oligarchs of supporting the invasion of Ukraine for similar reasons of personal benefit. Prigozhin claimed that Russia's oligarchs wanted the Kremlin to install former Ukrainian politician and Kremlin ally Viktor Medvedchuk as the new Ukrainian president after the removal of the Ukrainian government so that Medvedchuk would divide the assets of occupied Ukrainian territories between the oligarchs.[15] Prigozhin's rejection of the justifications of the war is not a rejection of the war itself, as he argued that the fighting in Ukraine is a "holy war with those who offend the Russian people."^[16] Prigozhin's attack on the Kremlin's justifications of the war is likely meant to legitimize the potential removal of the Russian security and business elite from power without directly calling for an end to Putin's war.

Prigozhin likely intends to truly conduct an armed rebellion against the Russian MoD, rather than expecting Kremlin support to compel MoD leadership changes or only escalating rhetorically. Prigozhin may have wildly miscalculated and called for an armed rebellion incorrectly thinking that he would have Putin's backing, considering Putin's past tenuous relationship with the MoD and Shoigu. This contingency is however extraordinarily unlikely, considering that Putin has recently more firmly aligned himself with the MoD, and the Kremlin's responses to Prigozhin's posturing thus far have indicated surprise and a lack of agreement with Prigozhin.^[17] Prigozhin's actions and statements may alternatively be a rhetorical overreach in his ongoing dispute with the MoD and his campaign to retain his wavering influence within the Russian information space following the culmination of Wagner's Bakhmut effort. However, this contingency is also highly unlikely, as initial indicators of actual Wagner movements are observable and the Kremlin is not responding to Prigozhin's statements as only rhetoric.

It is therefore most likely that Prigozhin fully intends for Wagner to move against MoD leadership and forcibly remove them from power, more likely against the Southern Military District command in Rostov-on-Don but possibly also against Moscow. ISW is unable to confirm exactly where the bulk of Wagner forces are currently located, but it currently appears more likely that Prigozhin intends for Wagner to move on the MoD assets in Rostov. Following Wagner's withdrawal from Bakhmut in late May and early June, a large contingent of Wagner forces likely remained in rear areas of Ukraine, particularly in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, or else at Wagner's training facility near Molkino, Krasnodar Krai. Considering the relative proximity of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and Krasnodar Krai to Rostov Oblast, the more likely course of action may be that Prigozhin views the MoD in Rostov as the most viable target of a Wagner armed rebellion. Prigozhin claimed at 0200 local time (1900 EST) that Wagner forces have crossed Russia's international border into Rostov Oblast and claimed they face no resistance, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation of any Wagner movements as of the time of this publication.^[18]

An armed Wagner attack against the Russian military leadership in Rostov-on-Don would have significant impacts on Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Rostov-on-Don houses both the headquarters of the SMD, whose 58th Combined Arms Army is currently decisively engaged in defensive operations against Ukrainian counteroffensives in southern Ukraine, and the command center for the Russian Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine as a whole.^[19] Rostov-on-Don is therefore a critical command and control membrane for the Russian army, and any threats to the MoD's presence are likely to have ramifications on some critical aspects of the war effort.

Prigozhin's apparent start of an armed rebellion is the culmination of his campaign to retain control over his military forces, and he likely views the rebellion as an existential survival effort. Prigozhin's largely independent control over Wagner forces has been the cornerstone of his campaign to become the central figure of the Russian ultranationalist movement.^[20] Prigozhin has long overstepped existing norms within the Russian information space that limit criticism of Russian leadership because he likely believed the Kremlin's need for Wagner to fight in Ukraine shielded him from punishment.^[21] Prigozhin primarily used Wagner's responsibility for tactical gains in and around Bakhmut to advocate for more influence and responsibility for himself and Wagner, and the effectiveness of this mode of self-promotion has likely declined since Wagner withdrew to rear areas following the capture of Bakhmut on May 21.^[22] The MoD recently ordered Wagner personnel to sign MoD contracts in an effort to fully subordinate Wagner to the MoD, and likely did so to seize on the opportunity of Wagner's weakened relevance to Russian operations in Ukraine.^[23]

The MoD's recent demands that Wagner fully subordinate itself to the MoD would entail Prigozhin losing control of his parallel military structure, and therefore both his main source of influence and his means for avoiding the consequences of his public self-promotion. The MoD reportedly gave Wagner an ultimatum between subordination to the MoD or the recognition of Wagner's continued operations on the frontlines as illegal.^[24] Prigozhin may have attempted to negotiate continued independence for Wagner with his own contract outlining how Wagner and the MoD would coordinate continued Wagner operations, although the MoD outright rejected this possible attempt at negotiation.^[25] Prigozhin likely reached a perceived crucial decision point between surrendering his independent armed forces and actively resisting the MoD, and appears to have chosen the latter. The severe consequences that would result from a failed armed rebellion suggest that Prigozhin viewed his alternatives to be just as threatening.

Prigozhin's likely intention was to gain the allegiance of senior Russian officers and military personnel, but he is unlikely to secure sufficient military support considering that Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin denounced Prigozhin's call for armed rebellion. Prigozhin explicitly called for the entire Russian military and all of Russia to join Wagner in its effort to remove the Russian military leadership.[26] Prigozhin's longstanding calls for supplies and ammunition for Wagner indicate that Wagner likely does not have the necessary level of independent access to the materiel required to militarily depose the MoD leadership, and therefore MoD elements with their own supplies will need to support Wagner's armed rebellion if it has any real chance at lasting success.[27] The desired outcome of Prigozhin's armed rebellion also relies on senior Russian officers and military personnel recognizing the legitimacy of the supposedly new Russian military command that would follow any attempt at an armed rebellion. Prigozhin likely sought to rally military support for the effort earlier in the day by seizing on longstanding grievances about high Russian losses in Ukraine, accusing Shoigu and Gerasimov of sending tens of thousands of Russian personnel unnecessarily to their death and calling on Russia to hold Shoigu and Gerasimov responsible for the claimed deliberate "genocide" of Russian citizens.[28] Prigozhin has likely miscalculated the level of support for Wagner, as one of Wagner's most high-profile alleged allies, Surovikin, called on Wagner personnel to not follow Prigozhin's orders.[29] Wagner likely previously relied on its relationship with high-profile allies like Surovikin to retain access to supplies and its responsibility for operations in the Bakhmut area.[30] Surovikin's rejection represents a major blow to Wagner's ability to rally elements of the MoD to its cause, and other high-ranking officers with Wagner affiliations and sympathies are less likely to support Wagner given the public statement from a high-profile senior officer like Surovikin.

Even if the Wagner Group can credibly threaten the MoD, Putin is incredibly unlikely to acquiesce to a successful effort by Prigozhin to topple the MoD. Should Wagner be able to tangibly attack the MoD in Rostov, Moscow, or elsewhere, and actually force a change in the military leadership (which is as of this time highly unlikely due to the apparent lack of backing for Wagner amongst senior officers and military personnel), it is unlikely that Putin would accept this at outcome. ISW has not observed any indications that Putin will accept such a change in MoD leadership. The violent overthrow of Putin loyalists like Shoigu and Gerasimov would cause irreparable damage to the stability of Putin's perceived hold on power, and Putin would be highly unlikely to accept any armed rebellion even if he supported the figures conducting it.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on June 23. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continued limited attacks in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area and made marginal gains southwest of Velyka Novosilka.[31] The Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported that Ukrainian forces made gains in western Zaporizhia south of Orikhiv on the Novodanylivka-Robotyne line and southeast of Orikhiv on the Mala Tokmachka-Novofedorivka line.[32] Milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces broke through Russian defenses north of Robotyne and advanced to positions within 1.5km north of the settlement.[33]

Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on June 23, primarily targeting a Ukrainian airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 14 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from strategic aviation over the Caspian Sea, targeting Khmelnytskyi Oblast and the Khmelnytski airfield, and reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all of the missiles.[34] Satellite imagery published on June 22 shows that Russian forces deployed strategic aviation to an airfield near Mozdok, North Ossetia as of May 24, and *Radio Liberty* reported that Russian strategic bombers that targeted Khmelnytskyi Oblast took off from this airfield.[35]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to have launched an armed rebellion on June 23 to force a leadership change within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) which is unlikely to succeed.
- Early reports following Prigozhin's statements suggest that Russian internal security forces are activating in response to Prigozhin's statements and possible Wagner moves, primarily in Moscow and Rostov, and the Kremlin appears opposed to Prigozhin's actions.
- Prigozhin set informational conditions for this effort earlier in the day by accusing the Russian MoD and unnamed oligarchs of deceiving Putin and the Russian public in order to launch the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Prigozhin likely intends to truly conduct an armed rebellion against the Russian MoD, rather than expecting Kremlin support to compel MoD leadership changes or only escalating rhetorically.
- It is therefore most likely that Prigozhin fully intends for Wagner to move against MoD leadership and forcibly remove them from power, more likely against the Southern Military District command in Rostov-on-Don but possibly also against Moscow.
- An armed Wagner attack against the Russian military leadership in Rostov-on-Don would have significant impacts on Russia's war effort in Ukraine.
- Prigozhin's apparent start of an armed rebellion is the culmination of his campaign to retain control over his military forces, and he likely views the rebellion as an existential survival effort.
- Prigozhin's likely intention was to gain the allegiance of senior Russian officers and military personnel, but he is unlikely to secure sufficient military support considering that Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin denounced Prigozhin's call for armed rebellion.
- Even if the Wagner Group can credibly threaten the MoD, Putin is incredibly unlikely to acquiesce to a successful effort by Prigozhin to topple the MoD.
- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least two sectors of the front on June 23.
- Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on June 23, primarily targeting a Ukrainian airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks in the Kupyansk area, and Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to skirmish south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects and the Wagner Group continue efforts to conceal the true scale of Russian and Wagner losses in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian and occupation administrations continue to disregard the lives of Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 22, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

June 22, 2023, 7:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on June 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kreminna area in Luhansk Oblast, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces in the Kreminna area achieved partial successes and consolidated themselves in new positions.^[2] Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Valeriy Shershen reported that Ukrainian forces advanced up to one kilometer in western Zaporizhia Oblast and on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.^[3] Shershen added that these Ukrainian advances were tactical measures aimed at improving Ukrainian positions along the front.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces also conducted unsuccessful offensive operations along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City front.^[5] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated on June 21 that Ukrainian forces have liberated eight settlements and over 113 square kilometers of territory since starting counteroffensive operations on June 4.^[6]

Senior Kremlin officials continue to publicly address the Ukrainian counteroffensive in a cohesive manner and acknowledge Ukrainian forces will conduct further operations, while continuing to inflate Russian successes. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed at a Russian Security Council meeting on June 22 that Ukrainian forces are regrouping and restaffing to prepare for further offensive operations in a single unspecified direction after "suffering significant losses."^[7] Shoigu claimed that both Russian and Ukrainian forces are preparing for further offensive operations. Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev claimed that Russian forces destroyed a heavily exaggerated amount of Ukrainian military equipment, including Western-provided equipment. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that his reporting on Ukrainian gains differs from official reports because Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov lie and exaggerate.^[8] Prigozhin claimed on June 13 that Ukrainian forces have likely liberated over 100 square kilometers since the start of the counteroffensive, in stark contrast to the Russian MoD's continual denial of Ukrainian territorial gains.^[9]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will form a “reserve army” by the end of June, form a new army corps, and reinforce key Western Military District (WMD) formations as part of intended force restructuring. Shoigu told Russian President Vladimir Putin that Russia is forming reserves for an unnamed army corps and an unspecified “reserve army” and adding five regiments to the 1st Guard Tank Army and the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army — both part of the WMD.^[10] Shoigu noted that the five regiments are already 60 percent staffed and equipped as of June 22. Shoigu’s announcement likely confirms ISW’s previous reports that the Russian military command is forming the 25th Combined Arms Army with recruits from the Russian Far East and is establishing the 40th Army Corps as part of the Southern Military District (SMD).^[11] The 20th Combined Arms Army is based on the northeast Ukrainian border and the 1st Guards Tank Army was (prior to February 2022) Russia’s highest quality army, making these formations the logical first recipients of new regiments. Shoigu previously outlined Russian efforts to conduct large-scale military reforms between 2023 and 2026 to optimize Russian Armed Forces for large-scale conventional warfare and expand Russian conventional forces on January 17, though as ISW assessed at the time Russia will struggle to fully staff and equip these large formations using existing force-generation processes.^[12]

The Russian MoD likely seeks to mitigate this force-generation challenge at least in part with volunteer formations.^[13] Shoigu claimed that Russia recruited 114,000 servicemen for contract service and 52,000 volunteers — noting that 1,336 people sign contracts with the Russian MoD each day and that Russia can form a regiment every 24 hours. This statement is not to be taken literally though since Russian regiments typically contain over 2,000 personnel.^[14] Shoigu added that Russia is not committing volunteers because “there is no urgent need” to deploy these forces to the battlefield. ISW previously observed residents of the Russian Far East receiving messages inviting men to join the 25th Combined Arms Army, indicating that the Russian MoD seeks to directly recruit volunteers to staff its formations.^[15] Shoigu also ordered Russian volunteer formations on June 10 to sign military contracts with the Russian MoD by July 1, which will also formally provide additional forces to the Russian MoD for its large-scale military reforms.^[16] Russia’s previous attempt to form a volunteer-based 3rd Army Corps in summer of 2022 did not establish a combat-effective force, however.^[17]

The Russian MoD is unlikely to fully formalize Russian volunteer formations by its stated July 1 deadline. The Russian MoD claimed on June 22 that four additional volunteer formations signed contracts with the MoD and that more than 20 volunteer formations have done so since the MoD began the effort to have all volunteers sign contracts.^[18] The MoD previously claimed on June 10 that more than 40 volunteer formations are currently active.^[19] The MoD may nominally have all volunteer formations sign contracts before July 1, but the extent of actual command ties is unclear. ISW previously assessed that the MoD’s formalization efforts intend to centralize control over Russian irregular personnel and supplies to respond to Ukraine’s counteroffensive as well as restrict the influence of figures outside of the MoD.^[20] It is unclear why a significant portion of volunteer formations have yet to sign contracts with the MoD, although Prigozhin’s criticism that MoD subordination could adversely impact command and control within irregular formations may be reflective of widespread concerns among these irregular Russian forces.^[21] The signing of contracts is the first phase of formalizing volunteer formations, and it is unclear if the MoD will be able to quickly, or at all, establish practical and effective control once these formations are *de jure* subordinate to the MoD, and the scale of implementation will vary between units.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian intelligence indicates that Russian forces are preparing to conduct a possible sabotage attack at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). A Russian-created radiological incident at the ZNPP remains unlikely but not impossible. Zelensky

stated that the planned attack would release radiation from the ZNPP, and announced that Ukrainian officials will widely share their intelligence on the planned attack with partners and international organizations in the coming days.[22] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov reported on June 20 that Russian forces had mined additional areas at the ZNPP, including the facility's cooling pond.[23] The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated on June 21 that its representatives have not observed any mines at the cooling pond, although it did acknowledge that Russian forces have mined areas in and around the ZNPP. [24] Russian forces would not be able to control the consequences of an intentional radiological incident at the ZNPP, which could impact their forces more than Ukrainian forces across the Kakhovka Reservoir given conditions at the time of the incident. An intentional radiological incident could also leave many areas in occupied southern Ukraine uninhabitable and ungovernable, further degrading Russia's ability to cement its occupation of southern Ukraine, and the destruction of the power plant would be a drastic act. Russian forces may be signaling that they are preparing to sabotage the ZNPP in order to dissuade Ukrainian forces from conducting counteroffensive operations in the area. The Kremlin has routinely employed threats of nuclear escalation and warned of (largely Russian imposed) threats to the safety of the ZNPP in an attempt to pressure Ukraine to constrain its military actions and prevent further Western security assistance to Ukraine.[25] However, the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam also harmed Russian forces, and possible Russian plans to sabotage the ZNPP cannot be ruled out and should be prepared for by Ukraine and its partners.

Ukrainian forces may be intensifying efforts to strike Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported on explosions in Melitopol and Yakymivka in Zaporizhia Oblast and Chonhar in Crimea on June 22.[26] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a Storm Shadow strike on the Chonhar Bridge, along the E105 highway connecting Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast and Crimea.[27] Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces also struck a bridge across Lake Syvash.[28] Ukrainian forces may be intensifying their efforts to strike rear areas and vulnerable areas along GLOCs to disrupt Russian supply routes.[29] Widespread Russian milblogger outrage and concern about the strike could indicate that Russian forces may be increasingly concerned over their ability to secure GLOCs in southern Ukraine.[30]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged that Western partners have different expectations for Ukraine's counteroffensive and stated that Ukrainian forces will perform operations as Ukraine sees fit independent of pressure from another country.[31] CNN reported on June 22 that senior US and other Western officials stated the Ukrainian counteroffensive thus far has failed to live up to expectations, but the officials acknowledged that the counteroffensive is still in the early phases and Western states remain hopeful that Ukrainian forces will make significant gains.[32] ISW continues to assesses that the slow pace of current Ukrainian counteroffensive operations is not emblematic of Ukrainian forces' overall offensive potential and that Ukrainian forces are likely setting conditions for a future main counteroffensive effort which will take time to conduct.[33]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front and reportedly made gains on June 22.
- Senior Kremlin officials continue to publicly address the Ukrainian counteroffensive in a cohesive manner and acknowledge Ukrainian forces will conduct further operations, while continuing to inflate Russian successes.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will form a "reserve army" by the end of June, form a new army corps, and reinforce key Western Military District (WMD) formations as part of intended force restructuring.
- The Russian MoD is unlikely to fully formalize Russian volunteer formations by its stated July 1 deadline.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian intelligence indicates that Russian forces are preparing to conduct a possible sabotage attack at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). A Russian-created radiological incident at the ZNPP remains unlikely but not impossible.
- Ukrainian forces may be intensifying efforts to strike Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in southern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged that Western partners have different expectations for Ukraine's counteroffensive and stated that Ukrainian forces will perform operations as Ukraine sees fit independent of pressure from another country.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks near the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kreminna.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Bakhmut.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued offensive operations on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces are transferring GRU Spetsnaz units to Kursk and Bryansk oblasts to fight Russian partisans.
- Russian sources claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested a group of saboteurs in occupied Melitopol that allegedly planned the assassination of unnamed Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials and sabotage against railroads.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 21, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

June 21, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on June 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on June 21. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on June 21 that Ukrainian troops had partial success during offensive operations in the Bilohorivka-Shypylivka direction (about 10km south of Kreminna in Luhansk Oblast).[1] A Russian milblogger additionally claimed that Ukrainian forces are counterattacking in the areas south and west of Kreminna.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on the Vilne Pole-Makarivka line, and Russian milbloggers continued to discuss Ukrainian attacks in this area, particularly south of Velyka Novosilka.[3] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, both south and southwest of Orikhiv and that Russian forces are counterattacking to regain lost positions in this direction.[4] Russian sources noted a relatively slower pace of Ukrainian offensive operations in both western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts compared to the previous days.[5]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged that the progress of Ukrainian counteroffensives has been slower than expected, likely due to effective Russian defenses. Zelensky stated that Ukrainian counteroffensive progress has been "slower than desired" and will take time.[6] Zelensky noted that Ukrainian advances are not easy because Russian forces have mined 200,000 square kilometers of frontline territory.[7] Russian President Vladimir Putin also addressed ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives and preposterously claimed that Russian forces have destroyed 244 tanks and 679 armored vehicles since these operations began on June 4.[8] Russian forces' doctrinally sound defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast and prepared defensive positions throughout southern Ukraine are likely slowing Ukrainian advances, as ISW has previously assessed.[9] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian defensive positions in southern Ukraine, dubbed the "Surovikin Line" after former overall theater commander Army General Sergei Surovikin, consist of several defensive zones between lines along dominant elevated positions up to 30km into Russian held territory.[10] The milblogger claimed that the "Surovikin Line" consists of a forward line of defense with several dozen platoon and company strongholds, and a main defensive line roughly 25km back with minefields, anti-tank ditches, and other defensive structures in between, though the extent of these defenses along the entire front line is unclear.[11] These Russian defensive lines are likely arrayed to enable a first echelon of Russian forces, deployed to the forward defensive line, to slow advancing Ukrainian forces while a second echelon of forces deployed closer to the main defensive line launch counterattacks against any Ukrainian breakthroughs, as well as providing prepared fallback positions for frontline Russian units.[12] Localized Ukrainian territorial gains are unlikely to immediately disrupt these Russian defensive lines and localized Ukrainian attempts at rapid breakthroughs are less likely to degrade these lines than a wider concerted operational effort, one which may be focused on degrading Russian defenders and fixing reserves rather than the immediate liberation of territory.

The overall slower than expected pace of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations is not emblematic of Ukraine's wider offensive potential, and Ukrainian forces are likely successfully setting conditions for a future main effort despite initial setbacks. Ukrainian officials have long signaled that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would be a series of gradual and sequential offensive actions and have more recently offered the observation that currently ongoing operations do not represent the main thrust of Ukraine's counteroffensive planning.[13] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar emphasized on June 20 that it is not useful to gauge the success of military actions based "solely by kilometers or the number of liberated settlements".[14] Malyar's statement echoes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's observation that war is not a "Hollywood movie" that will deliver immediate and tangible results.[15]

The observation that current Ukrainian operations may have objectives that are not simply territorial is an important one. Ukrainian forces may be conducting several offensive operations across the entire theater in order to gradually attrit Russian forces and set conditions for a future main effort. Losses are inevitable on both sides, but careful operational planning on the Ukrainian side likely seeks to mitigate and balance this reality with the equally important observation that the degradation of Russian manpower is a valuable objective. Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin voiced his concern that Russian forces are suffering major manpower and equipment losses as a result of ongoing Ukrainian attacks, especially in southern Ukraine.[16] The success of Ukrainian counteroffensives should not be judged solely on day-to-day changes in control of terrain, as the wider operational intentions of Ukrainian attacks along the entire frontline may be premised on gradually degrading, exhausting, and expending Russian capabilities in preparation for additional offensive pushes.

Ukrainian defense industry conglomerate "Ukroboronprom" announced on June 20 that Ukraine built and successfully tested a 1,000km-range drone, indicating Ukraine's intent and ability to target Russian military infrastructure in Russian-occupied territories and Russia with Ukrainian-made drones. [17] Ukroboronprom Spokesperson Nataliya Sad stated that Ukrainian forces successfully used the new Ukrainian-made drone but did not provide information on whether this drone was already used for strikes. Ukroboronprom previously announced its development of the 1,000km range drone in October 2022. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov told *The Economist* that Ukraine is at war and that drones over the Kremlin show that Russian defenses are "Potemkin villages" - an expression referring to the purported construction of fake settlements by a historical Russian minister to hide the true state of the Empire from the Tsar.[18] While Budanov did not confirm that the Ukrainian forces previously launched drones over the Kremlin on May 3, US intelligence officials previously assessed that the Ukrainian special military or intelligence units are behind a series of covert actions against Russian targets including the May 3 strike.[19] ISW had previously incorrectly assessed the May 3 attack on the Kremlin may have been a Russian false flag.[20] Ukraine's focus on development of long-range drones alongside US intelligence indicates that Ukraine will likely continue to pursue Russian rear targets with Ukrainian-made drones. 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.[21]

Russian occupation authorities continue to codify legal mechanisms for forcible deportations from occupied areas of Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin signed an order on June 20 that creates a working group to regulate and oversee the creation of "temporary detention facilities for foreign citizens and stateless persons" in occupied Donetsk Oblast and designates these individuals as subject to expulsion or deportation from territory considered to be Russian under Russian law.[22] Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on April 27 that presaged Pushilin's order by defining those living in occupied areas who refuse to accept Russian passports as "foreign citizens and stateless persons currently residing in the Russian Federation".[23] The establishment of the new DNR working group essentially sets formal conditions for the DNR government to detain residents of occupied Donetsk Oblast who are classified as "foreign citizens and stateless persons" under the April 27 law and officially designate them as subject to deportation from occupied Donetsk Oblast. The working group will also likely serve as a coercive tool aimed at forcing residents of occupied areas to obtain Russian passports out of fear of arbitrary detention and potential deportation. ISW continues to assess that all lines of effort aimed at codifying and formalizing the deportation of Ukrainians may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, as well as a potential deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on June 21.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged that the progress of Ukrainian counteroffensives has been slower than expected, likely due to effective Russian defenses.
- The overall slower than expected pace of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations is not emblematic of Ukraine's wider offensive potential, and Ukrainian forces are likely successfully setting conditions for a future main effort despite initial setbacks.
- Ukrainian defense industry conglomerate "Ukroboronprom" announced on June 20 that Ukraine built and successfully tested a 1,000km-range drone, indicating Ukraine's intent and ability to target Russian military infrastructure in Russian-occupied territories and Russia with Ukrainian-made drones.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to codify legal mechanisms for forcible deportations from occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to engage in positional battles along the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kreminna.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the Bakhmut area and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian military command is reportedly forming a new Azov Naval District as part of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.
- The Russian State Duma passed a law in the third reading raising age limits for Russian contract personnel and officer, likely to keep personnel currently due to retire in the force.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to deport children from occupied Luhansk Oblast to Russia under the guise of medical necessity.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 20, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, and Mason Clark

June 20, 2023, 4:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on June 20 ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on June 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts and in western Zaporizhia oblast.^[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that units of the Eastern Grouping of Forces repelled four Ukrainian assaults near Orikhiv, Zaporizhia Oblast, and in western Donetsk Oblast.^[2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on June 19 that Russian forces have committed significant forces to stop Ukrainian offensives, making Ukrainian advances difficult.^[3] Malyar added that ongoing Ukrainian operations have several tasks that are not solely focused on liberating territory and that Ukrainian forces have yet to start the main phase of counteroffensive operations.^[4]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to respond to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations with a relatively high degree of rhetorical coherence, suggesting that the MoD has learned from its past mishandling of the information space during previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu addressed the MoD Collegium on June 20 and began his speech by addressing ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Donetsk and Zaporizhia Oblasts.^[5] Shoigu claimed that the counteroffensive began on June 4, consistent with ISW's previous assessment of when the counteroffensive began.^[6] Shoigu additionally claimed that Ukrainian troops have launched 263 attacks on Russian positions since June 4 but denied that Ukrainian forces have made gains anywhere in the theater, contrary to publicly available geolocated evidence of Ukrainian advances. The fact that Shoigu addressed the counteroffensive in such a public and relatively even-keeled manner (even while maintaining typical MoD denial of Ukrainian successes) is a notable inflection from the Russian MoD's failure to prepare a unified response to Ukraine's Kharkiv and Kherson Oblast counteroffensives in 2022 and the resulting panic in the Russian information space, indicating the Russian information space has somewhat adapted to and learned from past moments of informational collapse.^[7]

Russian forces conducted a missile and drone strike on Ukraine on June 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 35 Shahed-131/136 drones, seven S-300 missiles, and one Iskander-M missile targeting Kyiv Oblast and civilian infrastructure facilities in Zaporizhia Oblast and that Ukrainian forces shot down 32 Shahed drones.^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched the Shahed drones from Bryansk Oblast and the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov.^[9]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on June 20.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to respond to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations with a relatively high degree of rhetorical coherence, suggesting that the MoD has learned from its past mishandling of the information space during previous Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Russian forces conducted a missile and drone strike on Ukraine on June 20.
- Russian forces continued a slightly intensified pace of ground attacks near Kreminna.

- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues to lower the requirements for Russian military service in an effort to increase recruitment.
- Russia aims to use the annual International Military-Technical Forum “Army-2023” to diversify and expand its defense industrial base (DIB).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 19, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mapes, and Mason Clark

June 19, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on June 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the frontline and made gains on June 19. A Russian milblogger reported that Ukrainian troops continued attacks northwest, northeast, and southwest of Bakhmut on June 19 claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Krasnopolivka (about 12km northeast of Bakhmut).[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar additionally announced that over the past week, Ukrainian troops in the Tavrisk (Zaporizhia) direction have advanced up to seven kilometers and liberated 113 square kilometers of territory, including eight settlements in western Donetsk and western Zaporizhia oblasts.[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops attacked south of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast.[3] Geolocated footage posted on June 19 confirms that Ukrainian troops liberated Pyatykhatk, about 25km southwest of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[4] Milbloggers also reported fighting south and southwest of Orikhiv over the course of the day on June 19.[5] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed on June 19 that Russia has likely deployed large portions of the Dnipro Grouping of Forces from the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast to the Zaporizhia and Bakhmut directions to respond to Ukrainian counteroffensive actions over the past 10 days.[6]

Russian forces conducted drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine on June 19. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched four Kalibr cruise missiles and four Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine and stated that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed all the drones and missiles.[7] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched the Kalibr cruise missiles from a submarine in the Black Sea and the Shahed drones from the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov.[8]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reported that the Chinese government reiterated that it is not providing, and will not provide, lethal assistance to Russia for use in Ukraine. Blinken reported on June 19 that the United States has not seen evidence contradicting Beijing's claims.[9] Blinken expressed concern that Chinese companies may be providing Russia technology that it can use in the war against Ukraine, however.

US defense manufacturer Lockheed Martin indicated that it is ready to help Ukraine fly and maintain Lockheed's F-16 fighter jets if NATO states agree to send them to Ukraine.[10] The *Financial Times* quoted Lockheed Martin Chief Operating Officer (COO) Frank St. John as stating that Lockheed is prepared to build new F-16s; modify existing airframes; and provide F-16 training, equipment, and systems support if NATO agrees to supply Ukraine with F-16s. US and other Western officials have recently signaled an increased willingness to provide Ukraine with F-16s, as ISW has previously reported.[11]

Kremlin-affiliated Russian tech giant Yandex claimed that international sanctions against Russia prevented the company from providing the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) with user data in compliance with a Russian security law, resulting in a significant fine. A Moscow court imposed a two million ruble (roughly \$23,795) fine against Yandex on June 18 for failing to provide the FSB with unspecified user data for national security reasons.[12] A Yandex representative claimed that Yandex did not intend to break Russian law but that international sanctions prevent Yandex from purchasing, installing, and configuring the foreign hardware and software necessary to comply with the law. A Moscow court previously imposed a 400,000 ruble (roughly \$4,759) fine against Yandex for the same violation in 2022.[13] While it is unclear how foreign technology products would help Yandex comply with the Russian law, the situation demonstrates that international sanctions have impacted some aspects of the Russian technology sector and national security apparatus.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the frontline and made gains on June 19.
- Russian forces conducted drone and missile strikes targeting southern Ukraine on June 19.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reported that the Chinese government reiterated that it is not providing, and will not provide, lethal assistance to Russia for use in Ukraine.
- US defense manufacturer Lockheed Martin indicated that it is ready to help Ukraine fly and maintain Lockheed's F-16 fighter jets if NATO states agree to send them to Ukraine.
- Kremlin-affiliated Russian tech giant Yandex claimed that international sanctions against Russia prevented the company from providing the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) with user data in compliance with a Russian security law, resulting in a significant fine.

- Russian forces made gains in the Kupyansk area and continued ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations while Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Bakhmut.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and made marginal gains.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks on along the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Wagner Group continues efforts to expand its recruitment pool in the wake of significant losses in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that a car carrying a Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official exploded in Simferopol, occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 18, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, and Mason Clark

June 18, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on June 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least four sectors of the front on June 18 and made limited territorial gains. Geolocated footage suggests that Ukrainian forces made limited advances within 30km south of Kremenna.[1] Avdiivka City Military Administration Head Vitaliy Barabash reported that Ukrainian forces advanced more than a kilometer north of Avdiivka on the Donetsk City frontline over the past two weeks.[2] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations south, southwest, and southeast of Velyka Novosilka on the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts and made some localized advances.[3] Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and geolocated footage suggests that Ukrainian forces entered the western part of Pyatychatky (41km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City), southwest of Orikhiv.[4] Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Valeriy Shershen stated that Russian forces continue to counterattack in western Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts, and that Ukrainian forces have "a lot of work."^[5] Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported that Russian forces continue to transfer personnel and heavy military equipment from around Nova Kakhovka and Kakhovka in eastern Kherson Oblast to the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline via Melitopol.[6]

Ukrainian forces may be temporarily pausing counteroffensive operations to reevaluate their tactics for future operations. Head of the Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Colonel Margo Grosberg stated on June 16 that he assesses "we won't see an offensive over the next seven days."^[7] The *Wall Street Journal* similarly reported on June 17 that Ukrainian forces "have mostly paused their advances in recent days" as Ukrainian command reexamines tactics.^[8] These reports are consistent with ISW's recent observations of the scale and approach of localized Ukrainian counterattacks in southern and eastern Ukraine.^[9] ISW has previously noted that Ukraine has not yet committed the majority of its available forces to counteroffensive operations and has not yet launched its main effort.^[10] Operational pauses are a common feature of major offensive undertakings, and this pause does not signify the end of Ukraine's counteroffensive.

A *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) interview with Russian prisoners of war (POWs) indicates continued significant morale and command issues among frontline Russian units and the continued Russian use of "barrier forces" to shoot retreating soldiers.^[11] WSJ amplified the statements of three unidentified Russian POWs who voluntarily surrendered to Ukrainian forces during Ukrainian counteroffensive operations near Velyka Novosilka, on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts. The POWs reported widespread fear of a Ukrainian counteroffensive among Russian forces on the frontlines. The POWs indicated that the Russian military command sees Russian conscripts and penal recruits as expendable, and claimed Russian officers order injured personnel deemed unfit for service back to the front line and use "barrier forces" to prevent penal recruits in "Storm-Z" units from retreating. Barrier forces are specialized units that threaten to shoot their own personnel either to prevent retreats or to force them to attack, and unverified social media footage recently circulated depicting Russian barrier troops shooting retreating Russian forces in Ukraine.^[12] The POWs also indicated that Russian forces struggle to supply and staff their units, including struggling to crew tanks and armored vehicles.^[13] The POWs expressed concern about returning to Russia in a POW exchange due to Russian laws prohibiting voluntary surrender to the enemy.

EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton announced on June 18 that the EU is accelerating arms deliveries to Ukraine. Breton referenced a pledge that the EU would supply a million high quality weapons to Ukraine over the coming year and stated that the EU is "going to step up our efforts to deliver arms and ammunition" as "this is a war of high intensity in which [high quality weapons] play a crucial role."^[14]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly supported select Russian milbloggers' proposal to create a Presidential Administration working group, likely in an effort to integrate prominent milbloggers into the pro-Kremlin information space. The working group would reportedly include members of the Russian presidential administration and aim to coordinate ideas on the war in Ukraine.^[15] It is unclear if and how Russian milbloggers will participate in the Presidential Administration working group, however. Putin's support of a working group to focus on war reporting suggests that Putin intends to continue to publicly engage with pro-Kremlin milbloggers in an attempt to expand his support in the ultranationalist community. The Kremlin has previously coopted prominent Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers by offering them official roles on the Russian Human Rights Council and in the Mobilization Working Group likely in exchange for amplifying pro-Kremlin rhetoric.^[16]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least four sectors of the front on June 18 and made limited territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces may be temporarily pausing counteroffensive operations to reevaluate their tactics for future operations.
- A *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) interview with Russian prisoners of war (POWs) indicates continued significant morale and command issues among frontline Russian units and the continued Russian use of “barrier forces” to shoot retreating soldiers.
- EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton announced on June 18 that the EU is accelerating arms deliveries to Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly supported select Russian milbloggers’ proposal to create a Presidential Administration working group, likely in an effort to integrate prominent milbloggers into the pro-Kremlin information space.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Svatove and south of Kremminna.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continued to repel Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast
- Some Russian ultranationalist figures are concerned that the Russian Ministry of Defense’s efforts to formalize volunteer formations will trigger command changes and degrade combat effectiveness.
- Russian occupation officials are continuing to prioritize medical treatment for Russian military personnel in occupied Mariupol, reportedly significantly increasing the civilian mortality rate in the city.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 17, 2023

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

June 17, 2023, 6:30 pm ET

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2 pm ET on June 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least four sectors of the front on June 17. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized ground attacks west and south of Kremminna.^[1] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked on the northern and southern outskirts of Bakhmut.^[2] The Russian MoD and other Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces repelled limited Ukrainian ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.^[3] Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations south, southwest, and southeast of Velyka Novosilka near the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.^[4] Ukrainian forces also conducted counteroffensive operations southwest and southeast of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[5] Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to two kilometers in multiple unspecified directions in southern Ukraine.^[6]

A delegation representing seven African states met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg on June 17, following a meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky on June 16, to propose a generalized peace plan focused on resuming international trade. The Egyptian prime minister, a Ugandan presidential envoy, and the presidents of South Africa, Zambia, Comoros, the Republic of the Congo, and Senegal previously visited Kyiv and met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on June 16, and notably had to take shelter during Russian missile strikes targeting Kyiv.^[7] South African President Cyril Ramaphosa corrected his spokesperson’s earlier denials that Russian forces did not conduct attacks on Kyiv during the visit and acknowledged that “such activity does not bode well for establishing peace.”^[8] Ramaphosa presented a ten-point generalized peace plan on June 16 calling for an end to hostilities and a negotiated peace settlement that would respect sovereignty and establish security guarantees for both Ukraine and Russia.^[9] The proposal also calls for securing the movement of grain and fertilizers from both Ukraine and Russia and closer cooperation with African states.^[10] Zelensky reiterated that negotiations are only possible after the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine and that Ukraine will not pursue negotiated settlements reminiscent of the Minsk Accords.^[11]

Putin stated that the Kremlin welcomes the African states’ “balanced” approach to resolving the war in Ukraine in his meeting with the delegation, but did not comment on the feasibility of Ramaphosa’s suggested peace plan.^[12] President of Comoros and current African Union Chairperson Azali Asoumani notably used language similar to the Kremlin’s preferred “Russian world” rhetoric about the war in Ukraine while meeting with Putin, stating that stability in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the world depends on fraternal relationships between neighboring Slavic “friendly nations.”^[13] Asoumani also highlighted that peace in Ukraine is important for addressing international food and energy security.^[14] Asoumani’s comments and the peace plan’s inclusion of grain shipment guarantees suggest the states involved in the proposal view resolving the economic fallout from the war in Ukraine as their paramount concern. The delegation likely seeks to balance Ukraine and Russia to maintain longstanding bilateral relationships with Russia without fully tying themselves diplomatically to the Kremlin’s war.

The Kremlin will likely exploit this proposal to promote Russian information operations aiming to slow Western security assistance to Ukraine and has not demonstrated any intent to engage with any peace process meaningfully. ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin has routinely signaled a false willingness to negotiate a settlement to the war to prompt Western concessions and dissuade Western officials from sending further support to Ukraine.^[15] The Kremlin previously intensified this effort to set conditions for its winter-spring 2023 offensive and is likely reamplifying this information operation in an effort to weaken Western support for Ukraine during counteroffensive operations.^[16] The Kremlin also used the equally vague peace plan presented by China in the spring of 2023 to amplify this information operation and has not yet attempted to expound upon the broad suggestions in that plan.^[17] The Kremlin instead attempted to use stated Chinese interest in negotiating a settlement to the war in Ukraine to pursue desired closer ties with China.^[18] The Kremlin will likely use the outreach by these African states to pursue strengthened bilateral and multilateral engagement.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to signal his disinterest in formally subordinating the Wagner private military company (PMC) to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Prigozhin sarcastically criticized the MoD’s formalization efforts on June 17 after previously portraying himself as compliant with the Russian MoD’s order for volunteer formations to sign formal contracts by July 1 and claimed he attempted to submit a contract to formalize Wagner under the

Russian MoD.[19] Prigozhin implied that the Russian MoD will confiscate weapons that volunteer units obtained outside of the Russian MoD's weapon deliveries and noted that inexperienced Russian commanders with higher military education will replace what he claimed are more combat-effective volunteer commanders. [20] Prigozhin added that formalization will destroy hierarchies within volunteer formations and force volunteers to serve in the military without the Russian MoD respecting military contract deadlines. Prigozhin noted that the Russian MoD will not provide sufficient supplies or weapons for volunteers and will mistreat irregular forces. Prigozhin did not discuss the contents of his claimed formalization contract with the Russian MoD on June 17, but a Wagner-affiliated milblogger suggested that Prigozhin demanded a series of powers and concessions from the Russian military command discussed in the force generation section of this update.[21] Prigozhin's behavior indicates that he is unlikely to subordinate Wagner forces to the Russian MoD unless such a move would grant him more political power within Russia.

The New York Times (NYT) released a report supporting ISW's prior assessment that Russian forces most likely destroyed the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam.[22] NYT cited multiple US and Ukrainian engineering experts who examined diagrams of the KHPP dam, imagery of the destroyed dam foundation, footage of the initial breach, and seismic data. The experts determined that the degree of damage to the dam's internal structures is consistent with an explosion from within the dam's internal structures rather than from prior damage. NYT also quoted a senior US military official as saying that the US ruled out an external attack, such as from a missile, rocket, or other projectile, as causing the explosion, and that the US believes that Russian forces most likely caused the internal explosion that caused the dam's collapse. ISW has assessed since the destruction of the KHPP dam on June 6 that the preponderance of available evidence, reasoning, and rhetoric suggests that Russian forces deliberately damaged the dam.[23]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least four sectors of the front.
- A delegation representing seven African states met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg following a meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky on June 16 to propose a generalized peace plan focused on resuming international trade.
- The Kremlin will likely exploit this proposal to promote Russian information operations aiming to slow Western security assistance to Ukraine and has not demonstrated any intent to meaningfully engage with any peace process.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to signal his disinterest in formally subordinating the Wagner private military company (PMC) to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- The New York Times (NYT) released a report supporting ISW's prior assessment that Russian forces most likely destroyed the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, and Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted localized ground attacks west and south of Kremenna.
- Russian forces and Ukrainian forces continued limited attacks in the Bakhmut area and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Vuhledar likely in response to Ukrainian territorial gains in the area on June 16.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near the administrative border between western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces intensified attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to gradually mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian officials are planning several infrastructure projects connecting occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to occupied Crimea, likely to secure new ground lines of communication (GLOCs) for the Russian grouping in southern Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 16, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

June 16, 2023, 5:15pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on June 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least three sectors of the front on June 16 and reportedly made gains. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that the Ukrainian forces conducted successful counteroffensive operations southwest of Bakhmut near Stupochky (about 12km southwest of Bakhmut); in western Donetsk Oblast near Vuhledar; in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area along the Levadne-Staromaiorske line; and in western Zaporizhia Oblast along the Novodanilivka-Robotyne line.[1] Geolocated footage posted on June 15 indicates that Ukrainian forces have made marginal gains on the northwestern outskirts of Bakhmut west of Yahidne, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops continued counterattacks northwest, west, and southwest of Bakhmut.[2] Russian milbloggers additionally claimed that Ukrainian forces continued attacking Russian positions south of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast, made gains in central Zaporizhia Oblast just south of Hulyaipole, and mounted offensive operations southwest of Orikhiv.[3]

Russian forces targeted Kyiv and Kryvyi Rih with cruise missiles and kamikaze drones on June 15-16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted five missile strikes with Kh-59, Kh-101, and Kh-555 cruise missiles on June 15 and that Ukrainian forces also shot down two Shahed drones.

[4] Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Head Serhiy Lysak reported that Russian missiles had targeted two industrial facilities in Kryvyi Rih on June 15.[5] Ukrainian officials also

reported that Ukrainian air defenses intercepted six Russian Kinzhal and six Kaliber missiles that targeted Kyiv Oblast during the day on June 16, coinciding with the visit of several African heads of state in Kyiv.[6]

The heads of state of seven African countries met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on June 16 in Kyiv as part of joint peace mission. President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa, President of Zambia Hakainde Hichilema, President of Comoros Azali Assoumani, President of the Republic of the Congo Denis Sassou Nguesso, Prime Minister of Egypt Mostafa Mabdouly, President of Senegal Macky Sall, and a Ugandan representative met with the Ukrainian leadership in Kyiv.[7] Russian forces conducted a missile strike on Kyiv during the visit, forcing the African leaders to take shelter in bunkers during their meetings.[8] Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces did not conduct missile strikes on Kyiv during the African leaders' visit, while another absurdly claimed that it was the Ukrainian forces that staged the attack.[9] The African leaders will continue their trip onward to St. Petersburg on June 17 to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin.[10] ISW will assess this trip in total following readouts from the delegation's visit to Russia.

The Kremlin claimed Russia has begun transferring tactical nuclear warheads (under Russian control) to Belarus, in line with previously announced plans. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on June 16 that Russia has moved the first deployment of tactical nuclear warheads to Belarus.[11] Putin stated that Russian forces will deploy the entirety of planned tactical nuclear warheads shipments to Belarus by the end of 2023.[12] ISW previously assessed that the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is part of a longstanding effort to cement Russia's *de facto* military control over Belarus and is highly unlikely to presage any Russian escalation.[13]

Select current and former Russian municipal officials signed an open letter calling on the Russian forces to return to the "universally" recognized Russian borders due to the crisis caused by the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam. Municipal officials from Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as Moscow and Leningrad oblasts signed the document, which argued that the destruction of the KHPP dam will affect the ecosystem of the planet, health issues, and the economy for many decades.[14] The letter stated that Putin's actions since February 24, 2022 have caused unspecified catastrophic events but did not cite continued Russian military operations in Ukraine as a reason for the withdrawal of Russian forces.[15] Non-Kremlin aligned Russian officials may be using public concern about the environmental and humanitarian situation associated with the destruction of the KHPP dam to voice opposition to the war in Ukraine without directly criticizing the war effort itself. The Kremlin has widely set the conditions for crackdowns against anti-war dissent. Russians who hold anti-war sentiments may use the destruction of the KHPP to voice their opposition to the war in a very limited fashion.[16]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive actions on at least three sectors of the front on June 16 and reportedly made gains.
- Russian forces targeted Kyiv and Kryvyi Rih with cruise missiles and kamikaze drones on June 15-16.
- The heads of state of seven African countries met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on June 16 in Kyiv as part of a joint peace mission.
- The Kremlin claimed Russia has begun transferring tactical nuclear warheads (under Russian control) to Belarus, in line with previously announced plans.
- Select current and former Russian municipal officials signed an open letter calling on Russian forces to return to "universally" recognized Russian borders due to the crisis caused by the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in the Vuhledar area.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near the administrative border of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and reportedly made gains in this area.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is attempting to monetarily incentivize the destruction of Ukrainian military equipment, likely to bolster ongoing recruitment efforts.
- Russian and occupation authorities are attempting to strengthen Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) between Russia and occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 15, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, and Mason Clark

June 15, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30pm ET on June 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and reportedly made gains on June 15. Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Ukrainian forces conducted successful offensive operations north and northwest of Bakhmut.[1] Ukraine's Tavrisk Group of Forces Press Center reported that Ukrainian forces advanced up to one kilometer in western Donetsk Oblast and are continuing attempts to improve their

tactical positions near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City).[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops unsuccessfully attacked southwest and south of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast and claimed that Ukrainian forces are increasing the tempo of counteroffensive operations in the area due to improved weather conditions.[3] Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff Brigadier General Oleksii Hromov reported that Ukrainian forces have advanced up to 3km near Mala Tokmachka in western Zaporizhia Oblast and up to 7km near Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast and have liberated seven settlements in those areas since beginning counteroffensive operations.[4] Advisor to the Ukrainian Presidential Office Mykhailo Podolyak however stated on June 15 that Ukrainian forces have yet to launch counteroffensives "as such" but acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive actions, a likely clarification that Ukrainian forces have not yet begun their main effort.[5] ISW assesses that ongoing Ukrainian offensive operations are likely setting conditions for wider Ukrainian counteroffensive objectives that are not immediately clear and therefore represent the initial phase of an ongoing counteroffensive.

Russian milbloggers continue to credit alleged superior Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities and defensive doctrine for Russian forces' successful defenses against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are implementing a "strategic defense" that seeks to attrit advancing Ukrainian forces in extended positional battles along a first line of defense before later launching counterattacks against weakened Ukrainian assault units.[6] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are maintaining doctrinally sound defensive operations in this sector in which a first echelon of forces repels or slows attacking forces before a second echelon of forces counterattacks against any enemy breakthrough.[7] Another prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian EW complexes prevent Ukrainian forces from using precision-guided munitions guided by GPS coordinates and heavily disrupt Ukrainian radio communication.[8] The milblogger specifically claimed that Russian forces use "Murmansk-BN" EW complexes to disrupt sensors on Ukrainian aerial reconnaissance equipment and "Krasukha-4" EW complexes to suppress connections with satellite signals within a radius of 300km.[9] ISW has previously assessed that Russian EW capabilities have been critical in complicating Ukrainian attacks in the Zaporizhia direction, although it is unclear if continued successful Russian EW tactics are a result of superior capacities or improved Russian employment of these systems. ISW has previously noted that initial Ukrainian assaults and Russian defensive operations should not be extrapolated to predict the outcome of all Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[10]

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes across Ukraine early in the morning of June 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that between 00:20 and 04:30 local time on June 15, Russian forces launched four Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from four Tu-95 strategic bombers from over the Caspian Sea and 20 Shahed-typed drones from the northern and southern directions.[11] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down one of the cruise missiles and all 20 Shaheds.[12] The remaining three cruise missiles struck industrial facilities in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[13] Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the UA Gen Staff Brigadier General Oleksii Hromov notably stated on June 15 that Russian forces have deployed a "Bal" Kh-35 coastal defense system to Bryansk Oblast, which Hromov warned may allow Russian forces to conduct strikes on Ukrainian far-rear areas in Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Poltava, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv oblasts.[14] Russian forces have long repurposed various missile systems, such as S-300 surface-to-air-missile systems, to strike ground targets and compensate for shortages of precision munitions, which is likely why Russian forces have deployed a coastal defense system to a land-locked oblast.

The Russian military is advancing initial efforts to stand up new corps- and army-level formations to implement Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's announced intent to conduct large-scale force restructuring by 2026, though these new formations are not yet staffed and operational. Independent Western open-source intelligence analysts began reporting in mid-May that Russian military authorities are actively recruiting officers and conscripts from Buryatia and Irkutsk to staff the new 25th Combined Arms Army.[15] The army HQ will reportedly be based in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast.[16] ISW also previously reported on June 3 that Russia is forming the 40th Army Corps as part of the Southern Military District and actively trying to staff one of the corps' motorized rifle battalions.[17] Efforts to construct and staff both the 25th Combined Arms Army and 40th Army Corps are likely part of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) implementation of intended large-scale reforms of Russia's ground forces to optimize for large-scale conventional warfare.[18] It remains unclear how Russian authorities intend to staff corps- and army-level formations to their doctrinal end strengths considering endemic force-generation challenges faced by the Russian military.[19] These formations may in part be intended to integrate a number of ad hoc volunteer formations that have been created over the course of the war in Ukraine, although Russia's previous attempt to integrate volunteer battalions in the form of the 3rd Army Corps over the summer of 2022 did not yield particularly positive results.[20]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov deployed Chechen "Akhmat" special forces to border areas in Belgorod Oblast, likely as part of a continued effort to align himself with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Kadyrov claimed on June 15 that the Chechen "Zapad Akhmat" Battalion arrived to the Nekhoteevka and Kozinka border checkpoints in Belgorod Oblast on his orders to protect the border from raids into Russian territory.[21] Kadyrov emphasized that the Akhmat forces will work in tandem with other Russian forces to defend Belgorod Oblast and residents of other border areas. Kadyrov likely aims to posture himself and Chechen forces as cooperating with the MoD, directly contrasting with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, who previously threatened to deploy Wagner forces to Belgorod Oblast without permission from the Russian MoD or the Russian military command.[22] Kadyrov has also taken advantage of the frequent Russian information-space discourse about Belgorod Oblast to posture himself as an effective and cooperative military leader without having to commit all Chechen forces to an attritive offensive or defense effort.

Western states may provide F-16 fighter aircraft and additional Leopard tanks to Ukraine in the coming months. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced on June 15 that Ukrainian pilots are already training on F-16 aircraft, allowing Western states to provide F-16s to Ukraine on an unspecified timeline. [23] The first of two chambers of the Swiss National Council voted on June 14 to decommission 25 Leopard-2 tanks and send the tanks back to Germany, which would then export the tanks to Ukraine.[24]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and reportedly made gains on June 15.
- Russian milbloggers continue to credit alleged superior Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities and defensive doctrine for Russian forces' successful defenses against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes across Ukraine early in the morning of June 15.
- The Russian military is advancing initial efforts to stand up new corps- and army-level formations to implement Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's announced intent to conduct large-scale force restructuring by 2026, though these new formations are not yet staffed and operational.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov deployed Chechen "Akhmat" special forces to border areas in Belgorod Oblast, likely as part of a continued effort to align himself with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

- Western states may provide F-16 fighter aircraft and additional Leopard tanks to Ukraine in the coming months.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Bakhmut, and Russian forces have gained territory as of June 15.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces reportedly continued limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces are beginning to decommission specialized company-size assault units and transferring their personnel to volunteer formations.
- Ukrainian partisans reportedly sabotaged a railway in occupied Melitopol, though ISW has observed no visual confirmation or Russian corroboration of the attack.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 14, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, and Mason Clark

June 14, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on June 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and made gains on June 14. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on June 14 that Ukrainian troops have advanced between 200 to 500 meters in unspecified sectors of the Bakhmut front and 300 to 350 meters in unspecified parts of the Zaporizhia direction.^[1] Russian milbloggers reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing counterattacks on the northwestern, northeastern, and southwestern outskirts of Bakhmut.^[2] Ukrainian and Russian sources additionally reported that fighting continued in western Donetsk Oblast, particularly around Makarivka (directly south of Velyka Novosilka), and in western Zaporizhia Oblast south of Orikhiv.^[3] Russian milbloggers speculated that heavy rain and poor weather in southern Ukraine may have decreased the tempo of Ukrainian attacks, but Malyar emphasized that weather conditions do not always have an impact of Ukrainian offensive actions.^[4] Ukrainian Tavrisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Valery Shershen noted that Ukrainian forces in the Tavrisk (Zaporizhia) direction are prioritizing strikes on Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems, and ISW has previously assessed that Russian EW capabilities have been critical in complicating Ukrainian attacks on this sector of the front.^[5] US Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh affirmed the United States' commitment to partially replacing Ukrainian losses of the US-provided equipment used in counteroffensive operations but noted that there may not be a one-for-one replacement ratio.^[6]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck a division of the 20th Combined Arms Army (Western Military District) near Kremenna, Luhansk Oblast while they were waiting for the commander of the 20th CAA to give a speech, prompting typical discontent among milbloggers about Russian commanders. ISW has observed both of the 20th CAA's divisions, the 144th and 3rd Motorized Rifle Divisions, operating in the Kremenna area for the past several months and could not confirm which division was struck by the Ukrainian forces.^[7] Russian sources claimed that the division waited two hours in one location while waiting for 20th Combined Arms Army Commander Major General Sukhrab Akhmedov to arrive and deliver a speech before the division conducted offensive operations.^[8] One milblogger suggested that the reported Ukrainian HIMARS strike killed around 100 Russian personnel and wounded another 100, although ISW has not observed any visual confirmation of the strike or its aftermath.^[9]

Milbloggers rightfully criticized the poor decision to concentrate a large number of Russian forces within range of Ukrainian fire for such a long time and used the situation to reiterate longstanding critiques of ineffective Russian command.^[10] The outrage is reminiscent of previous instances of notable irresponsible Russian military actions resulting in dramatic losses, particularly the December 31, 2022, Ukrainian strike on a large Russian force concentration in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast.^[11] Russian milbloggers previously urged for Russian officials to hold the Russian military leadership accountable for the Makiivka strike, and milbloggers have routinely attempted to place the blame for large scale Russian military failures on individual commanders.^[12] Milbloggers complained that Akhmedov and similar commanders continue to occupy key positions instead of being held accountable, a longstanding complaint that is indicative of widespread disdain for the traditional Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment.^[13] One milblogger even called for the responsible commanders to be shot in front of their formations, whether they are colonel or generals.^[14]

Russian sources disseminated conflicting reports about the condition of Russian Duma Deputy and Commander of the Chechen Rosgvardia branch, Adam Delimkhanov, on June 14. ISW has not observed any visual evidence to confirm or deny the contradictory claims about Delimkhanov's condition. Some Russian sources claimed on June 14 that Delimkhanov was dead or wounded, and some claimed a Ukrainian strike killed or wounded him in an unspecified location.^[15] Other Russian sources including Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmat Special Forces Commander Major General Apti Alaudinov, and Russian Duma Deputy Andrey Kartopolov later claimed that Delimkhanov was alive and unharmed.^[16] Kadyrov published a video on June 14 of himself with Delimkhanov on an unspecified date after rumors began circulating about Delimkhanov's condition.^[17] Kadyrov then claimed that Ukrainian media was circulating reports of Delimkhanov's death (ignoring that many of the reports originated from Russian sources) as part of an information operation, but did not elaborate on the intent of the supposed information operation.^[18]

Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on June 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched six Kh-22 cruise missiles, four Kalibr cruise missiles, and 10 Shahed 131/136 drones and noted that Ukrainian forces destroyed three Kh-22 missiles and nine Shaheds. [19] Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Andriy Kovalev reported that Russian forces targeted infrastructure facilities in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Kirovohrad, and Odesa oblasts.[20]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and made gains on June 14.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck a division of the 20th Combined Arms Army (Western Military District) near Kreminna, Luhansk Oblast while they were waiting for the commander of the 20th CAA to give a speech, prompting typical discontent among milbloggers about Russian commanders.
- Russian sources disseminated conflicting reports about the condition of Russian Duma Deputy and Commander of the Chechen Rosgvardia branch, Adam Delimkhanov, on June 14. ISW has not observed any visual evidence to confirm or deny the contradictory claims about Delimkhanov's condition.
- Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on June 14.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the Kupyansk direction and south of Kreminna.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near the administrative border of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and reportedly made gains in this area as of June 14.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast on June 14.
- Satellite imagery suggests that Russian helicopters defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine are likely deployed to an airfield in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.
- A Russian State Duma bill aimed at raising the conscription age suggests that the Kremlin may be aiming to shield specific generations from the demographic and social impacts of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to consolidate economic control of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 13, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark

June 13, 2023, 8:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:30 pm ET on June 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and made further limited territorial gains on June 13. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces advanced by 250 meters northeast of Bakhmut and by 200 meters south of Bakhmut.[1] Malyar also reported that Ukrainian forces advanced 500-1,000m in the past 24 hours around the administrative border between Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts, liberating around three square kilometers of territory in the area.[2] Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Andriy Kovalev reported that Ukrainian forces have liberated over 100 square kilometers of territory since beginning counteroffensive operations.[3] Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on June 13 that he assesses that Ukrainian forces have likely liberated more than 100 square kilometers.[4] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued ground assaults southwest of Orikhiv and south of Hulyaipole in western Zaporizhia Oblast on the night of June 12 to 13.[5] Russian sources widely reported that the tempo of Ukrainian operations in the Orikhiv area has declined in recent days.[6] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense Environmental Safety Department and Mine Action representative Major Vladyslav Dudar reported on June 13 that Russian forces are regularly destroying small dams in localized areas of southern Ukraine to disrupt Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with 18 prominent Russian milbloggers and war correspondents to discuss the progress of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on June 13.[8] Putin largely met with milbloggers closely associated with the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company and other state-owned outlets, notably excluding milbloggers who have been more critical of Putin's war effort.[9] Putin addressed several key milblogger concerns relating to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russian objectives in Ukraine, Russian mobilization and the possibility of imposing martial law, the formalization of private military companies (PMCs), and hostile incursions into Belgorod Oblast.

Putin discussed the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and signaled that he believes Russia can outlast Western military support for Ukraine. Putin stated that Russian objectives have not fundamentally changed, reiterating boilerplate rhetoric and false narratives accusing Ukraine and NATO of initiating the war.[10] Putin added that the West can push Ukraine into negotiations with Russia by stopping the supplies of military aid to Ukraine.[11] Putin noted that Ukrainian forces launched a "massive" counteroffensive on June 4 and noted that Ukrainian forces attacked in southwestern Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts, claiming they suffered significant losses. Putin claimed that Ukraine has lost 160 tanks and claimed that 30 percent of Ukraine's casualties are killed in action, whereas Russian

forces have lost only 54 tanks. Putin may be attempting to systematically amplify and misrepresent Ukrainian losses of Western military equipment to portray Ukraine's counteroffensive as failed and discourage the West from continuing to support Ukraine. Former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin observed that Putin's comments indicate that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to misinform him about the true situation on the battlefield.[12]

Putin indicated that he is unwilling to announce a second wave of mobilization or declare martial law, despite maintaining his maximalist objectives in Ukraine. Putin acknowledged that some Russian "public figures" are discussing the urgent need for mobilization but noted that there "is currently no need today" for mobilization. Putin boasted about Russian contract service recruitment efforts using rhetoric consistent with ISW's previous assessments that Putin is disinterested in announcing another mobilization wave and is instead prioritizing volunteer recruitment.[13] Putin also downplayed milbloggers' concern over the Kremlin's decision to not declare full-scale martial law throughout Russia, stating that Russia needs to expand its law enforcement rather than declare martial law. ISW continues to assess that Putin is a risk-averse actor who is hesitant to upset Russian society by ordering another mobilization wave or establishing martial law throughout Russia, indicating that Putin has not yet decided to fully commit to fighting a total war. Putin's statements likely aim to reassure his constituencies that he does not intend to expand the "special military operation" further.

Putin aimed to assuage widespread discontent in the Russian information space about limited cross border raids by pro-Ukraine forces into Belgorod Oblast, drone strikes across Russia, and border security in general. Putin stated that Russian forces do not plan to divert forces from other sectors of the frontline in Ukraine to Belgorod and other border oblasts in response to border incursions and drone strikes on Russian territory.[14] Putin stated that Russian leadership is considering creating a buffer zone within Ukraine to prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching Russian territory, but caveated the suggestion by saying that Russian officials will not immediately create a buffer zone and will examine how the situation develops.[15] Russian officials have previously responded to limited tactical activity in Belgorod Oblast and other border oblasts by calling for a Russian offensive to push Ukrainian forces away from the international border with Russia in Kharkiv Oblast.[16] Putin's comments indicate that the Kremlin does not intend to react to cross-border operations in an effort to preserve forces for combat in Ukraine, despite growing discontent within Russia prompted by the raids. Putin also confirmed that Russian conscripts are serving in Belgorod Oblast and that Colonel General Alexander Lapin commanded conscripts to repel the pro-Ukrainian all-Russian limited raids in Belgorod Oblast. Russian forces are likely deploying conscripts to serve in border oblasts due to a lack of reserves and an unwillingness to transfer forces away from the frontline elsewhere in Ukraine. ISW previously assessed that limited raids and border shelling in Belgorod Oblast have become a notable focal point for criticism against the Russian military leadership, and Putin is likely attempting to address critiques that he has ignored the situation there in order to insulate himself from further criticism.[17]

Putin discussed the importance of formalizing volunteer formations, supporting the Russian MoD's measures to centralize its control over operations in Ukraine. Putin claimed that all volunteer formations serving in Ukraine must sign military contracts with the Russian MoD to "bring everything in line with common sense, established practice, and the law" and to ensure that individual volunteers can legally receive state social benefits.[18] Putin emphasized that the Russian government cannot provide social guarantees to volunteer structures without signed contracts.[19] Putin's emphasis on the legality of volunteer formations suggests that Putin may be intending to either assert direct control over or set conditions to ban state assistance to select private military organizations (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group, which are technically illegal under the Russian law.

Putin is likely continuing to publicly engage with, and platform select pro-Kremlin milbloggers to further leverage the community to expand his support among Russian ultranationalists. Putin previously held a closed-door meeting with milbloggers on June 17, 2022, to defuse growing discontent about Russian setbacks in Ukraine, and has occasionally interacted with the pro-Kremlin milblogger community since.[20] ISW previously assessed that the milblogger community rose to prominence likely as a direct result of the Kremlin's failure to establish an effective social media presence as well as its general failure to prepare the Russian public for a serious and protracted war.[21] The Kremlin has protected Russian milbloggers from criticism and calls for censorship and has rewarded select milbloggers with official positions to co-opt their audience and gain access to their close ties to prominent nationalist and pro-war groups.[22] Putin's highly publicized meeting with the milbloggers is reflective of the Kremlin's promotion of this group in the previous year and suggests that Putin intends to further elevate their standing. Putin is likely setting information conditions to prevent potential lines of attack against the Kremlin in the event of Russian failure. Putin may also be increasingly aware that committed pro-war figures are his key constituency as he calls on the Russian public to prepare for a protracted war in Ukraine. The Kremlin is likely aware that key pro-war figures will be crucial to rallying the rest of society to that effort, and Putin's engagement with these milbloggers may suggest that the Kremlin will increasingly rely on the wider ultranationalist community to maintain support for the war effort.

Russian sources claimed that a Ukrainian missile strike killed Chief of Staff of the 35th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) Major General Sergei Goryachev in Zaporizhia Oblast.[23] ISW has observed other elements of the Eastern Military District including elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army and 5th Combined Arms Army operating in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[24] Goryachev's reported death in Zaporizhia Oblast could suggest that Russian forces have dedicated elements of the 35th Combined Arms Army to operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and that some Russian senior military command officials continue to operate close to the frontline and remain exposed to accurate Ukrainian strikes.[25]

Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on June 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 16 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles and four Shahed 131/136 drones that targeted infrastructure facilities in Kharkiv Oblast and residential buildings in Kryvyi Rih.[26] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed 11 Kh101/555 missiles and one Shahed drone.[27]

Russian authorities continue to express increasing concern over information related to Russia's defense industrial base (DIB). The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) reportedly arrested two defense sector employees for allegedly collaborating with Ukraine and Germany.[28] A Russian milblogger claimed that the FSB arrested an engineer at the end of May who worked in the defense industry and collaborated with the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR).[29] Russian opposition news outlet SOTA reported that the FSB arrested a former employee of a defense enterprise for allegedly providing information to Germany about the Russian defense industry.[30] ISW has previously reported on Russian authorities arresting individuals with reported access to DIB-related information.[31]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three directions and made further limited territorial gains on June 13.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with 18 prominent Russian milbloggers and war correspondents to discuss the progress of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on June 13.

- Putin discussed the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and signaled that he believes Russia can outlast Western military support for Ukraine.
- Putin indicated that he is unwilling to announce a second wave of mobilization or declare martial law, despite maintaining his maximalist objectives in Ukraine.
- Putin aimed to assuage widespread discontent in the Russian information space about limited cross-border raids by pro-Ukraine forces into Belgorod Oblast, drone strikes across Russia, and border security in general.
- Putin discussed the importance of formalizing volunteer formations, supporting the Russian MoD's measures to centralize its control over operations in Ukraine.
- Putin is likely continuing to publicly engage with, and platform select pro-Kremlin milbloggers to further leverage the community to expand his support among Russian ultranationalists.
- Russian sources claimed that a Ukrainian missile strike killed Chief of Staff of the 35th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) Major General Sergei Goryachev in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on June 13.
- Russian authorities continue to express increasing concern over information related to Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian forces continued ground attacks on the Kremenna frontline but did not conduct offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatov line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to advance on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks, while Russian forces launched counterattacks in the vicinity of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and are transferring additional forces from east (left) bank Kherson Oblast to reinforce the direction.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near the administrative border of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that the Russian military has recruited 150,000 contract servicemembers as well as over 6,000 volunteers since January 2023.
- Russian occupation officials in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast are reportedly continuing evacuation efforts, although are likely continuing to deny services to some residents in flooded areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 12, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark

June 12, 2023, 5:20pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front and made territorial gains on June 12. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on June 12 that Ukrainian forces in the Donetsk and Tavriisk (Zaporizhia) directions have advanced 6.5km and retaken 90 square kilometers of territory over the past week.^[1] Malyar added that Ukrainian forces liberated one settlement in western Zaporizhia Oblast and six settlements in eastern Zaporizhia and western Donetsk oblasts in the same period. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian troops continued counterattacks on the flanks of Bakhmut and advanced 250 to 700 meters in unspecified areas on the outskirts of the city.^[2] Russian sources noted that Ukrainian forces continued counterattacks on Russian positions southwest, north and northwest of Bakhmut, particularly near Berkivka (3km northwest of Bakhmut).^[3] Geolocated footage posted on June 12 additionally indicates that Ukrainian forces have made limited advances in western Donetsk Oblast south of Velyka Novosilka.^[4] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are trying to counterattack in this area and that fighting continued in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area over the course of June 12.^[5] Russian milbloggers additionally reported Ukrainian combat activity in western Zaporizhia Oblast near Orikhiv, but noted that the intensity of attacks on this sector has decreased somewhat.^[6]

Russian forces reportedly launched a counterattack on June 12 in western Donetsk Oblast following Ukrainian tactical gains near the Vremivka salient on June 11. Russian sources reported that elements of the Russian 127th Motorized Rifle Division (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) launched a large counterattack against Ukrainian forces in the Vremivka salient on June 12.^[7] Russian forces have made no confirmed territorial gains in these counterattacks as of this publication, though some Russian sources reported that Russian forces recaptured Makarivka (5km south of Velyka Novosilka).^[8] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces still control Makarivka as of June 12.^[9] A Russian source reported that fighting in the Vremivka salient as ongoing and that the results of the battle are unclear.^[10] Ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin claimed that, if true, these reports confirm the success of Russian flexible defense tactics in the area and that the Russian military command cares more about wearing down Ukrainian forces than regaining territory.^[11] Girkin claimed that the typical defense of Russian forces is to retreat to rear areas to draw Ukrainian infantry out from Ukrainian air defense and electronic warfare coverage. Girkin claimed that Russian forces then attack the area with tank and air defense support in order to prevent the Ukrainian forces from deploying air defense elements forward to newly gained areas.

Russian milbloggers claimed that poor weather conditions grounded Russian aircraft, impeding Russian defenses against Ukrainian attacks near the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces managed to make tactical gains on June 11 due to heavy rain and fog preventing Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and army aviation (rotary wing aircraft) from striking Ukrainian force concentrations.[12] Russian sources reported that Russian VKS and army aviation resumed intense airstrikes against Ukrainian forces on June 12 after the rain cleared.[13] Girkin claimed that the weather will play an important role in determining the outcome of operations in this sector in the coming days.[14]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on June 11 that he had received an order from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to subordinate his forces to Russian military command.[15] Prigozhin published a claimed segment of the letter from the Russian MoD, which instructs Wagner and other Russian volunteer military formations to inform the Joint Staff of Russian Grouping of Forces about their numbers of forces, reserves, and the supplies they have received from the Russian MoD by June 15.[16] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu previously announced on June 10 that Russian volunteer personnel must sign contracts directly with the Russian MoD by July 1.[17] Prigozhin later claimed that Wagner is receiving 2.5 times more recruits after the recent “provocative announcements about the need to terminate the existence of Wagner private military company [PMC],” stating that Russian volunteers are joining Wagner to avoid signing contracts with the Russian MoD.[18] Prigozhin accused the Russian MoD of using this formalization effort to harm Wagner amidst the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives.[19]

The Russian MoD formalization efforts are likely intended to centralize control of Russian irregular personnel and supplies to respond to Ukraine’s counteroffensive, as well as restrict Prigozhin’s independence. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Shoigu’s new decree legalizes the destruction of PMCs and that the Russian MoD will use this decree to stop providing Wagner forces with ammunition, medical assistance, and military equipment.[20] A member of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee (and an avid critic of Wagner) Viktor Sobolev claimed that the Russian MoD will not permit volunteers to participate in hostilities without signing a military contract with the Russian MoD, which may make it illegal for Wagner forces to operate on the frontlines.[21] Russian milbloggers implied that the order may allow the Russian MoD to retain contract servicemen longer on the frontlines, as they claim the Russian MoD is less likely to abide by contract periods than PMCs like Wagner.[22] One prominent milblogger claimed that the timing of Shoigu’s announcement is strange given that Ukrainian forces just launched a counteroffensive, and another noted that the Russian MoD is prioritizing bureaucratically eliminating Wagner instead of focusing on the counteroffensive.[23] The Russian military command similarly ordered formalization of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics’ (DNR and LNR) militias in January and February ahead of the Russian winter offensive.[24] Shoigu and the Russian military command may be leverage possibly regaining some favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin after Russian forces successfully conducted some defensive operations in southern Ukraine to pursue formalization of Russian irregular forces that they likely originally planned in winter 2023. Prigozhin’s operations on the Bakhmut frontline in winter and spring 2023 and the Russian MoD’s lack of decisive victories in Donbas may have limited the Russian MoD’s ability to pursue its desired formalization of Russian forces. The move is likely militarily sound and in part unrelated to the dispute with Prigozhin, as a formal accounting and direct control of Russia’s array of irregular formations will likely enable the Russian military command to redeploy forces as needed.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to rhetorically align himself with the Russian MoD and further distancing himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Kadyrov reported on June 12 that several Chechen commanders, including Akhmat Special Forces Commander Major General Apti Alaudinov, met with Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel General Alexei Kim to sign a military contract with the Russian MoD that will grant Akhmat forces the same legal status, rights, and benefits as official MoD personnel.[25] Kadyrov emphasized the importance of this contract for the effectiveness of Akhmat troops and claimed that Chechen fighters have been instrumental in supporting Russian operations in Ukraine.[26] Kadyrov’s public display of agreement with the Russian MoD further aligns him and Akhmat troops with the official Russian military apparatus while further distancing Kadyrov from Prigozhin, who notably is pushing back on the MoD contracts as a direct attack on the Wagner Group.[27] Kadyrov will likely continue efforts to curry favor with the MoD as he tries to increase the prominence of Chechen troops.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in at least three sectors of the front on June 12.
- Russian forces reportedly launched a counterattack on June 12 following Ukrainian tactical gains near the Vremivka salient in western Donetsk Oblast on June 11.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that poor weather conditions grounded Russian aircraft, impeding Russian defenses against Ukrainian attacks near the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on June 11 that he had received an order from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to subordinate his forces under the Russian military command.
- The Russian MoD formalization efforts are likely intended to centralize control of Russian irregular personnel and supplies to respond to Ukraine’s counteroffensive, as well as restrict Prigozhin’s independence.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to rhetorically align himself with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and further distancing himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks south of Kreminna.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near the administrative border of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and made gains as of June 12.
- Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces conducted limited counteroffensive operations southwest of Orikhiv.
- Social media video footage circulated on June 12 reportedly shows Russian barrier troops shooting Russian forces that abandoned their positions somewhere in Ukraine.
- Russia continues to strengthen the legal regime in occupied areas of Ukraine under martial law.

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Mason Clark

June 11, 2023, 6:40pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three areas of the front and made territorial gains on June 10 and 11. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations in the Bakhmut area, and Russian sources reported continued Ukrainian ground attacks on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks.^[1] Geolocated footage and Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces liberated multiple settlements during continued ground attacks south, southwest, and southeast of Velyka Novosilka in western Donetsk Oblast.^[2] Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued to attack southwest of Orikhiv in Zaporizhia Oblast, and Ukrainian forces made gains in this area.^[3]

Ukrainian forces made visually verified advances in western Donetsk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast, which Russian sources confirmed but sought to downplay. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces advanced 300 to 1,500 meters in southern Ukraine.^[4] Malyar and other Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces made gains south of Velyka Novosilka between June 10 and 11, including liberating Makarivka, Neskuchne, Blahodatne, Storozheve, and Novodarivka.^[5] Some Russian sources reported that battles are ongoing in "grey zone" or contested areas or that Ukrainian forces are operating in areas that Russian forces did not fully occupy before Ukrainian attacks in southern Ukraine.^[6] Russian sources are likely referring to Ukrainian territorial advances through Russian defenses as capturing "grey zones" in order to downplay Ukrainian gains and omit reporting on Ukrainian forces breaking through defensive lines. Ukrainian forces liberated several towns, but claims of a Ukrainian "breakthrough" are premature at this time.

Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russian forces are transferring their most combat-capable units from the Kherson direction to the Bakhmut and Zaporizhia directions. Malyar stated on June 11 that Russian forces are transferring elements of the 49th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) and unspecified naval infantry and airborne forces elements from the Kherson direction in connection with the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam.^[7] Malyar noted that Russian forces likely blew the KHPP dam in order to shorten their defensive lines in Kherson Oblast as part of the response to the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Flooding downriver of the KHPP has drained the Kakhovka Reservoir, resulting in landmasses emerging from the water. It is unclear how these terrain changes will affect maneuver warfare in southern Ukraine at this time.^[8] If the terrain changes from flooding in the Dnipro River do not foreclose any possible Ukrainian river crossings in coming weeks and months, Russian forces may struggle to defend Kherson Oblast with remaining or then-available units if and when Ukrainian forces choose to conduct offensive operations across the river, assuming they have the ability to do so.

Russian forces conducted a limited series of drone strikes targeting eastern Ukrainian border areas overnight on June 10 to 11. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down six Russian Shahed drones that targeted border areas in Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts overnight.^[9] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces are working to produce more high-precision, long-range ballistic missiles and stated that Ukraine's stock of Western air defense systems is currently insufficient to replace its stock of Soviet air defense systems.^[10]

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin characterized the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) plan to formalize volunteer formations by July 1 as an attack on him and his forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced on June 10 that all volunteer formations must sign military contracts with the Russian MoD by July 1.^[11] Prigozhin defensively claimed that Wagner private military company's (PMC) servicemen will not sign contracts with the Russian MoD in his media response to Shoigu's announcement.^[12] Prigozhin proceeded to criticize Shoigu and the structure of the Russian Armed Forces and specified that Wagner is entirely subordinate to the interests of Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Prigozhin's mention of Putin as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief closely mirrors the language Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov used in his accusation on June 9 that Prigozhin is being insubordinate to Putin.^[13] Prigozhin also noted that Wagner approves its actions with the Russian military command via Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin.

Some members of Russia's veteran community indicated Shoigu's statement is not intended to target Wagner. A member of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee (and former commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army) Viktor Sobolev stated that Shoigu's order excludes Wagner.^[14] Sobolev is an avid critic of Wagner and claimed that Wagner personnel are mercenaries, not volunteers.^[15] Former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin supported the order and stated that cohesive armies win wars rather than separate detachments or private military companies (PMCs).^[16] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger contrarily (baselessly) claimed that Wagner is not a PMC and that a secret decree legalized Wagner's existence in Russia.^[17] The milblogger also claimed that Shoigu and the Russian MoD are Girkin's patrons who are using Girkin to prevent Prigozhin from assuming more authority and reshuffling leadership in the Russian MoD.

Russia and Ukraine conducted a near one-for-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange on June 11. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukraine returned 94 Russian POWs of unspecified ranks to Russia.^[18] Ukrainian Presidential Office Head Andriy Yermak reported that Russia returned two Ukrainian officers and 93 privates and sergeants to Ukraine.^[19]

Key Takeaways

- **Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least three areas of the front and made territorial gains on June 10 and 11.**
- **Ukrainian forces made visually verified advances in western Donetsk Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast, which Russian sources confirmed but sought to downplay.**

- Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russian forces are transferring their most combat-capable units from the Kherson direction to the Bakhmut and Zaporizhia directions.
- Russian forces conducted a limited series of drone strikes targeting eastern Ukrainian border areas overnight on June 10 to 11.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin characterized the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) plan to formalize volunteer formations by July 1 as an attack on him and his forces.
- Russia and Ukraine conducted a near one-for-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks south of Kreminna.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued limited ground attacks around Bakhmut and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces made gains near the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and in western Zaporizhia Oblast as of June 10.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that rain along the Zaporizhia Oblast front may slow Ukrainian operations in the coming days.
- The Republic of Chechnya reportedly formed two new regiments – Akhmat-Russia and Akhmat-Chechnya – equipped with commercially-available Chinese armored equipment.
- Saboteurs, reportedly including Ukrainian partisans, conducted two discrete improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against railways in occupied Kherson Oblast and Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 10, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

June 10, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four areas of the front on June 10. Russian sources reported Ukrainian activity in Luhansk Oblast near Bilohorivka.^[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty noted that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 1,400m in unspecified areas of the Bakhmut front, and Russian milbloggers reported Ukrainian advances northwest and northeast of Bakhmut.^[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops conducted localized attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, particularly in the Velyka Novosilka area.^[3] Geolocated footage posted on June 10 additionally indicates that Ukrainian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast made localized gains during counterattacks southwest and southeast of Orikhiv, and Russian milbloggers continued to claim that Russian forces in this area are successfully defending against attempted Ukrainian advances.^[4]

Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are continuing to defend against Ukrainian attacks in accord with sound tactical defensive doctrine. A Russian millogger claimed that Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine are relying on three main components: early detection and destruction of Ukrainian assault formations, massive use of anti-tank weapons, and mining of territories near Russian defensive positions.^[5] The millogger claimed that minefields have a twofold effect by initially damaging Ukrainian armored vehicles when they attempt to breakthrough the minefield and then again when they retreat from the area.^[6] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces responded to the start of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast following established Russian doctrine, which calls for a first echelon of troops to repel or slow attacking forces with minefields, fortifications, and strongpoints, and a second echelon of forces to counterattack against any enemy breakthrough.^[7] Russian reporting of Ukrainian assaults in southern Ukraine in recent days suggests a pattern in which Ukrainian forces conduct limited breakthroughs and temporarily occupy new positions before Russian forces later recapture or push Ukrainian forces out of those positions.^[8] This tactical pattern indicates that Russian forces have likely maintained doctrinally sound defensive operations in southern Ukraine, though as ISW previously reported, defending units of the 58th CAA are likely some of the most effective Russian units currently deployed in Ukraine.^[9]

Russian milbloggers continue to highlight reported superior Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities as key to disrupting Ukrainian attacks. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian EW units are disrupting Ukrainian communications as well as aviation units and alleged that some Ukrainian mechanized groups were not prepared to fight without communications or with suppressed GPS.^[10] Another millogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted their own "electronic counter measures" against Russian reconnaissance and control capabilities in areas where there are Ukrainian assaults but that these attempts were unsuccessful.^[11] Russian forces have reportedly successfully improved their EW use throughout the invasion of Ukraine.^[12]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces have tactical advantages in conducting assaults at night due to Western-provided equipment with superior night optics systems. A prominent Russian millogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are launching assaults at night because Western-provided equipment provides Ukrainian forces with "excellent" night vision optics.^[13] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov also claimed that night assaults allow Ukrainian forces to more effectively use Western-provided equipment.^[14] Russian sources have widely claimed that Ukrainian forces have started or intensified assaults at night in recent days, and Ukrainian forces may be increasingly leveraging the advantages provided by Western systems.^[15]

Russian sources continue to highlight the role of scarce military district-level Russian TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems against Ukrainian attacks, though Ukrainian forces destroyed at least two of these key systems in recent days. Geolocated footage published on June 8 and 9 confirms that Ukrainian

forces have used Western precision munitions (reportedly the Paladin 155mm artillery system) to destroy at least two Russian TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems – highly destructive but scarce artillery assets controlled at the Russian military district level – in western and eastern Zaporizhia Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) highlighted the role of Russian thermobaric artillery systems in striking Ukrainian positions on the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.[17] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian thermobaric artillery units have consistently fired on Ukrainian forces on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border and in western Zaporizhia Oblast for the past several days and characterized the units as essential to repelling Ukrainian frontal assaults.[18] Russian forces' apparent reliance on specific artillery assets is noteworthy, as precision Ukrainian strikes on these systems could potentially complicate Russian defensive capabilities and Russian forces are unlikely to possess enough TOS-1A systems to provide the same level of fire support all along the front line.

Ukrainian forces are currently attempting an extraordinarily difficult tactical operation – a frontal assault against prepared defensive positions, further complicated by a lack of air superiority – and these initial assaults should not be extrapolated to predict all Ukrainian operations. Ukrainian forces are unsurprisingly taking casualties in initial attacks against some of the best-prepared Russian forces in Ukraine. However, initial attacks – and particularly selected footage that Russian sources are intentionally disseminating and highlighting – are not representative of all Ukrainian operations. The Russian military remains dangerous and Ukrainian forces certainly face a hard fight, but Ukraine has not yet committed the vast majority of its counteroffensive forces and Russian defenses are not uniformly strong along all sectors of the front line.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov established a clear rhetorical line between criticizing the Russian MoD and criticizing Russian President Vladimir Putin in a statement on June 9. Kadyrov published a post to Telegram on June 9 outlining the details of a private phone call that occurred between Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in late May after Kadyrov and Prigozhin reportedly reached an agreement for Chechen forces to replace Wagner in Bakhmut.[19] The interactions between Kadyrov and Prigozhin rapidly deteriorated in subsequent days, but Prigozhin claimed that he personally called Kadyrov on June 1 to resolve their dispute.[20] Kadyrov claimed on June 9 that he genuinely believed he was doing his best to help Prigozhin by offering for Chechen troops to replace Wagner fighters but that Prigozhin's tone towards Kadyrov and the Chechen troops changed suddenly, and Kadyrov felt as though he had to personally mitigate.[21] Kadyrov also noted that he himself has occasionally criticized the Russian MoD but rhetorically drew a line against criticizing Putin directly, claiming he has always understood that Putin's position as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces means that Putin has the best understanding of battlefield realities.[22] Kadyrov then criticized Wagner for being a weak and ineffective force when faced with the same operational restraints as Chechen forces in previous phases of the war.[23] Kadyrov's message likely sought to signal his loyalty to Putin and portray Prigozhin as further at odds with the overall Russian military leadership.

Russian forces targeted a Ukrainian operational airfield during another missile and drone strike on Ukraine on the night of June 9 to 10. Ukrainian Air Force Command reported on June 10 that Russian forces launched eight ground-based missiles of various types and 35 Shahed-type drones at Ukraine from the northern and southern directions and hit an operational airfield in Poltava Oblast with Iskander ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and Iranian-made drones.[24] Poltava Oblast Head Dmytro Lunin noted that the strike damaged airfield infrastructure and other unspecified equipment.[25] Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) spokesperson Eduard Basurin praised the strike for "finally" targeting Ukrainian airfields.[26] ISW recently assessed that Russia is conducting a new air campaign to target Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities, and Russian sources will likely use reporting of such strikes to frame the current air campaign as proactive and effective over the backdrop of Ukrainian counterattacks throughout the theater.[27]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in at least four areas of the front on June 10.
- Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are continuing to defend against Ukrainian attacks in accord with sound tactical defensive doctrine.
- Russian milbloggers continue to highlight reported superior Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities as key to disrupting Ukrainian attacks.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces have tactical advantages in conducting assaults at night due to Western-provided equipment with superior night optics systems.
- Russian sources continue to highlight the role of scarce military district-level Russian TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems in defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, though Ukrainian forces destroyed at least two of these key systems in recent days.
- Ukrainian forces are currently attempting an extraordinarily difficult tactical operation – a frontal assault against prepared defensive positions, further complicated by a lack of air superiority – and these initial assaults should not be extrapolated to predict all Ukrainian operations.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov established a clear rhetorical line between criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and criticizing Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- Russian forces targeted a Ukrainian operational airfield during another missile and drone strike on Ukraine on the night of June 9 to 10.
- Russian forces made marginal advances northeast of Kupyansk and continued ground attacks near Kreminna.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces both continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks near the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and have made marginal gains in the area as of June 10.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on June 10 that it plans to formalize the organization of volunteer formations.
- Russia is further consolidating a centralized media apparatus in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 9, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Annika Ganzeveld, and Mason Clark

June 9, 2023, 7:50 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in least four areas of the front on June 9. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled limited and localized Ukrainian ground attacks in the Kreminna area.^[1] Ukrainian officials stated on June 9 that Ukrainian forces advanced 1.2 kilometers in continued offensive operations near Bakhmut on June 8.^[2] Ukrainian forces continued limited counteroffensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border on June 9, and made tactical gains in the area.^[3] Ukrainian forces also continued ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast overnight from June 8 to 9 and during the day on June 9, and a Russian source suggested that Ukrainian forces made incremental gains during the attacks.^[4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged on June 9 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive recently began and noted that Ukrainian forces still have offensive potential, a departure from previous Kremlin efforts to downplay Ukrainian counteroffensives.^[5] Putin stated that fighting has been ongoing for five days and claimed that Ukrainian forces "did not reach their aims in any area of combat" after committing "strategic reserves."^[6] Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces suffered significant losses and attributed Russian successes to superior Russian military equipment and personnel. Putin added that the Russian military command is "realistically" assessing the current situation and "will proceed from these realities." Putin's discussion of the Ukrainian counteroffensive is a notable departure from his previous distanced approach to discussing battlefield realities and may indicate that the Kremlin is learning from its previous failed approach to rhetorically downplay successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in 2022. ISW previously reported on May 2 that the Kremlin reportedly adopted a new information policy directing officials to not downplay the prospects of a Ukrainian counteroffensive and focus on the Russian fight against Western-provided weapon systems.^[7]

Contrarily, much of the Russian information space prematurely claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed after Russian forces damaged more Western-provided Ukrainian military equipment on June 9. Battlefield footage shows damaged or destroyed Western-provided infantry fighting vehicles and tanks in western Zaporizhia Oblast, though the number of Ukrainian vehicles several Russian sources claimed Russian forces destroyed are highly inflated.^[8] Ukrainian forces previously lost military equipment in the same location on June 8.^[9] Some prominent Russian ultranationalists claimed that damaged or destroyed Western-provided equipment indicated that Ukrainian forces failed to launch a large-scale counteroffensive.^[10] Russian nationalists are widely celebrating the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District), despite Russian forces only executing basic defensive operations that should not be so unusual as to deserve wide praise. One Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian offensive activity is in the decline, while a retired Russian general expressed gratitude to elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army and proclaimed these elements as heroes despite battles continuing along different frontlines.^[11] Another Russian milblogger claimed that a counteroffensive can only last up to 10 to 15 days, implying that Ukrainian counteroffensive will soon culminate.^[12] However, other ultranationalists warned that Ukrainian forces have not yet carried out the main offensive and noted that Russian forces are reinforcing the second echelon in anticipation of Ukrainian breakthroughs.^[13] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger condemned the excessive enthusiasm around the destruction of Ukrainian military equipment, noting that Western kit is not "some kind of magic."^[14] Many Russian ultranationalists appear to be overcorrecting for their previous fears of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[15]

Ukrainian officials directly acknowledged that Ukrainian forces expect to suffer equipment losses during counteroffensive operations. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on June 9 that losses are expected during combat operations and that "military equipment that cannot be destroyed" has yet to be invented.^[16] Malyar added that Russian sources are heavily amplifying footage of Ukrainian equipment losses for informational effects.^[17] *The Economist* reported that Ukrainian forces are using critical Western equipment in areas of the frontline where Ukrainian forces have recently suffered equipment losses.^[18] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian forces appear to have committed only a portion of their available reserves for current counteroffensive operations, and that the existing reports of damaged Western-provided equipment are not a definitive measure of current Ukrainian combat power.^[19] Available footage of Ukrainian equipment losses additionally indicates that many of these armored vehicles have been rendered immobile, but not outright destroyed, and are likely recoverable by Ukrainian forces.^[20] The footage also suggests that the Ukrainian crews of these armored vehicles, who are far more valuable than the vehicles themselves and can remount new or repaired vehicles, likely survived and withdrew once the vehicles became immobilized.^[21]

The Russian command structure responsible for areas of southern Ukraine is unclear and likely overlapping. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published a video statement on June 8 from the commander of the Russian grouping in the Zaporizhia operational direction, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk, wherein he reported details about Ukrainian assaults in southern Ukraine.^[22] Romanchuk is reportedly the Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD), although his level of responsibility for southern Ukraine remains unclear.^[23] A Russian colonel previously claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky also played a decisive role in commanding Russian forces that repelled recent Ukrainian assaults in southern Ukraine.^[24] Teplinsky is rumored to be deputy theater commander and responsible for the Zaporizhia, Kherson, and southern Donetsk operational directions.^[25] It is unclear if Romanchuk would report to Teplinsky or SMD Commander Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev. The Russian MoD also claimed that overall theater commander and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov took command of Russian operations in southern Ukraine on June 5.^[26] The command relations between these four officers — Romanchuk, Teplinsky, Kuzovlev, and Gerasimov — who have all been described as primarily responsible for Russian forces in this area are unclear.

Russian forces carried out missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on the night of June 8 to 9. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 16 Shahed-131/136 drones and six Kh-101/55 cruise missiles fired from two Tu-95 aircraft over the Caspian Sea and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 10 Shahed drones and four Kh-101/55 missiles.^[27] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched eight missile strikes against residential buildings in Zhytomyr Oblast.^[28] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that current Russian missile strikes aim to distract Ukrainian air defense systems, while Russian missile strikes in May mainly targeted Kyiv.^[29]

Several independent sources reported additional evidence that an internal explosion likely destroyed the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam on June 6. Norwegian seismic monitoring center NORSAR reported that seismic data indicates that an explosion occurred on June 6 at 2:54am local time, about the same time as the collapse of the KHPP dam.^[30] NORSAR seismologist Volker Oye stated that seismic data indicated a pulse of energy that was "typical of an

explosion."^[31] Seismic data cannot locate the energy pulse of the explosion to a more exact location than within 20 to 30km of the KHPP, however.^[32] Oye stated that it would be an "unusual coincidence" if something other than an explosion caused the energy pulse.^[33] *The New York Times* reported that an unnamed senior White House official stated that US spy satellites equipped with infrared sensors detected an explosion at the KHPP dam before it collapsed.^[34] *The Wall Street Journal* reported that multiple engineers and munition experts assessed that an explosive blast likely detonated at a specific point or multiple points of weakness, which destroyed the KHPP dam.^[35] ISW previously reported that engineering and munitions experts that the *New York Times* interviewed believe that a deliberate explosion caused the KHPP dam's collapse.^[36] The preponderance of evidence suggests that a deliberate explosion damaged the KHPP dam. ISW continues to assess that the balance of evidence, reasoning, and rhetoric suggests that the Russians deliberately damaged the dam.^[37]

The White House revealed on June 9 that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Republic of Tatarstan, Russia, underscoring the growing military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow despite Western sanctions.^[38] National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby stated on June 9 that the drone factory — which the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February 2023 could produce at least 6,000 Iranian Shahed-136 drones — could be operational by early 2024.^[39] Kirby previously announced on May 15 that Russia is seeking to purchase new drones from Iran after expending most of its Iranian drone supply.^[40] A factory producing Iranian drones in Russia would support Russia's war effort against Ukraine. Russia could provide Iran with advanced military equipment that would modernize Iran's air force, such as Su-35 fighter jets, attack helicopters, radars, and YAK-130 combat trainer aircraft, in return for helping construct the factory. Officials of an unspecified US ally previously stated that Iranian officials travelled to Yelabuga in January 2023 to discuss the construction of a new drone manufacturing facility in the city, reporting the same claim the facility could produce 6,000 or more drones in the coming years.^[41]

Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov discussed increasing Russian-Chinese military cooperation with Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) Joint Staff Department Chief of Staff Liu Zhenli on June 9. Gerasimov emphasized the importance of joint military exercises within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Association of South East Asian Nations' (ASEAN) Defense Ministers Meeting (SOMA Plus) format.^[42] Gerasimov also claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping confirmed that Russian–Chinese strategic cooperation is at "the highest level."^[43]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in least four areas of the front on June 9, making further gains around Bakhmut and in Western Donetsk.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged on June 9 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive recently began and noted that Ukrainian forces still have offensive potential, a departure from previous Kremlin efforts to downplay Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Contrarily, much of the Russian information space prematurely claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed after Russian forces damaged more Western-provided Ukrainian military equipment on June 9.
- Ukrainian officials directly acknowledged that Ukrainian forces expect to suffer equipment losses during counteroffensive operations.
- The Russian command structure responsible for areas of southern Ukraine is unclear and likely overlapping.
- Russian forces carried out missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on the night of June 8 to 9.
- Several independent sources reported additional evidence that an internal explosion likely destroyed the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam on June 6.
- The White House revealed on June 9 that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Republic of Tatarstan, Russia, underscoring the growing military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow despite Western sanctions.
- Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov discussed increasing Russian-Chinese military cooperation with Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) Joint Staff Department Chief of Staff Liu Zhenli on June 9.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted limited and localized ground attacks south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russia continues to evade international sanctions and has reportedly restored access to key Western microchips and electronics that Russia needs to produce military equipment.
- A Ukrainian report states that Russian authorities may be preparing evacuations from northern Crimea.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on June 9 that Russia will begin deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in July 2023, and this is not an escalation from Putin's prior nuclear weapons rhetoric.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 8, 2023

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov,
Mason Clark, and Fredrick W. Kagan

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Ukraine has conducted counteroffensive operations with differential outcomes in at least three sectors of the front as part of wider counteroffensive efforts that have been unfolding since Sunday, June 4. Ukrainian officials signaled that Ukrainian forces have transitioned from defensive to offensive operations in the Bakhmut sector and are making gains of between 200 meters and nearly two kilometers on the flanks of the city.^[1] Ukrainian forces have made tactical gains during limited localized counterattacks in western Donetsk Oblast near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border since June 4.^[2] Ukrainian forces additionally conducted an attack in western Zaporizhia Oblast on the night of June 7 to 8 but do not appear to have made gains as part of this attack as of the time of this publication.

Ukrainian forces conducted a limited but still significant attack in western Zaporizhia Oblast on the night of June 7 to 8. Russian forces apparently defended against this attack in a doctrinally sound manner and had reportedly regained their initial positions as of June 8. Russian sources began reporting late at night on June 7 that elements of Ukrainian brigades that have recently been equipped with Western kit launched an attack southwest of Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast.^[3] Several Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked along the Mala Tokmachka-Polohy line with the aim of breaking through the Russian defensive line between Robotyne and Verbove (both about 15km southeast of Orikhiv).^[4] Russian sources acknowledged that Ukrainian forces broke through the first line of defense in this area, held by elements of the 291st and 70th Motorized Rifle Regiments (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and the 22nd and 45th Separate Guards Special Purpose (GRU) Brigades, but reported that these Russian elements succeeded in counterattacking and eventually pushing Ukrainian forces back to their original positions.^[5] Available geolocated combat footage suggests that limited Ukrainian forces crossed the N08 Polohy-Voskresenka highway, but Russian sourcing indicates that Russian forces likely pushed Ukrainians back in the Orikhiv direction towards the frontline and regained the lost positions.^[6]

Ukrainian forces also reportedly lost Western-provided vehicles on June 8.^[7] Losses are inevitable during any military undertaking. Ukrainian forces will suffer losses, including of both Western and Soviet equipment, during any offensive operations. Western equipment is not impervious to damage any more than the equipment that the Ukrainians have been using and losing since February 2022. The loss of equipment — including Western equipment — early on in the counteroffensive is not an indicator of the future progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive. It is important not to exaggerate the impact of initial losses of Western or any other equipment, particularly in penetration battles against prepared defensive positions.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) responded to the Ukrainian attack with an uncharacteristic degree of coherency and praised Southern Military District elements for repelling the attack and regaining lost positions. The Russian MoD published a video statement by the commander of the Russian grouping in the Zaporizhia direction, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk, wherein Romanchuk reported that Ukrainian forces started attacking around 0200 local time June 8 and that Russian forces, particularly those of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division, succeeded in repelling the attack.^[8] Romanchuk claimed that Ukrainian forces telegraphed the ground attack with extensive artillery preparation of the battlefield.^[9] The Russian MoD also released a statement by 58th Combined Arms Army Commander Major General Ivan Popov, who credited elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army with effectively laying mines to impede Ukrainian advances.^[10] The overall Russian response to the attack, both among various milbloggers and the Russian MoD, was notably coherent and relatively consistent with the available visual evidence, which may suggest that Russian forces were not surprised and reacted in a controlled and militarily sound manner. As ISW has previously assessed, the Russian information space reacts with a high degree of chaos and incoherence when taken by surprise by battlefield developments that do not allow the propaganda apparatus to develop a clear line.^[11] By contrast, the Russian responses to this attack suggest that Russian forces defended in the way that they had prepared to, thus giving Russian sources a rhetorical line to coalesce around.

Russian sources provided explanations for claimed Russian successes during the June 8 attacks, praising Russian forces' effective use of electronic warfare (EW) systems, air support, and landmines against Ukrainian forces. Multiple Russian sources reported that Russian EW severely interfered with Ukrainian command and control signals, GPS-enabled devices, UAV controls.^[12] Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces had insufficient air defense in the Orikhiv sector, that Russian forces operated with an "unprecedented" amount of rotary wing air support, and that Russian aviation was able to return to a high level of activity after not actively engaging in combat operations since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022.^[13] Continuous Russian missile and drone attacks against Kyiv and critical Ukrainian infrastructure may have fixed Ukraine's more advanced air defense systems away from the frontline, although ISW cannot assess which systems would be effective against the kinds of air support missions Russian aircraft were flying. ISW's previous assessments that Russian air and missile attacks were not setting conditions to defend against the Ukrainian counter-offensive may thus have been inaccurate. Russian sources also praised at length their claimed defensive success using layered field fortifications and landmines, with Major General Popov stating that Russian minefields played a "very important role" in defeating the initial Ukrainian advance in the early hours of June 8.^[14] CNN additionally reported that an anonymous US official said that Russian landmines degraded Ukrainian armored vehicles.^[15]

Russian forces appear to have executed their formal tactical defensive doctrine in response to the Ukrainian attacks southwest of Orikhiv. Russian doctrine for a defending motorized rifle battalion calls for a first echelon of troops to repel or slow attacking forces with minefields, fortifications, and strongpoints, with a second echelon of forces counterattacking against an enemy breakthrough.^[16] Russian forces apparently operated in this fashion in this sector – Ukrainian forces penetrated the initial defensive lines; Russian forces pulled back to a second line of fortifications; and Russian reserves subsequently counterattacked to retake the initial line of defenses.^[17] This maneuver is a regular feature of defensive operations and has been executed by both Ukrainian and Russian forces throughout the war. Early control of terrain changes day to day should thus not be misconstrued as the overall result of a wider attack.

Ukrainian attacks in western Zaporizhia on June 8 do not represent the full extent of Ukrainian capabilities in the current counteroffensive. Ukraine previously demonstrated the ability to conduct a coordinated and effective offensive operation using multiple mechanized brigades as early as September 2022 during the liberation of Kharkiv Oblast. Ukrainian forces possessed this capability – in terms of both available forces and the capacity to coordinate complex attacks – before the provision of Western kit for offensive brigades and additional training from NATO partners. Ukraine's counteroffensive will likely consist of many undertakings of varied size, including more localized attacks as observed in this sector on June 8, and the smaller efforts do not represent the maximum capacity of Ukrainian numbers or effectiveness. Ukraine reportedly formed 12 dedicated counteroffensive brigades, nine equipped with Western kit and three with existing equipment, and these units will almost certainly be joined by experienced Ukrainian units already online.^[18] Ukraine appears to have committed only a portion of the large reserve of forces available for counteroffensive operations, and observers should avoid counting down reported Ukrainian brigades committed or reportedly damaged Western kit as the measure of the remaining effective combat power of Ukrainian forces.

It is additionally noteworthy that the Russian Southern Military District Forces deployed in this particular area are likely to be a higher quality force grouping than Russia has elsewhere in theater, and their defensive performance is unlikely to be reflective of defensive capabilities of Russian groupings elsewhere on the front. Elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army have been deployed in a doctrinally consistent manner to the Orikhiv area and have been conducting defensive preparations in this sector of the front for several months.^[19] The 291st and 70th Motorized Rifle Regiments in particular have reportedly gained experience in defending against limited Ukrainian reconnaissance-in-force efforts this area over the past months and have had time to commit to and prepare for defensive operations and familiarize themselves with the terrain.^[20] The 58th Combined Arms Army elements in this sector, therefore, are likely generally fresher and more experienced than elements in other areas of the front. The Russian defense of this sector should not be taken as indicative of overall Russian defensive capabilities as Ukraine continues counteroffensive operations. Russian forces defending in other sectors have indeed performed much more poorly. Ukraine, having

recently regained the battlefield initiative across the theater, will be able to choose exactly where in to continue attacking based on observed defensive capabilities of various Russian groupings along the frontline among other factors.

Russian forces and occupation authorities continue to exacerbate the humanitarian ramifications of the flooding resulting from the Kakhovka

Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam break. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on June 8 that Russian forces are hiding amongst civilians who are evacuating from flooded settlements on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River and that occupation authorities are housing evacuated residents in boarding houses and recreation centers where Russian troops and equipment are located.[21] Several Ukrainian and Western sources additionally reported that Russian troops shelled a flooded evacuation site in Kherson City, killing one civilian and injuring nine.[22] Russian occupation authorities claimed that Ukrainian forces shelled evacuation efforts on the east bank but did not provide visual evidence commensurate with these allegations.[23]

Russian President Vladimir Putin has reportedly postponed his annual press conference from June 2023 until November or December 2023.[24] Russian news outlet *Kommersant* claimed on June 8, citing sources within the Kremlin, that Putin is postponing his annual "Direct Line" live journalistic forum until the Russian military situation is more stable, which the sources characterized as likely in November or December. *Kommersant's* source reportedly stated that these dates are preliminary, and that Putin aims to hold the "Direct Line" before the March 2024 presidential elections.[25] ISW has previously assessed that Putin would likely hold the "Direct Line" in early June 2023 after Russian forces captured Bakhmut, and pushing back the forum indicates that the Kremlin may perceive the capture Bakhmut as an insufficient informational victory to compensate for the overall unstable Russian military situation in Ukraine.[26] Delaying the "Direct Line" forum further illustrates Putin's decline from a seemingly involved and strong leader to one more often portrayed as minutely involved in small infrastructure projects, as ISW has previously noted.[27]

Key Takeaways

- Ukraine has conducted counteroffensive operations with differential outcomes in at least three sectors of the front as part of wider counteroffensive efforts that have been unfolding since Sunday, June 4.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a limited but still significant attack in western Zaporizhia Oblast on the night of June 7 to 8. Russian forces apparently defended against this attack in a doctrinally sound manner and had reportedly regained their initial positions as of June 8.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) responded to the Ukrainian attack with an uncharacteristic degree of coherency and praised Southern Military District elements for repelling the attack and regaining lost positions.
- Russian sources provided explanations for claimed Russian successes during the June 8 attacks, praising Russian forces' effective use of electronic warfare (EW) systems, air support, and landmines against Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces appear to have executed their formal tactical defensive doctrine in response to the Ukrainian attacks southwest of Orikhiv.
- Ukrainian attacks in western Zaporizhia on June 8 do not represent the full extent of Ukrainian capabilities in the current counteroffensive.
- It is additionally noteworthy that the Russian Southern Military District Forces deployed in this particular area are likely to be a higher quality force grouping than Russia has elsewhere in theater, and their defensive performance is unlikely to be reflective of defensive capabilities of Russian groupings elsewhere on the front.
- Russian forces and occupation authorities continue to exacerbate the humanitarian ramifications of the flooding resulting from the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam break.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin has reportedly postponed his annual press conference from June 2023 until November or December 2023.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove line and around Kremenna.
- Ukrainian forces made limited gains around Bakhmut, and Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- The Russian MoD continues to posture itself as a firm authority over the defense industrial base (DIB) through emphasizing its ability to transport new equipment to the front.
- Russian occupation authorities are reportedly resorting to punitive measures against civilian populations in occupied Ukraine due to Russian occupation authorities' decreasing influence over civilians.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 7, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 7, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on June 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam is significantly changing the geography and topography of the Kherson frontline sector in southern Ukraine. Near-infrared (NIR) imagery captured at 0400 am ET on June 7 indicates that the flooding is heavily disrupting Russian prepared defensive positions on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River – especially affecting Russian first-line positions in Hola Prystan and Oleshky. Various sources reported that Oleshky, Hola Prystan, Kozacha Laheri, and Dnipryany are almost entirely flooded with water levels rising to the height of a one-story buildings in some areas.

[1] The Ukrainian headquarters established to remediate the consequences of the dam's destruction reported that as of June 7 29 settlements are partially or fully flooded, 19 of which are located on the Ukrainian-controlled territory and 10 on Russian occupied territories.[2] Russian sources published footage indicating that water had begun receding in Nova Kakhovka and had dropped by 30cm.[3] Russian sources also claimed that water levels decreased by three to four meters in some areas from a high of 10 meters.[4] Water levels in nearby Mykolaiv City reportedly increased by 70cm as of June 7.[5] Flooding will likely worsen and further change the geography in Kherson Oblast over the next 72 hours.

The destruction of the KHPP dam is affecting Russian military positions on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River. The flooding has destroyed many Russian first line field fortifications that the Russian military intended to use to defend against Ukrainian attacks. Rapid flooding has likely forced Russian personnel and military equipment in Russian main concentration points in Oleshky and Hola Prystan to withdraw. Russian forces had previously used these positions to shell Kherson City and other settlements on the west (right bank) of Kherson. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces relocated their personnel and military equipment from five to 15 kilometers from the flood zone, which places Russian forces out of artillery range of some settlements on the west (right bank) of the Dnipro River they had been attacking.[6] The flood also destroyed Russian minefields along the coast, with footage showing mines exploding in the flood water.[7] Kherson Oblast Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo, however, claimed that the destruction of the KHPP is beneficial to the Russian defenses because it will complicate Ukrainian advances across the river.[8] Saldo's assessment of the situation ignores the loss of Russia's first line of prepared fortifications. The amount of Russian heavy equipment lost in the first 24 hours of flooding is also unclear.

Ukrainian officials continued to accuse Russian forces of destroying the KHPP dam out of fear that Ukrainian forces would land on the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Andriy Yusov stated that only Russian forces could have detonated the dam given its structural and engineering features and noted that Russians are "very happy that the islands, on which [Ukrainian forces] were allegedly based, were flooded." [9] Humenyuk states that Russian forces did not consider the consequences before destroying the dam and were too concerned over a Ukrainian counteroffensive.[10] The Ukrainian General Staff similarly claimed that Russian forces detonated internal structures of the KHPP to damage the dam and thereby prevent the advance of Ukrainian forces.[11] Russian milbloggers had expressed concern about claimed Ukrainian river crossings onto the east bank the day before the destruction of the KHPP dam and on numerous occasions in the past. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that there were active engagements between Ukrainian and Russian forces in the Dachi area on the east bank of the Dnipro River (11km southwest of Kherson City) and on the contested islands near Kherson City as of June 5.[12] The milblogger claimed that the number of Ukrainian speedboats also increased in the Dnipro Delta as of June 5. Another milblogger speculated that Ukrainian forces were attempting to establish a bridgehead by seizing the KHPP dam.[13] ISW offers no assessment of whether the Ukrainians were attempting to cross the river or for what purpose they might have sought to do so. The clear concern in the Russian military information space, however, shows that the fear of such a crossing and belief that it was either underway or imminent was present in the minds of Russians closely following the war shortly before the dam was destroyed.

The New York Times (NYT) reported that engineering and munitions experts believe that a deliberate explosion was the likely cause of KHPP dam's collapse on June 6.[14] NYT reported that a blast within an enclosed space would cause the most damage, whereas external detonations – such as by targeted missile or artillery strikes – would only exert a fraction of the force necessary to breach the dam. The NYT quoted the experts as acknowledging that the KHPP sustained damage from military operations prior to the collapse but questioning whether this prior damage alone was sufficient to collapse the dam. NYT reported that the dam was first breached in its middle, close to the KHPP on the Russian-held east (left) riverbank, and that more of the dam collapsed throughout the day, a pattern that one expert characterized as inconsistent with the dam failing due to prior damage.

Russian forces and occupation authorities are responding to the flooding in Kherson Oblast with a great degree of disorganization and thereby exacerbating harm to the civilian population of occupied areas. Kherson Oblast Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo claimed that Russian authorities have evacuated about 1,500 people from flooded areas and established 48 temporary accommodations in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to house them.[15] Saldo also claimed that the Kherson Occupation Administration is "almost mandatorily" sending children living in flooded areas to "recreation camps" located deeper in Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast and in occupied Crimea.[16] Saldo's reports of proactive efforts on the part of occupation authorities do not cohere with reports by Ukrainian officials and anecdotal evidence from the occupied east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, however. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian military personnel near Kozachi Laheri (30km southwest of the KHPP on the Russian-occupied east bank of the Dnipro River) purposefully prevented civilian populations from fleeing the area despite flooding.[17] Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that residents of east bank settlements are waiting on their roofs with no food or water for the occupation administration to provide aid and evacuate them, while Russian soldiers abandoned their positions and fled.[18] Russian opposition outlet Verstka reported that civilians in Russian-occupied Oleshky (53km southwest of KHPP) have waited for almost two days on roofs for volunteers and Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations employees to arrive after which they helped civilians evacuate to dry areas of Oleshky, but that Russian forces did not permit civilians to evacuate outside of Oleshky.[19] Russian forces' and occupation authorities' varied responses and slow reaction time indicate that they were unprepared to deal with civilian evacuations. Civilian accounts about the lack of evacuations in Belgorod Oblast in response to the pro-Ukrainian all-Russian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russian Legion's (LSR) raids suggest a similar pattern of Russian authorities struggling to coordinate evacuations even on their own territory. [20]

Select Wagner Group-affiliated Russian senior military officers continue to posture as effective commanders to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin by capitalizing on high-profile military events. A Russian milblogger published a long interview with Russian Colonel "K. Zalessky" in which Zalessky claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky played a decisive role in Russian forces' ability to defend against the ongoing Ukrainian localized counterattacks near Velyka Novosilka, Donetsk Oblast.[21] Zalessky confirmed prior claims that Teplinsky became an overall theater deputy commander responsible for southern Ukraine as of April 1 and praised Teplinsky for being intimately involved in Russian defensive preparations west of Vuhledar and throughout the south.[22] The interview notably portrays the Russian defense against these localized Ukrainian attacks as a significant undertaking, contrasting with some Russian milblogger claims that these Ukrainian operations constitute a reconnaissance-in-force and were not part of a main counteroffensive effort.[23]

The pro-Teplinsky interview is likely part of an information operation aimed at undermining the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Zalessky claimed that Teplinsky praised the commanders of the 5th Combined Arms Army and 36th Combined Arms Army (both of the Eastern Military District) for their defensive efforts in the Velyka Novosilka area but claimed that not all of the Russian military command displayed similar bravery.[24] Zalessky claimed that Teplinsky personally arrayed Russian formations across their defensive lines, inspected battalions, and trained personnel, echoing Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's June 6 criticisms that MoD officials need to visit the front lines.[25] The interview was published almost immediately after the MoD claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov took command of Russian operations in the south on June 5, and after Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu characterized the defense

as an MoD success on June 6.[26] Shoigu notably also praised elements of the 5th and 36th Combined Arms armies but failed to visit them on the frontlines as Teplinsky reportedly did.[27] Teplinsky notably had to use a Russian milblogger to claim credit for repelling claimed Ukrainian attacks in eastern Zaporizhia and western Donetsk oblasts. The MoD has previously blocked Wagner-affiliated commanders from being featured on official platforms.[28] It is noteworthy that Russian commanders and senior military leaders appear to prioritize public posing in the midst of ongoing significant military operations and major catastrophes.

Wagner-affiliated commanders' reactive public relations campaigns may not be sufficient to deflect from battlefield realities. Though some large milbloggers amplified the Teplinsky interview on June 7, the broader Russian information space remained saturated with tactical claims of Ukrainian counterattacks near Velyka Novosilka and with the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam disaster.[29]

Key Takeaways

- The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam is significantly changing the geography and topography of the Kherson frontline sector in southern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian officials continued to accuse Russian forces of destroying the KHPP dam out of fear that Ukrainian forces would land on the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- *The New York Times (NYT)* reported that engineering and munitions experts believe that a deliberate explosion was the likely cause of KHPP dam's collapse on June 6.
- Russian forces and occupation authorities are responding to the flooding in Kherson Oblast with a great degree of disorganization and thereby exacerbating harm to the civilian population of occupied areas.
- Select Wagner Group-affiliated Russian senior military officers continue to posture as effective commanders to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin by capitalizing on high-profile military events.
- The pro-Teplinsky interview is likely part of an information operation aimed at undermining the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Wagner-affiliated commanders' reactive public relations campaigns may not be sufficient to deflect from battlefield realities.
- Russian and Ukrainian officials each accused the other state of damaging an ammonia pipeline that runs through Kharkiv Oblast and causing an ammonia leak.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks around Kreminna.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction as of June 7.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts on June 7.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly engaged in skirmishes in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue to restrict international travel for those eligible for military service.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to establish patronage programs between Russian regions and occupied territories in order to integrate occupied territories into Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 6, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 6, 2023, 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.

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on June 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Damage to the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam in the early hours of June 6 caused massive flooding of the Dnipro River delta, river wetlands, estuaries, and shoreline settlements in Kherson Oblast. Russian and Ukrainian sources began reporting loud noises resembling explosions emanating from the KHPP (across the Dnipro River in the Nova Kakhovka area about 55km northeast of Kherson City) between 0200 and 0230 local time on June 6, followed by reports of rushing water and an overall increase in the water level of the Dnipro.[1] Ukraine's Kherson Oblast Administration announced the evacuation of several raions (districts) of the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast as of 0730 local time and reported that the Tyahinka, Odradokamianka, Beryslav, Ivanivka, Mykilske, Tokarivka, Ponyativka, Bilozerka, and Ostriv areas had been partially or completely flooded.[2] Russian Kherson Oblast occupation officials announced the evacuation of the Nova Kakhovka, Hola Prystan, and Oleshky raions.[3] Ukrainian officials noted that over 80 settlements are within the flood zone in Kherson Oblast.[4] General Director of Ukraine's hydroelectric power plant regulator Ukrhydroenergo Ihor Syrota said that water is draining from the Kakhovka Reservoir at a rate of 15-20cm an hour, which Syrota stated means that the reservoir will be entirely dry in the next four days.[5] A researcher at the Ukrainian Department of Water Bioresources at the Kherson Oblast Agrarian and Economic University, Yevhen Korzhov, noted that the rate of water discharge from the dam may lead to flooding as far downstream as Kizomys, about 120km southwest from the KHPP.[6] A Russian milblogger claimed that the water level in Nova Kakhovka, immediately adjacent to the KHPP, reached as high as 11m.[7] Various Russian sources additionally highlighted footage showing that several east (left) bank settlements, including Oleshky, Korsunka, and Dnipryany, are entirely or nearly entirely underwater.[8]

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Ukrainian officials stated that the drop in the water level at the Kakhovka Reservoir should not affect the safety of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). IAEA Director Rafael Grossi reported that the drop in the water level at the Kakhovka Reservoir poses "no immediate risk to the safety of the plant" and that IAEA personnel at the ZNPP are closely monitoring the situation.[9] Grossi stated that the ZNPP is pumping water into its cooling channels and related systems, and that the large cooling pond next to the ZNPP will be "sufficient to provide water for cooling for some months."[10] Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom's President Petro Kotin stated that the fall in the water level at the Kakhovka Reservoir does not directly impact the water level in the ZNPP cooling pond and noted that the ZNPP pool basins are still at the same water level.[11] Ukrainian Chief Inspector for Nuclear and Radiation Safety Oleh Korikov stated that the decrease in water level at the Kakhovka Reservoir will not affect the condition of the ZNPP provided that ZNPP personnel implement established safety measures.[12]

Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces intentionally destroyed the KHPP dam and suggested that the Russian military did not prepare for subsequent flooding. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian intelligence indicates that Russian forces conducted an intentional premeditated explosion at the dam but did so in a "chaotic" manner that allowed Russian military equipment to be flooded downstream.[13] Zelensky added that the only way to destroy the dam is through mining and emphasized that Russian forces have now occupied the dam for over a year.[14] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Russian forces mined the dam shortly after its capture early in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and later planted additional mines on the locks and supports of the dam in April 2022.[15] Ukrhydroenergo stated that Russian forces destroyed the KHPP dam by detonating an explosive within the KHPP engine room.[16] The Ukrainian Resistance Center amplified reporting from the Crimean-based Ukrainian Atesh partisan movement alleging that the Russian 1st Battalion of the 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) was responsible for the detonation at the KHPP dam.[17] Other Ukrainian officials accused Russia of intentionally destroying the dam out of concerns about potential Ukrainian advances and counterattacks.[18] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are having to evacuate their forces on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River because subsequent flooding has disproportionately impacted the Russian-occupied bank of the river.[19] Footage published on June 6 purports to show Russian forces withdrawing from flooded positions, suggesting that these forces were not prepared for the flooding that resulted from the destruction of the KHPP dam.[20]

Russian officials accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the KHPP dam and used the allegations to bolster ongoing efforts to portray Ukrainian assaults elsewhere in Ukraine as immediate failures. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Ukrainian forces conducted a sabotage attack at the KHPP dam because "Ukrainian armed forces are not achieving their goals" in large-scale offensive operations.[21] This explanation is implausible because Ukrainian forces have not yet conducted large-scale offensive operations. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Ukrainian forces intend to send forces from the Kherson direction to support "failing" offensive operations elsewhere and thus destroyed the dam to disrupt Russian forces' ability to take advantage of weakened Ukrainian defenses on the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast.[22] This explanation is also implausible because the limited Russian forces on the east (left) bank of the river pose no meaningful threat to the west (right) bank that would require extensive Ukrainian forces to defend against. Russian officials appear to be increasingly trying to immediately characterize Ukrainian offensive efforts as failures and have likely decided to use their accusations against Ukraine concerning the KHPP dam to bolster this informational effort. Shoigu also claimed on June 6 that Russian forces - specifically elements of the Eastern Military District's (EMD) 433rd Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 127th Motorized Rifle Division (5th Combined Arms Army), the 37th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army), and the 60th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army) - repelled Ukrainian offensives in five different directions in the last three days.[23] Shoigu preposterously claimed that Russian forces have killed and wounded 3,175 Ukrainian servicemembers and destroyed 205 armored combat vehicles and 52 tanks in the previous three days of fighting in Ukraine.[24] Russian sources have previously attempted to paint Ukrainian counteroffensive actions as immediate failures and Russian sources are likely attempting to do the same with what they view as the start of the announced Ukrainian counteroffensive.[25]

ISW has not yet observed clear evidence of what transpired at the KHPP on June 6 and is therefore unable to offer an independent assessment of responsibility at the time of this publication. White House spokesperson John Kirby noted that the US still cannot say conclusively what caused the destruction of the dam but is assessing reports that "the blast was caused by Russia." [26] NBC additionally reported that the US has intelligence indicating Russia's responsibility for the dam's destruction but is currently working to declassify relevant information.[27] Various European officials made statements indicating that they believe Russia is involved and underlining the resulting humanitarian impacts of the flooding.[28]

Statements by US and European officials are generally consistent with ISW's October 2022 forecast that the Russians have a greater and clearer interest in flooding the lower Dnipro despite the damage to their own prepared defensive positions and forces than the Ukrainians.[29] ISW previously assessed on October 21, 2022, that Ukraine has no material interest in blowing the dam and pointed out that 80 settlements would risk flooding.[30] Ukrainian officials confirmed on June 6, 2023, that 80 settlements risk flooding as a result of the damage.[31] ISW further assessed that by contrast, Russia may use the flooding to widen the Dnipro River and complicate Ukrainian counteroffensive attempts across the already-challenging water feature.[32] Russian sources have expressed intense and explicit concern over the possibility that Ukraine has been preparing to cross the river and counterattack into east bank Kherson Oblast.[33] Available footage from June 6, corroborated by claims made by Russian milbloggers, suggests that the flooding washed away Ukrainian positions near the Dnipro shoreline and forced Ukrainian formations to evacuate while under Russian artillery fire.[34]

Ukrainian officials acknowledged that Russian formations and positions on the east bank may have been caught off guard and threatened by the flooding due to the topography of the area, some Ukrainian officials suggested that this was a result of the chaotic handling of the intentional detonation of the dam by Russian forces.[35] Some Russian sources indicated that the damage to the dam could threaten the water supply to occupied Crimea, but ISW previously noted that Crimea survived without water from the Dnipro River in the years between Russia's initial illegal annexation in 2014 and when water access was restored following the 2022 full-scale invasion.[36] There is also the possibility, of course, that pre-existing structural damage to the dam eventually caused breakage and flooding, as some sources have additionally suggested, although reports of noises like explosions are not necessarily consistent with this notion.[37] **ISW cannot offer a definitive assessment of responsibility for the June 6 incident at this time but finds that the balance of evidence, reasoning, and rhetoric suggests that the Russians deliberately damaged the dam.**

Ukrainian officials offered assurances that the damage to the dam and subsequent flooding will not impede Ukrainian counteroffensive preparations. Zelensky emphasized that the "detonation of the dam did not affect Ukraine's ability to de-occupy its own territories." [38] Ukrainian Joint Forces Commander Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev noted that the Ukrainian command has already taken into account Russia's propensity for "insidious actions" and that as a result any potential planned counteroffensive actions will not be impacted in areas where there is flooding.[39] It is additionally noteworthy that the areas of the theater that are impacted by the flooding (those within a 120km flood radius between Nova Kakhovka and Kizomys) are geographically very far removed from areas of

the frontline where ISW has observed recent combat activity in the past few days.[40] The flooding of the lower Dnipro will not likely have any impact on the areas that have seen active fighting recently.

Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike across Ukraine on the night of June 5-6. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 35 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from six Tu-95 bombers over the Caspian Sea and that Ukrainian air defense shot down all 35 missiles.[41] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces targeted Kharkiv City with S-300 surface-to-air missiles.[42] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk noted that the fact that Russia only launched Kh-101/555-type missiles and returned all sea-based Kalibr missile carriers to their base points before the strike may suggest that Russia is running out of Kalibr to launch.[43] Humenyuk's comments are consistent with periodic Ukrainian tallies of the numbers of Kalibr remaining and Russia's capacity to produce them. [44] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian aerospace forces conducted the strike with long-range air-launched missiles against Ukrainian "decision-making centers" and struck all intended targets.[45] The UK MoD reported on June 5 that Russian forces have recently heavily relied on Iranian drones to try to attrit Ukrainian air defense missile capabilities, but the fact that Ukraine is still managing to employ air defense systems against cruise missiles to such high effect suggests that these Russian efforts have been largely unsuccessful.[46]

Russian sources claimed that the pro-Ukrainian all-Russian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russian Legion (LSR) are gone from a border settlement in Belgorod Oblast as of June 6. Russian sources published footage of Russian forces stating that they are in control of Novaya Tavolzhanka (a small village about 3km from the Kharkiv-Belgorod Oblast border) and that RDK and LSR elements are no longer present in the settlement.[47] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that a senior Russian officer of the Belgorod Operational Group, Colonel Andrey Stesev, was killed in action in Novaya Tavolzhanka overnight on June 4-5.[48] The Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) claimed on June 6 that its forces killed Stesev.[49]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to directly threaten the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian military command if they do not fulfill his demands for a larger independent army and political influence in Russia. Prigozhin threatened on June 5 that Wagner forces will "go to Belgorod" without explicit permission from the Russian MoD if the Russian military command does not "liberate" Belgorod Oblast border areas from various all-Russian pro-Ukrainian groups operating on Russian soil and improve the situation in Shebekino (a settlement 6km from the international border).[50] Prigozhin presented letters that he reportedly received from Shebekino residents who complained that the Russian military is neglecting their safety and called on Wagner to defend them. Prigozhin also sarcastically stated that the Russian MoD might be considering "using a nuclear weapon on their own territory" when discussing the Russian military command's unwillingness to defend Belgorod Oblast as part of his attempt to exaggerate the Russian MoD's disinterest in defending its own citizens. Prigozhin's comments about such nuclear use, like much of his heavier sarcasm, were not meant to be taken literally. Prigozhin also reiterated that he had requested 200,000 troops and ammunition to seize Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and this demand may be reflective of his efforts to blackmail the Kremlin into giving Wagner forces additional resources and expanding its influence over the Russian MoD. Prigozhin also noted that Russia will not be able to fix its long-standing military incompetency at this time without executing Russian military officials responsible for military failures in Ukraine – and noted that failure to do so might upset Russian society.

Key Takeaways

- Damage to the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam in the early hours of June 6 caused massive flooding of the Dnipro River delta, river wetlands, estuaries, and shoreline settlements in Kherson Oblast.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Ukrainian officials stated that the drop in the water level at the Kakhovka Reservoir should not affect the safety of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces intentionally destroyed the KHPP dam and suggested that the Russian military did not prepare for subsequent flooding.
- Russian officials accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the KHPP dam and used the allegations to bolster ongoing efforts to portray Ukrainian assaults elsewhere in Ukraine as immediate failures.
- ISW has not yet observed clear evidence of what transpired at the KHPP on June 6 and is therefore unable to offer an independent assessment of responsibility at the time of this publication.
- Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike across Ukraine on the night of June 5-6.
- Russian sources claimed that the pro-Ukrainian all-Russian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russian Legion (LSR) are gone from a border settlement in Belgorod Oblast as of June 6.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to directly threaten the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian military command if they do not fulfill his demands for a larger independent army and political influence in Russia.
- Ukrainian officials offered assurances that the damage to the dam and subsequent flooding will not impede Ukrainian counteroffensive preparations.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks north and southwest of Bakhmut, and Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk line.
- Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in southwestern Donetsk and in eastern Zaporizhzhia oblasts.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that the Russian 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade is part of the irregular 6th Division.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue efforts to use infrastructure projects to integrate occupied territories into Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 5, 2023

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Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 5, 2023, 8pm ET

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2pm ET on June 5. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 6 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian and Ukrainian officials are signaling the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. ISW offers no assessment of these signals at this time. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on June 5 that Ukrainian forces conducted a “large-scale offensive” across five sectors of the frontline in southwestern Donetsk Oblast on June 4.[1] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled all Ukrainian attacks and assigned Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov to oversee the southwestern Donetsk frontline.[2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar noted on June 5 that Ukrainian forces are “transferring to offensive actions” in some unspecified areas of the front.[3] Malyar added that Russian sources are actively spreading information about the Ukrainian counteroffensive to deflect attention from Russian losses in the Bakhmut direction. The Russian MoD’s claims that Russian forces immediately repelled Ukrainian counteroffensives are consistent with previous false Russian claims made during past counteroffensives. Ukrainian forces are likely making limited gains despite Russian denials. **ISW will not attempt to assess at this time whether or not these gains are part of broader counter-offensive operations.** ISW observed an increase in combat activity in different sectors of the frontline but will not speculate about the intent, weight, or focus of Ukrainian counteroffensives operations.[4] A successful counteroffensive operation may take days, weeks, or even months before its outcome becomes fully clear, during which time Russian sources may falsely claim to have defeated it.

Ukrainian forces made limited advances north and southwest of Bakhmut on June 5. Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces are conducting offensive operations on the eastern front in the Bakhmut area and advanced 200 to 1,600 meters in the direction of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), and 100 to 700 meters near Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) and Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[5] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that mechanized Ukrainian forces also advanced from 300 meters to one kilometer in the direction of Zaliznyanske (13km north of Bakhmut) and Bohdanivka (8km northwest of Bakhmut).[6] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky thanked the Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut direction for “moving forward” in their areas of responsibility on June 5.[7] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Ukrainian forces captured an unspecified part of Berkivka (6km north of Bakhmut) and criticized the Russian military command for previously withdrawing Russian forces from the Berkivksy Reservoir on May 12 to protect their positions in the settlement.[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults in the direction of Soledar (12km northeast of Bakhmut), likely referring to the wider area north and northeast of Bakhmut.[9] One milblogger claimed that Russian forces fought Ukrainian forces near Rozdolivka (19km northeast of Bakhmut).[10] Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also attacked Russian positions in an unspecified location in the Siversk (31km northeast of Bakhmut) area.[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian assault near Mayorsk (21km southwest of Bakhmut) and north of Horlivka (26km south of Bakhmut).[12] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Ukrainian advances in the Bakhmut associated with these limited offensives on June 5.

The pro-Ukrainian all-Russian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) claimed that it continues to operate in a Russian border settlement in Belgorod Oblast as of June 5. Geolocated footage published on June 5 shows the RDK personnel operating in Novaya Tavolzhanka (a small settlement about 3km from the Kharkiv-Belgorod Oblast border).[13] The Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), which conducted a raid into Belgorod Oblast with the RDK, published footage purportedly showing LSR forces striking Russian tanks and armored vehicles near the Shebekino checkpoint, about 7km northeast of Novaya Tavolzhanka.[14] The Russian MoD claimed on June 5 that Russian forces and the Russian Border Guard Service repelled two attacks near Novaya Tavolzhanka on June 4, but did not respond to the RDK’s claim that RDK personnel still operate in the settlement.[15]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen forces are ready to defend against raids in Belgorod Oblast, likely in part to keep his forces out of combat in Ukraine. Kadyrov claimed on June 5 that he has 70,000 Chechen servicemen serving in unspecified formations in the Russian military who could defend against the raids into Belgorod Oblast due to their extensive anti-terrorism training.[16] Kadyrov notably stated that the Russian “Commander-in-Chief” – implying Russian President Vladimir Putin – “knows better,” but that Kadyrov wanted to “remind” everyone that Chechen units could have dealt with “terrorists who invaded Belgorod Oblast.” Kadyrov’s suggestion for Chechen forces to operate in Belgorod Oblast follows Putin’s order deploying Chechen units to areas along the Donetsk frontline on May 31.[17] Kadyrov’s rhetorical shift towards suggesting that Chechen forces get involved in Belgorod Oblast may suggest a desire to preserve his forces from engaging in combat in more challenging sectors of the front.[18] ISW previously assessed that Kadyrov appeared to have been conserving forces and did not deploy forces to participate in large-scale offensive operations since summer 2022.[19] Kadyrov previously claimed on May 26 that 7,000 Chechen servicemen are operating in Ukraine.[20] If Kadyrov’s claims are close to accurate, only about 10 percent of available Chechen forces are serving in Ukraine, but his statements are impossible to verify.

The Russian Black Sea Fleet is attempting to mitigate complications with logistical support in occupied Crimea by shifting resources to mainland Russia. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk reported on June 5 that Russian forces are transferring the Black Sea Fleet’s logistics centers from Sevastopol, occupied Crimea, to Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai.[21] Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are moving the logistics centers because of widespread logistical and ammunition provision issues in occupied Crimea.[22] Humenyuk noted that Russian amphibious ships are continuing to maneuver in the Black Sea and enter Sevastopol, but that the overall center of gravity of the Black Sea Fleet appears to be shifting towards Novorossiysk.[23] Recent strikes on Russian concentration areas, logistics hubs, and transportation assets in southern Ukraine may be causing increased anxiety over the security of the Black Sea Fleet, and the move to Krasnodar Krai is likely in part reflective of this fact.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing efforts to exacerbate the divide between the Wagner Group and the Russian MoD. Prigozhin’s press service published a video on June 4 showing a Wagner fighter interrogating a Russian soldier who identified himself as Lieutenant Colonel Roman Venevitin of the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps).[24] Venevitin admitted on camera that he ordered his unit to fire on a Wagner vehicle while intoxicated due to his own “personal animosity” towards Wagner.[25] Venevitin appeared to have sustained facial injuries during the time of his capture by Wagner.[26] Prigozhin also claimed that Wagner personnel engaged in a small skirmish with Russian MoD personnel in Semihirya (15km southeast of Bakhmut) on May 17 after the MoD personnel fired on Wagner fighters when they tried to stop the MoD personnel from laying mines in Wagner’s rear.[27] As ISW has previously assessed, Prigozhin continues to inject such anti-MoD narratives into the Russian information space in order to retain his status in the information space following the culmination of

Wagner's Bakhmut offensive and Wagner's withdrawal from combat in Ukraine.[28] The suggestion that units operating under the Russian MoD are actively firing on Wagner while intoxicated strengthens Prigozhin's argument that the Russian MoD is a combat-ineffective and somewhat nefarious force.

Russian milbloggers responded to the video of Lieutenant Colonel Venevitin with concern, indicating that several prominent pro-war voices are becoming increasingly concerned over the ramifications of the Wagner-MoD divide. One prominent milblogger called for Venevitin to be tried by the military prosecutor's office, which would be normal practice in such cases, but noted that the Wagner-MoD conflict "continues to be unhealthy."^[29] Another milblogger who claimed to have personally spoken to Wagner commanders accused both Wagner and MoD units of not knowing what they are fighting for and all of trying to outcompete each other to be "heroes."^[30] Former Russian officer and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin noted that the video of Venevitin is another step towards "troubles" regardless of the circumstances of the incident and that Prigozhin is provoking an open war between units ostensibly on the same side of the war.^[31] As Prigozhin continues his efforts to maintain informational relevance his rhetorical charades will likely further deepen the divide between the MoD and Wagner, thus hindering the overall combat-effectiveness of both forces and additionally generating increasing discontent in the information space that used to back him.

Key Takeaways

- Russian and Ukrainian officials are signaling the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited successful offensives north and southwest of Bakhmut.
- The pro-Ukrainian all-Russian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) claimed that it continues to operate in a Russian border settlement in Belgorod Oblast as of June 5.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen forces are ready to defend against raids in Belgorod Oblast, likely partially in order to keep his forces out of combat in Ukraine.
- The Russian Black Sea Fleet is attempting to mitigate complications with logistical support in occupied Crimea by shifting resources to mainland Russia.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing efforts to exacerbate the divide between the Wagner Group and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Russian milbloggers responded to the video of Lieutenant Colonel Venevitin with concern, indicating that several prominent pro-war voices are becoming increasingly concerned over the ramifications of the Wagner-MoD divide.
- Russian forces reportedly conducted unsuccessful reconnaissance-in-force operations northeast of Kharkiv City and continued limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts and made further limited tactical gains.
- Ukrainian forces continue to target rear Russian positions throughout southern Ukraine.
- Iran has allegedly signed contracts with Russia for about \$1.74 million in ammunition for Russia to use in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian sources and Belarusian sources indicated that Belarus has been involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 4, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros,
and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 4, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) conducted another limited raid into Belgorod Oblast on June 4 and are reportedly continuing to operate in a Russian border settlement. Geolocated footage published on June 4 shows LSR and RDK personnel advancing towards Novaya Tavolzhanka (3.5km from the Ukrainian border).^[1] Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov confirmed that there was fighting within Novaya Tavolzhanka, although the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that units of the Western Military District and the Russian Border Guard Service struck a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group near the settlement, forcing them to withdraw.^[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that a sabotage and reconnaissance group of 20 personnel entered Novaya Tavolzhanka without armored vehicles.^[3] *Wall Street Journal* Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent Yarsoslav Trofimov reported that the pro-Ukrainian Russian fighters remain in Novaya Tavolzhanka as of 1700 (Moscow Standard Time).^[4]

Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov responded to a RDK and LSR demand to negotiate for the exchange of captured Russian prisoners of war (POWs). The LSR and RDK addressed a video to Gladkov purporting to show RDK and LSR fighters with two Russian POWs whom they said they captured near Novaya Tavolzhanka. The RDK and LSR demanded that Gladkov arrive at the temple in Novaya Tavolzhanka by 1700 (Moscow Standard Time) to negotiate for the release of the POWs.^[5] Gladkov stated that he was ready to meet with the RDK and LSR fighters at the Shebekino checkpoint to negotiate the exchange of the POWs.^[6] Gladkov later reportedly refused to meet with the RDK and LSR fighters because he believed that the Russian POWs were already dead.^[7] The RDK and LSR released a subsequent video showing themselves with 12 Russian POWs, criticizing Gladkov for lacking courage, and stating that they would send the POWs to Ukraine.^[8]

The dissonant Russian responses to and reporting about the limited raid in Belgorod Oblast continue to suggest that the Russian leadership has not yet decided how to react to these limited cross-border raids. The contradictory reporting from official Russian sources about the situation in Belgorod Oblast and Gladkov's apparent personal decision to respond to the RDK and LSR suggests that the MoD and Gladkov are not coordinating their responses to the raids. ISW has previously reported that Russian officials have disproportionately responded to the limited raids into Russian territory in an effort to assuage growing Russian anxiety about the war in Ukraine while also supporting ongoing information operations that aim to present the war as existential to Russia.^[9] Russian responses have primarily centered on informational effects, and there is no indication that the Russian leadership has set a wider policy for preventing further limited raids into Russian border oblasts. It is also not clear if Russian authorities are orchestrating the evacuation response to this activity. An RDK fighter claimed on June 4 that Belgorod Oblast authorities have not organized the announced evacuation measures in the Shebekino area and that Russian citizens have largely fled of their own accord, leaving many settlements in a semi-abandoned state.^[10] Gladkov claimed that 4,000 residents from the area are currently staying at temporary accommodation centers in connection with evacuation efforts, however.^[11] Ukrainian Advisor to the Internal Affairs Minister Anton Herashchenko stated on June 4 that the RDK and LSR activity has prompted Russian leaders to divert significant forces to stop border incursions, although ISW has not observed confirmation that Russian forces have done so.

The limited raids and border shelling in Belgorod Oblast are increasingly becoming the current focal point for criticism against the Russian military leadership. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to use the situation in Belgorod Oblast to criticize the MoD on June 3 and 4, specifically calling out the lack of response from Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Colonel General Alexander Lapin, and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valeriy Gerasimov.^[12] Prigozhin offered to negotiate the release of POWs held by the RDK and LSR if Russian authorities failed to do so, and responded to criticism of his offer by sarcastically stating that Russia has a problem with people who have "balls."^[13] Other ultranationalist milbloggers responded to the latest raid by criticizing Gladkov for being willing to negotiate with the RDK and LSR, and Russian authorities for failing to consistently inform the public about the situation in Belgorod Oblast.^[14] A prominent milblogger used the raid in Belgorod Oblast to criticize the MoD for not funding Belgorod territorial defense volunteer formations and for not considering the volunteers as actual combatants.^[15] Former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin argued that the Kremlin cannot do anything about the situation in Belgorod Oblast without engaging in a costly diversion of resources that would likely end in an attritional operation reminiscent of Bakhmut.^[16]

Russian forces again targeted Ukraine with Iranian-made drones and cruise missiles on June 4, marking the fourth consecutive day of strikes across Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched five Shahed-136/131 drones from Bryansk Oblast and six Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from six strategic Tu-95 bombers in the Caspian Sea in the early morning of June 4.^[17] Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down three Shahed drones and four cruise missiles. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that two Russian missiles struck an active Ukrainian airfield near Kropyvnytskyi in Kirovohrad Oblast.^[18] Ihnat added that two Shahed drones struck unspecified infrastructure in Sumy Oblast.^[19] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all drones and missiles that targeted Kyiv.^[20]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on June 4 that Ukrainian forces may have regained positions in southwestern Bakhmut, supporting repeated Ukrainian reports that the Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the southwestern outskirts of the city. Prigozhin claimed that some unspecified reports suggest that Ukrainian forces established observation posts in the southwestern outskirts of Bakhmut.^[21] Prigozhin recommended that the Russian forces in Bakhmut take action if these reports are true. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar and other Ukrainian officials have continuously reported that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in the southwestern outskirts of Bakhmut since May 20, when Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces seized the entirety of the city.^[22]

Key Takeaways

- Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) conducted another limited raid into Belgorod Oblast on June 4 and are reportedly continuing to operate in a Russian border settlement.
- Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov responded to a RDK and LSR demand to negotiate for the exchange of captured Russian prisoners of war (POWs).
- The dissonant Russian responses to and reporting about the limited raid in Belgorod Oblast continue to suggest that the Russian leadership has not yet decided how to react to these limited cross-border raids.
- The limited raids and border shelling in Belgorod Oblast are increasingly becoming the current focal point for criticism against the Russian military leadership.
- Russian forces again targeted Ukraine with Iranian-made drones and cruise missiles on June 4 making it the fourth consecutive day of strikes across Ukraine.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on June 4 that Ukrainian forces may have regained positions in southwestern Bakhmut, supporting repeated Ukrainian reports that Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the southwestern outskirts of the city.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces both claimed to have made limited territorial gains on the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks around Bakhmut and Marinka.
- Ukrainian forces conducted local ground attacks and reportedly made limited tactical gains in western Donetsk Oblast and eastern Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) submitted a draft government decree that will no longer require an individual's presence at an enlistment office for military registration.
- Russian officials continue to use rest and rehabilitation schemes to deport Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 3, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 3, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

Ukrainian officials continue to signal that Ukrainian forces are prepared to start counteroffensive operations. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in a June 3 interview with the *Wall Street Journal* that Ukraine is ready to launch a counteroffensive.^[1] Zelensky stated that Ukraine “would like to have certain things, but … can’t wait for months” to start counteroffensive operations.^[2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on June 3 that “military plans love silence” and that she will “discuss something else” in the meantime, likely acknowledging that Ukrainian officials have started to more strictly enforce a regime of informational silence about operations in preparation for upcoming counteroffensives.^[3] Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko stated on June 3 that Ukraine has formed all nine brigades of the “Offensive Guard” and that these formations are ready to take part in hostilities at Zelensky’s and Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi’s orders.^[4]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin escalated his feud with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), likely hoping to draw criticism back to the Russian military leadership and downplay his ongoing conflict with Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov. Prigozhin alleged on June 2 that representatives of the MoD placed anti-tank mines and other explosive devices along routes that Wagner forces were using to withdraw from Bakhmut.^[5] Prigozhin asserted that these charges were placed in rear areas with no Ukrainian activity and that the MoD likely meant for Wagner forces to detonate the explosives in order to give Wagner a “public flogging.”^[6] Prigozhin also further responded to a concerted attack that Chechen commanders launched against him on June 1 and stated on June 3 that he and Kadyrov settled the conflict.^[7] Prigozhin claimed that he called Kadyrov on June 1 and the two agreed to let the “whole story” about the conflict dissipate.^[8] Prigozhin suggested that a group in the Kremlin may have started the conflict between Kadyrov’s forces and Wagner and insinuated that the Kremlin often plays “dangerous games” that could destabilize interethnic relations within Russia.^[9] Kadyrov has yet to publicly address the conflict between Chechen forces and Wagner.

Prigozhin has not yet responded to Kadyrov or the Chechen commanders who started the attack in an antagonistic manner typical of his usual approach to responding to critiques.^[10] The claimed private phone call between Prigozhin and Kadyrov would suggest that Prigozhin is concerned that this typical public response might further antagonize Kadyrov and Chechen commanders and that Prigozhin is concerned about having another prominent *silovik* figure like Kadyrov aligned against him. Prigozhin likely accused the MoD of trying to kill Wagner forces and the Kremlin of creating the conflict with the Chechen commanders to quickly reorient Russian discussion back to his usual targets of ire, the Russian military and political leadership. Prigozhin is also likely aiming to rally pro-war ultranationalist groups, specifically Kadyrov and Chechen commanders, to join him in criticizing those targets as he has done before.

Prigozhin’s flamboyant allegations are also likely an attempt to retain his heightened initiative within the Russian information space following the capture of Bakhmut. Prigozhin has consistently shaped discussions within the Russian information space leading up to the capture of Bakhmut and following the end of Wagner’s effort in the city by engaging in a near-daily series of public outbursts and demonstrative actions.^[11] Prigozhin has used his heightened profile following the capture of Bakhmut to intensify his attacks against the Russian military establishment and elites and bolster his attempt to solidify himself as the central figure of the Russian ultranationalist community.^[12] The concerted attack from Chechen commanders represents the first instance since the capture of Bakhmut that Prigozhin has not been the one to initiate larger conversations about himself and the Wagner Group within the Russian information space. Prigozhin’s desire to retain Kadyrov as a potential ally has likely constrained Prigozhin’s regular approach to shaping the Russian information space. Prigozhin has routinely used Wagner’s claimed responsibility for tactical gains to legitimize his pursuit of influence and his criticism of others, and he is likely also concerned that he may soon lose his current ability to dominate discussions about himself and Wagner as Wagner Group forces withdraw to rear areas to replenish and reconstitute.^[13] Prigozhin’s dramatic accusation against the MoD aims to remove any constraints resulting from his conflict with Kadyrov, shift the conversation back to criticizing his opponents in the MoD, and allow Prigozhin to continue determining how he and Wagner are portrayed.

Prigozhin seized on general Russian discontent with security on the Belgorod Oblast border to threaten that Wagner Group forces may operate in Russian territory without approval from the Russian military command.^[14] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner will not wait for an invitation or permission from the MoD to defend Belgorod Oblast if the MoD does not curb security threats to the region. Prigozhin justified his threat of insubordination by claiming that Wagner aims to protect the Russian people, implying that Wagner will assume the role of border defender that the MoD should already occupy. Prigozhin’s threats capitalize on complaints from other prominent information space voices that Russian authorities have not done enough to protect border areas from the impacts of the war and reflect Prigozhin’s current loss of informational initiative.^[15]

Prigozhin’s threats also indicate that he may aim for Wagner forces to assume primary or sole responsibility for an axis in the Ukrainian theater now that Wagner forces have withdrawn from that role in the Bakhmut area. Prigozhin may see the Belgorod-Ukraine border as an easy enough front line to defend as the raids into Russia have thus far occurred on an extremely limited scale. Deploying Wagner forces to the Belgorod border would allow Prigozhin to maintain his position as a commander of frontline forces without the grueling demands of conducting human wave-style frontal assaults against a heavily fortified Ukrainian city. **Prigozhin’s apparent threat to undertake military operations, even defensive ones, on Russian territory without the permission of the Russian MoD is astonishing if it is anything other than flamboyant rhetoric.** It implies that Prigozhin regards himself as able to use large military forces loyal to him at his own discretion and beyond the control of the actual Russian military. Russian President Vladimir Putin would have to have tremendous confidence in Prigozhin’s personal loyalty to himself to be at all comfortable with such a situation.

A Russian Duma Deputy stated during a public forum on June 1 that Russia has failed to accomplish any of its articulated goals for the “special military operation” in Ukraine. First Duma Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Affairs Konstantin Zatulin emphasized that of Russia’s officially declared goals at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine — “denazification, demilitarization, the neutrality of Ukraine, and the protection of the inhabitants of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics”—none have actually been met.^[16] Zatulin further noted that as the war has worn on, these goals have ceased to hold actual meaning and suggested that Russian forces should have been more aggressive in efforts to push Ukrainian forces back from the borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Zatulin’s critical observations are noteworthy considering that he is a contributor to the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club, which famously upholds views complementary to Russian President Vladimir Putin and the official Kremlin propaganda line.^[17] Zatulin’s apparent views of the war represent an absolute minority within the Russian domestic political environment, as self-censorship and general information space repressions are commonplace. However, such statements coming from a relatively mainstream and well-platformed official suggest that a small subset of the predominant pro-war Russian political faction may feel somewhat empowered to voice discontent and advocate for escalated goals as the war continues.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials continue to signal that Ukrainian forces are prepared to start counteroffensive operations.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin escalated his feud with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), likely hoping to draw criticism back to the Russian military leadership and downplay his ongoing conflict with Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov. Prigozhin's flamboyant allegations are also likely an attempt to retain his heightened initiative within the Russian information space following the capture of Bakhmut.
- Prigozhin seized on general Russian discontent with security on the Belgorod Oblast border to threaten that Wagner Group forces may operate in Russian territory without approval from the Russian military command.
- A Russian Duma Deputy stated during a public forum on June 1 that Russia has failed to accomplish any of its articulated goals for the “special military operation” in Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line and northwest and south of Kremenna.
- Regular Russian forces have likely largely relieved Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut amid a low offensive tempo in the area as of June 3.
- Russian forces focused offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line near Marinka.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued efforts to establish defensive positions in Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian military leadership is attempting to create and staff new military formations.
- Likely Ukrainian partisans assassinated a Russian collaborator in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 2, 2023

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

Layne Philipson, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 2, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on June 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to respond disproportionately to limited raids into Russian territory, likely to project confidence and competence in the MoD's ability to respond to perceived threats. The Russian MoD issued a second update about the June 1 Shebekino, Belgorod Oblast border raid, largely fixating on the timeliness and scope of the Russian response to the raid.^[1] The MoD claimed that additional Russian Western Military District (WMD) elements reinforced the border area within an hour of the start of the raid and conducted heavy air, artillery, and flamethrower strikes against the raiding units and their reserves. The MoD claimed that over 135 people and 35 vehicles in total conducted the raids and that various Russian defensive efforts - including small arms fire and mines - repelled the raids. The MoD later celebrated the commander of an unspecified motorized rifle battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Nikitin, for leading the defensive effort, likely to preempt attempts to attribute the “victory” achieved by Belgorod border defense on Russian Colonel General Alexander Lapin as the information space did during the May 23 raid.^[2] The Russian MoD's fixation on portraying Russian forces and the Russian military command as capable defenders of Russia likely reflects internal and broader information space anxiety over the coming Ukrainian counteroffensive as well as any reverberating informational impacts from any failures to defend against Ukrainian counterattacks.

Select Russian milbloggers continue to use the situation in Belgorod Oblast to criticize Russian leadership while others downplayed the recent raids. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger stated that the Russian MoD is not treating Belgorod Oblast like Russian territory and claimed that it is only adding to the list of settlements affected by Ukrainian shelling.^[3] A milblogger called on Russian forces to destroy increasingly well-equipped Ukrainian forces at their deployment points along the border and not to lie in their reports about the situation in the area.^[4] Some milbloggers stated that Russian forces have responded well to the raids, which they claim are merely “terrorist attacks” aimed at creating a psychological impact as opposed to securing concrete territorial goals.^[5] A prominent Russian milblogger absurdly claimed that Ukrainian forces have concluded that it is too risky to start the counteroffensive now after observing Russia's responses to recent probing efforts.^[6] The raids, any Ukrainian probing efforts, and Russian responses in the past few weeks have all been on an extremely small scale compared with the announced forces Ukraine is reportedly preparing for the counter-offensive. The Russian hyperfocus on minor tactical engagements highlights Russian nervousness and insecurity about the forthcoming counteroffensive.

Russian forces conducted another series of strikes against Ukraine using cruise missiles and Iranian-made drones on the night of June 1-2. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 15 Kh-101/555 missiles at Kyiv City from Tu-95 aircraft over the Caspian Sea and that Ukrainian air defense destroyed all 15 missiles.^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all 21 Shahed 131/136 drones that Russian forces launched at Kyiv from southern Ukraine.^[8] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces are attempting to attack in atypical patterns and at unexpected times to deceive Ukrainian air defense, but that newly supplied air defense systems nonetheless allow Ukrainian forces to shoot down all Russian missiles flying along a ballistic trajectory.^[9] Ukrainian Southern Forces Joint Press Center Head Nataliya Humenyuk stated on June 2 that Ukrainian air defenses shot down a Russian drone over Mykolaiv Oblast during the June 1 to 2 overnight strikes.^[10]

Head of the Russian Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff Colonel General Yevgeny Burdinsky announced that the Russian military will form two new military districts and other new formations by the end of 2023. The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) “Military Commissariats of Russia” journal published an article by Burdinsky in its June 2023 edition in which he stated that it is necessary for Russian forces to create the Moscow and Leningrad military districts and organize and staff new combined arms and air armies, army corps, the Azov naval regional formation, five divisions, and 26 brigades in 2023.^[11]

Burdinsky emphasized that the main organizational task for the MoD remains contract service recruitment and the implementation of conscription, however.[12] Burdinsky did not expound upon how the Russian military plans to generate the necessary personnel and equipment required to form these new formations and it is unclear if Burdinsky's statements were meant to represent a formal MoD deadline for the creation of the new formations.

Burdinsky's statements likely aim to reintroduce and reamplify Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's standing proposals to significantly expand the Russian military. Shoigu delivered a series of public proposals at the MoD's Collegium on December 21, 2022 aimed at significantly increasing the size of the Russian military which included the reestablishment of the Moscow and Leningrad military districts as well as the formation of a new army corps.[13] Shoigu proposed that the Russian Armed Forces increase its strength to 1.5 million servicemen, including 695,000 contract servicemen, but did not specify a timeline for any of his proposals.[14] Shoigu also proposed an increase in the age of conscription, a measure that Russian officials have decided to implement in a phased manner over the course of three years instead of by the end of the year.[15] The creation of two military districts and these formations is a significant undertaking, and the Russian MoD's current force generation efforts do not signal that the MoD intends to generate the necessary number of personnel to fulfill these tasks by the end of 2023.

Both a Kremlin-affiliated milblogger and Igor Girkin, an ardent nationalist milblogger who is increasingly critical of the Kremlin, questioned where the MoD plans to acquire the personnel and equipment from to create these new formations. [16] Girkin stated that 26 brigades would require 80,000 personnel, a figure roughly correct if brigades were formed at full staff with 3,000 personnel per brigade.[17] Girkin added that five divisions would require another 40,000 personnel and argued that the MoD would have to conduct another mobilization wave to generate the roughly 120,000 required personnel.[18] ISW has previously assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely hesitant to launch another mobilization wave and that the MoD's current hybrid force generation effort of contract service recruitment and crypto mobilization is aimed at avoiding such a mobilization wave.[19] **The Russian MoD is highly unlikely to institute any of Shoigu's long-term force restructuring and expansion proposals by the end of 2023 with the possible exception of re-establishing the Moscow and Leningrad military districts.**

Russian sources appear to be reorienting the debate about the attribution of responsibility for small-scale tactical gains in the Bakhmut area to an ongoing offensive operation to capture Marinka, a small, almost leveled settlement where Russian forces have struggled to advance since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A prominent Russian milblogger stated that there are disputes within the Russian information space over who took more control of Marinka even though Russian forces have not yet fully captured the settlement.[20] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed the elements of the 150th and 20th Motorized Rifle Divisions (8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) are primarily responsible for the gains around Marinka.[21] The milblogger claimed that the DNR's 100th Brigade, Sparta Battalion, and the "Kaskad" and "Rusich" Operational Tactical Combat Formations deserve responsibility for gains around Marinka as well.[22]

These discussions about responsibility coincide with the reported arrival of Chechen forces to assume responsibility of the Donetsk front and complete the capture of Marinka and other settlements in the area.[23] These discussions are likely aimed at undermining Kadyrov's ability to use any subsequent tactical gains to elevate his standing and reintroduce his paramilitary forces as a main irregular offensive force following the culmination of Wagner forces and their withdrawal from the frontlines.[24] Many irregular formations, primarily DNR forces, have served on the Donetsk front and may be resentful of Kadyrov's attempt to assume responsibility for any success following months of attritional offensives.[25] This discussion around Marinka also coincides with a concerted attack from Chechen commanders against Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, which has generated debates between Chechen and Wagner commanders about which forces have been more successful fighting in Ukraine.[26] Prigozhin routinely emphasized Wagner's responsibility for tactical gains around Bakhmut throughout the offensive to capture the city to advocate for more supplies for Wagner and increased influence.[27] Other irregular forces may be trying to replicate this informational campaign in Marinka and elsewhere in Ukraine and are likely competing amongst each other for envisioned favor from the Kremlin. The capture of Bakhmut, despite offering no operational advantages, did allow the Kremlin to present a Russian victory, if only temporarily, to the Russian public. The capture of Marinka, a settlement with a pre-war population of 10,000 people and with no tactical or operational significance, would likely present marginal informational benefit to the Kremlin at most. Russian forces have advanced less than 2km from 2014-controlled territory around Marinka since the start of the full-scale invasion, suggesting that this entire conversation is premature.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on June 2 that calls for a ceasefire are unacceptable because they will freeze the current lines in place and enable Putin to consolidate control of occupied areas and prepare for future attacks on Ukraine.[28] Blinken noted that the war is a strategic failure for Russia and Russia is worse off militarily, economically, and geopolitically than before the start of its full-scale invasion – all contrary to Russian President Vladimir Putin's broader strategic aims. Blinken noted that the war undermined many of Putin's broader goals, including to divide NATO, foster a partnership with China, and strengthen the Russian military. Blinken stated that Russian forces in Ukraine suffered 100,000 killed and wounded "in a meat grinder of its own making" just within the past six months. Blinken stated that Putin believes he can outlast Ukraine and its supporters but reiterated that NATO remains committed to supporting Ukraine, as "Ukraine will never be Russia."

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to respond disproportionately to limited raids into Russian territory, likely to project confidence and competence in the MoD's ability to respond to perceived threats.
- Select Russian milbloggers continue to use the situation in Belgorod Oblast to criticize Russian leadership while others downplayed the recent raids.
- Russian forces conducted another series of strikes against Ukraine using cruise missiles and Iranian-made drones on the night of June 1-2.
- Head of the Russian Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff Colonel General Yevgeny Burdinsky announced that the Russian military will form two new military districts and other new formations by the end of 2023. Burdinsky's statements likely aim to reintroduce and reamplify Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's standing proposals to significantly expand the Russian military.
- Russian sources appear to be reorienting the debate about the attribution of responsibility for small-scale tactical gains in the Bakhmut area to an ongoing offensive operation to capture Marinka, a small, almost leveled settlement where Russian sources have struggled to advance since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These discussions about responsibility coincide with the reported arrival of Chechen forces to assume responsibility of the Donetsk front and complete the capture of Marinka and other settlements in the area.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on June 2 that calls for a ceasefire are unacceptable because they will freeze the current lines in place and enable Putin to consolidate control of occupied areas and prepare for future attacks on Ukraine.

- Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Kupyansk and Kreminna directions.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Marinka.
- A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces made territorial gains during limited counterattacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukraine struck the port area in occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, with Storm Shadow missiles.
- Ukrainian sources continue to report that Russian cadets from higher military academies are deploying to areas near the Ukrainian border within Russia.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to forcibly transport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of medical rehabilitation schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 1, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

June 1, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on June 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes on Ukraine overnight on May 31 to June 1 and during the day on June 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 10 Iskander ballistic missiles targeting Kyiv City from Bryansk Oblast, which borders Ukraine, in the morning on June 1, and that Ukrainian air defense destroyed all 10 missiles.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched two S-300 missiles targeting critical infrastructure in Kharkiv City during the day on June 1.^[2] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukraine cannot strike launch points of Russian Iskander missiles in Russia as Ukraine is under obligations not to strike Russian territory with Western-provided weapons.^[3] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces began a new limited air campaign in recent months to degrade Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities, but that the Russian prioritization of Kyiv is likely further limiting the campaign's ability to meaningfully constrain potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.^[4]

Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LRS) reportedly conducted another raid into Belgorod Oblast on June 1. Geolocated footage published on June 1 shows alleged LSR personnel operating near Novaya Tavolzhanka (3.5km from the Russian-Ukrainian border) and LSR and RDK personnel striking Russian positions near the settlement as well as Shebekino, Belgorod Oblast (7km from the Russian-Ukrainian border).^[5] The RDK stated that the "second phase" of its operations has begun and published footage purporting to show RDK personnel engaging in combat on the outskirts of Shebekino.^[6] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian Border Guard Service and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers thwarted two motorized infantry companies reinforced with tanks that attempted to "invade" Russian territory near Shebekino and Novaya Tavolzhanka.^[7] Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov stated that "there were no enemies on the territory of Belgorod Oblast" during the attempted raids, although geolocated footage shows alleged LSR personnel operating on Russian territory.^[8]

A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that 20 Russian border guards and 20 conscripts as well as Russian aviation and artillery units repelled the RDK and LRS personnel that attempted to conduct a raid near Shebekino.^[9] Other Russian milbloggers claimed that the formations that conducted the raids near Shebekino and Novaya Tavolzhanka were roughly the size of a company and had tanks as well as other armored fighting vehicles, although one prominent milblogger claimed that the group that tried to enter near the Shebekino checkpoint was only comprised of 10 people.^[10] The reported company size elements conducting these operations indicate that these operations in Belgorod Oblast are doctrinally raids. **Raids, according to US Army doctrine, are small scale assault operations involving swift entry into hostile territory to secure information, disrupt hostile forces, or destroy installations.**^[11] Raids end with a planned withdrawal from a narrowly defined target area and do not seek to establish long-term control over territory. The RDK and LRS have not seriously attempted to control territory in Belgorod Oblast, either on June 1 or during their May 22 raid, despite their avowed goal to capture Russian territory.^[12]

Russian officials and milbloggers' responses to the limited raid in Belgorod Oblast are indicative of a continued heightened anxiety within the Russian information space regarding the war in Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on June 1 that Russian President Vladimir Putin constantly receives information about the situation in Belgorod Oblast, and that Putin awarded Shebekinsky Raion Head Vladimir Zhdanov the Order of Courage for his response to the situation along the border.^[13] Gladkov announced that Russian officials in Belgorod Oblast evacuated 200 children to Penza Oblast and plan to evacuate another 600 children to Kaluga and Yaroslavl oblasts on June 3.^[14] BBC's Russia Service reported on June 1 that Gladkov agreed with authorities of several Russian regions to accept 1,200 Belgorod residents during evacuations.^[15] These evacuations, Putin's reported attentiveness, and the MoD's characterization of the raid as an attempt to "invade" Russian territory suggests that the Kremlin is trying to use these limited raids to support ongoing information operations that seek to portray the war in Ukraine as existential and garner domestic support for a protracted war.^[16]

Select Russian milbloggers used the situation in Belgorod Oblast to criticize the Russian leadership while others argued that the limited raids are precursors for Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin argued that increased activity within Russia is a result of Russian forces wasting reserves in the fall of 2022, Russian officials failing to transition the economy to a war footing, and the Kremlin's decision not to introduce martial law.^[17] Girkin argued that these failures caused Ukraine to understand Russia's relative weaknesses and suggested that they emboldened Ukrainian forces to conduct operations within Russia itself.^[18] Girkin also argued that the Kremlin will likely respond to the alleged Ukrainian operations within Russia too late and that the Russian

public's support for the Russian leadership will wane by then.[19] Another milblogger criticized Putin directly for pretending that everything is fine in Shebekino. [20] Other milbloggers argued that the raids in Belgorod Oblast are a Ukrainian effort to divert Russian forces away from important sectors of the front in Ukraine to border regions ahead of potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[21]

Chechen commanders and officials launched a concerted attack on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on June 1 in a likely attempt to undermine Prigozhin. Chechen member of the Russian State Duma Adam Delimkhanov responded to Prigozhin's May 31 statement in which Prigozhin noted that he is unaware Chechen units' new positions in Ukraine and that Chechen forces will fight for select settlements, rather than the entirety of the Donetsk Oblast.[22] Prigozhin's original statement appeared relatively neutral compared with his more inflammatory statements and did not directly criticize Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov or his forces. Delimkhanov informally addressed Prigozhin as "Zhenya" (a nickname for Yevgeny) and urged him to select a date on which they could meet to clarify what Chechen "Akhmat" forces are doing on the frontlines.[23] Delimkhanov also called on Prigozhin to stop "screaming" about Wagner's shortages of military supplies and exposing Russian military failures to the world, and claimed that Prigozhin had already established himself as a "blogger" who is triggering Russian society to question his military capabilities. Delimkhanov stated that Wagner received more military equipment "than anyone else" from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and still suffered significant casualties.

Akhmat Special Forces (Spetsnaz) Commander Major General Apty Alaudinov echoed Delimkhanov's statements, noting that he only respected Wagner personnel and not Prigozhin, despite Kadyrov's personal fondness for Prigozhin.[24] Alaudinov stated that Wagner received tanks, planes, helicopters, and a 50,000-person army that the Akhmat forces did not receive. Alaudinov reiterated that Akhmat Spetsnaz is part of the Russian MoD and claimed that many former Wagner fighter had joined the Chechen armed formation. Chairman of the Chechen Parliament Magomed Daudov said that Prigozhin does not need to know the details of Chechen operations and stated that Prigozhin would have been killed for his critiques of the Russian military during World War II.[25] Daudov also indirectly implied that Kadyrov and Putin are the ones making decisions while Prigozhin overestimated his powers by trying to establish himself as the face of the war.[26]

Prigozhin responded to the attacks claiming that he will continue to voice his opinions until the Russian MoD officials are punished for their mistakes in planning the invasion of Ukraine.[27] Prigozhin stated that his statements were not "reprehensible" and attached two videos from his latest press conference to eliminate "ambiguity" surrounding his claims. In one video, Prigozhin stated that the Russian security forces will "die instead of convicts" on the frontlines when responding to a question about Kadyrov's proposal to send qualified security forces to fight in Ukraine. Prigozhin added that "nothing bad will happen" if half of the security forces leave to fight in the war.[28] The other video showed Prigozhin agreeing with Kadyrov's proposal to declare martial law across Russia and stating that Russia will not finish the war in 2023.[29] Prigozhin also amplified a response from an unnamed Wagner commander to Daudov, who stated that Wagner is the best private military company (PMC) in the world and that Wagner had never received military supplies from Chechnya.[30] The Wagner commander also claimed that the Wagner forces perceived Daudov's attack as a personal slight and questioned Daudov's audacity in referring to Prigozhin as "Zhenya."

Chechen attacks on Prigozhin's character may be a part of the Kremlin's efforts to discredit and undermine Prigozhin as his forces withdraw from the frontlines. The attacks notably occurred on June 1, which is both the day Prigozhin claimed Wagner would withdraw from the frontlines and his birthday. Prigozhin had previously complained that Russian state media outlets are banning mention of Prigozhin and Wagner forces.[31] Prigozhin may be finding himself in a more vulnerable position than when the Kremlin relied on his forces to capture Bakhmut, and has likely been attempting to remain relevant in the information space by conducting press conferences across Russia.[32] Igor Girkin speculated that Kadyrov has likely calculated the value in maintaining Prigozhin as an ally and concluded that Prigozhin cannot offer him any significant benefits.[33] Girkin also speculated that Kadyrov is not interested in a total collapse of the current military and political system that benefits him and his army, and so is distancing himself from Prigozhin who is attacking it.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes on Ukraine overnight on May 31 to June 1 and during the day on June 1.
- Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) reportedly conducted another raid into Belgorod Oblast on June 1.
- Russian officials and milbloggers' responses to the limited raid in Belgorod Oblast are indicative of a continued heightened anxiety within the Russian information space regarding the war in Ukraine.
- Chechen commanders and officials launched a concerted attack on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on June 1 in a likely attempt to undermine Prigozhin's appeal.
- Prigozhin responded to the attacks claiming that he will continue to voice his opinions until Russian MoD officials are punished for their mistakes in planning the invasion of Ukraine
- Chechen attacks on Prigozhin's character may be a part of the Kremlin's efforts to discredit and undermine Prigozhin as his forces withdraw from the frontlines.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and northwest of Svatove.
- The tempo of Russian and Ukrainian offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction remains low as of June 1, and Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks along the southern axis.
- The Russian State Duma rejected a draft law that would have granted mobilization exemptions to candidates and doctors of the science.
- Russian occupation authorities announced that regional elections in occupied territories will take place on September 10.
- Ukrainian Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin announced on May 31 that Ukraine is investigating over 2,900 crimes against children committed by Russian forces.

May 31, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on May 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the June 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian military command has likely ordered Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's forces to begin offensive operations in Ukraine following the withdrawal of Wagner Group forces from Bakhmut. Kadyrov claimed on May 31 that Chechen forces received a new order and assumed responsibility over the Donetsk Oblast frontline.^[1] Kadyrov claimed that Chechen units need to start "active combat activities" and "liberate a series of settlements." Kadyrov added that Chechen "Akhmat" Special Forces (Spetsnaz) and the "Sever-Akhmat" Special Purpose Regiment transferred to the Marinka direction southwest of Donetsk City. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) also claimed that assault detachments of the 5th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 1st Army Corps and Akhmat Spetsnaz conducted offensive operations in the Marinka direction.^[2] Kadyrov noted that the Russian military command ordered Russian, Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard), and Chechen Akhmat forces to begin offensive actions along the front line in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts as well.^[3] Kadyrov claimed that these units have already begun tactical preparations for these offensive actions and claimed that "Akhmat" units' offensive operations began before Ukrainian forces launched a counteroffensive. ISW has observed no indications of Chechen offensive operations in Zaporizhia or Kherson as of this writing.

The claimed return of Chechen forces to offensive operations would break Kadyrovites from a nearly yearlong hiatus from participating in high-intensity combat operations. Chechen forces have been largely operating in the rear after participating in the battles for Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk - with the exception of some offensive activities around Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.^[4] ISW also observed Kadyrov's forces operating as a police force in the rear in southern Ukraine and performing localized reconnaissance-in-force operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.^[5] Kadyrov also claimed that 3,300 personnel of the "Sever-Akhmat" Regiment were in Chechnya as of May 8, and ISW assessed that Kadyrov may have been conserving his forces instead sending them to the frontlines.^[6] Chechen units' limited participation on the frontlines alongside Kadyrov's heavy emphasis on recruitment may suggest that Kadyrov is hesitant to commit his forces to grinding offensive operations in Ukraine despite his ultranationalist narratives.^[7]

The Kremlin may be attempting to reintroduce Kadyrovites as the main offensive force following the culmination of Wagner forces and their withdrawal from the frontlines. ISW had previously assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin had been attempting to pressure Kadyrov into increasing the role of Chechen fighters in combat operations since at least Putin's public meeting with Kadyrov on March 13.^[8] Kadyrov also claimed on May 20 to have met with Putin in Pyatigorsk, Stavropol Krai, around the time of Wagner Group's claimed victory in Bakhmut.^[9] The Kremlin did not publish a readout from this meeting, and Kadyrov claimed that he boasted to Putin that there are seven Chechen regiments and four battalions operating in Ukraine.^[10] Kadyrov later clarified on May 26 that there are 7,000 Chechen personnel in Ukraine.^[11] The Russian MoD's mention of "Akhmat" operations in the Marinka direction a day prior to Wagner's initial claimed withdrawal date on June 1 indicates that Putin may have coerced Kadyrov into assuming an offensive role in the war to compensate for Wagner's likely culmination.^[12] The Kremlin may perceive Chechen units as an untapped assault force that can restore Russia's ability to sustain simultaneous offensive efforts on multiple axes of advance. If Kadyrov's claims that he has 7,000 troops in Ukraine are close to accurate his forces will not be able to mount multiple significant offensive operations successfully.

The Kremlin may also be attempting to sever Kadyrov's relationship with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and re-emphasize federal authority over Chechen forces. Prigozhin responded on May 31 to reports of Chechen forces transferring to occupied Donetsk Oblast, stating that he is confident that Kadyrov's forces will be successful in capturing some settlements in the region but emphasized that Kadyrov was not tasked with capturing the entirety of Donetsk Oblast.^[13] Prigozhin also noted that he is not aware of Chechen units' new positions as this information is secret. Kadyrov participated in Prigozhin's blackmail attempt in early May aimed at coercing the Russian MoD to allocate additional military supplies to Wagner in Bakhmut.^[14] Kadyrov claimed that his forces would relieve Wagner forces on May 6 and even directly asked Putin to authorize the transfer of Chechen forces from other directions to Bakhmut.^[15] Putin may have perceived Kadyrov's behavior as a threat to his control given that Kadyrov and Prigozhin had conducted a successful joint information campaign in early October 2022 to facilitate military command changes.^[16] Putin or the Russian military command may have ordered Kadyrov to increase the presence of his units on the battlefield in retaliation for Kadyrov's blackmail attempt.

The official Russian responses to recent attacks against Russia remain likely insufficient to satisfy the Russian ultranationalist information space's desire for escalation in the war. Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov called on Russian forces on May 29 to capture Kharkiv City and Kharkiv Oblast to create a barrier between Belgorod Oblast and Ukraine.^[17] Gladkov later announced on May 31 the evacuation of children from the border areas of Shebekino and Grayvoron raions — including 300 children relocated to Voronezh Oblast — in response to the "deteriorating" border situation.^[18] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on Gladkov's statements on May 29, igniting some ire in the Russian information space.^[19] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin criticized Peskov, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu for their reluctance to address attacks against Russian territory.^[20] Russian milbloggers have complained about the lack of Russian military escalation to secure border areas in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts since at least September 2022, often criticizing the Kremlin for underreacting to attacks against Russian territory and failing to fully dedicate itself to the war effort.^[21] The evacuations and Peskov's comments are largely consistent with Putin's unwillingness and inability to meaningfully escalate the war short of full-scale general and economic mobilization, as ISW has previously assessed.^[22]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military command has likely ordered Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's forces to begin offensive operations in Ukraine following the withdrawal of Wagner Group forces from Bakhmut.
- The claimed return of Chechen forces to offensive operations would break Kadyrovites from a nearly yearlong hiatus from participating in high-intensity combat operations.

- The Kremlin may be attempting to reintroduce Kadyrovites as the main offensive force following the culmination of Wagner forces and their withdrawal from the front lines.
- The Kremlin may also be attempting to sever Kadyrov's relationship with Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and re-emphasize federal authority over Chechen forces.
- The official Russian responses to recent attacks against Russia remain likely insufficient to satisfy the Russian ultranationalist information space's desire for escalation in the war.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northwest of Svatove and south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continue to concentrate in southern Ukraine.
- The Russian State Duma appears to be considering measures to legalize the military recruitment of current or formerly incarcerated Russian men.
- Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lyubinets announced that Ukraine has a new avenue to repatriate Ukrainian children abducted to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 30, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

May 30, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia claimed that Ukraine conducted a series of drone strikes against Moscow on May 30 as Russia again targeted Ukraine with Iranian-made Shahed drones. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) accused Ukraine of attacking Moscow with eight drones on the morning of May 30, and claimed that Russian forces shot down five of the drones and suppressed three drones with electronic warfare systems.^[1] Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyev, however, claimed that Ukraine launched 32 drones of which some targeted the prestigious neighborhood of Rublyovka in Moscow Oblast.^[2] A Russian independent outlet claimed that the drone strikes predominantly targeted areas near Russian President Vladimir Putin's residence in Novo-Ogaryovo and other elite neighborhoods in Moscow Oblast.^[3] Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin stated that several buildings in Moscow suffered minor damage, and Russian sources amplified footage of a minor explosion in the Novaya Moskva neighborhood.^[4] A Russian milblogger claimed that drones flying over Moscow resembled Ukrainian attack drones.^[5] Geolocated footage shows Russian forces shooting down drones identified as Ukrainian by OSINT accounts in several different areas of Moscow and Moscow Oblast.^[6] Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak denied that Ukraine was directly involved in the drone strike but forecasted that there could be an increase in such attacks in the future.^[7]

Russian forces conducted another Shahed 131 and 136 drone strike against Kyiv overnight on May 29 to May 30. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 29 of 31 Russian Shahed 131 and 136 drones that targeted Kyiv.^[8] Senior Russian officials claimed that Russian forces struck high profile targets in Kyiv during recent strikes, likely to appear successful in retaliation for the recent Belgorod Oblast incursion.^[9] Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that Russian forces struck a Patriot air defense system in recent days.^[10] Ukrainian Air Forces Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat denied Shoigu's claim, however.^[11] Russian milbloggers' recent complaints about the perceived lack of Russian escalation in response to the Belgorod border raid and Moscow drone strikes do not give Russian forces credit for the unprecedented scale of their air campaign against Kyiv. Many milbloggers, including high-profile voices like former Russian officer Igor Girkin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin have frequently and recently complained about the lack of full scale general and economic mobilization in Russia, the only feasible measure likely to satisfy the broader information space outcry.^[12]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to downplay the drone attack on Moscow to avoid exposing the limited options he has to retaliate against Ukraine. Putin claimed that Russian forces struck the Ukrainian military intelligence headquarters "two [to] three days ago" and claimed that the Russian Armed Forces continue to respond to Ukraine's "war against Donbas" by striking Ukrainian military infrastructure.^[13] Putin insinuated that the drone strike on Moscow was Kyiv's response to Russian strikes, and the Russian MoD conveniently claimed on May 30 that Russian forces carried out "a group of strikes with long-range high-precision air-launched weapons at main decision-making centers" in Ukraine.^[14] The Russian MoD did not claim that it had struck the Ukrainian military intelligence headquarters recently and there is no available confirmation of Putin's claim.^[15] Putin stated that Ukraine is trying to provoke a response and make Russia "mirror" its actions. Putin's emphasis on past and ongoing missile strikes is likely an attempt to signal that Russia is already actively retaliating and does not need to respond to further Ukrainian provocations. Putin has consistently retaliated against genuine and purported Ukrainian actions by ordering massive missile and drone campaigns, likely due to Russian forces' inability to achieve any decisive effects on the battlefield.^[16]

Putin additionally pushed numerous Kremlin boilerplate narratives aimed at maintaining domestic support for the Russian war effort and villainizing the West. Putin also noted that, while the Moscow air defense systems "worked normally," Russia still needs to "work" on improving these systems – a notable attempt to preempt criticism from Russian ultra-nationalists who have been criticizing Russia's ineffective air defense systems in Moscow and along the Russian border regions with Ukraine.^[17] Putin also accused Ukraine of threatening to destabilize the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and using "dirty devices" – both default Russian false narratives that the Kremlin uses during Russian military failures.^[18]

The drone attack on Moscow generated varied responses from the Russian information space. Moscow Duma Deputy Andrey Medvedev claimed that the Ukrainian forces hurriedly executed the drone attack as part of an information operation with negligible kinetic effects.[19] Some Russian milbloggers used the drone attacks to criticize the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts in April 2022.[20] Igor Girkin used the strikes against Rublyovka to criticize Russian elites who he claimed have “never thought about the country and never will” and will not respond to Ukrainian attacks in Moscow, Belgorod Oblast, or Russian-occupied Ukraine.[21] Girkin also mocked Putin for continuing to assert that the war is a “special military operation,” despite drone attacks on the Russian capital. [22] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin reprimanded the Russian MoD and called on Russian officials to actually defend Russia instead of “sitting quietly.”[23] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov threatened the European countries, claiming that, if they continue to supply Ukraine with weapons, they will not have the weapons needed to defend themselves when Russia “knocks on their doors.”[24]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely attempting to conceal the high Russian losses in Ukraine by artificially inflating Ukrainian casualties in the war. Defense Minister Shoigu claimed on May 30 that Russian forces had destroyed an absurdly high number of Western-provided Ukrainian weapons, including long range missiles, in the past month.[25] Shoigu celebrated claimed successes and training efforts, including by awarding Russian formations and bragging about the upcoming summer military exercises. A Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger criticized Shoigu, implying that Shoigu’s statements are so unrealistic that they appear to be fake to readers.[26] Dutch open-source group Oryx reported on May 29 that it confirmed that Russia has lost over 2,000 tanks and 2,366 infantry fighting vehicles (including over 850 BMPs) since the war began.[27]

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell stated that Russia will not enter negotiations while trying to win the war, supporting ISW’s assessment that Russian statements expressing willingness to negotiate are part of an ongoing information operation intending to weaken Western willingness to aid Ukraine.[28] Reuters reported on May 29 that Borrell said that Russia has repeatedly signaled that it would not end the war until it achieved its military goals and that it has over 300,000 personnel in Ukraine — twice as many as when the invasion started.[29]

Key Takeaways

- Russia claimed that Ukraine conducted a series of drone strikes against Moscow on May 30 as Russia again targeted Ukraine with Iranian-made Shahed drones.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to downplay the drone attack on Moscow to avoid exposing the limited options he has to retaliate against Ukraine.
- The drone attack on Moscow generated varied responses from the Russian information space.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely attempting to conceal the high Russian losses in Ukraine by artificially inflating Ukrainian casualties in the war.
- EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell stated that Russia will not enter negotiations while trying to win the war.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and northwest of Svatove, and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted a ground attack south of Kreminna.
- The tempo of Russian and Ukrainian offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction remains low as of May 30.
- Russian forces made marginal advances amid continued ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks along the southern axis.
- Russian officials are establishing domestic veteran support programs which likely aim to advertise the perks of military service in Russia.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of providing pediatric healthcare.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 29, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, Karolina Hird, and Fredrick W. Kagan

May 29, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on May 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Russian forces conducted another series of strikes against Ukraine with cruise missiles and Iranian-made drones overnight on May 28 to 29 and during the day on May 29. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 40 Kh-101/Kh-555 air-based cruise missiles and 38 Shahed-131/136 drones on the night of May 28 to 29 and 11 Iskander-M/K missiles during the day on May 29.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed in all 36 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles, 30 Shahed drones, and all 11 Iskander missiles.[2] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted all 11 Iskander missiles, and 40 cruise missiles and Shahed drones that targeted Kyiv City and Kyiv Oblast.[3] Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces also intercepted missiles and drones near the cities of Lviv, Mykolaiv, and Odesa, and that Russian forces struck port infrastructure in Odesa City and a military infrastructure facility in Khmelnytskyi Oblast.[4] Russian forces launched a relatively higher number of missiles than in recent series of strikes following the largest Russian series of Shahed strikes since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on May 28.[5] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces began a new limited air campaign in recent months to degrade Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities, but that the Russian prioritization of targeting Kyiv is likely further limiting the campaign’s ability to meaningfully constrain potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.[6]

Russia deployed more S-400 air defense systems (probably at least a battery) to Belarus on May 28. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense released video on May 28 showing a train with S-400 systems deploying to an unspecified area in Belarus.^[7] Independent Belarusian monitoring organization The Hajun Project reported that the train with S-400s arrived at the 25th Missile Arsenal near Stoubtsi (about 60 km southwest of Minsk).^[8] It is unclear whether these S-400s will enter service near Stoubtsi or deploy further to a different location. These systems will likely enter service with the Belarusian military but under Russian operational control. Russia's and Belarus' Joint Regional Air Defense System (established in 2009 and operational in 2016) effectively subordinates Belarus' air defense assets to the Russian Western Military District.^[9] Belarusian officials confirmed that Russian-provided S-400 in Belarus became operational and deployed on combat duty on December 25, 2022.^[10] ISW forecasted in 2020 that Russia would deploy S-400s to Belarus.^[11]

Former Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev confirmed that he is now operating as deputy commander of the Wagner Group. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger published an interview on May 29 in which Mizintsev confirmed previous claims that he assumed the position.^[12] Mizintsev stated that he has maintained good relations with Wagner for the previous 10 years, further substantiating reports that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin used close connections with Mizintsev to secure resources for Wagner while Mizintsev was in the Russian MoD.^[13] Mizintsev claimed to be in Bakhmut overseeing the ongoing relief-in-place operation and claimed that Wagner is conducting an organized withdrawal.^[14] Mizintsev praised the Wagner commanders and advocated that Wagner's structure and management become a model for the total war that Russia needs to be fighting.^[15] Mizintsev declined to comment about feuds between the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner but highlighted that the Russian military has struggled with ammunition provisions and conducting a large-scale mobilization of the Russian nation to win in Ukraine.^[16] ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin likely appointed Mizintsev as Wagner deputy commander in an effort to retain Wagner's access to supplies, and Prigozhin has since promoted Mizintsev as his preferred replacement for Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.^[17] Mizintsev's publicized confirmation of his position and adulation of Wagner is likely part of Prigozhin's wider effort to advocate for more influence following the capture of Bakhmut.^[18]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied former Russian officer Igor Girkin's May 27 accusation that Prigozhin could stage a military coup against the Kremlin by arguing that Wagner lacks the personnel needed to start a coup. Prigozhin stated on May 29 that there are different types of coups across the globe – including a “chaotic military coup” in Sudan – which take too long and result in major conflicts.^[19] Prigozhin argued that Wagner does not have a large enough army required to carry out a coup and claimed that Wagner has good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Prigozhin vaguely implied that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu could stage a coup as he has access to the Russian Special Forces. Prigozhin added that while some individuals in Russia are expecting a revolution Wagner is only advocating for select corrections to the Russian system. Prigozhin's response to Girkin notably follows his response to a media inquiry in which he hypothesizes about who could have authorized the reported ban on mentions of Wagner on the Russian state media, and even considered Putin.^[20] Prigozhin then stated that there is an effort in Russia to avoid recognizing the legitimate heroes of this war and that “the officials-bureaucrats who run the Russian state today must remain the heroes and they are the only ones who can be thanked.” He added that “if they aren't thanked, then they say, ‘Fine, heck with it, praise the president,’” implying that Putin is receiving unearned praise and thanks because of the unwillingness of Russian bureaucrats to honor those who truly deserve it. Prigozhin has dramatically increased the number of direct references to Putin since May 9 – after he indirectly criticized Putin during the Victory Day holiday.^[21]

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning denied a *Wall Street Journal* report that Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui urged European officials to end the conflict in Ukraine before it escalates.^[22] Mao claimed that European officials acknowledged China's “positive role in promoting peace talks” and appreciated China's “calling for sovereignty and territorial integrity.”^[23] Mao claimed that the war in Ukraine is “now at a critical juncture” and that China continues to attempt to work with all parties to resolve the “crisis.” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that European officials did not confirm reports that Li urged them attempt to end the war or consider recognizing Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine as Russian territory.^[24] Kuleba also stated that Ukraine will continue to engage with China on the basis of three principles: mutual respect for territorial integrity, no proposals of territorial concessions, and no suggestions of freezing the conflict.

Russian authorities continue to forcefully integrate dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast into the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) demonstrating the integral connection of the ROC with the Russian state. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that the Russian Bishop of Bronnitsky, Luka, held the first liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church in Berdyansk Cathedral, which the Russian Orthodox Church had taken control over on May 16.^[25] Rogov claimed that Russian Orthodox Church Head Patriarch Kirill appointed Bishop of Bronnitsky Luka as head of the Berdyansk and Prymorsk dioceses of the ROC. The Berdyansk and Prymorsk dioceses were previously part of the Russian-affiliated UOC MP, and their forced integration with the ROC emphasizes the close relationship between the ROC and the Russian state.^[26]

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted another series of strikes against Ukraine with cruise missiles and Iranian-made drones overnight on May 28 to 29 and during the day on May 29.**
- **Russia deployed more S-400 air defense systems (probably at least a battery) to Belarus on May 28.**
- **Former Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev confirmed that he is now operating as deputy commander of the Wagner Group.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied former Russian officer Igor Girkin's May 27 accusation that Prigozhin could stage a military coup against the Kremlin by arguing that Wagner lacks the personnel needed to start a coup.**
- **Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning denied a *Wall Street Journal* report that Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui urged European officials to end the conflict in Ukraine before it escalates.**
- **Russian authorities continue to forcefully integrate dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast into the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) demonstrating the integral connection of the ROC with the Russian state.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.**
- **The tempo of Russian offensive operations in and around Bakhmut remains notably low.**
- **Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front, particularly focusing on Marinka.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast and are expanding fortifications in Mariupol.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled limited Ukrainian reconnaissance in force operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.**

- The Russian military command appears to be introducing doctrinal organization to some of its irregular formations.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on May 29 that will further strengthen the martial law regime in occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is likely not hospitalized as of May 29.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, and Fredrick W. Kagan

May 28, 2023, 3pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on May 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted the largest Shahed drone strike against Ukraine since the start of the war overnight on May 27-28. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 59 Shahed-131/136 drones, of which Ukrainian forces shot down 58.[1] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat characterized this strike as the largest drone strike since the start of the war and stated that Russian forces chiefly targeted Kyiv.[2] Zhytomyr Oblast Head Vitaliy Bunechko reported that Russian drones struck an unspecified infrastructure facility in the oblast.[3] The Russian allocation of aerial munitions to targeting Kyiv rather than prioritizing infrastructure or military facilities continues to constrain this limited Russian air campaign's ability to meaningfully degrade Ukrainian offensive capabilities for the upcoming counteroffensive, as ISW has previously assessed.[4]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that the Russian relief in place operation in Bakhmut may continue past his initial June 1 deadline and last until June 5. Prigozhin stated on May 28 that Wagner's withdrawal from the city may take a few more days because Wagner is not able to transfer all equipment in good condition by June 1.[5] Prigozhin stated that Wagner forces intend to fully withdraw from Bakhmut to rear field camps by June 5.[6] *The Washington Post* reported on May 28 that Ukrainian personnel in the Bakhmut area have observed Wagner forces leaving Bakhmut City itself and regular Russian personnel taking responsibility for Wagner's previous positions in the city.[7] The Ukrainian personnel reportedly stated that they cannot confirm that regular Russian forces are replacing Wagner throughout Bakhmut City, however.[8] Russian sources amplified footage on May 27 and 28 purporting to show elements of the "Nevsky" volunteer battalion and the irregular 1st "Wolves" Sabotage and Reconnaissance Brigade operating on the flanks in the Bakhmut area.[9] ISW has previously assessed that the "Wolves" Sabotage and Reconnaissance Brigade was operating in the Avdiivka area, further suggesting that Russian forces may be transferring irregular forces and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) elements from around Avdiivka to the Bakhmut area.[10] ISW previously assessed that the Russian transfer of these elements to Bakhmut may decrease the tempo of Russian offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.[11]

The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut remains notably low. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 28 that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), west of Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut), and in the direction of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).[12] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported on May 28 that only one combat clash occurred near Bakhmut City in the past 24 hours.[13] Geolocated footage published on May 28 indicates that Russian forces made marginal gains west of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[14] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are counterattacking west of Klishchiivka but that Ukrainian forces maintain their current positions in the area.[15] A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counterattacks near Orikhovo-Vasylivka on May 27, where Russian sources claimed Ukrainian forces advanced up to one kilometer on May 26.[16] Ukrainian personnel in the Bakhmut area reportedly expressed optimism that the decreased tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut may facilitate further limited and localized Ukrainian counterattacks.[17] ISW previously assessed that the decreased tempo of Russian offensive operations in the Bakhmut area and the ongoing relief in place operation are likely providing Ukrainian forces in the area the initiative to launch a new round of operations around the city if they so choose.[18]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to have again indirectly undermined Russian President Vladimir Putin's authority and regime. Prigozhin responded to a journalist's question about Russian state media banning any discussions about Wagner forces, stating that unnamed Russian bureaucrats will only benefit from such censorship in the near term of one to three months before the Russian people will push back and start hating the bureaucrats.[19] Prigozhin stated that Russian officials would have been able to enjoy their historic ability to censor Russian society if Russia had not started the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin then gave advice to an unnamed official: "If you are starting a war, please have character, will, and steel balls - and only then you will be able to achieve something." Prigozhin implied that accomplishing real achievements would let the official avoid lying about the construction of new buildings, metro stations, and bridges in an effort to look good. Prigozhin notably shifted the discussion from talking about unnamed Russian officials to directly addressing a single man. Prigozhin's comments are likely targeted at Putin whom the Russian state media has routinely portrayed as a leader minutely involved with small infrastructure projects and the lives of ordinary Russian people. Putin used to host annual hours-long "Direct Line" press conferences with constituents in which he often responded to inquiries that are best suited for local governments, for example.[20]

Prigozhin may be attacking Putin for failing to give Prigozhin some promised reward for seizing Bakhmut. Prigozhin's previous attack on Putin's character occurred on May 9 – a symbolic holiday that Putin may have wanted to use to portray Russia's claimed victory in Bakhmut as an achievement equivalent to Soviet Union's drive on Berlin in 1945.[21] Kremlin state media compared the seizure of Bakhmut city to the Soviet victory in Berlin on May 21, which likely indicates that the Kremlin was preparing to associate the victory in Bakhmut with Victory Day.[22] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner had effectively captured Bakhmut by May 10 and cleared the city by May 20, and attempted to blame the delay in Wagner's capture of the city on the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) withholding of ammunition.

[23] Prigozhin also claimed that his "Bakhmut meatgrinder" offensive operation killed half of the Ukrainian army, a statement that Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin declared to be false.[24] Prigozhin also claimed that Wagner opened a springboard for further offensive operations in Donbas and sarcastically noted that Russian regular forces subordinated under the Russian MoD will be able to reach the Dnipro River, capture the territories of the four annexed regions, and capture Ukrainian strongholds west and north of Bakhmut.

Prigozhin's jabs at Putin and the Russian MoD - in combination with his bragging about Wagner's accomplishments – may suggest that Prigozhin is frustrated that he did not receive some promised compensation for his victory in the Battle for Bakhmut. The Russian MoD may have deliberately sabotaged Prigozhin days or weeks prior to May 9th to prevent Wagner from capturing the remaining few blocks in western Bakhmut before Victory Day, as Prigozhin suggests. Putin may have deliberately overlooked such MoD sabotage efforts to avoid having to fulfill whatever promise Prigozhin thinks Putin had made to him. Prigozhin has previously stated that if he was given 200,000 personnel, Wagner would have made further great advances on the frontlines.[25] Prigozhin's May 28 statement and his previous behavior may indicate that he had envisioned expanding Wagner at the expense of Russian conventional forces or replacing Russian military officials with Wagner-affiliated personnel.[26] ISW previously assessed that Putin is a risk averse actor who is concerned over the health of his regime and thus unlikely to fully satisfy Prigozhin's radical demands.[27]

The Wagner Group held a reportedly illegal pro-Wagner rally in Yekaterinburg on May 28 despite the reported banning of the rally by Yekaterinburg authorities. Approximately 100 to 150 cars of Wagner personnel and supporters held a procession from Yekaterinburg to a cemetery in Berezovsky, Sverdlovsk Oblast, where the supporters laid flowers at a Wagner monument.[28] Some Russian opposition sources claimed that local authorities explicitly banned Wagner from holding the rally and that Wagner held the rally in direct defiance of the ban.[29] Footage shows luxury cars participating in the procession, suggesting that some local elites may be supporting Wagner.[30] Sverdlovsk Oblast is a notable Russian defense industrial base (DIB) hub, and Russian authorities recently conducted several prominent arrests there of individuals including *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich on charges of espionage.[31] Gershkovich notably traveled to Yekaterinburg to report on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's criticisms of the Yekaterinburg History Museum Director Igor Pushkarev.[32] Prigozhin has also notably feuded with Russian regional officials over allowing dead Wagner personnel to receive burials equivalent to those of regular Russian military personnel.[33]

Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov criticized former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin on May 27. Solovyov accused Girkin of discrediting the Russian military and stated that Russian authorities should have already imprisoned Girkin.[34] Solovyov complained that authorities have prosecuted other Russian milbloggers for discrediting the Russian military but have not touched Girkin. Girkin responded on May 28, noting that Solovyov is criticizing him despite his extensive military experience. Girkin highlighted that Solovyov has not criticized Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin despite Prigozhin's criminal record and control over a "mercenary army." [35] Rumors of an investigation into Girkin for discrediting the Russian military previously gained prominence in mid-April, during which Prigozhin may have tried to pressure Girkin and his patronage networks as part of an ongoing feud to compete for influence and patronage.[36]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted the largest Shahed drone strike against Ukraine since the start of the war overnight on May 27-28.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that the Russian relief in place operation in Bakhmut may continue past his initial June 1 deadline and last until June 5.
- The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut remains notably low.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to have again indirectly undermined Russian President Vladimir Putin's authority and regime.
- Prigozhin may be attacking Putin for failing to give Prigozhin some promised reward for seizing Bakhmut.
- The Wagner Group held a reportedly illegal pro-Wagner rally in Yekaterinburg on May 28 despite the reported banning of the rally by Yekaterinburg authorities.
- Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov criticized former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin on May 27.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces conducted limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- Russian forces continued to fire on areas in Southern Ukraine.
- The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) asserted that Russia is now demanding that Russian citizens make additional sacrifices to support the war effort.
- Russian occupation officials continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of summer camps.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 27, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, and Fredrick W. Kagan

May 27, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on May 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group mercenaries appear to be withdrawing from Bakhmut city to reconstitute and regroup in the rear as Russian offensive operations decrease in and around the city. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian offensive operations had dramatically decreased to two skirmishes in the Bakhmut direction,

and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar attributed this decrease to the Russian relief-in-place and regrouping of forces in the area.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 27 that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations west of Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut) and in the direction of Predtechyne (15km southwest of Bakhmut).[2] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces hold dominant elevated positions north and south of Bakhmut and that Ukrainian forces stopped combat operations on May 26 and 27 to fulfill other unspecified tasks.[3] Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces continue to control positions in the southwestern outskirts of Bakhmut City.[4] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are not conducting active operations aimed at regaining positions in Bakhmut City itself despite the possible continuation of localized Ukrainian counterattacks northwest and southwest of the city.[5]

Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that Wagner mercenaries are withdrawing from the city of Bakhmut and are "regrouping to another three locations." [6] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin reiterated that Wagner forces continued to withdraw from Bakhmut city on May 27.[7] Prigozhin's statements are likely true given the decrease in Russian offensive capabilities around Bakhmut and Ukrainian statements regarding the situation in Bakhmut.

The Russian military command may be transferring Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) forces to relieve Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut city. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces have likely entered Bakhmut city as of May 24 and begun clearing operations. [8] ISW previously observed elements of the 132nd Separate Guard Motorized Rifle Brigade of the DNR's 1st Army Corps operating in the Bakhmut direction after previously fighting in the Avdiivka area.[9] It is unclear at this time if elements of the 132nd Brigade are operating inside of the city, but DNR Head Denis Pushilin previously raised the DNR flag in Bakhmut - which likely indicates that the DNR forces are assuming control over Bakhmut.[10] Pushilin also indicated that DNR elements were clearing the city as of May 23.[11]

The Russian transfer of DNR elements to Bakhmut may decrease the tempo of Russian offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line. ISW previously assessed that the Russian military command has heavily committed a variety of DNR elements to the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.[12] Russian attacks around Avdiivka-Donetsk City area appear to have been decreasing in recent days, which may be connected to the transfer of DNR forces to Bakhmut. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 27 that Russian forces conducted 13 combat operations in eastern Ukraine, of which seven attacks were in the Marinka area (about 19km west from Donetsk City).[13] The Ukrainian General Staff previously reported that Russian forces attacked 20 times in Marinka alone on the day Wagner forces declared victory over Bakhmut on May 20.[14] The Russian offensives around Avdiivka have been steadily decreasing since at least April 8 after the Russian military command attempted to intensify offensive operations near the settlement in mid-March, and the transfer of DNR units to Bakhmut may further slow Russian efforts on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.[15] The Russian military command may be transferring DNR units operating in the well-defended Avdiivka-Donetsk City area to avoid making other directions vulnerable or to ensure quick reinforcements for Bakhmut city.

The Russian military command appears to be reinforcing Bakhmut's flanks with regular formations, however. The UK MoD assessed that elements of the 31st Brigade of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) have likely transferred from the Svatove-Kremenna line to reinforce Bakhmut's flanks in recent weeks.[16] Ukrainian military officials previously reported that Russian forces are transferring unspecified VDV, motorized rifle, and special forces units to the Bakhmut direction after successful Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks.[17] ISW also observed Cossack units operating in Soledar, although these units likely were previously operating in the area.[18]

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of planning a coup against the current Russian leadership. Girkin openly accused Prigozhin of planning to conduct a coup amid the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive and of continuously violating Russian censorship laws against the discreditation of the Russian army and military command.[19] Girkin warned of "mutiny" if Prigozhin is "allowed" to lead the Wagner Group. Girkin noted that Prigozhin ordered for the Wagner forces to withdraw to the Wagner bases deep inside of Russia on the eve of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. He also claimed that Wagner personnel had never taken oaths promising not to engage in combat against Russia or its military.[20] Prigozhin stated on May 27 that Wagner will decide later on if it will fight in Ukraine or in another country, which indicates that Prigozhin retains the ability to command his own army outside of the formal Russian military command structure.[21] Girkin also recently criticized the Russian military command for failing to address Prigozhin's open and vulgar conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), even warning that Prigozhin will "devour" the Russian military officials who "bet" in his favor as he seeks to increase his political power.[22] A member of Girkin's Angry Patriots Club claimed that the conflict between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Prigozhin is developing into a conflict between the Russian military and Wagner forces but that Putin is not paying attention.[23] Girkin's and his associates' criticisms are largely consistent with Prigozhin's continued prioritization of his own personal aims over those of the Russian Ministry of Defense and the broader operational situation near Bakhmut.[24] Prigozhin's decision to withdraw his forces from Bakhmut and, apparently, from active combat on the eve of the Ukrainian counter-offensive is strategically questionable.

Ukrainian officials denied Western reporting that suggested that a Chinese diplomat expressed interest in a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine amidst the likely renewal of Russia's information campaign surrounding negotiations. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on May 27 that he contacted his European counterparts who recently met with Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui and that they denied that Li had expressed interest in a ceasefire that would see Russia retain control of occupied territories, as a May 26 *Wall Street Journal* report suggested.[25] Li Hui visited Moscow on May 26 reportedly to discuss a negotiated settlement to Russia's war in Ukraine, a visit that the Kremlin likely used to attempt to renew a recurring information operation falsely claiming that Russia is open to serious negotiations.[26] The Kremlin previously intensified this information operation in December 2022 to attempt to delay the provision of Western tanks and other advanced military equipment to Ukraine in order to set conditions for Russia's 2023 winter-spring offensive.[27] The Kremlin is likely reintroducing the information operation intending to weaken Western willingness to send critical security assistance to Ukraine ahead of potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.

The Kremlin has established a pattern in this information operation in which some Russian officials express feigned interest in negotiations while other Russian officials simultaneously reiterate Putin's maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine.[28] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin stated on May 26 that the conditions for a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace" in Ukraine include the cessation of hostilities by Ukrainian forces, the end of Western security assistance to Ukraine, the Ukrainian return to a "neutral non-aligned status," the explicit Ukrainian refusal to join NATO and the EU, and the recognition of Russia's annexation of occupied territories in Ukraine.[29] Galuzin's reiteration of Russia's maximalist objectives coincide with Putin's alleged expression of Russian interest in negotiations during a phone call with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva on May 26.[30]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group mercenaries appear to be withdrawing from Bakhmut city to reconstitute and regroup in the rear as Russian offensive operations decrease in and around the city.
- The Russian military command may be transferring Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) forces to relieve Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut city.
- The Russian transfer of DNR elements to Bakhmut may decrease the tempo of Russian offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- The Russian military command appears to be reinforcing Bakhmut's flanks with regular formations, however.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of planning a coup against the current Russian leadership.
- Ukrainian officials denied Western reporting that suggested that a Chinese diplomat expressed interest in a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine amidst the likely renewal of Russia's information campaign surrounding negotiations.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike rear logistics nodes in southern Zaporizhia oblast.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) warned on May 26 that Russian forces are preparing to conduct large scale provocations to create radiological danger at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- The Russian Ministry of Justice registered the civil society group "Council of Mothers of Wives" as a foreign agent on May 26, likely to curb resistance to ongoing and future Russian force generation efforts.
- Russian authorities are escalating efforts to portray Russia as a safe guardian of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 26, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

May 26, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1:30pm ET on May 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces continue to hand over positions in Bakhmut to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and withdraw from the city. Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on May 26 that the MoD is fulfilling its agreement by actively deploying regular Russian units to Wagner-held positions in Bakhmut city.[1] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner is conducting an organized withdrawal from Bakhmut and reiterated that the Russian MoD will fully control the city and its surrounding areas by June 1.[2] A Russian milblogger published footage of Prigozhin visiting Russian rear positions where Wagner forces are allegedly withdrawing to.[3] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of regular Russian forces taking up Wagner positions in Bakhmut itself or that Wagner is leaving the city. ISW has recently observed footage purporting to show elements of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 123rd Brigade, likely previously deployed near Siversk, operating in the Bakhmut area, and DNR forces may be replacing Wagner formations.[4]

Ukrainian sources claim that Wagner forces are still present in Bakhmut and that the tempo of Russian offensive operations around the city continues to decrease. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that regular Russian units have replaced Wagner units in Bakhmut's suburbs, likely referring to areas on the flanks around Bakhmut.[5] Malyar claimed that Ukrainian forces still control positions on the southwestern outskirts of the city and that Wagner forces are still present in Bakhmut city itself.[6] Ukrainian sources continue to report that the tempo of Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut has declined since the claimed Russian capture of the city.[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Bakhmut and in the direction of Predtechyne (15km southwest of Bakhmut) on May 26.[8]

Continued successful limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks may complicate the Russian relief in place operation in Bakhmut. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted successful counterattacks near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut) and Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[9] A prominent milblogger claimed that Ukrainian counterattacks near Orikhovo-Vasylivka caused elements of the "Veterany" private military company (PMC) to retreat up to a kilometer from their previously held positions in the area.[10] Milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces captured elevated positions along the E40 (Bakhmut to Sloviansk) highway near Orikhovo-Vasylivka and that fighting is ongoing in the area.[11] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced towards Klishchiivka and crossed the Siverskyi Donets Canal, possibly threatening to encircle the settlement and force Russian forces to retreat towards the east.[12] Geolocated footage published on May 24 and 25 indicates that Russian forces likely regained limited positions west of Klishchiivka, however. [13] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may struggle to conduct a relief in place of Wagner forces in Bakhmut, and successful limited and localized Ukrainian counterattacks will likely complicate their ability to do so.[14] The decreased tempo of Russian offensive operations in the Bakhmut area and the reported ongoing relief in place operation are likely further providing Ukrainian forces in the area the initiative to launch a new phase of operations around the city if they so choose.[15]

Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile and drone strike across Ukraine on May 25 and 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched ten Kh-101/555 air-based cruise missiles at Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts and launched eight S-300/400 anti-aircraft guided missiles at Dnipro City. [16] Russian forces also reportedly launched 31 Shahed-131/136 drones from the southern and northern directions on the night of May 25 to 26. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed all ten Kh-101/555 missiles and 23 Shahed-131/136 drones.[17] The Kyiv Oblast Military Administration Head Ruslan Kravchenko stated that Russian forces have conducted 13 missile attacks on Kyiv Oblast since beginning of May.[18] Ukrainian sources reported that the Russian forces struck a civilian hospital and residential buildings in Dnipro in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[19]

The Kremlin is likely reviving its information campaign to coerce the West into forcing Ukraine to accept concessions and negotiate on terms favorable to Russia. The Kremlin claimed on May 26 that Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed “the openness of the Russian side to dialogue on the political and diplomatic track, which is still blocked by Kyiv and its Western sponsors” in a phone call with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.[20] Putin’s statement does not indicate that Russia is interested in pursuing negotiations with Ukraine, and the Kremlin has not established any serious grounds for negotiations nor abandoned its maximalist goals to force the Ukrainian government to capitulate. The Kremlin is likely attempting to intensify its false claims about its readiness to negotiate with Ukraine amidst the arrival of the Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui in Moscow on May 26 to discuss a negotiated settlement to Russia’s war in Ukraine. [21] The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported that Li previously urged European officials to end the conflict in Ukraine before it escalates during his visit to European states in the past week.[22] The WSJ also reported that a (likely European, but unspecified) diplomat who spoke to Li explained that freezing the conflict was not beneficial to international interests and that Europe would not withdraw its support for Ukraine. The WSJ also reported that another (likely European, but unspecified) diplomat claimed that China’s main interests are ensuring Russian victory and ensuring that Russia does not use nuclear weapons. The claimed interaction likely indicates that China may be attempting to push the West to influence Ukraine into accepting a ceasefire. The Kremlin is likely amplifying its false interests in negotiations ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive in order to discourage continued Western aid to Ukraine. ISW has previously reported on Russia’s peace negotiation information operations to deter Western support for Ukraine.[23]

The Wagner Group reportedly exchanged 106 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) for an unspecified number of Russian POWs on May 25, suggesting that Wagner may have conducted the exchange independently of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin published footage on May 25 showing Wagner forces conducting the exchange of Ukrainian POWs and Russian POWs.[24] Separate geolocated footage published on May 25 indicates that the exchange occurred near Bakhmut.[25] Ukrainian sources reported on May 25 that Ukraine received 98 soldiers and eight officers in the exchange. [26] Russian sources did not specify the number of returned Russian personnel but claimed that some were from the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet and unspecified Chechen Akhmat formations.[27] ISW previously reported that Wagner has purportedly conducted a prisoner exchange without the Russian MoD’s involvement.[28]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces continue to hand over positions in Bakhmut to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and withdraw from the city.
- Ukrainian sources claim that Wagner forces are still present in Bakhmut and that the tempo of Russian offensive operations around the city continues to decrease.
- Continued successful limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut’s flanks may complicate the Russian relief in place operation in Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a large-scale missile and drone strike across Ukraine on May 25 and 26.
- The Kremlin is likely reviving its information campaign to coerce the West into forcing Ukraine to accept concessions and negotiate on terms favorable to Russia.
- The Wagner Group reportedly exchanged 106 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) for an unspecified number of Russian POWs on May 25, suggesting that Wagner may have conducted the exchange independently of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front.
- Russian forces continued to target Ukrainian positions in southern Ukraine.
- Russian officials are continuing to form new volunteer formations to defend Russian regions that border Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials continuing attempts to erase Ukrainian cultural heritage by looting Ukrainian artifacts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 25, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

May 25, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on May 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on May 25 that the Wagner Group began handing over its positions in Bakhmut to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and claimed Wagner will entirely withdraw from the city on June 1. Footage posted on May 25 shows Prigozhin speaking with

Wagner fighters in Bakhmut and announcing that Wagner began handing over their positions to the Russian MoD and withdrawing to rear areas of the city.[1] Prigozhin reminded some of the fighters that Wagner will withdraw from the city entirely and reconstitute, rest, and train following June 1.[2] Prigozhin also claimed that Wagner plans to leave behind ammunition and provisions for regular Russian troops if necessary and sardonically showed two Wagner fighters who he claimed he will leave behind for the Russian MoD.[3] ISW has previously reported that Prigozhin announced that Wagner would hand over its positions to the MoD starting on May 25 and withdraw from Bakhmut by June 1, but it remains unclear if Wagner will be able to withdraw the entirety of its contingent by June 1 and if Russian MoD troops will execute a successful relief in place.[4]

Russia and Belarus signed agreements formally advancing preparations to deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus as part of a longstanding effort to cement Russia's *de facto* military control over Belarus, though Russia has not yet deployed nuclear weapons to Belarus and their possible deployment is highly unlikely to presage any Russian escalation. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin signed documents on the deployment of Russian non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons to Belarusian territory during a meeting of defense ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Minsk, Belarus on May 25.[5] Shoigu emphasized that Russia would retain control of the tactical nuclear weapons in the event of their deployment to Belarus and claimed that Belarusian aircraft are now capable of carrying nuclear weapons.[6] Russian President Vladimir Putin previously announced on March 25 that Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by July 1, likely to renew tired information operations about the potential for nuclear escalation over the war in Ukraine.[7] Russia has long fielded nuclear weapons that are able to strike any target that tactical nuclear weapons launched from Belarus could also hit, and ISW continues to assess that Putin is extraordinarily unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or elsewhere.[8] Shoigu also announced that Russian forces will deploy additional military contingents to Belarus to develop military infrastructure, expand joint combat training, and conduct reconnaissance activities near the borders of the Union State.[9] The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus requires both significant military infrastructure and Russian command and control over elements of the Belarusian Armed Forces. The Kremlin likely intends to use these requirements to further subordinate the Belarusian security sphere under Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union member states and several other post-Soviet heads of state at the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Moscow on May 25, likely to expand sanctions evasion opportunities. Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov attended the meeting alongside leaders of non-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states, including Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon.[10] Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Secretary General Zhang Min also attended the meeting.[11] Putin, Pashinyan, and Tokayev all called on further development of the EAEU's relationship with third-party countries, including the negotiation of free trade agreements with the United Arab Emirates, India, Egypt, Indonesia, Israel, and Iran.[12] Tokayev highlighted efforts to create new international transport routes to China, India, Pakistan, Iran, the Middle East, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.[13] Tokayev also offered to help Russia launch the 2873km Chelyabinsk-Bolshak-Iran high speed freight railway, a project similar to the recent agreement between Russia and Iran to build a segment of the North-South corridor railway project between Rasht and Astara in order to strengthen Russo-Iranian military-economic cooperation.[14] Putin also called for the EAEU to create technological alliances with third-party countries, likely aimed at securing critical components that Russia is struggling to produce or acquire itself.[15]

The Kremlin is likely attempting to convince EAEU member states and other post-Soviet countries to aid in the Kremlin's ongoing sanctions evasion schemes with China, Iran, and others by facilitating the logistics of those schemes.[16] Putin called for an increase in the number of new joint ventures under the common trademark "made in the EAEU," a measure likely aimed at rebranding Russian products as being EAEU products to avoid Western sanctions on exports.[17] Lukashenko and Tokayev both specifically called for the creation of a full-fledged Economic Union with a functioning common market, and Lukashenko claimed that EAEU representatives are discussing the creation of a common market for gas, oil, and petroleum products.[18] Belarus and Kazakhstan are likely both heavily involved in helping Russia evade sanctions, and the Kremlin is likely seeking to expand and formalize those relationships with the wider EAEU.[19] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin appears to be leveraging its dominance in the CSTO to court member states to procure dual-use technologies that Russia cannot directly purchase due to Western sanctions, and it appears that the Kremlin is attempting to similarly leverage its role in the EAEU.[20]

Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced that Russian officials have created seven territorial defense battalions in Belgorod Oblast as of May 24, likely in order to posture his personal engagement in the defense of Russian border areas following the May 22 all-Russian pro-Ukrainian raid into Belgorod Oblast.[21] Gladkov stated that the seven battalions comprise 3,000 people in total, noting that they are already combat-ready units.[22] Gladkov previously announced the creation of several territorial defense battalions in December 2022, and has likely re-upped discussion of them in response to increased anxiety in border areas following the May 22 raid.[23] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on May 24 that these battalions have a strong presence but are severely hindered by an inadequate weapons supply.[24] The milblogger claimed that United Russia Secretary General Andrey Turchak had urged President Putin to address the legal issues associated with providing weapons to the battalions a month ago.[25] These battalions, if left unfunded and unequipped, are very unlikely to have a substantial positive effect on the security of Russian border areas, however. The publicization of these formations is also likely meant to support ongoing Russian information operations that aim to generate support for a protracted war by portraying Ukraine as existentially threatening Russia.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin held a meeting with representatives of Russian oblasts bordering Ukraine to discuss fortifying border areas on May 24. Prigozhin proposed the creation of additional trenches, dugouts, and fire support along the Russia-Ukraine border, arguing that these structures can provide significant protection against possible military threats.[26] Prigozhin also emphasized the need to strengthen the presence of Russian forces along the border, expand the armament of border guards, and retrain them from using machine guns to grenade launchers.[27] Prigozhin stated that the May 22 raid of Belgorod Oblast by all-Russian pro-Ukrainian forces exposes how Russia lacks the rapid reaction forces needed to protect its borders against military threats.[28] Prigozhin stated that a general mobilization of the Russian population is inevitable, emphasizing the fact that Russian leadership can no longer snap its fingers to fix manpower shortcomings.[29] Prigozhin stated that a general mobilization should begin now in order to provide the people with the necessary training, a process that typically takes at least a minimum of four to six months.[30]

Wagner and Russian forces have notably engaged in previous efforts to fortify border areas, and the recent Belgorod Oblast raid exposed major shortcomings in these efforts. Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov reported on March 9 that Russian authorities spent 10 billion rubles (about \$132 million) to construct the "Zasechnaya Line" of fortifications along Belgorod Oblast's border with Ukraine.[31] Prigozhin announced the construction of a set of fortifications called the "Wagner Line" throughout Luhansk, Donetsk, and Belgorod oblasts in October 2022, and directly criticized the Russian bureaucracy for not supporting the construction of the line.[32] New calls to fortify Russian regions along the Russia-Ukraine border will likely have little substantial effect, with Russian and

Wagner forces misallocating manpower that would be better suited supporting active offensive operations (or defenses in occupied Ukraine itself) by manning these fortifications. Existing fortifications and defensive preparations did little to thwart the limited May 22 raid into Belgorod. Prigozhin is likely taking advantage of information space anxieties surrounding this reality following the raid to build out his own domestic influence.

Russian political strategist Konstantin Dolgov claimed on May 25 that he was fired as a result of his May 23 interview with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Dolgov published a post to his Telegram channel alleging that he was fired from his position with Russian propaganda platform *Telega Online* "because of an interview with Prigozhin" and refuted claims that he had previous plans to leave.[33] Prigozhin used his interview with Dolgov to highlight the massive scale of losses suffered by the Wagner Group during the Battle of Bakhmut, mount scathing critiques against Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, attack the families of Russian elites, and vaguely threaten violence against the broader Russian military establishment.[34] Dolgov complained that he is being personally punished for Prigozhin's replies because Russian authorities cannot do anything about Prigozhin himself and suggested that Russian President Vladimir Putin would disagree with his firing.[35] Dolgov's firing may be part of a larger informational campaign pushed by Russian authorities that is aimed at quietly disenfranchising Prigozhin in an attempt to counterbalance Prigozhin's ever-growing platform, which continues to deprive Russian military officials of informational oxygen.

Russia conducted another massive Shahed-131/136 drone strike across Ukraine on the night of May 24 to 25. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 36 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from the northern and southern directions and that Ukraine shot down all 36 of the drones.[36] Russian milbloggers claimed that some of the drones reached their intended targets through rear areas of Ukraine, including Kyiv Oblast.[37] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted on May 25 that Ukraine has destroyed 357 Shahed-type drones since Russia began using them in 2022.[38] The White House reported on May 15 that Russia has purchased over 400 drones (primarily Shaheds) from Iran since August 2022.[39] The suggestion that Ukraine has shot down 357 Shahed drones since August 2022 is likely inflated—Ukrainian officials may sometimes count drone crashes due to user error or technical malfunction as official shoot downs, so the actual number is likely to be somewhat lower.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued attempts to portray Russia as an effective international mediator by mediating negotiations between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Kremlin newswire *RIA Novosti* reported on May 25 that Pashinyan stated that Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed on a mutual recognition of territorial integrity.[40] Aliyev noted that Armenia and Azerbaijan could reach a peace agreement now that Armenia recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Kremlin newswire *TASS* reported that Pashinyan qualified that statement on May 22 and emphasized that Armenia would recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan on the condition that Azerbaijan ensures the security of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian residents.[41] Russian media reported that Putin noted the importance of the agreement and facilitated bilateral talks with Pashinyan and Aliyev before holding a trilateral meeting.[42] European Council President Charles Michel has also held talks to normalize Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, and Putin is likely seeking to act as a diplomatic counter-balance to the European involvement in Eurasian affairs.[43]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on May 25 that the Wagner Group began handing over its positions in Bakhmut to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and claimed Wagner will entirely withdraw from the city on June 1. It remains unclear if Wagner will be able to withdraw the entirety of its contingent by June 1 and if Russian MoD troops will execute a successful relief in place.
- Russia and Belarus signed agreements formally advancing preparations to deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus as part of a longstanding effort to cement Russia's *de facto* military control over Belarus, though Russia has not yet deployed nuclear weapons to Belarus and their possible deployment is highly unlikely to presage any Russian escalation.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union member states and several other post-Soviet heads of state at the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Moscow on May 25, likely to expand sanctions evasion opportunities.
- Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced that Russian officials have created seven territorial defense battalions in Belgorod Oblast as of May 24, likely in order to posture his engagement in the defense of Russian border areas following the May 22 all-Russian pro-Ukrainian raid into Belgorod Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin held a meeting with representatives of Russian oblasts bordering Ukraine to discuss fortifying border areas on May 24.
- Wagner and Russian forces have notably engaged in previous efforts to fortify border areas, and the recent Belgorod Oblast raid exposed major shortcomings in these efforts.
- Russian political strategist Konstantin Dolgov claimed on May 25 that he was fired as a result of his May 23 interview with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.
- Russia conducted another massive Shahed-131/136 drone strike across Ukraine on the night of May 24 to 25.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued attempts to portray Russia as an effective international mediator by mediating negotiations between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks around Bakhmut as Wagner Group forces reportedly began their withdrawal from frontline areas the city.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces shot down six drones over Crimea.
- Russian forces are reportedly continuing to recruit personnel with various diseases.
- Russian occupation officials continue to announce partnerships with various local Russian officials to improve the standard of living in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 24, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 24, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4 pm ET on May 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Discussions regarding reported Russian losses in Bakhmut have saturated the pro-war information space and are drowning out any remaining positive informational effect resulting from the city's capture. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed during an interview with Russian political strategist Konstantin Dolgov on May 23 that Wagner lost 10,000 convict recruits and 10,000 full-time professional Wagner fighters killed in action over the course of the Battle for Bakhmut.^[1] Prigozhin specifically noted that Wagner had recruited 50,000 prisoners, 20 percent of whom (10,000) died in fighting for Bakhmut.^[2] Russian milbloggers immediately seized on the reported losses, thereby shifting the overall Russian conversation away from discussions of the significance of the capture of Bakhmut and towards amplifying speculation surrounding the reported losses. The nationalist pro-war faction, exemplified by the views of former Russian officer Igor Girkin, commented on the massive scale of the reported losses and speculated that real losses may be much higher. Russian politician Viktor Alksnis simply remarked that the Soviet Army lost far fewer soldiers (15,051) in nine years in Afghanistan.^[3] Girkin stated that he believes that Wagner's actual losses could be more than 1.5 times higher than Prigozhin's claims and pointed out that of the 50,000 recruits Wagner received from prisons, 10,000 died in action and 26,000 reportedly received pardons and returned to Russia, leaving 14,000 prison recruits unaccounted for.^[4] Girkin suggested that a large portion of these 14,000 unaccounted-for prison recruits may have also been killed in action and claimed that Wagner has likely suffered more than 40,000 killed in action.^[5] Girkin suggested that Prigozhin "keep [his] mouth shut" and stop talking about "wild losses for a very insignificant result."^[6] Another Russian milblogger, by contrast, praised Prigozhin for being open about the scale of losses and stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would have hidden such figures.^[7]

The overall Russian information space response to the capture of Bakhmut has fixated on attributing responsibility for its capture and speculating on the associated costs of the operation, thus depriving the Russian MoD of the oxygen necessary to positively frame the city's capture. As ISW reported on May 22 factions within the pro-war information space immediately began arguing over whether Wagner or regular Russian units and commanders should receive medals and commendations for operations in Bakhmut.^[8] Prigozhin's claims about Wagner's losses in Bakhmut have similarly become a distinct point of tension in the information space and have come to define the predominant discourse about Russia's entire campaign in Bakhmut. In shifting the conversation towards claimed Wagner losses, Prigozhin has largely succeeded in further depriving the Russian MoD of the opportunity to claim informational victory over Bakhmut and will likely continue to define and lead conversations on Bakhmut going forward but at the cost of highlighting the huge losses his own forces suffered for a negligible gain.

Prigozhin is likely using his heightened profile following the capture of Bakhmut to intensify his attacks against the Russian military establishment and elites. Prigozhin stated in his May 23 interview with Dolgov that the Russian military leadership has so far failed to achieve the main objectives of the war in Ukraine.^[9] Prigozhin blamed his usual targets, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, for being the main problem within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and for blocking support and supplies to Wagner.^[10] Prigozhin also criticized Shoigu's son-in-law and daughter for being the stereotypical children of Russian elite whose life experience is in dramatic opposition to those fighting in Ukraine.^[11] Prigozhin warned that the Russian elite is fostering a situation that could end up like the revolution of 1917, in which soldiers and their loved ones stood up against the Russian government.^[12] Prigozhin threatened that the Russian public may become violent towards the Russian elite, referencing mobs with pitchforks and alluding to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, a string of politically motivated mob assassinations in France in 1572.^[13] **Prigozhin's somewhat subtle and purposefully obscure threats of violence represent an inflection in his longstanding feuds with the Russian military establishment and select elite figures.**

Prigozhin is also using the perception that Wagner is responsible for the capture of Bakhmut to advocate for a preposterous level of influence over the Russian war effort in Ukraine. Prigozhin reiterated that the Wagner Group is the best army in the world and argued that the conventional Russian army is second to Wagner.^[14] Prigozhin claimed that 6,000 Wagner personnel can each manage his own company worth of personnel and that Wagner could therefore command a force of 600,000 personnel, roughly twice the estimated number of Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine.^[15] Prigozhin suggested that he has previously asked for 200,000 personnel to command in Ukraine and argued that if he had such a force then Wagner could advance from 50 to 150km in different directions.^[16] Prigozhin claimed that he did not receive this force because of fears that such a force would allow him to dictate terms and theoretically "come to Moscow in tanks."^[17] Prigozhin also advocated for Russian Deputy-Minister-of-Defense-for-Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizinstev to replace Shoigu as Defense Minister and for former overall theater commander and alleged Wagner ally Army General Sergey Surovkin to replace Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff.^[18]

Prigozhin is also likely doubling down on his attempts to establish himself as a Russian totalitarian figure who could achieve military victory in Ukraine. Prigozhin called for complete martial law, several subsequent waves of mobilization, and wide-scale economic mobilization of Russian industry to save Russia.^[19] Prigozhin also suggested that Russia should become a totalitarian regime akin to North Korea and close all borders for a certain number of years to achieve victory in Ukraine. Prigozhin has routinely crafted an image to resonate with a constituency interested in the ideology of Russia's national superiority, Soviet brutalist strength, and Stalinist totalitarian control.^[20] Prigozhin is likely advocating for incredibly radical policy approaches to the war in Ukraine to contrast himself with Putin's relatively risk-averse decision-making approach to the war.^[21] ISW has previously assessed that Prigozhin harbors serious political ambitions and intends to cement himself as the central figure of the Russian ultranationalist community.^[22] The capture of Bakhmut has likely emboldened Prigozhin to pursue those ambitions in a more explicit manner regardless of the internal upheaval that it may cause or the danger it may place him in with the Kremlin.

The Kremlin continues efforts to portray Russia as having significant diplomatic partnerships. Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke to attendees of the 11th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues in Moscow on May 24 to deliver boilerplate rhetoric accusing the West of generating global instability and calling on Asian, African, and Latin American states to form a multipolar world order.[23] Putin later attended the Eurasian Economic Forum in Moscow alongside Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, and Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan.[24] Putin also met with Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska (the Serbian political entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Dodik demonstratively supported the Russian narrative about the war in Ukraine by stating that Russia was forced to launch the “special military operation” and that the war is a clash against the West.[25] The Kremlin has previously leveraged energy and military cooperation with Republika Srpska to attempt to spread Russian influence in the Balkans, although Russian influence with its other notable partner in the region, Serbia, appears to be waning.[26] The Kremlin has used previous international forums and meetings with heads of state to portray Russia as having robust international partnerships and to advocate for the formation of a potential anti-Western coalition.[27] Putin most notably tried and failed to secure a no-limits bilateral partnership with Chinese President Xi Jinping in late March and align China with Russia in Putin’s envisioned geopolitical conflict with the West.[28] The nominal support of several post-Soviet states and the explicit support of a small constituent entity is likely far less than what the Kremlin is hoping to achieve with this wider diplomatic effort.

Russian sources continued to respond to the limited all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) raid into Belgorod Oblast. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed at the Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium meeting that Western Military District Border Guards expelled all pro-Ukrainian forces from Belgorod Oblast, killing 70 personnel and destroying an unspecified number of vehicles and armored vehicles.[29] Some milbloggers criticized the ineffectiveness of the Russian border guards and questioned why they would allow the RDK and LSR to break through to Russian territory and mine the border areas over the course of two days.[30] Other milbloggers criticized Russian forces for not maintaining “normal communication and interactions” with border guards, which created difficulties in repelling RDK and LSR forces.[31] One milblogger praised Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov and claimed that he rose to the occasion during the raid by solving problems that civilian officials usually do not have to solve.[32] Gladkov, however, said that he has “more questions for the MoD” and that lessons needed to be learned from the mistakes in Belgorod Oblast.[33] Another milblogger criticized Belgorod Oblast civilian authorities for allowing civilians to live one kilometer away from the “front line” and questioned why authorities chose not to relocate civilians until after the situation improved.[34]

The New York Times reported on May 24 that unnamed US officials said that the US intelligence community assesses with low confidence that unknown Ukrainian elements with unknown connections to Ukraine’s leadership were responsible for the May 3 drone attacks on the Kremlin.[35] ISW had previously assessed that the attack was a Russian false flag operation on May 3.[36] ISW has no additional information about this incident.

Key Takeaways

- Discussions regarding reported Russian losses in Bakhmut have saturated the pro-war information space and are drowning out any remaining positive informational effect resulting from the city’s capture.
- The overall Russian information space response to the capture of Bakhmut has fixated on attributing responsibility for its capture and speculating on the associated costs of the operation, thus depriving the Russian MoD of the oxygen necessary to positively frame the city’s capture.
- Prigozhin is likely using his heightened profile following the capture of Bakhmut to intensify his attacks against the Russian military establishment and elites. Prigozhin is also using the perception that Wagner is responsible for the capture of Bakhmut to advocate for a preposterous level of influence over the Russian war effort in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to portray Russia as having significant diplomatic partnerships.
- Russian sources continued to respond to the limited all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) raid into Belgorod Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks on the outskirts of Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continue to target Ukrainian positions in southern Ukraine with FAB-500 aerial bombs.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on May 24 that more than 120,000 Russian personnel have undergone training since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- The Russian Federation Council approved a law on holding elections in territories under martial law on.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 23, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

May 23, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4pm ET on May 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian authorities ended the “counterterrorism” operation in Belgorod Oblast and claimed to have defeated the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) in the region on May 23. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Western Military

District (WMD) Border Guards units defeated the raid and expelled all “saboteurs” from Belgorod Oblast.[1] Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced that the “counterterrorism” operation had ended but called on civilians who evacuated to wait before returning to the border settlements.[2] Russian authorities later announced on May 23 that authorities evacuated 100 civilians from nine border settlements in Belgorod Oblast on May 22 after Gladkov originally denied conducting formal evacuations.[3] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not hold an emergency meeting of the Russian Security Council to discuss the Belgorod raid but will instead discuss the situation during the Security Council’s planned May 26 meeting, likely in an effort to project confidence about Russian handling of the situation.[4]

Russian forces likely pushed the RDK and LSR forces at least to the Kozinka border settlement and possibly out of Russian territory as of May 23. Kozinka is located approximately 76km southeast of Sumy City. Russian sources amplified footage of Russian forces firing on RDK and LSR vehicle positions near the Kozinka border checkpoint overnight and claimed that Russian forces recaptured Kozinka and its border checkpoint in the morning.[5] Geolocated footage from Russian state media shows damaged and destroyed vehicles at the checkpoint.[6] Some Russian sources claimed that RDK and LSR forces entrenched themselves in the Kozinka church but that preliminary reports suggest Russian forces may have ousted the Ukrainian forces by the evening.[7] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces began clearing operations in Kozinka and Glotovo (immediately east of Kozinka) on May 23.[8] Geolocated footage posted on May 23 shows the aftermath of shelling Gora Podol (about 6km northwest of Kozinka) and Russian infantry conducting patrols between Grayvoron (about 7km northwest of Kozinka) and Gora Podol, suggesting that RDK and LSR personnel no longer hold or never held positions in the settlement.[9] It is unclear whether the RDK and LSR captured any villages on May 22 or May 23, however. The LSR claimed that LSR and RDK personnel continued to operate in Belgorod Oblast on May 23, however.[10]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted raids across the Kharkiv-Belgorod border on May 23, but ISW has observed no confirmation that these raids occurred. Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian and Ukraine-affiliated formations – including Azov Regiment, Kraken Regiment, Territorial Defense, and regular Ukrainian forces – and RDK personnel attempted additional raids near Gorkovsky, Bogun-Gorodok, and Tsapovka, and managed to cross the border south of Shchetinovka.[11] Other Russian sources denied claims that sabotage groups crossed the Kharkiv-Belgorod border.[12] Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces accumulated reserves less than 10 kilometers from the Kharkiv-Belgorod border and expressed fear about the threat of further raids.[13] One milblogger claimed that the Azov Regiment, Kraken Regiment, Territorial Defense, and regular Ukrainian forces all took part in a raid in Bryansk Oblast on May 22, but ISW has still not observed confirmation of this claimed raid.[14]

The Russian information space largely hyperfixated on speculated goals for the raids and on the conduct of the Russian response. Some Russian milbloggers amplified claims that a drone struck the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Belgorod City and speculated that Ukrainian forces aimed to attack the FSB and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) in the raid.[15] Russian sources also amplified a photograph of Colonel General Alexander Lapin posing with a captured vehicle and claimed that Lapin led the counterterrorism operation alongside elements of the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (20th Guards Combined Arms Army, Western Military District).[16] Many Russian sources praised Lapin for organizing Russian forces to conduct coherent counterterrorism operations after the Russian Border Service failed to repel the raids.[17] Some sources criticized the decision to give Lapin command and noted Lapin’s prior military failures such as the disastrous Siverskyi Donets river crossing near Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast in May 2022.[18] Lapin has notably returned to commanding Russian operations in eastern Ukraine after suffering intense criticism for commanding the operations to take Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, and Lapin has not received much praise in the information space since the campaign to undermine him led to Lapin’s dismissal in November 2022.[19] The openness of Russian milbloggers to praise Lapin for commanding the defense against an extremely small and limited border incursion suggests that at least some milblogger factions are amenable to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s tendency to rotate old and disgraced commanders.[20] The Russian reaction to the raid in the information space and in the reported military activities appears to be a highly disproportionate response to a very small and localized undertaking. Russian forces should not have required significant reinforcements—or the involvement of a colonel general—to repulse a raid conducted by reportedly 13 armored vehicles.[21]

Ukrainian officials stated that the pace of fighting in the Bakhmut direction has decreased amid continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut’s flanks on May 23. The Ukrainian General Staff did not report fighting in Bakhmut City in its 1800 situational report for the first time since December 2022, suggesting that Wagner Group forces may have made further advances within the city. The General Staff also reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut).[22] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that combat operations have decreased in and around Bakhmut and reiterated that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in a fortified area near the MiG-17 monument in western Bakhmut.[23] A milblogger amplified video footage purportedly showing Wagner forces near the MiG-17 monument and claimed that there are no Ukrainian forces in the area, however.[24] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces advanced 200 to 400 meters along the flanks of Bakhmut and still control a number of buildings and fortifications in southwestern Bakhmut.[25] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Yahidne (1km northwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Hryhorivka (8km northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (immediately west of Bakhmut). [26] Another milblogger denied reports that Ukrainian forces made gains during counterattacks northwest and southwest of Bakhmut and assessed that a Russian offensive from Bakhmut toward Ivanivske or Bohdanivka remains unlikely.[27]

Key Takeaways

- Russian authorities ended the “counterterrorism” operation in Belgorod Oblast and claimed to have defeated the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) in the region on May 23.
- Russian forces likely pushed the RDK and LSR forces at least to the Kozinka border settlement and possibly out of Russian territory as of May 23.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted raids across the Kharkiv-Belgorod border on May 23, but ISW has observed no confirmation that these raids occurred.
- Ukrainian officials stated that the pace of fighting in the Bakhmut direction has decreased amid continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut’s flanks on May 23.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Pardoned Wagner Group convicts continue to commit crimes in Russia after finishing their military contracts with Wagner.
- Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials announced the start of preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia party.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 22, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 22, 2023, 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.](#)

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4pm ET on May 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) conducted a raid into Belgorod Oblast on May 22. Russian sources began reporting on the morning of May 22 that a detachment of the RDK and LSR consisting of two tanks, an armored personnel carrier, and nine other armored vehicles crossed the international border and captured Kozinka, a settlement in the Grayvoron region of Belgorod Oblast within 600 meters of the border with Sumy Oblast.^[1] Several Russian sources claimed that the grouping then captured the settlements of Glotovo and Gora Podol (3km and 5km from the border, respectively), although some milbloggers disputed claims that the attack completely captured Glotovo or Gora Podol, instead reporting that RDK forces only got to the Glotovo House of Culture.^[2] ISW has not yet observed geolocated confirmation that the RDK or LSR reached Glotovo or Gora Podol. Geolocated footage posted on May 22 does confirm that the RDK struck a border post near Kozinka before crossing the border with at least one tank.^[3] The RDK also posted footage reportedly showing the body of a Russian border guard in a border station, likely from the border crossing near Kozinka.^[4] Russian milbloggers later claimed that Russian troops retook control of all three settlements.^[5] Some Russian sources additionally reported that Russian forces repelled pro-Ukrainian sabotage groups near Dronovka, about 22km northwest of Kozinka.^[6] The RDK additionally posted footage reportedly outside two settlements near the border area in Bryansk Oblast, but the nature of this incursion is unclear and ISW has not observed additional evidence or discourse surrounding actions in Bryansk Oblast on May 22.^[7]

Ukrainian officials noted that they are aware of the attack but denied any direct involvement by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov noted that the RDK and LSR are comprised exclusively of Russian citizens and reported that the groups launched an operation in Belgorod Oblast to "liberate these territories...from the so-called Putin regime" and create a "security zone" by the border to protect Ukrainian civilians from further Russian shelling.^[8] Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Ukraine is observing and studying the situation but "has no direct relation to it," noting that armed anti-regime Russian partisan movements are inevitable against the backdrop of the war.^[9]

The raid prompted a slate of responses from local and federal Russian officials. Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced on May 22 the start of a counterterrorism operation regime in order to "ensure the safety of citizens in Belgorod Oblast."^[10] While some social media users posted footage claiming to show an official evacuation from the Grayvoron region, the Belgorod Oblast Ministry of Emergency Situations reported that it never announced an evacuation and suggested that some individuals may be leaving of their own accord.^[11] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Federal Security Service (FSB), and Border Service reported to Russian President Vladimir Putin on an "attempt by Ukrainian saboteurs to break into Belgorod Oblast."^[12] Peskov also accused Ukraine of staging the incident in order to distract from the situation in Bakhmut.^[13] A Russian milblogger additionally claimed that the Russian military leadership decided to deploy the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) to the Belgorod Oblast border area in order to counter the attack.^[14]

The Russian information space responded with a similar degree of panic, factionalism, and incoherency as it tends to display when it experiences significant informational shocks. Some milbloggers fixated on the fact that the RDK and LSR are comprised of mostly Russians and labeled them traitors to Russia, baselessly accusing them of working under the GUR.^[15] Several milbloggers additionally speculated that the attack was a purposeful information operation intended to distract from the recent Russian capture of Bakhmut and to instill panic in the Russian information space in advance of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[16] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin remarked that he has long warned that such cross-border raids may be part of a wider Ukrainian counteroffensive strategy.^[17] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin took advantage of the incident to accuse the Russian government and its bureaucratic inertia of contributing to the attack and criticized the Russian MoD for being unable to strengthen Russian borders and defend Russia.^[18] The first observed line of Russian defensive fortifications notably runs 2km in front of Gora Podol, and the suggestion that RDK forces managed to penetrate the defensive line emphasizes the weakness of such fortifications at least when not fully manned by well-prepared and well-equipped soldiers. While the majority of milbloggers responded with relatively varied concern, anxiety, and anger, the information space did not coalesce around one coherent response, which indicates first and foremost that the attack took Russian commentators by surprise.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces will withdraw from the entire frontline in Ukraine after June 1 in order to reconstitute and train for about two months. Prigozhin claimed on May 21 – one day after he declared victory in Bakhmut City – that Wagner forces will give Russian conventional forces control of Bakhmut on May 25 and completely withdraw from the entire frontline by June 1 to rest and reconstitute over a two-month period.^[19] Prigozhin also claimed that any reports of Wagner assault operations during that two-month period are fake unless he says otherwise. ISW previously assessed that Wagner forces are unlikely to continue fighting beyond Bakhmut due to severe depletion and the culmination of their offensive capabilities.^[20] The two-month reconstitution period Prigozhin has announced could have Wagner forces sitting out key parts of the Ukrainian counter-offensive depending on when and how it begins.

Ukrainian officials stated that limited fighting continued in and around Bakhmut on May 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that fighting continues in Bakhmut and that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Hryhorivka (8km northwest of Bakhmut) and south of Ivanivske (immediately west of Bakhmut).[21] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reiterated that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in a fortified area in western Bakhmut and that fighting for heights north and south of Bakhmut continues.[22] Geolocated footage published on May 21 shows that Wagner forces advanced towards the T0504 entrance to southwestern Bakhmut.[23] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that fighting is ongoing just west of Bakhmut near Khromove as of May 21.[24] Another milblogger claimed on May 22 that Russian forces attempted a limited ground attack south of Bakhmut near Bila Hora.[25] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin, Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces began clearing and demining operations on the western outskirts of Bakhmut.[26]

The Russian informational response to the capture of Bakhmut has thus far focused on competing for responsibility for the victory rather than discussing the resulting military situation. Prominent Russian milbloggers amplified a document allegedly from the Russian MoD that would grant state awards for the capture of Bakhmut to Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel General Alexey Kim, MoD deputies Tatyana Shevtsova and Ruslan Tsalikov, and Ksenia Shoigu, the daughter of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu – notably omitting Wagner Group personnel and its affiliates, such as Prigozhin and Army General Sergey Surovkin.[27] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that DNR Head Pushilin announced the creation of a specific award commemorating the Battle of Bakhmut but complained that Russia should not hand out the medal to those who did not actually fight in Bakhmut.[28] Prigozhin complained that Russia has not issued state awards to dead Wagner fighters for the Bakhmut effort, and that the MoD had never even awarded Wagner fighters medals commemorating the capture of Palmyra, Syria.[29] Russian milbloggers amplified footage showing a Wagner commander awarding personnel with Wagner's own internal award commemorating Bakhmut, likely attempting to beat the Russian MoD in solidifying its claims in the capture of Bakhmut.[30] A Russian milblogger affiliated with the nationalist, pro-war Angry Patriots Club criticized Prigozhin for claiming sole responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut, claiming that conventional Russian forces defended Bakhmut's flanks and that the 137th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (106th Guards Airborne Division, Western Military District) has supported Wagner forces since the early part of the Bakhmut effort.[31]

The hyperfocus on claiming victory in Bakhmut distracts from the precarious Russian military situation in and around Bakhmut, underscoring the weight of Prigozhin's influence in the information space. The Russian military situation in Bakhmut is particularly vulnerable as the Russian offensive effort in the area has likely culminated, granting Ukrainian forces the opportunity to launch further counterattacks on Bakhmut's already-weakened flanks.[32] Wagner's withdrawal in contact will also likely result in the Russian MoD manning defensive lines with poorly trained and provisioned conventional units similar to those that retreated from their positions while defending against Ukrainian counterattacks earlier in May.[33] The Russian information space is largely ignoring these vulnerabilities, however. Girkin complained that the Russian focus on capturing Bakhmut was a "strategic failure" that resulted in an "unnecessary and Pyrrhic" victory.[34] Girkin criticized Prigozhin, Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov for prolonging the effort to take Bakhmut and distracting from preparations to defend against a coming Ukrainian counteroffensive.[35]

Russian forces launched another large-scale drone and missile strike against Ukrainian infrastructure on the night of May 21-22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 22 that Russian forces launched 21 Shahed drones at Ukraine and 21 missiles at Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia cities and Kharkiv Oblast, including four Kh-101/555 air-launched cruise missiles, five Kh-22 cruise missiles, two Iskander-M ballistic missiles, five S-300 missiles, and four other unspecified missiles.[36] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all of the Kh-101/555 missiles and Shahed drones. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces may have lost the desire to strike Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts from the northern direction with guided aerial bombs due to the downing of two Russian Mi-8 helicopters, one Su-34 aircraft, and one Su-35 aircraft in Bryansk Oblast on May 13.[37]

Key Takeaways

- Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russian Legion (LSR) conducted a raid into Belgorod Oblast on May 22.
- Ukrainian officials noted that they are aware of the attack but denied any direct involvement by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The raid prompted a slate of responses from local and federal Russian officials.
- The Russian information space responded with a similar degree of panic, factionalism, and incoherency as it tends to display when it experiences significant informational shocks.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces will withdraw from the entire frontline in Ukraine after June 1 in order to reconstitute and train for about two months.
- Ukrainian officials stated that limited fighting continued in and around Bakhmut on May 22.
- The Russian informational response to the capture of Bakhmut has thus far focused on competing for responsibility for the victory rather than discussing the resulting military situation. The hyperfocus on claiming victory in Bakhmut distracts from the precarious Russian military situation in and around Bakhmut, underscoring the weight of Prigozhin's influence in the information space.
- Russian forces launched another large-scale drone and missile strike against Ukrainian infrastructure on the night of May 21-22.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Kupyansk direction.
- Russian forces made marginal gains in the Avdiivka area and did not conduct any confirmed or claimed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant reportedly lost power for the seventh time since the beginning of the war.
- The Russian military is reportedly lowering the length of training for convicts in order to compensate for heavy losses.
- Russian occupation authorities announced that preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia Party has commenced in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 21, 2023

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

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Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12:30pm ET on May 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group mercenaries likely secured the western administrative borders of Bakhmut City while Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize counterattacks on Bakhmut's outskirts. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces control an "insignificant" part of southwestern Bakhmut City around the T0504 highway — a tacit acknowledgement that Russian forces have secured the rest of western and northwestern Bakhmut, if not all of it.^[1] These officials' statements indicate that Ukrainian forces withdrew from the remaining areas in Bakhmut except those adjacent to the two highways into the city. Geolocated footage published on May 21 showed Wagner forces raising Russian and Wagner flags over a residential building in westernmost Bakhmut.^[2] The Wagner Group's likely capture of the last remaining small area of western Bakhmut does not impact ongoing Ukrainian counterattacks north or south of Bakhmut, nor does it impact Ukrainian control over the ground lines of communications (GLOCs) around Bakhmut that exhausted Wagner forces would need to reach in order to conduct further offensive operations. Russian forces will likely need additional reinforcements to hold Bakhmut City and its flanks at the expense of operations in other directions. ISW has observed artillery units of the 132nd Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (which was previously observed in the Avdiivka area) operating in the Bakhmut direction.^[3]

Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces lost part of the dominant heights around Bakhmut and noted that sustained Ukrainian advances could lead to a tactical encirclement of Wagner forces in Bakhmut.^[4] The Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade stated on May 20 that the brigade's counterattacks have expanded the Ukrainian salient in the Bakhmut area to 1,750 meters wide by 700 meters deep in an unspecified area.^[5] Geolocated footage showed the Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade striking unspecified Russian forces south of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), and engaging with the Russian 200th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 14th Army Corps (Northern Fleet) northeast of Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut).^[6] Russian conventional forces such as the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade are unsuccessfully attempting to regain lost positions and respond to Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks, actions that are consistent with ISW's assessment that Ukrainian forces regained the tactical initiative around Bakhmut.^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian conventional forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations south of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), in the direction of Hryhorivka (about 6km northwest of Bakhmut), and in the direction of Bila Hora (12km southwest of Bakhmut), and Russian milbloggers also noted the failed Russian assaults on Bakhmut's flanks.^[8]

ISW previously forecasted that Wagner offensive operations would likely culminate after months of attritional urban combat, and it is unlikely that Wagner will continue fighting beyond Bakhmut at its current depleted state. ISW assessed that Wagner forces were nearing culmination when they decided to fight though Bakhmut City. Wagner forces were enabled to continue offensive operations past that culmination point as Russian regular forces took responsibility for Bakhmut's flanks, allowing Wagner to concentrate on the urban fight. Wagner forces began showing signs that they would be unable to pursue offensive operations beyond Bakhmut City from at least late December 2022.^[9] A Russian milblogger claimed on May 21 that Wagner forces have not directly attacked Khromove and Ivanivske — settlements immediately west and southwest of Bakhmut — since capturing Bakhmut.^[10] Commander of the Vostok Battalion Alexander Khodakovsky stated that, "driven in [their] head by the inertia of the offensive, [Russian forces] did not want to promptly recognize the depletion of [Russian] offensive potential and did not take care to set up necessary defenses" in captured areas.^[11] Former Russian officer Igor Girkin stated that all Russian forces are now exhausted after decisively committing to win an unnecessary battle for Bakhmut and claimed that exhausted Wagner mercenaries stopped immediately at the outskirts of Bakhmut "as they crawled" to the city's administrative border.^[12] Russian regular forces situated on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks are also unlikely to push west towards Kostyantynivka or north towards Slovyansk amid Ukrainian counterattacks in the Bakhmut area any time soon. Russian conventional forces will be even more unlikely to pursue offensive operations if Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin delivers on his stated intent to withdraw Wagner personnel from Bakhmut City on May 25.^[13] It is currently unclear if Prigozhin will actually withdraw his forces from Bakhmut, but some milbloggers are speculating that Prigozhin will commit Wagner to a different "critical" frontline at the end of the month.^[14] Russian forces faced a similar culmination following highly attritional infantry attacks in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in June–July 2022.

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated the Wagner Group and the Russian military on May 21 for capturing Bakhmut.^[15] Putin directly attributed the capture of the city to Wagner mercenaries, while noting that Russian regular forces provided "necessary support and flank protection" for the Battle of Bakhmut. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) similarly announced that Russia captured Bakhmut because of Wagner assaults in the city and aviation and artillery support from the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces.^[16] Putin and the MoD likely directly acknowledged Wagner's responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut to avoid a repetition of the backlash that followed their immediate failure to do so when Wagner captured Soledar on January 12.^[17] Putin's acknowledgement of Wagner's role in Bakhmut is the first time that he himself has directly credited Wagner with a battlefield victory. Putin likely took this step because Prigozhin has thoroughly established Wagner's responsibility for operations in Bakhmut within the Russian information space. Putin and the MoD likely sought to mitigate Prigozhin's ability to claim sole responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut by emphasizing that regular Russian forces aided in the effort.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin predictably claimed the victory over Bakhmut City entirely for himself and his forces. Prigozhin stated on May 21 that "it is a total lie" that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) helped Wagner capture the city and said that no one from the Russian MoD was in Bakhmut.^[18] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner practically received no help from the Russian military except from former overall theater commander Army General Sergey Surovikin and Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizinstev.^[19] Prigozhin claimed that the 305th Artillery Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) helped Wagner after being subordinated to Wagner's command. Prigozhin also acknowledged that the 57th Motorized Infantry Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) played a "satisfactory" role in controlling one of the flanks around Bakhmut.^[20] Prigozhin argued that the Russian command will attempt to claim the victory over Bakhmut when Wagner transfers the city to regular Russian forces and stated that the situation will be similar to how the MoD took much of Wagner's alleged credit for capturing Palmyra, Syria, in 2016.^[21]

Prigozhin is likely attempting to solidify Wagner as solely responsible for Bakhmut's capture before the Kremlin and the MoD can craft a response. Russian sources widely congratulated Wagner for the capture of Bakhmut and accepted Prigozhin's May 20 claim — rather than Putin's statement — as the official announcement of the city's capture.[22] Russian sources also amplified footage of Wagner forces placing a Wagner Group flag — not a Russian flag — at the highest point in Bakhmut, likely an intentional snub of the MoD.[23] Prigozhin will likely use Wagner's perceived responsibility for Bakhmut's alleged capture to advocate for more supplies, responsibilities, and privileges for Wagner as he did following Wagner's involvement in the capture of Popasna in May 2022.[24] Prigozhin will also likely use Wagner's role in the alleged capture of Bakhmut to intensify his efforts to establish himself as the central figure of the Russian ultranationalist community.

Russian reactions to the claimed capture of Bakhmut illustrate an increasingly growing divide between the Kremlin's domestic presentation of the war and the ultranationalist milblogger community's coverage of Russian operations in Ukraine. Russian state television portrayed the alleged capture of Bakhmut as a seminal historic event and claimed that the city's capture would facilitate Russian operations to capture Slovyansk (41km northwest of Bakhmut) and Kramatorsk (35km northwest of Bakhmut) and even Dnipro City (roughly 215km west of Bakhmut).[25] The Kremlin likely attempted to oversell the significance of the capture of Bakhmut as a historical victory due to the continued lack of tactical success in Ukraine, with one Russian state media outlet outrageously commenting that Wagner personnel in Bakhmut must feel like "their grandfathers in Berlin."[26]

Russian ultranationalist milbloggers celebrated the alleged capture of Bakhmut but emphasized that "Bakhmut is not Berlin" and that the capture of the city would be simply another step in ongoing difficult operations to achieve Russian objectives in Ukraine.[27] Russian milbloggers responded to the alleged capture of Bakhmut by discussing more immediate possible Russian operations to capture Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut), Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), and Chasiv Yar (12km west of Bakhmut).[28] Other prominent Russian milbloggers responded to the capture of Bakhmut by focusing on possible imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations instead of possible future Russian offensive operations.[29] Russian milbloggers shifted to more conservative expectations of Russian operations as the attritional offensive to capture Bakhmut continued from winter into spring of 2023, and they have largely abandoned their previous high expectations that the capture of Bakhmut would lead to a collapse of Ukrainian lines in the area and Russian advances up to Slovyansk and Kramatorsk.[30] Russian milbloggers' more realistic views about both Russian capabilities in Ukraine and the relevance of the Bakhmut offensive highlight the divergence between two very different segments of the pro-war Russian information space: the more *optimistic* presentation of the war offered by the Kremlin and the more *informed* presentation of the war offered by milbloggers. These growing differences will likely continue to undermine the Kremlin's ability to shape the Russian information space.

US President Joe Biden stated on May 21 that the US will train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation aircraft, including F-16s, to augment Ukraine's defense capabilities in the long term. Biden stated that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave him a "flat assurance" that Ukrainian forces will not use Western-provided F-16s to strike Russian territory.[31] Biden reiterated that Ukraine will not use F-16s in its anticipated counteroffensive and framed the provision of F-16s as part of a longer-term effort to augment Ukraine's defensive capabilities as Ukraine's operational needs evolve.[32] Biden expanded on this argument, stating that the US did not pledge to send Ukraine tanks earlier because Ukraine did not need tanks earlier.[33] ISW has assessed that the need to send Ukraine Western tanks, including M1s, became apparent in June 2022.[34]

ISW previously assessed in January 2023 that delays in the provision to Ukraine of Western long-range fires systems, advanced air defense systems, and tanks have limited Ukraine's ability to take advantage of opportunities for larger counter-offensive operations presented by flaws and failures in Russian military operations.[35] The inevitable delay between the pledge to send such systems and the Ukrainians' ability to use them calls for the provision of such systems at the earliest indications that they will be required, not when the situation becomes dire.[36] Had Western leaders started setting conditions for Ukraine to use Western tanks in June 2022, when the first clear indicators appeared that Western tanks would be needed, Ukrainian forces would have been able to start using them in November or December. The continual delays in providing Western materiel when it became apparent that it is or will soon be needed have thus contributed to the protraction of the conflict.[37]

Former Russian officer Igor Girkin's "Club of Angry Patriots" social movement opened a St. Petersburg chapter with an inaugural event on May 21. The event's speakers discussed their dissatisfaction with the way elements of Russia's "military-political elite" are not trying to decisively defeat Ukraine and instead are focusing efforts on maintaining current Russian gains in Ukraine and holding negotiations with the West.[38] They also discussed how the Club of Angry Patriots is creating an "alternative center of power" that should help achieve the final destruction of the Ukrainian state and the further mobilization of the Russian nation to that end.[39] Speakers also discussed how the Russian elite that formed against the backdrop of the 1990s period of privatization and "the post-Soviet catastrophe" has "rotted." [40]

The opening of the club in St. Petersburg is likely a continuation of Igor Girkin's political feud with Prigozhin and the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group opened its first official national headquarters in St. Petersburg in November 2022.[41] The Angry Patriots Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of supporting efforts to freeze the war in Ukraine in April 2023.[42] Girkin launched the "Club of Angry Patriots" social movement as a new effort in April 2023 likely aimed at protecting the influence of the Russian pro-war faction within the Kremlin.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- Wagner Group mercenaries likely secured the western administrative borders of Bakhmut City while Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize counterattacks on Bakhmut's outskirts.
- ISW previously forecasted that Wagner offensive operations would likely culminate after months of attritional urban combat, and it is unlikely that Wagner will continue fighting beyond Bakhmut at its current depleted state.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated the Wagner Group and the Russian military on May 21 for capturing Bakhmut.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin predictably claimed the victory over Bakhmut City entirely for himself and his forces
- Russian reactions to the claimed capture of Bakhmut illustrate an increasingly growing divide between the Kremlin's domestic presentation of the war and the ultranationalist milblogger community's coverage of Russian operations in Ukraine.
- US President Joe Biden stated on May 21 that the US will train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation aircraft, including F-16s, to augment Ukraine's defense capabilities in the long term.
- Former Russian officer Igor Girkin's "Club of Angry Patriots" social movement opened a St. Petersburg chapter with an inaugural event on May 21.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline but have not made any verifiable territorial gains.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a deep strike against a Russian headquarters at an airfield in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, with a Storm Shadow missile.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that seven regiments and four battalions from Chechnya are operating in Ukraine as of May 20.
- Russian occupation authorities are reportedly intensifying filtration measures in occupied Ukraine to find Ukrainian partisans.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 20, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 20, 2023, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on May 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin declared victory in Bakhmut City on May 20 and announced his intent to withdraw from the city on May 25.

[1] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner Group forces completely captured Bakhmut City on May 20, seizing the last multi-story apartment building in southwestern Bakhmut near the MiG-17 monument. Prigozhin announced that Wagner forces will establish defensive positions before transferring responsibility for the city to Russian conventional forces on May 25. Prigozhin effectively stated that Wagner forces will conduct an operational pause by resting and restoring combat power at field training camps in unspecified areas, presumably far from the frontline. ISW has not observed geolocated footage confirming Prigozhin's claims as of this publication. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are still fighting in a small section of southwest Bakhmut as of May 20. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces continue to hold positions near the MiG-17 monument as of May 20.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not commented on Prigozhin's claims as of this publication.

Prigozhin's claimed victory over the remaining areas in Bakhmut is purely symbolic even if true. The last few urban blocks of eastern Bakhmut that Prigozhin claimed that Wagner Group forces captured are not tactically or operationally significant. Their capture does not grant Russian forces operationally significant terrain to continue conducting offensive operations or any particularly strong position from which to defend against possible Ukrainian counterattacks.

Ukrainian forces continue pressuring Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks. Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that fighting is ongoing on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks in the directions of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), Stupochky (13km southwest of Bakhmut), and Bila Hora (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[3] Ukrainian forces reported on May 19 that they have recaptured approximately four square kilometers of additional territory near Bakhmut, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue conducting localized attacks near Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut).[4] Prigozhin's claimed capture of the remaining blocks in Bakhmut is not strategically significant as it will not allow exhausted Wagner or conventional Russian forces to establish a meaningful springboard for further offensive operations. Ukrainian ongoing counterattacks north, west, and southwest of Bakhmut will complicate any further Russian advances beyond Bakhmut in the near term. Prigozhin's withdrawal announcement, whether Wagner withdraws from the city or not, indicates that Prigozhin does not intend to continue an offensive effort to push directly west of Bakhmut.

Wagner forces are unlikely to successfully conduct a controlled withdrawal from Bakhmut while in contact with Ukrainian forces within five days without disrupting the Russian MoD's efforts to prepare for planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. Wagner forces are unlikely to establish adequate defenses or consolidate recent gains in Bakhmut sufficient to forestall Ukrainian counterattacks by May 25 even if Prigozhin's announcement of Wagner's withdrawal is true. Ukrainian forces are still in Khromove and Ivanivske and are engaging Russian forces in and near Bakhmut. Ukrainian artillery can still target Russian forces in and around Bakhmut. Withdrawal in contact with the enemy is an exceedingly difficult task that the Wagner Group's forces are unlikely to perform well within Prigozhin's five-day time frame. Conducting a relief-in-place while in contact is also an extremely challenging maneuver that Russian forces would likely struggle to conduct even if the Russian MoD agrees to undertake it. Wagner units have shown poor coordination with Russian conventional forces, other irregular formations subordinated to the Russian MoD, and the Russian military command—factors that would hinder a smooth relief-in-place operation.[5] The Russian military command is unlikely to generate sufficient forces to relieve Wagner in Bakhmut and hold its flanks within the window Prigozhin has announced without redeploying Russian forces from other areas. Prigozhin's statement of his intent to withdraw could be a crude attempt to mislead Ukrainian forces into conducting a counterattack through Bakhmut City.

Russian conventional forces likely will still need to transfer additional forces to the Bakhmut direction even if Wagner mercenaries remain in Bakhmut. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian forces continue to transfer airborne, motorized rifle, and special forces elements to reinforce the Bakhmut flanks even as Wagner forces remain in Bakhmut City.[6] The UK MoD also reported that the Russian military command likely redeployed several battalions in the last few days to reinforce Bakhmut despite only having few uncommitted combat units and that this redeployment suggests a substantial commitment to the Bakhmut effort by the Russian leadership.[7] These additional forces could in principle be meant to participate in the relief-in-place of Wagner forces that Prigozhin has just announced, reducing but not eliminating some of the challenges considered above, but it is more likely that they are intended to secure Bakhmut's threatened flanks.

Russian forces targeted Kyiv Oblast with Iranian-made Shahed drones on the night of May 19 to 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 18 Shahed-136/131 drones at Kyiv Oblast, and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 18 of the drones.[8] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that

Ukrainian forces destroyed two Russian Shahed drones in eastern Ukraine.^[9] Russian forces have targeted Kyiv heavily in the past month, likely to produce informational affects with both Russian and Ukrainian audiences. This hyperfocus on targeting Kyiv is at odds with the new limited Russian air campaign's other target: alleged Ukrainian rear logistics.^[10] These conflicting target sets likely further limit the campaign's ability to degrade Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities in the near term.^[11]

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated on May 20 that the United States may agree to transfer modern combat aircraft to Ukraine, including the F-16, on the condition that Ukraine does not use them to strike Russian territory. Sullivan stated the war in Ukraine has "evolved" and that F-16 fourth-generation fighter aircraft have now become "part of that mix" of weapons that Ukraine will need as part of a "future force to be able to deter and defend against Russian aggression as we go forward."^[12] Sullivan stated that any F-16s given to Ukraine – like other Western weapons provided to Ukraine – will be provided under the condition that they do not strike Russian territory.^[13] Sullivan also stated that training Ukrainian pilots to use F-16s is the "obvious first step" and that the next steps are to "determine how to do the actual provision of planes."^[14] US President Joe Biden informed G7 leaders on May 19 that Washington will support a joint effort to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16s and other fourth generation aircraft but did not pledge that the US will send Ukraine the F-16s.^[15]

Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian sources are falsely alleging that high-ranking Ukrainian military commanders have recently died, likely to demoralize the Ukrainian forces and to portray Russian forces as constraining Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities. Malyar stated that these information operations allege that Russian strikes have recently killed Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces Commander General Ihor Tantsyura, Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, and Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi.^[16] Prigozhin also amplified the information operation alleging that Zaluzhnyi might be dead on May 20.^[17] These information operations are particularly absurd given that Zaluzhnyi spoke with US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley on May 19 and that Syrskyi appeared on Ukrainian television on May 16.^[18] Ukrainian officials have denied previous Russian claims that a May 10 strike on a Ukrainian command post in the Bakhmut area killed several high-ranking Ukrainian military officials and that Wagner forces killed Tantsyura while he was en route to Bakhmut on May 2.^[19] ISW has previously assessed that Russian ultranationalists are increasingly seeking to frame any Russian operations as delaying potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.^[20]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin declared victory in Bakhmut City on May 20 and announced his intent to withdraw from the city on May 25.
- Prigozhin's claimed victory over the remaining areas in Bakhmut is purely symbolic even if true.
- Ukrainian forces continue pressuring Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks.
- Wagner forces are unlikely to successfully conduct a controlled withdrawal from Bakhmut while in contact with Ukrainian forces within five days without disrupting the Russian MoD's efforts to prepare for planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Russian conventional forces likely will still need to transfer additional forces to the Bakhmut direction even if Wagner mercenaries remain in Bakhmut.
- Russian forces targeted Kyiv Oblast with Iranian-made Shahed drones on the night of May 19 to 20.
- US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated on May 20 that the United States may agree to transfer modern combat aircraft to Ukraine, including the F-16, on the condition that Ukraine does not use them to strike Russian territory.
- Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian sources are falsely alleging that high-ranking Ukrainian military commanders have recently died, likely to demoralize Ukrainian forces and to portray Russian forces as constraining Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Kremenna area.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- *The Washington Post* reported on May 19 that a Ukrainian commander stated that Ukrainian Special Operations forces conduct raids in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast but that Ukrainian forces do not hold stable positions there.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is incorporating mobilized and conscripted personnel into its own "Veterany" private military company (PMC), leading to discrimination and conflict.
- A Lithuanian official publicly accused Russia of attempting to hold international children hostage in occupied Crimea as "human shields" against a future Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 19, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

May 19, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Ukrainian official stated that Russian forces have concentrated most of their available reserves to the Bakhmut area and slowed Ukrainian counterattacks in the past 24 hours. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on May 19 that Russian forces concentrated most of their reserves in the Bakhmut direction, which has slowed the rate of Ukrainian advances.[1] Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces continue to counterattack on the northern and southern outskirts of Bakhmut and advanced 500 meters on one flank and 1,000 meters on the other.[2] Some Russian milbloggers celebrated the slowed Ukrainian rate of advance and claimed that the Ukrainian forces are unable to sustain prolonged localized counterattacks around Bakhmut.[3] Russian forces on Bakhmut's flanks likely remain weak, however; Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to criticize the Russian 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps) on May 19 for retreating from defensive lines southwest of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).[4] **Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut have notably likely eliminated the threat of a Russian encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut and forced Russian troops to allocate scarce military resources to defend against a limited and localized offensive effort, as Ukrainian command likely intended.**

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes across Ukraine on the night of May 18 to 19. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russia launched six Kalibr cruise missiles and 22 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from the direction of the Black Sea.[5] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 16 drones and three Kalibr missiles, despite the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s claim that Russian forces struck all intended targets.[6] Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Head Serhii Lysak reported explosions near Kryvyi Rih following Russian strikes in the area.[7] Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky noted that the recent uptick in Russian drone and missile strikes, as well as artillery strikes along the entire frontline, are meant to disrupt Ukrainian counteroffensive plans and preparations.[8] ISW previously assessed on May 14 that the recent increase in Russian strikes on Ukrainian rear areas is likely part of a new air campaign premised on degrading Ukrainian counteroffensive capabilities in the near term.[9] Skibitsky additionally noted that Russia can only produce 25 Kalibr cruise missiles, 35 Kh-101s, two Kinzhals, and 5 ballistic 9M723 Iskander-Ms per month.[10] Considering that Russian forces have launched missile strikes at rear areas of Ukraine on a near daily-basis thus far in May, it is likely that they are rapidly expending their stocks of precision munitions, potentially at a rate that exceeds production capabilities.

President Joe Biden reportedly informed G7 leaders on May 19 that Washington will support a joint effort to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16s and other fourth generation aircraft. This decision marks a sharp turn in US policy vis a vis fourth generation aircraft in Ukraine and follows Biden's meetings with various G7 leaders in Hiroshima, Japan on May 19. *Yahoo News* relatedly reported on May 18 that Ukrainian pilots outperformed standard Pentagon expectations for F-16 training time in a flight simulator and would be able to operate F-16s in only four months as opposed to the anticipated 18 months, citing an internal US Air Force assessment.[11]

The Kremlin reportedly spent 3.1 trillion rubles (approximately \$38.7 billion) in an undisclosed section of the Russian budget in 2023, likely to fund the war and maintain occupied territories in Ukraine. Independent Russian news outlet *The Bell* reported that the Russian Ministry of Finance released data on May 16 on budget expenditures since the start of 2023 amounting to a total of 11.9 trillion rubles (\$148.5 billion) with only 8.8 trillion rubles (\$109.8 billion) accounted for in Russia's public budget, leaving 3.1 trillion rubles – over a quarter of Russia's expenditures – unaccounted for.[12] *The Bell* reported that most undisclosed budget items account for defense, national security, and law enforcement, and that some may fall onto social and other expenditures in occupied Ukraine. The Bell also reported that the unspecified spending is higher than in the same time period in previous years. ISW continues to assess that the Russian economy will struggle to meet the needs of the large-scale war that the Russian military is fighting in Ukraine and to sustain its occupation of Ukrainian territories.[13]

Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin announced that he will run for reelection as a member of Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party for the first time, prompting criticism from select Russian ultranationalists. Russian "Civil Solidarity" movement head Georgy Fedorov argued on May 19 that Sobyanin's United Russia candidacy suggests that "all political processes in Russia are now only possible in the pre-existing political party system," that Russia is set to experience "great turbulence," and that Russia's "non-systemic opposition has been crushed."[14] Former Russian officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin amplified Georgy's statements and sarcastically called United Russia the "party of crooks and thieves," a well-known slogan used by Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.[15] Sobyanin has held the post of Moscow Mayor nominally as an independent since 2010, although his United Russia candidacy is likely simply a public formalization of his longstanding relationship with United Russia, as Sobyanin has been a member of the party since 2001. United Russia likely seeks to buttress its own popularity (which stands around 45% in Moscow) with that of Sobyanin, who has polled at 74%. [16] These select ultranationalists likely responded to Sobyanin's announcement to critique what they view as United Russia's attempt to monopolize support amongst the Russian ultranationalist constituency and were likely not genuinely reacting to the loss of an independent figure. The Kremlin may additionally have publicly linked Sobyanin to United Russia to remove a nominally independent figure, regardless of his actual independence. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin will likely attempt to solidify United Russia as the definitive pro-war party during elections in 2023 and 2024, and Russian ultranationalist communities with their own political ambitions may increasingly seek to undercut these efforts.[17]

A Ukrainian source reported that elements of two spetsnaz brigades of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) have deployed to border areas of Kursk Oblast in order to conduct counter-sabotage activities and provocations. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated on May 19 that the 3rd and 22nd Guards Special Purpose brigades have deployed to Tyotkino, Kursk Oblast to prevent cross-border Ukrainian partisan activities, carry out cross-border provocations, and raise the morale of Russian forces.[18] ISW has previously assessed that such Russian deployments to border areas are likely an attempt to fix a portion of Ukrainian forces to border regions and disperse them from critical frontline areas.[19] Elements of the 3rd Guards Special Purpose Brigade have been previously reported near the Kreminna area of Luhansk Oblast, while elements of the 22nd Guards Special Purpose Brigade were reportedly active in the Orishiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[20] It is unclear why Russian leadership may have made the decision to remove such elements from active sectors of the frontline to Russian rear areas, and it may be possible that these units suffered previous losses in recent operations and have been withdrawn and redeployed in order to rest and refit. The deployment of these units to border areas is unlikely to have the desired informational or operational effects.

Key Takeaways

- **A Ukrainian official stated that Russian forces have concentrated most of their available reserves to the Bakhmut area and slowed Ukrainian counterattacks in the past 24 hours.**
- **Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut have notably likely eliminated the threat of a Russian encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut and forced Russian troops to allocate scarce military resources to defend against a limited and localized offensive effort, as Ukrainian command likely intended.**

- Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes across Ukraine on the night of May 18 to 19.
- President Joe Biden reportedly informed G7 leaders on May 19 that Washington will support a joint effort to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16s and other fourth generation aircraft.
- The Kremlin reportedly spent 3.1 trillion rubles (approximately \$38.7 billion) in an undisclosed section of the Russian budget in 2023, likely to fund the war and maintain occupied territories in Ukraine.
- Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin announced that he will run for reelection as a member of Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party for the first time, prompting criticism from select Russian ultranationalists.
- A Ukrainian source reported that elements of two brigades of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) have deployed to border areas of Kursk Oblast in order to conduct counter-sabotage activities and provocations.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in the Bakhmut area and slightly increased their tempo of ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces are preparing defenses by flooding fields in Russian occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev claimed that the Russian military has recruited 117,400 contract personnel in volunteer formations since January 1, 2023.
- The Russian State Duma adopted the final reading of a draft law authorizing regional elections under martial law.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 18, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 18, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces have seized the tactical initiative and made tactically significant gains around Bakhmut in counter-attack operations on May 18. These operations are a continuation of the localized counter-attacks Ukrainian forces have been conducting for some days and do not reflect the start of a major new operation. Multiple Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces drove through the Russian defensive lines south and southwest of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) and northwest of Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut) from the northwest.^[1] The milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces retreated from positions north of Sakko i Vantsetti (15km north of Bakhmut) to positions south of the settlement, but that Ukrainian forces have not yet entered the settlement. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Russian forces yielded 570 meters of territory north of Bakhmut, which is consistent with Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar's statement that Ukrainian forces had advanced 500 meters north of Bakhmut and 1,000 meters south of Bakhmut.^[2] Ukrainian Eastern Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 1,700 meters in the past day, and the Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade stated that the brigade's counterattacks expanded the Ukrainian salient in the Bakhmut area to 2,000 meters wide by 700 meters deep.^[3]

Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces have seized the battlefield initiative in the Bakhmut area. Cherevaty stated on May 18 that Ukrainian forces regained the battlefield initiative and are forcing Russian forces to respond to Ukrainian actions, including by transferring Russian Airborne (VDV) elements to Bakhmut's flanks to defend against the Ukrainian advances.^[4] Malyar stated that Russian forces have deployed most of their reserves to the Bakhmut area, very likely to the detriment of other areas of the frontline.^[5] ISW recently assessed that the Russian military command is reallocating military assets to the Bakhmut area in order to augment Wagner's offensive capabilities and to gain a tactical victory ahead of a Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[6] The limited nature of Wagner's offensive operations in Bakhmut compared to the localized Ukrainian counterattacks underscores the loss of Russian initiative in the area. Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces began assaulting one of the final Ukrainian fortified areas in western Bakhmut.^[7] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official and prominent Russian information space voice Vladimir Rogov claimed that Wagner forces cut the Bakhmut-Chasiv Yar road in western Bakhmut on May 17, although ISW is unable to confirm this claim.^[8] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces advanced 260 meters in Bakhmut and that Ukrainian forces only control 1.28 square kilometers of the city.^[9] One milblogger optimistically claimed that Wagner forces increased their pace of advance following Russian ammunition deliveries to Wagner, though Prigozhin's claimed daily rate of advance has remained largely consistent.^[10]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin admitted on May 18 that Wagner mercenaries are unable to encircle the Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut due to the loss of stable flanks north and south of Bakhmut. Prigozhin accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of losing advantageous positions after MoD-subordinated units retreated from their positions on Bakhmut's flanks necessary for an encirclement.^[11] Prigozhin and Wagner sources have long indicated Wagner's intent to encircle Bakhmut and trap Ukrainian forces but proved unable to do so after the Ukrainian military command decided to defend the city. ISW had previously assessed that Russian forces were unlikely to encircle Bakhmut after Wagner forces made several rapid breakthroughs north, south, and east of the city in winter-spring 2023.^[12] Prigozhin likely anticipated that Ukrainian forces would entirely withdraw from Bakhmut out of fear of imminent encirclement and even offered to allow President Volodymyr Zelensky to withdraw Ukrainian forces from the city on March 3.^[13] The Ukrainian defensive operation, however, prioritized the defense of the Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) west of Bakhmut, which forced Wagner forces into urban warfare and grinding directly through the city itself. Prigozhin's admission further supports Ukrainian officials' statements that Wagner is losing the initiative on the battlefield.

Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated milbloggers are blaming Russian conventional forces for military failures in and around Bakhmut. Prigozhin directly appealed to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov to hold Sakko i Vantsetti for at least few more days.[14] Prigozhin also blamed Gerasimov for the retreats of Russian conventional forces from Bakhmut's flanks.[15] A prominent Wagner-affiliated milblogger stated on May 18 that Russian forces lack the organization, fire support, coordination, and training necessary to defend the Bakhmut's flanks.[16] The milblogger complained that Russian forces allow Ukrainian forces to "drive a BMP [infantry fighting vehicle] for 15 minutes" into the Russian rear without destroying it, with the Ukrainian assault lasting only 16 minutes.[17] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces would not be able to drive an infantry fighting vehicle into the Ukrainian rear without Ukrainian forces destroying it.[18] The milblogger also claimed that Russian airborne forces attempted to occupy territory in the "grey zone" and Ukrainian forces immediately interdicted their efforts with artillery fire, making it impossible for Russian forces to move and gain a foothold in the targeted location.[19] A non-Wagner-affiliated milblogger noted the lack of coordination between Wagner and conventional Russian forces and claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) needs "competent command and control" to strengthen interactions between Russian forces and Wagner fighters for operations after Bakhmut.[20]

Prigozhin's efforts to blame the Russian military for failures around Bakhmut are causing some ultranationalists to accuse him of using the Battle for Bakhmut to satisfy his personal ambitions. Russian serviceman and prominent ultranationalist Andrey Morozov (known under the alias Murz) criticized a Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel for wrongfully attributing successful artillery fire of the 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 2nd Army Corps to Wagner mercenaries.[21] Morozov argued that Prigozhin's claims that Russian conventional forces are abandoning the flanks is another part of Prigozhin's narratives aimed at saving his forces at the expense of other units that deployed to reinforce Wagner forces. Morozov accused Prigozhin of improving his financial standing at the expense of the war while setting up reinforcement units for failure and claimed that elements of 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade nearly all died when attempting to secure the flanks southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka. Morozov also claimed that Prigozhin is blaming conventional units in order to promote himself. ISW assessed on May 17 that Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) are attempting to discredit Prigozhin by accusing him of attempting to use victory in Bakhmut to further his political aspirations in Russia.[22] Morozov's criticism is notable as it may indicate a shift in ultranationalists' perception of Prigozhin.

Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike across Ukraine on the night of May 17 to 18, targeting Kyiv for the ninth time since the beginning of May.[23] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 22 Kh-101/555 air-launched cruise missiles, six Kalibr sea-launched cruise missiles from Black Sea vessels, and two Iskander-K ground-launched cruise missiles at Kyiv, Odesa, and Mykolaiv cities.[24] Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed 29 cruise missiles, two Shahed-136/131 drones, and two reconnaissance drones.[25] Russian forces are likely attempting to use reconnaissance drones after launching missile strikes to locate Patriot air defense systems.

The Kremlin continues to strengthen domestic repression measures likely to encourage self-censorship and prepare Russian society for a prolonged war. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on May 17 amending the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Regulations to expand the responsibility and reach of the FSB.[26] The amendment explicitly states that the FSB is responsible for state security issues within its powers, strengthens the FSB and its director's powers in matters of information security. This allows the FSB head to determine the conditions for FSB personnel combining FSB work and military service. These amendments are likely part of a prolonged effort to expand the FSB's domestic power, and ISW has previously reported on the FSB expanding its powers and involvement in the war in Ukraine.[27] Russian opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported on May 18 that Russian authorities conducted mass searches of residences of individuals allegedly associated with the Congress of People's Deputies and former Russian State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomarev under the accusation of spreading false information about the Russian military.[28] Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on May 18 that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Russian State Duma deputies are preparing a bill to punish "Russophobia" with fines of 100,000 to 300,000 rubles (about \$1,250 to \$3,730), and up to five years in prison, or service in a forced labor colony.[29] ISW previously reported on Russian efforts to criminalize "Russophobia" as another method of domestic repression and censorship.[30]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that NATO may discuss the possible provision of Western fighter jets to Ukraine at the June Defense Ministers meeting.[31] Stoltenberg told German outlet *Der Spiegel* on May 18 that NATO members are "constantly discussing whether modern Western fighters are needed in both Europe and Ukraine," adding that the provision of fighter jets to Ukraine will also require ammunition, spare parts, and "round-the-clock" aircraft maintenance.[32]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces have seized the tactical initiative and made tactically significant gains around Bakhmut in counter-attack operations on May 18.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces have seized the battlefield initiative in the Bakhmut area.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin admitted on May 18 that Wagner mercenaries are unable to encircle the Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut due to the loss of stable flanks north and south of Bakhmut.
- Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated milbloggers are blaming Russian conventional forces for military failures in and around Bakhmut.
- Prigozhin's efforts to blame the Russian military for failures around Bakhmut are causing some ultranationalists to accuse him of using the Battle for Bakhmut to satisfy his personal ambitions.
- Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike across Ukraine on the night of May 17 to 18, targeting Kyiv for the ninth time since the beginning of May.
- The Kremlin continues to strengthen domestic repression measures likely to encourage self-censorship and prepare Russian society for a prolonged war.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that NATO may discuss the possible provision of Western fighter jets to Ukraine at the June Defense Ministers meeting.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Unknown actors, possibly Ukrainian partisans, attacked a Russian rail line in Crimea.
- The Russian Supreme Court ruled on May 18 that Russian military personnel who voluntarily surrender on the battlefield will be prosecuted under treason charges.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to announce patronage programs with Russian federal subjects to support infrastructure projects in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 17, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 17, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces are advancing in unspecified areas on Bakhmut's flanks.^[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 500 meters in the Bakhmut direction in the past day and continue to attack Russian flanks.^[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) made marginal advances but acknowledged continued Ukrainian counterattacks against Bakhmut's flanks near Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).^[3] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied the MoD's claim of territorial gains, however, and criticized the MoD for falsely portraying a retreat as capturing new positions.^[4] One prominent milblogger complained that Russian forces must now react to Ukrainian actions, implying that Russian forces are losing the initiative in the Bakhmut area despite the limited nature of Ukrainian counterattacks in the area.^[5]

Ukrainian officials reported that terrain features constrain Ukrainian offensive operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian Southern Forces Joint Press Center Head Nataliya Humenyuk acknowledged that the width of the Dnipro River hinders Ukrainian territorial advances in Kherson Oblast and called for the information space to "forget" about Ukrainian offensive activities in the Kherson direction.^[6] Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) Colonel Roman Kostenko stated on May 14 that the Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces back from the islands close to Kherson City and stated that the islands have poor terrain, no trenches, limited shelter, and that the ground is always wet.^[7]

US officials reported that a Patriot air defense system is operational after Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian missile strikes on Kyiv destroyed the system on May 16. CNN cited three US officials as stating that a Patriot air defense system is still operational despite the Russian MoD claims that a Kinzhal missile destroyed it.^[8] An unidentified US defense official had previously told CNN that the Patriot system likely suffered damage, but three officials specified that the system suffered minimal damage that does not impede its operations.^[9] Officials did not specify if Russian missiles or debris caused the damage.

The Kremlin reportedly accused three hypersonic missile scientists of treason. Employees of the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mathematics of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science published an open letter on May 15 in defense of three of their scientists — Anatoly Maslov, Alexander Shiplyuk, and Valery Zvegintsev — whom Russian authorities reportedly arrested in the past year under suspicion of committing "high treason."^[10] The open letter also noted that these arrests deter the younger generation from pursuing careers in science, which contributes to a decrease in the quality of scientific research. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the Kremlin was aware of the open letter and that Russian security services are involved.^[11]

Select Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) are likely attempting to signal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin that he must cease his political ambitions in Russia. Prigozhin responded to a media inquiry on May 17 about several allegations from Russian Telegram channels — which are reportedly affiliated with the Russian Presidential Administration and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) — about Prigozhin's political aspirations in Russia.^[12] These channels claimed that Prigozhin is using the battle for Bakhmut and war in Ukraine to become a political figure in Russia rather than actually fighting for Russia's interests.^[13] The journalist directly asked Prigozhin if he thinks that Russian *siloviki* are trying to signal to him via these Telegram channels.^[14] Prigozhin confirmed that he had an interaction with an unnamed Russian senior official "recently" who had accused Prigozhin of deliberately acting in his own self-interest.^[15] Prigozhin emphasized that this official was not Russian President Vladimir Putin but indirectly implied that these sentiments are widespread in the Russian Presidential Administration — noting that the Telegram posts reflect the collective opinion of the bureaucratic community.

The Russian *siloviki* may be intimidating Russian officials affiliated with Prigozhin to discourage their cooperation with Wagner. One of the Telegram channels mentioned in the media inquiry noted that Prigozhin is losing contact with Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin and had a fight with First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko who originally supported his initiatives.^[16] Volodin, for example, reportedly stopped pushing Wagner's agendas to avoid a conflict with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The channel observed that a member of the Russian Communist Party, Viktor Sobolev, originally supported a bill that favored Wagner only to later denounce Wagner as an "illegal armed formation" on May 15.^[17] The channel noted that Prigozhin still has contact with Putin's administration via Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Executive Office Anton Vaino and noted that Prigozhin's fate lies

entirely in Putin's hands. Shoigu is reportedly unsuccessfully attempting to convince Putin to eliminate Prigozhin due to Prigozhin's failure to secure battlefield victories — which likely indicates that Prigozhin's bloody efforts to capture Bakhmut are in fact an attempt to compete with Shoigu for self-preservation.

The siloviki appear to be unsuccessful in their attempts to scare Prigozhin into obedience. Prigozhin stated that he is ready to take on the "bureaucrats" and accused them of attempting to gain more authority while using Wagner to fight the war. Prigozhin also accused unnamed officials of being apathetic about Russian deaths on the frontlines and sarcastically stated that the future Russian defense minister has been in Bakhmut for over a week when responding to a question asking if Shoigu had accepted his invitation to visit the Bakhmut frontline.[18] Prigozhin had been recently publicizing his cooperation with former Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, and it is possible that Prigozhin may be attempting to promote Mizintsev as a replacement for Shoigu.[19] Prigozhin is likely aware that Putin is not entirely convinced of Shoigu's ability to win the war and may be hopeful that a decisive victory in Bakhmut would give him the leverage to replace Shoigu with Wagner-affiliated officials. Both Prigozhin and Shoigu likely perceive this feud as an existential matter.

Russian authorities continue to crack down against domestic anti-war dissent in an effort to strengthen domestic repressions and prepare Russian society for a long-term war effort. BBC's Russia service reported on May 17, citing anonymous interlocutors, that the Russian General Prosecutor's office and the Federal Service for the Supervision of Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) conducted an unscheduled inspection at the European University in St. Petersburg as part of counterterror and counter-extremism measures.[20] BBC noted that the investigators investigated the dissertation topics and personal files of undergraduate and graduate students as well as the publications and classes of faculty in at least four departments: anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. BBC stated that the investigation affected several dozen faculty members and hundreds of students. BBC reported that Russian authorities have been conducting similar inspections at three other Moscow universities since 2021. One of the interlocutors stated that Russian authorities regularly conduct these inspections, resulting in faculty and curricula changes.

The Astrakhan Oblast "A Just Russia" party faction voted out faction head and former Russian State Duma Deputy Oleg Shein on May 16 after Shein resigned from the post on April 18.[21] Shein cited disagreements with federal "A Just Russia" faction co-leader Sergey Mironov — who is notably connected with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin — for the Astrakhan faction's vote and claimed that the party forced him out of his role due to his anti-war sentiment.[22] Shein later quipped that the faction had not yet "invented" the reason for his ousting.[23]

Russian authorities are likely forcefully integrating Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine. Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill and the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) announced the adoption of the Berdyansk and Prymorsk UOC dioceses into the ROC on May 16.[24] [25] The ROC claimed that Berdyansk and Prymorsk dioceses, clergy, and parishioners voted to join the ROC after UOC leadership "abandoned" the dioceses.[26] [27] ISW has previously reported on Russia's religious oppression occupied Ukraine, including the detention or assassinations of at least 29 Ukrainian clergy or religious leaders since the start of the war.[28] [29]

Key Takeaways

- Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17.
- Ukrainian officials reported that terrain features constrain Ukrainian offensive operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- US officials reported that a Patriot air defense system is operational after Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian missile strikes on Kyiv destroyed the system on May 16.
- The Kremlin reportedly accused three hypersonic missile scientists of treason.
- Select Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) are likely attempting to signal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin that he must cease his political ambitions in Russia.
- The Russian *siloviki* may be intimidating Russian officials affiliated with Prigozhin to discourage their cooperation with Wagner but appear to be unsuccessful in their attempts to scare Prigozhin into obedience.
- Russian authorities continue to crack down against domestic anti-war dissent in an effort to strengthen domestic repressions and prepare Russian society for a long-term war effort.
- Russian authorities are likely forcefully integrating Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to make incremental gains in Bakhmut and conducted limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued to target west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and islands at the Dnipro River delta out of fear of planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- The Kremlin continues crypto-mobilization efforts by recruiting regional volunteer battalions and criminals.
- The Russian State Duma adopted amendments to the martial law on May 16 that authorize the forced and controlled movement of citizens from territories under the martial law to the territories without marital law.
- Russian ultranationalists are speculating about the fate of Belarus' independence in case of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's severe illness or death.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 16, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 16, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Russian forces have likely committed to reinforcing their tactical offensive effort in the Bakhmut area despite Ukraine's apparent focus on limited and localized counterattacks. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed on May 16 that Russian forces have strengthened their forces in the Bakhmut area to stabilize the situation, and a prominent Russian milblogger claimed that four unspecified Russian battalions have deployed to the flanks around Bakhmut to prevent Ukrainian breakthroughs.^[1] Russian claims about Russian reinforcements are consistent with Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar's May 15 statement that Russian forces are deploying additional airborne (VDV) forces to defend Bakhmut's flanks, presumably from other areas of the front.^[2] Russian forces have continued to make marginal gains within Bakhmut itself as of May 16, and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to claim that Russian forces around Bakhmut are focused on repelling Ukrainian counterattacks.^[3] The Russian MoD claimed on May 16 that elements of the 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps) repelled 10 Ukrainian counterattacks near Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).^[4]

Ukrainian military officials continue to indicate that Ukraine is pursuing much more limited operations in the Bakhmut area than Russian forces, who appear to be committed to Bakhmut as a renewed main effort. Malyar stated on May 16 that while Ukrainian forces have liberated roughly 20 square kilometers of territory in recent days, Russian forces are continuing to make marginal gains within Bakhmut.^[5] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to use the concept of "active defense" in conducting counterattacks in unspecified areas near Bakhmut.^[6] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevati reiterated that the main objective of the Ukrainian defensive operation in the Bakhmut area is to exhaust Russian forces in the area.^[7] ISW has geolocated footage published on May 16 of Ukrainian positions in southwestern Bakhmut that suggests that Ukrainian forces have recently made limited gains in the city itself.^[8] Geolocated footage published on May 16 indicates that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains east of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), although ISW has not observed any further Ukrainian gains around Bakhmut as of May 16.^[9]

The reported Russian reinforcements to the Bakhmut area suggest that Russian forces are continuing to concentrate offensive capabilities there despite an assessed wider effort to reprioritize operations to prepare for potential Ukrainian counteroffensives. Russian forces have also recently transferred elements of the 6th Guards Motorized Rifle Division (20th Guards Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) to an unspecified area north of Bakhmut, likely from positions along the Svatove-Kupyansk line.^[10] The movement of Russian forces from other sectors of the front to the Bakhmut area is likely a response to persisting Russian concerns about the stability of frontlines in the area amid Wagner Group's continued degradation in the offensive to capture Bakhmut.^[11] These concerns were likely more pronounced in recent days that saw limited Ukrainian gains around Bakhmut and may have prompted further Russian concentration on the tactical offensive effort in the area. The reinforcements are also likely meant to enhance Wagner's ability to capture the remainder of Bakhmut rapidly and present a Russian tactical victory before possible setbacks during a Ukrainian counteroffensive operation. ISW assesses that the Russian military command likely decided to reprioritize operations and sustainment efforts in recent weeks to prepare for potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, although the continued concentration on Bakhmut may suggest that immediate tactical concerns could be undermining the larger effort.^[12]

Russia conducted another large-scale drone and missile strike on the night of May 15 to 16. Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces launched six Kh-47 Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missiles from six MiG-31K aircraft at Kyiv, as well as nine Kalibr cruise missiles and 10 land-based S-400 and Iskander-M missiles at other rear areas of Ukraine.^[13] Ukrainian air defense shot down all missiles, including all six Kinzhals (repeatedly touted by Russian forces as unstoppable) and nine total drones, including six Shahed-131/136s.^[14] It is unclear which systems Ukrainian forces used to shoot down the Kinzhals, but Ukrainian officials previously attributed the defeat of a Kinzhal missile to US-provided Patriot air defense system on May 4.^[15] Ukrainian Joint Forces Commander Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev noted that the missile strike on Kyiv is the eighth in the month of May alone.^[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) notably claimed that one of the Kinzhals struck a Patriot air defense system in Kyiv.^[17] An unidentified US defense official told CNN that the Patriot system has likely suffered damage but has not been destroyed and that the US is still assessing the extent of the damage.^[18]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin attempted to downplay his reported cooperation with Ukrainian intelligence on May 15. Prigozhin responded to a media inquiry about leaked US intelligence report published in *The Washington Post* that revealed that he attempted to disclose positions of Russian conventional forces to Ukrainian intelligence in exchange for Ukraine's withdrawal from Bakhmut.^[19] Prigozhin stated that "in any war exchanges are made, and this is not a secret for the warring parties" in an attempt to downplay his reported connections with the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR).^[20] Prigozhin argued that information about troop positions is "not secretive at all" in modern warfare due to the use of satellite imagery. Prigozhin also paradoxically attempted to deny the validity of the leaked US intelligence documents, claiming that a junior US officer would have not had access to such secret documents. GUR Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Ukraine will not comment on the leaked document.^[21]

The Wagner Group's continued glorification and normalization of violence is evident in a widely circulated video purportedly showing a killed American volunteer in Bakhmut. A Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channel posted footage on May 16 of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and former Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev showing the documents and body of an American volunteer serving with the Ukrainian military.^[22] Prigozhin claimed that he would give the body to US authorities because he likely died a worthy death in war.^[23] Prigozhin's video emphasizes Wagner's continual promotion of brutality and glorification of war, as the video appeared to showcase Wagner gloating over the

death of an American and amplified the graphic nature of his death. ISW previously reported on Wagner's promotion of violence through the use of widely-shared graphic video footage.[24] A US State Department spokesperson stated that the State Department is "aware of the reports" and "seeking additional information."[25]

Russia and Iran continue efforts to strengthen bilateral military-economic cooperation. Iranian state-run news agency IRNA reported on May 16 that Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali announced that Russia and Iran will sign an agreement on the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway line during Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak's visit to Tehran on May 16 and 17.[26] This agreement will reportedly advance the completion of Iran's North-South corridor project by completing a 162km link between the Iranian cities of Rasht and Astara and will create a connection between St. Petersburg and the Persian Gulf.[27] The completion of this sector has been a long-standing Iranian line of effort, partially aimed at strengthening Iran's domestic economy and facilitating sanctions evasion efforts. Both Russia and Iran are taking additional steps to further bilateral military cooperation. The White House reported on May 15 that Russia seeks to buy additional drones from Iran after having used most of the 400 Iranian drones purchased since August 2022 in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure.[28] Iranian media also reported on May 13 that Iran will receive its first shipment of Russian Su-35 multi-role fighter aircraft in the coming week.[29] Moscow will likely continue to pursue mutually beneficial military-economic programs in order to ensure continued Iranian material support for Russian operations in Ukraine.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) proposed a draft regulatory act that would allow FSB officers to conduct searches without a court order, likely to support the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to strengthen domestic repression. The draft regulatory legal act would allow FSB officers to conduct operational search activities not associated with an ongoing criminal case without a court order in instances "that are urgent and may lead to the commission of a serious ...crime." [30] FSB officers would also be allowed to conduct searches without court orders in connection with "events or actions that pose a threat to the state, military, economic, information, or environmental security of Russia." [31] ISW has previously assessed that the FSB appears to be currently conducting an overhaul of domestic security organs, and the new regulatory act is likely meant to augment these efforts.[32] The Kremlin has recently supported laws strengthening punishments for trespassing at facilities run by certain federal bodies, for the misappropriation of Russian military assets, and for the discreditation of all Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine to expand pretexts for the arrests of Russian citizens and the removal of officials who have fallen out of favor.[33] The FSB's involvement in ongoing overhauls and the increasingly broad regulations to conduct searches suggest that the Kremlin is preparing for the FSB to be the internal security organ that would conduct a wider domestic crackdown.

Russian forces reportedly shut down another Ukrainian evangelical Christian church in Mariupol likely as part of a wider systematic religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine. Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported that Russian forces seized the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church of the Holy Trinity in Mariupol and are using the church to house 10 to 30 Russian servicemen.[34] ISW reported on April 9 that Protestants suffered two-thirds of all of the reported religious repression events in occupied Mariupol.[35] ISW identified that Russian occupation officials most commonly persecute members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Protestants, particularly evangelical Baptists.[36]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have likely committed to reinforcing their tactical offensive effort in the Bakhmut area despite Ukraine's apparent focus on limited and localized counterattacks.
- The reported Russian reinforcements to the Bakhmut area suggest that Russian forces are continuing to concentrate offensive capabilities there despite an assessed wider effort to reprioritize operations to prepare for potential Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Russia conducted another large-scale drone and missile strike on the night of May 15 to 16.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin attempted to downplay his reported cooperation with Ukrainian intelligence on May 15.
- The Wagner Group's continued glorification and normalization of violence is evident in a widely circulated video purportedly showing a killed American volunteer in Bakhmut.
- Russia and Iran continue efforts to strengthen bilateral military-economic cooperation.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) proposed a draft regulatory act that would allow FSB officers to conduct searches without a court order, likely to support the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to strengthen domestic repression.
- Russian forces reportedly shut down another Ukrainian evangelical Christian church in Mariupol likely as part of a systematic religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian forces are reportedly deploying additional manpower and equipment from Belarus to reinforce their positions in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremmina line.
- Russian forces have made marginal gains within Bakhmut as of May 16 and continued limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces are continuing to panic about maintaining their positions in the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast ahead of anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- The Kremlin continues to pass legislation that provides benefits to participants of the war and their families in order to incentivize military service.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to consolidate the economic subordination of occupied areas of Ukraine into the Russian economy.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 15, 2023

[Read the full report here](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 15, 2023, 6:35pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 1pm ET on May 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Leaked US intelligence accessed by *The Washington Post* indicates that Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin offered to disclose the locations of Russian positions to Ukrainian intelligence in exchange for Bakhmut.^[1] *The Washington Post* reported on May 15 that Prigozhin offered the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) information about Russian troop positions in exchange for a Ukrainian withdrawal from Bakhmut, and two Ukrainian unnamed officials confirmed that Prigozhin had spoken to GUR officials on numerous occasions. GUR officials reportedly rejected Prigozhin's offer because they did not trust Prigozhin, and some documents indicate that Kyiv suspects that the Kremlin is aware of Prigozhin's communication with Ukrainian intelligence. *The Washington Post* reported that Prigozhin urged Ukrainian officials to attack Russian forces and revealed the problems that the Russian forces are facing with morale and ammunition stocks. *The Washington Post* published an interview with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on May 13 about GUR Chief Major General Kyrylo Budanov's interactions with Prigozhin and his operatives in Africa in which Zelensky did not confirm Ukraine's contacts with Prigozhin.^[2]

The reports of Prigozhin's offers to cooperate with Ukrainian intelligence triggered a mixed response within Russia. Prigozhin originally responded to Zelensky's interview on May 14, sarcastically stating that he can "confirm this information" because Wagner "has nothing to hide from foreign special services" and that he and Budanov are "still in Africa."^[3] Prigozhin's later accused *The Washington Post* of spreading fake information and claimed that unnamed figures warned him about the efforts to discredit him using fake information.^[4] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov dismissed the allegations on May 15 and stated that, although he cannot comment on the information, it "looks like yet another hoax."^[5] Russian milbloggers – including one of Prigozhin's enemies, former Russian officer Igor Girkin – claimed that they do not believe that Prigozhin would cooperate with Ukrainian intelligence.^[6] State Duma Parliamentarian Viktor Sobolev warned that mobilized servicemen who decide to join the ranks of Wagner private military company (PMC) will face 10 to 15 years in prison because Wagner is an illegal armed formation within Russia.^[7] It is unclear if Sobolev's comments were made in response to the allegations, since Sobolev is an avid critic of Prigozhin and the Wagner forces.^[8]

Prigozhin's reported efforts to cooperate with Ukrainian intelligence would have been part of his feud with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) rather than an attack on Russian President Vladimir Putin. ISW assessed on March 12 that Prigozhin is competing with the Russian MoD for Putin's favor but had unintentionally alarmed Putin with his military-political ambitions.^[9] Prigozhin's reported outreach to Ukrainian intelligence would likely have been part of an effort to win Putin's favor, in fact, by facilitating a rapid Wagner victory in Bakhmut while harming Russian conventional forces behind the scenes. Prigozhin recently retracted his May 9 comments that indirectly mocked Putin, further indicating that Prigozhin is aware of his dependence on Putin and does not mean to antagonize him.^[10]

The allegations are unlikely to cause the Kremlin to remove Prigozhin in the near term but can contribute to efforts to discredit Prigozhin. The Kremlin likely suspects or is aware of Prigozhin's reported communications with Ukrainian intelligence and likely was not blindsided by *The Washington Post* report or the leaked US intelligence documents. Russian officials had reportedly threatened Prigozhin with treason if he were to act on his attempt to blackmail the MoD into providing him more ammunition by threatening to withdraw from Bakhmut. The Kremlin is likely preparing mechanisms to discredit Prigozhin as a traitor.^[11] Unnamed Kremlin sources revealed that the Russian Presidential Administration is preparing an information operation to publicly discredit Prigozhin but noted that the Kremlin is unlikely to threaten Prigozhin while Wagner forces are on the frontlines.^[12] Prigozhin commands the Wagner forces in Donbas, and his removal would disrupt the Russian lines in Bakhmut – a risk that Putin is unlikely to take. The Kremlin is also unable easily to publicly remove and replace Prigozhin as the de facto head of Wagner because Wagner is an independent company and Prigozhin holds no official position in the Russian government. Removing Prigozhin from his control of Wagner would ironically require asserting direct Kremlin control of the mercenary group from which Putin has been at pains to maintain formal distance.

Ukrainian officials acknowledged limited Ukrainian battlefield successes during recent localized counterattacks in and around Bakhmut. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on May 15 that the Ukrainian forces made unspecified advances in and around Bakhmut in the past several days. Malyar added that Russian forces are deploying airborne (VDV) forces to defend Bakhmut's flanks, presumably from other areas of the front.[13] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi characterized the localized Ukrainian counterattacks as the first successes in Ukraine's overall defense of Bakhmut and noted that this operation must be perceived as only a partial success.[14] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated on May 14 that Ukrainian forces advanced 150-600 meters in various directions in the Bakhmut area and that Russian forces continue efforts to complete the capture of Bakhmut and defend the occupied territories.[15]

Russian milbloggers uniformly attacked a proposal for “military censorship,” further indicating that the community is highly motivated to defend its privileged position within the Russian information space. State Duma Deputy Viktor Sobolev proposed on May 15 that military correspondents' reports about the situation in Ukraine should be subject to “military censorship” and that the lack of censorship has led to the spread of false information and panic.[16] Russian milbloggers widely criticized Sobolev for the supposed illegality and impracticality of the proposal, arguing that “military censorship” would be incongruous with Russia’s need to fill the information space with pro-Russian sources against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.[17] State Duma Deputy Oleg Matveyevich amplified an article by Russian political scientist Pavel Daniilin on May 14 accusing the Russian milbloggers of promoting panicky false stories about Russian retreats and problems with the Russian MoD.[18] Daniilin suggested that the milbloggers’ actions constitute acts of high treason and stated that “during the Great Patriotic War, those who [sowed] panic … were put against the wall.”[19] Russian milblogger and Human Rights Council member Alexander “Sasha” Kots refuted Daniilin’s points and launched a series of critiques against Matveyevich that other milbloggers amplified.[20] Russian milbloggers in both instances highlighted their alleged achievements and the importance of the “patriotic segment of Telegram” in bringing attention to acute problems and moving Russia closer to victory.[21]

Select Russian officials have previously called for the censorship of Telegram and the milbloggers, although ISW assesses that Putin is unlikely to approve such a measure because the Kremlin is attempting to use the wider ultranationalist community’s established networks to recruit volunteers and generate social support for the war.[22] The rapid and unified response from milbloggers suggests that the community perceives itself as a unitary civil society entity, one interested in defending its increasingly singular privilege in being able to criticize the conduct of the Russian war in Ukraine despite its internal factions and disagreements.

The Russian MoD claimed that it intercepted a Ukrainian Storm Shadow missile for the first time on May 15.[23] The MoD made this claim on the third day of four days of claimed Ukrainian Storm Shadow strikes against the Russian military assets in Luhansk City, roughly 80-100 kilometers behind the frontline.[24] A Russian milblogger expressed concern that Ukraine’s use of the missile can severely impact the situation on the frontlines because the only way Russian forces can counter the Storm Shadows is to destroy the aircraft carrying the missiles.[25]

The Kremlin has reportedly banned high-ranking officials from resigning during the war in Ukraine, likely in an attempt to maintain stability within domestic security organs, government bodies, and the Russian military command. Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Isotrii* (*iStories*) reported on May 15 that a former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer and sources close to an unnamed regional governor and the presidential administration stated that the Kremlin threatened civil servants in security organs and government bodies with criminal prosecution for trying to defy the ban.[26] The Kremlin reportedly instituted the ban because many officials wanted to leave their positions after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, although *iStories*’ sources emphasized that the informal and illegal nature of the ban may allow for exceptions.[27] The Kremlin may be attempting to stop Russian officials from resigning in protest to advance their own objectives. ISW previously reported that former Central Military District (CMD) commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin and Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky reportedly resigned due to intense public criticism and in protest of conditions at the front, respectively.[28] Teplinsky likely used the fallout from his resignation to advocate for a leading military command position in Ukraine, a scenario that the Kremlin may attempt to avoid in the future by applying the reported ban more broadly.[29]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on May 14 and 15 confirming the provision of more Western military aid. The Ukrainian and French governments issued a joint statement on May 15 announcing that France will train and equip “several” Ukrainian battalions with “tens” of armored vehicles and light tanks, including the AMX-10RC.[30] The joint statement reiterated that the French government would continue providing political, financial, humanitarian, and military aid to Ukraine “for as long as it takes.” The UK government confirmed on May 15 that Sunak will announce another round of military aid to Ukraine, including the provision of unspecified long-range attack drones with ranges of over 200 kilometers, and will deliver them to Ukraine over the coming months.[31] Sunak announced that the UK will begin developing a program to train Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter jets and will begin training an initial cohort of pilots over the summer.

Key Takeaways

- Leaked US intelligence accessed by *The Washington Post* indicates that Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin offered to disclose the locations of Russian positions to Ukrainian intelligence in exchange for Bakhmut.

- Ukrainian officials acknowledged limited Ukrainian battlefield successes during recent localized counterattacks in and around Bakhmut.
- Russian milbloggers uniformly attacked a proposal for “military censorship,” further indicating that the community is highly motivated to defend its privileged position within the Russian information space.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that it intercepted a Ukrainian Storm Shadow missile for the first time on May 15.
- The Kremlin has reportedly banned high-ranking officials from resigning during the war in Ukraine, likely in an attempt to maintain stability within domestic security organs, government bodies, and the Russian military command.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on May 14 and 15 confirming the provision of more Western military aid.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Masyutivka, Kharkiv Oblast and established a bridgehead on the west bank of the Oskil River, but ISW has observed no visual confirmation of these claims.
- Russian forces continued to launch ground assaults in and around Bakhmut and conducted limited offensive operations near Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that approximately 152,000 Russian military personnel in southern Ukraine continue defensive efforts ahead of a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to take advantage of migrant labor and incentivize foreigners into contract military service.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to set conditions to forcibly relocate Ukrainians from occupied territories to Russia.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko received a briefing from Belarusian generals on May 15 following recent speculation about his possible illness or death.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 14, 2023

[Read the full report here](#)

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 14, 2023, 3pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 12pm ET on May 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of May 13 to 14. Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces launched an unspecified number of drones of varying models at Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces destroyed 25, including 18 Shahed 131/136s.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces launched 23 Shahed-136/131 drones in total.^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces launched an unspecified number of Kalibr missiles from the Black Sea as well as an unspecified number of Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles, and that Ukrainian forces shot down three Kh-101/555/55 missiles.^[3] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck civilian infrastructure in Ternopil and Mykolaiv cities as well as Kharkiv City and Zolochiv in Kharkiv Oblast with S-300 missiles.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian ammunition depot in Khmelnytskyi City and Ukrainian military facilities and deployment areas near Ternopil and Petropavlivka, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.^[5]

Increasingly regular series of Russian drone and missile strikes are likely a part of a new Russian air campaign in Ukraine aimed at degrading Ukrainian abilities to conduct counteroffensive offensive operations in the near term. Russian forces have conducted at least 10 series of strikes throughout Ukraine,

particularly in rear areas, since April 19.[6] Russian forces have used significantly fewer high precision missiles in these latest series of strikes in comparison to their failed campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure from the fall of 2022 through the winter of 2023. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces likely expended a significant proportion of their precision missiles in the previous air campaign, and the current Russian air campaign may be using far fewer of these missiles in an effort to conserve the limited remaining stocks.[7] Russian forces have instead relied heavily on launching large numbers of Iranian-made Shahed drones to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses, although Ukrainian forces have been more effective in shooting down Russian precision systems than during the previous Russian air campaign.[8] The new Russian air campaign appears to be focused on Kyiv and alleged Ukrainian military industrial and logistics facilities in deep rear areas. The more limited air campaign has so far been more regular than the previous wider Russian campaign against critical infrastructure, and ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may be attempting to conduct almost daily series of strikes to portray themselves as successfully constraining potential upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[9] The alleged targets and limited nature of this campaign indicates that Russian forces are immediately concerned with current Ukrainian capabilities to launch counteroffensive operations, although the diminished effectiveness of these strikes are likely not significantly constraining Ukrainian capabilities writ large.

Ukrainian forces continued counterattacking around Bakhmut on May 14. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces captured over 10 Russian positions on the northern and southern outskirts of Bakhmut over the course of the day on May 14.[10] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops attacked towards Berkhivka, Klishchiivka, and Kurdiuvka and took up new unspecified positions near the settlements and additionally advanced towards Yahidne from the direction of Bohdanivka.[11] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Ukrainian forces did not conduct any attacks on the night of May 13 to 14, however.[12] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of new Ukrainian positions around Bakhmut. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty emphasized on May 14 that Ukraine's main goal in Bakhmut is to destroy Russian concentration areas and encircle the city, not to conduct frontal assaults.[13] Cherevaty noted that Ukrainian forces have recently advanced up to 300m in some areas, and Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces are advancing in two directions in the suburbs of Bakhmut.[14]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is attempting to distract from recent Ukrainian successes near Bakhmut by praising Russian defensive efforts against the Ukrainian counterattacks. The Russian MoD praised the defensive efforts of the Russian 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps) south of Ivanivske, 200th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) east of Bohdanivka, and the 6th Guards Motorized Rifle Division (20th Guards Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) in an unspecified area on the Soledar-Bakhmut line.[15] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled all Ukrainian counterattacks and that the 4th Brigade Commander Colonel Vyacheslav Makarov and Deputy Commander for the likely 2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps of Political-Military Work Colonel Yevgeny Brovko died while leading their respective defense efforts.[16] The Russian MoD noted that it presented combat medals and state awards to defending Russian personnel at their combat positions, and later posted footage of Russian military leadership presenting over 120 personnel with various awards, including "For Courage," "For Military Distinction," and "For Military Valor."[17] The Russian MoD likely seeks to assuage information space criticism of the MoD's failure to acknowledge Ukrainian battlefield successes in a timely manner without actually acknowledging the degree of these successes, which is consistent with recent Kremlin guidance to not downplay Ukrainian military successes.[18] The MoD also notably highlighted the efforts of its regular forces over those of irregular forces, including Wagner Group forces operating in Bakhmut. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin criticized reports on May 14 that Russian Airborne (VDV) forces are helping Wagner forces, instead claiming that VDV forces are failing to support Wagner's offensive operations, defending captured positions, or recapturing positions recently lost to Ukrainian forces.[19]

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" is continuing efforts to expand its presence and influence public discourse. The Club of Angry Patriots announced on May 14 that it is forming regional branches and called on experienced politicians, public opinion leaders, and heads of Russian organizations to participate.[20] The Club of Angry Patriots also stated that it will hold a news conference in Moscow on an unspecified date in June, during which it will address how Russia can win the war in Ukraine.[21]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of May 13 to 14.
- Increasingly regular series of Russian drone and missile strikes are likely a part of a new Russian air campaign in Ukraine aimed at degrading Ukrainian abilities to conduct counteroffensive offensive operations in the near term.
- Ukrainian forces continued counterattacking around Bakhmut on May 14.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is attempting to distract from recent Ukrainian successes near Bakhmut by praising Russian defensive efforts against the Ukrainian counterattacks.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" is continuing efforts to expand its presence and influence public discourse.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Kupyansk-Svatov line.
- Russian forces have not made additional confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut and continued limited offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued to fire on areas west of Hulyapole in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continue efforts to replenish manpower losses using prisoners.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to prepare for the September 2023 elections in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 13, 2023

[Read the full report here](#)

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 13, 2023, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Ukrainian forces continue to counterattack in the Bakhmut area amid unconfirmed claims of further marginal Ukrainian gains southwest of the city as of May 13. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces established new positions on the outskirts of Kurdyumivka (14km southwest of Bakhmut) and pushed Russian forces behind the Siversky Donets-Donbas canal in the area.^[1] The milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced towards Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) from the direction of Predtechyne (16km southwest of Bakhmut). ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these additional Ukrainian gains southwest of Bakhmut or elsewhere in the wider Bakhmut area as of May 13. Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on May 13 that Ukrainian forces are advancing in unspecified areas of the front, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are currently conducting active operations in the Bakhmut area.^[2] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated on May 13 that Ukrainian forces liberated 17.3 square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut direction over three days of counterattacks.^[3] ISW has assessed as of May 13 that the Ukrainian forces have liberated 16.85 square kilometers in the Bakhmut area during recent counterattacks. Russian sources amplified footage purporting to show the aftermath of a recent Ukrainian counterattack on Russian positions near Mayorsk (20km southwest of Bakhmut) and claimed that the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 3rd Brigade of the 1st Army Corps repelled the assaults.^[4] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that recent successful limited Ukrainian counterattacks north of Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut) degraded Russian forces' ability to interdict the O0506 highway between Khromove and Chasiv Yar (13km west of Bakhmut), a significant ground line of communication (GLOC) for Ukrainian forces operating in Bakhmut itself.^[5] The milblogger claimed that Russian retreats in response to recent Ukrainian counterattacks have occurred in relatively small areas of the frontline but warned that these "regroupings" could become more significant if Russian forces fail to stabilize the frontline.^[6] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on May 12 that talks of tactical Russian withdrawals are nonsense as Russian forces continue to outright abandon positions in unspecified locations.^[7]

Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike against Ukraine on the night of May 12 to 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that shot down 18 of the 22 Shahed-131/136 drones that Russian forces launched from the northern and southern directions.^[8] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that drones struck an infrastructure facility in Khmelnytsky Oblast.^[9] Footage published on May 13 purportedly shows the aftermath of the strike in Khmelnytsky Oblast.^[10]

Russian media reported that two Russian Mi-8 helicopters, a Su-34 bomber, and an Su-35 fighter crashed in Bryansk Oblast on May 13, which some Russian sources claimed was caused by Ukrainian air defenses. Geolocated footage shows the aftermath of crashes near Sureshtskii Muravei and Klintsy, about 50km from the Ukrainian border.[11] Russian milbloggers speculated that all four aircraft crashed as the result of a coordinated Ukrainian strike using air defense systems pulled to the border area of Chernihiv Oblast.[12] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not yet responded to the incident at the time of publication. Ukrainian officials have similarly refrained from commenting on the incidents. However, several Russian milbloggers seized on the incident to criticize aspects of how the Russian aerospace forces conduct air operations and to accuse the leadership responsible for these aircraft of gross negligence and incompetence. Milbloggers warned about Ukrainian capabilities and called for harsh retaliation against Ukraine. Some milbloggers questioned why the two Mi-8 helicopters were flying so close to the border in the first place and called for aerospace commanders to take better steps to move such assets further into the rear.[13] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrey Medvedev warned that Ukrainian counteroffensive actions will not manifest only in mechanized warfare, suggesting that Russian authorities should prepare for further strikes on such aviation assets as part of a wider Ukrainian counteroffensive strategy.[14] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Deputy Information Minister Daniil Bezsonov accused the Russian aerospace command of "tyranny" and "fraud."[15]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck rear Russian areas in Luhansk Oblast with British Storm Shadow cruise missiles on May 12 and 13, prompting heightened Russian anxiety about potential Ukrainian abilities to target Russian logistics. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 13 that Ukrainian aircraft struck industrial facilities in occupied Luhansk City with a Storm Shadow cruise missile on May 12.[16] Geolocated footage published on May 13 shows the aftermath of Ukrainian strikes on Yuvileyne (7km west of Luhansk City) on May 13, and Russian sources widely claimed that Ukrainian forces also used Storm Shadow cruise missiles in the subsequent strike.[17] A Russian milblogger claimed that a Storm Shadow cruise missile would have caused more damage, however, and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Internal Ministry claimed that Ukrainian forces used "Hrim-2" missiles to conduct the May 12 strike.[18] United Kingdom Defense Secretary Ben Wallace confirmed on May 12 that the UK is supplying Ukraine with the missiles but did not specify when or even if Ukraine received them.[19] ISW has not observed visual confirmation that Ukrainian forces have used Storm Shadow cruise missiles to strike Russian positions in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers claimed that the strike illustrates that Ukrainian forces may be able to target airfields and rear deployment and logistics centers in areas previously considered to be completely safe.[20] A prominent Russian milblogger compared the alleged use of the cruise missiles to the summer of 2022 when Ukrainian forces began using HIMARS rockets to target Russian logistics in Kherson Oblast and argued that the Russian information space is similarly attempting to downplay the impact that such systems may have.[21]

Russian President Vladimir Putin's insistence on conducting the war in Ukraine in the style of the "Great Patriotic Special Military Operation" has opened the door for several hardline actors to advocate for the institutionalization of increasingly Stalinist domestic policies. Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin proposed on May 13 that, in light of the requirements for "economic security in a war," Russia should take the path of "nationalization of the main sectors" of the economy.[22] A prominent Russian milblogger responded to Bastrykin's statement and noted that whole-scale nationalization has transcended the rhetoric of the Communist Party and is now being advocated for by one of the largest Russian law enforcement agencies.[23] The milblogger remarked that the Russian elites appear to be increasingly using Bolshevik and Stalinist practices to organize Russian society for war in the absence of other successful historical analogues for wartime economic structuring.[24] ISW has previously assessed that Putin is invested in constructing false historical parallels between the war in Ukraine with the Soviet Great Patriotic War.[25] The emulation of these conditions on the highest levels of Russian government will likely continue to have domestic implications as the war continues and opens the door for increased normalization of Soviet and Stalinist practices in all branches of government.

Former Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Sergey Avakyants reportedly received an appointment to lead a new Russian force generation organization called "Voin" ("Warrior"), which reportedly replaced Russia's legacy Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF). One Russian source claimed on May 13 that the "Voin" organization, which will provide combat training and education to Russians between 14 and 35 years old, has "completely replaced" DOSAAF, which had been active in recruitment efforts.[26] ISW previously reported that the same Russian milblogger claimed that Avakyants will be forming a new "organization" which could cooperate with DOSAAF.[27] It is unclear what DOSAAF's current status is if this milblogger's report is accurate. It is also unclear if DOSAAF was disbanded and reformed into "Voin" or if "Voin" had subsumed DOSAAF's organization into a new vertically integrated organization under Avakyants' and the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD's) control. This report, if accurate, could indicate a Kremlin effort to subordinate DOSAAF — a nominally non-governmental organization — under the MoD. DOSAAF, a Soviet-era youth movement for promoting military skills, has likely supported Russian forces and Wagner Group recruitment and youth education aimed at Russifying youth in occupied Ukraine.[28]

Belarusian President Lukashenko was reportedly hospitalized at a presidential hospital in Minsk on May 13. Independent Belarusian monitors reported that Lukashenko was hospitalized in Minsk around 19:00 local time on May 13 but that Lukashenko's motorcade had left the hospital by around 21:00.[29] The status of Lukashenko's health condition remains unclear. Lukashenko has not been seen in public nor has his office updated his weekly schedule with any events since his visit to Moscow on May 9.[30] Lukashenko did not deliver his traditional Victory Day address in Minsk, Belarus, on May 9 although it is not clear why.[31]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continue to counterattack in the Bakhmut area amid unconfirmed claims of further marginal Ukrainian gains southwest of the city as of May 13.

- Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike against Ukraine on the night of May 12 to 13.
- Russian media reported that two Russian Mi-8 helicopters, an Su-34 bomber, and an Su-35 fighter crashed in Bryansk Oblast on May 13, which some Russian sources claimed was caused by Ukrainian air defenses.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck rear Russian areas in Luhansk Oblast with British Storm Shadow cruise missiles on May 12 and 13, prompting heightened Russian anxiety about potential Ukrainian abilities to target Russian logistics.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's insistence on conducting the war in Ukraine in the style of the "Great Patriotic Special Military Operation" has opened the door for several hardline actors to advocate for the institutionalization of increasingly Stalinist domestic policies.
- Former Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Sergey Avakyants reportedly received an appointment to lead a new Russian force generation organization called "Voin" ("Warrior"), which reportedly replaced Russia's legacy Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF).
- Belarusian President Lukashenko was reportedly hospitalized at a presidential hospital in Minsk on May 13.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and northwest of Svatove.
- Russian forces made marginal gains within Bakhmut and continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front.
- Russian forces targeted Ukrainian positions in southern Ukraine west of Hulyaipole.
- Russian forces are reportedly replenishing units with mobilized personnel.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of "rest and relaxation" schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 12, 2023

[Read the full report here](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 12, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3:00 pm ET on May 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Ukrainian forces have made gains northwest of Bakhmut in localized counterattacks as of May 12. Geolocated footage posted on May 12 shows Russian forces fleeing Ukrainian artillery fire on the southern bank of the Berkhivske Reservoir, about 4km northwest of Bakhmut.^[1] This footage visually confirms claims made by a number of Russian milbloggers that Ukrainian forces made gains northwest of Bakhmut in the area between Bohdanivka and Berkhivka.^[2] One Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) lost their positions in the area between Hryhorivka and Dubovo-Vasylivka (about 6km northwest of Bakhmut).^[3] Several Russian sources warned that Ukrainian forces may be attempting to encircle the Wagner Group within Bakhmut.^[4] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Priogozhin emphasized that Ukrainian forces are approaching Berkhivka and claimed that Ukraine now holds positions within 500m of Bakhmut's northwestern city limits.^[5] Russian milbloggers additionally reported that Ukrainian troops are counterattacking towards Khromove (3km west of Bakhmut), Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), and Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut).^[6] One Russian milblogger claimed that the situation southwest of Bakhmut near Mayorsk has stabilized following Ukrainian attacks on positions of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps.^[7] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) rejected claims made by other Russian sources regarding Ukrainian advances and claimed instead that elements of the 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (Luhansk People's Republic) and 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) repelled all attacks in the Berkhivka area "taking into account the favorable conditions of the Berkhivske Reservoir."^[8]

Russian milbloggers and other prominent voices in the pro-war information space continue to respond to recent Ukrainian counterattacks with varying degrees of caution and anxiety. Many milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian activity around Bakhmut marks the official beginning of the anticipated spring counteroffensive and speculated about where Ukraine's main effort will take place.[9] Several prominent Russian voices, however, urged caution and restraint in responding to the counteroffensive, suggesting that some milbloggers are advocating for the application of certain lessons they took from the information space meltdown during Ukraine's successful Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives. Some milbloggers warned that reports about Ukrainian success could be a deliberate Ukrainian attempt to sow panic.[10] Another milblogger warned against accepting all reports that Ukrainian activities are "psychological operations" at face value and voiced concern about Russian propaganda responses to the counterattacks.[11] One milblogger suggested that credible reports of Ukrainian counterattacks do not mean that "everything is on fire," cautioning the audience against falling into despair.[12] The milblogger remarked that telling the truth about Ukrainian operations does not amount to "sowing panic."^[13] The overall Russian information space response appears to be focused on the idea of avoiding spreading panic.

Ukrainian and American officials stated that Ukrainian forces have not yet started the planned counteroffensive. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on May 12 that Ukrainian forces are still conducting defensive operations, which sometimes include counterattacks and other unspecified active actions. [14] A senior US military official and a senior Western official stated on May 12 that Ukrainian forces have started conducting "shaping" operations in advance of the counteroffensive.^[15] Western reporting on this subject notably contradicts Russian sources, many of which have claimed the counteroffensive is officially underway.

Senior Russian officials proposed a series of domestic repression and censorship measures during the St. Petersburg International Legal Forum on May 11. The theme of the forum centered on the criminalization of "Russophobia," a measure that Russian Human Rights Council Chairperson Valery Fadeev proposed and Deputy Minister of Justice Andrey Loginov and Russian Ombudsman Tatyana Moskalkova supported.^[16] Moskalkova defined Russophobia as a "misanthropic ideology," and a State Duma deputy claimed that the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants for Russian officials for the kidnapping of Ukrainian children to Russia is an example of "Russophobia."^[17] Deputy Minister of Justice Oleg Sviridenko announced an expansion of the law against "foreign agents" to include a section penalizing "third parties" for aiding foreign agents in violating Russian law.^[18] Russian Investigative Committee Chairperson Alexander Bastrykin asked Russian Constitutional Court Chairperson Valery Zorkin to look into ways of establishing an unspecified state ideology in the Russian Constitution, which Bastrykin claimed would require the Duma to adopt a new constitution rather than pass an amendment.^[19] Russian Minister of Justice Konstantin Chuichenko supported Bastrykin's proposal, but Zorkin noted that the current constitution contains a set of values that can "allow civil society to connect."^[20] Senior Russian officials' introduction of such proposals indicates that the Kremlin may be gauging the information space reaction to increased repression measures and setting conditions for long-term strengthening of these measures.

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" held a press conference on May 12 to discuss its discontent with the current Russian conduct of the war in Ukraine. Former self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "People's Governor" Pavel Gubarev emphasized that the goal of the "special military operation" should be the "elimination of Ukrainian statehood," and "Another Russia" political party coordinator Mikhail Aksel accused Russian authorities of not taking the steps needed to realize the goals of the war.^[21] Girkin himself reiterated his belief that the Russian military in its current state cannot achieve decisive battlefield results and criticized the inaction of Russian leadership.^[22] As ISW has previously assessed, the Club of Angry Patriots is using its platform to launch specific critiques at the inner circles of Russian leadership while protecting a pro-war faction within the Kremlin.^[23] The public format of this press conference is additionally noteworthy--Girkin and other members of the club typically use their individual Telegram channels to propagate their talking points, and a public press conference suggests that they have had some success in reaching broader audiences, potentially as domestic pro-war factions are increasingly discontent with the way Russia has been fighting the war thus far. The Club of Angry Patriots notably held the press conference during a period of high information space agitation about a future Ukrainian counteroffensive, which may inflame some factions' criticisms of senior Russian leadership for poor performance in the war.

U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety accused South Africa of loading a Russian ship with ammunition and weapons in December 2022, contradicting its proclaimed neutral stance on the war in Ukraine.^[24] Brigety stated on May 11 that a sanctioned Russian vessel containing weapons departed the Simon's Town naval base in Cape Town on December 9, 2022, and arrived in Novorossiysk on February 22, 2023.^[25] White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby stated on May 12 that these reports are a "serious issue" as the US has consistently and strongly urged other countries not to supply weapons to Russia.^[26] South African officials stated that there is no evidence to support US accusations and summoned Brigety on May 12 after criticizing his statements.^[27]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces have made gains northwest of Bakhmut in localized counterattacks as of May 12.
- Russian milbloggers and other prominent voices in the pro-war information space continue to respond to recent Ukrainian counterattacks with varying degrees of caution and anxiety.
- Ukrainian and American officials stated that Ukrainian forces have not yet started the planned counteroffensive.

- Senior Russian officials proposed a series of domestic repression and censorship measures during the St. Petersburg International Legal Forum on May 11.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" held a press conference on May 12 to discuss its discontent with the current Russian conduct of the war in Ukraine.
- U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety accused South Africa of loading a Russian ship with ammunition and weapons in December 2022, contradicting its proclaimed neutral stance on the war in Ukraine.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) attempted to distract from and assuage information space paranoia over a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive on the Kharkiv-Luhansk front.
- Russian forces continue limited ground attacks in and around Bakhmut.
- Russian sources continue to speculate about potential Ukrainian counteroffensive preparations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continue to recruit convicts and establish volunteer battalions as a part of crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Senior Russian officials are claiming that they are taking active measures to return displaced and illegally deported Ukrainian civilians, including Ukrainian children, to occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 11, 2023

[Read the full report here.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mapes, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 11, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 2:00 pm ET on May 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces likely broke through some Russian lines in localized counterattacks near Bakhmut, prompting responses from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Russian forces retreated up to two kilometers behind Russian lines in unspecified sectors of the Bakhmut front.^[1] Syrskyi's confirmation of Ukrainian gains prompted a response from Prigozhin, who claimed that Ukrainian forces have started the counteroffensive and recaptured three kilometers of ground in and around Bakhmut.^[2] The Russian MoD acknowledged the Ukrainian counterattacks uncharacteristically quickly, claiming that Russian forces repelled eight ground attacks and three reconnaissance-in-force efforts in the Donetsk direction but denied reports that Ukrainian forces broke through the Russian defensive lines.^[3] Prigozhin's and the MoD's responses are reflective of increased panic in the Russian information space over speculations about planned Ukrainian counteroffensives and indicate increased concern among Wagner and Russian MoD leadership as well as reflecting Kremlin guidance to avoid downplaying Ukrainian successes.^[4]

The deployment of low-quality Russian forces on the flanks around Bakhmut suggests that the Russian MoD has largely abandoned the aim of encircling a significant number of Ukrainian forces there. The Russian MoD likely began a broader deprioritization of the Bakhmut effort by January 2023 when the MoD cut off Wagner Group penal recruitment efforts, which likely prompted Prigozhin to ramp up the Soledar-Bakhmut effort in January and publicly complain about the lack of MoD support for his efforts starting in February 2023.^[5] The Russian MoD briefly allocated more resources to the Bakhmut front line in March and April by sending T-90 tanks and Russian Airborne (VDV) forces to the Bakhmut area and assigning mobilized reservists to Wagner, however.^[6] Prigozhin claimed on April 24 that the Russian MoD only deployed irregular and degraded units to hold Bakhmut's flanks, and the inability of these units to fulfill even this limited mission indicates that Russian flanks in Bakhmut and other similarly-manned areas of the front are likely vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks.^[7] The MoD's allocation of forces combined with changes in the geometry of the battlespace also suggests that the danger of a Russian encirclement of significant Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut may have passed. Wagner forces will likely continue conducting frontal assaults in Bakhmut, which would allow Ukrainian forces to conduct organized withdrawals from threatened areas in a shallower partial envelopment rather than facing encirclement on a large scale.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine needs more time to launch a counteroffensive because it is waiting for the delivery of promised military aid. Zelensky told the BBC that some of the expected military equipment has not arrived in Ukraine and that, although Ukrainian forces are ready for the counteroffensive, Ukraine would suffer too many casualties.^[8] Zelensky also stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive is important to prevent Russia from freezing the war.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov contradicted the pre-war Kremlin justifications for the war by asserting that the Russian “special military operation” began as “a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.” He said that Russia has “partially” achieved the goals of “protecting” people in Donbas,^[9] but added that Russia is still far from fully achieving these goals. He said that it was “hard to believe” at the beginning of the war that NATO, the United States, and European countries would “intervene in this conflict.” ISW previously reported that the Kremlin has begun to shift its domestic narratives to claim that Russia is fighting only against NATO in an effort to set informational conditions for potential Russian military failures during the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[10] Peskov’s statement is consistent with the new Russian narrative but contradicts Russian President Vladimir Putin’s statements prior to the February 24, 2022 invasion. Putin stated on February 21, 2022, that Russia is “not fighting the Ukrainian people” and claimed that Ukraine had become a hostage of its “Western masters.”^[11] The Russian pre-war justification for the invasion relied heavily on portraying a NATO threat to Russia supposedly emanating from Ukraine.^[12]

Unnamed Kremlin sources claimed that Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin’s recent rhetoric is “seriously disturbing the top leadership” of Russia. Two Kremlin sources told Russian opposition outlet Meduza that the Kremlin saw Prigozhin’s attempts to blackmail the Russian MoD on May 5 as a “serious threat” and that Prigozhin is not acting in the Kremlin’s interests.^[13] One interlocutor stated that Prigozhin is committed to claiming Bakhmut as a personal victory in order to have influence over the Russian MoD. The Kremlin reportedly expressed further concerns over Prigozhin’s May 9 mockery of the “happy grandfather” figure who is responsible for future Russian generations.^[14] ISW assessed on May 9 that Prigozhin was likely referring to Putin, and a Kremlin source claims that Prigozhin’s statement was a direct allusion to Putin. The second interlocutor claimed that Prigozhin’s rhetoric cannot be interpreted as a “direct attack” on Putin, however. Prigozhin attempted on May 10 to downplay his original statements, claiming that the “happy grandfather” did not refer to Putin.^[15] The sources noted that Prigozhin’s escalating behavior is likely a result of his inability to meet an unspecified deadline for the capture of Bakhmut. One source claimed that Prigozhin is blaming conventional units in order to avoid accepting responsibility for failing to follow through on his “personal promise” to capture Bakhmut.

The interlocutors noted that Prigozhin may have crossed the Kremlin’s “red lines” and may alienate his supporters within the Russian inner circle. Prigozhin reportedly is losing contact with one of his patrons, Russian billionaire and Putin’s “personal banker” Yuriy Kovalchuk. Kovalchuk was reportedly one of the leading voices supporting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine after developing a strong relationship with Putin during the Covid-19 pandemic.^[16] The sources noted that Russian propagandists received a directive to discredit Prigozhin as a traitor if he continues to critique the Kremlin – an effort that has previously failed.^[17] The sources assessed that Prigozhin is not at risk while Wagner is still on the frontline, which allows Prigozhin to have contact with Putin.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied official Ukrainian and US reports that a Patriot missile defense system shot down a Kinzhal missile on the night of May 4.^[18] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on May 11 that a “high-ranking source in the Russian MoD” denied reports that Ukraine intercepted a Kinzhal missile. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Mykola Oleshchuk had reported that Ukrainian forces used the Patriot system to shoot down a Kinzhal missile in the air over Kyiv Oblast at night on May 4.^[19] The Russian MoD denied this report only after the US Department of Defense confirmed on May 9 that a Patriot air defense system had shot down a Russian Kinzhal missile.^[20]

Russian occupation authorities seized the cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Simferopol as oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church continues in Russian-occupied Crimea. The Commissioner of the Crimean Eparchy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Metropolitan Kliment of Simferopol, and Crimean journalist Andriy Shchekun reported on May 11 that representatives of the Russian State Property Fund of the Republic of Crimea and other occupation authorities broke down the doors of the church and began stealing the property of the cathedral.^[21] ISW has previously reported on Russia’s religious repression throughout occupied Ukraine.^[22]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces likely broke through some Russian lines in localized counterattacks near Bakhmut, prompting responses from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- The deployment of low-quality Russian forces on the flanks around Bakhmut suggests that the Russian MoD has largely abandoned the aim of encircling a significant number of Ukrainian forces there.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine needs more time to launch a counteroffensive because it is waiting for the delivery of promised military aid.

- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov contradicted the pre-war Kremlin justifications for the war by asserting that the Russian “special military operation” began as “a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.”
- Unnamed Kremlin sources claimed that Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin’s recent rhetoric is “seriously disturbing the top leadership” of Russia.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied Ukrainian and US reports that a Patriot missile defense system shot down a Kinzhal missile on the night of May 4.
- Russian occupation authorities seized the cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Simferopol as oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church continues in Russian-occupied Crimea.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to conduct localized counterattacks around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces targeted Ukrainian positions west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson Oblast.
- Russia needs to produce over 29 million shells per year to satisfy Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s demands for Wagner to use 80,000 shells per day – 13 times more than Russia’s pre-invasion annual production rate.
- Russian officials continue to threaten and seek to manipulate international humanitarian efforts by threatening to dissolve the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which is set to expire on May 18.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 10, 2023

[Read the full report here.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 10, 2023, 4pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Pervasive issues with Russian combat capability, exacerbated by continued attritional assaults in the Bakhmut area, are likely considerably constraining the ability of Russian forces in this area to defend against localized Ukrainian counterattacks. The 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade itself is emblematic of many of the endemic force generation issues constantly faced by the Russian military. ISW reported on August 7, 2022, that the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade was forming in Orenburg Oblast as part of the 3rd Army Corps, a new formation created in 2022 and largely comprised of volunteer battalions. [7] Forbes reported in September of 2022 that the 3rd Army Corps deployed to Kharkiv Oblast and that the Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive largely destroyed the corps’ constituent elements, likely including the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade.[8] Ukrainian media suggested that the surviving elements of the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade may have redeployed to Mykolaiv Oblast following the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive, where they once again suffered losses during Ukraine’s southern counteroffensive in October 2022.[9] ISW cannot confirm where the 72nd Brigade deployed to following the withdrawal of Russian forces from the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River, but it is highly likely that whatever elements of the 72nd Brigade that deployed to the Bakhmut area more recently are not operating at anywhere near full strength. The Russian military command’s apparent commitment of elements of a formation that has suffered two successive defeats to the Bakhmut axis alongside already attrited Wagner elements likely offer Ukrainian forces opportunities to exploit with limited counterattacks. A Russian milblogger, citing a Wagner commander active in the Bakhmut area, additionally reported that the alleged withdrawal of the 72nd Brigade was the result of severe miscommunication between command of the 72nd Brigade and the Wagner Group.[10] Issues with the *ad hoc* commitment of various depleted force groupings to the Bakhmut axis, alongside apparent command and control failures, are likely preventing Russian forces in the area from conducting sound defensive operations.

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck a command center where high-ranking Ukrainian military commanders and officials were located, likely to support an ongoing effort to frame Russian operations as constraining Ukrainian capabilities to launch a counteroffensive. Russian milbloggers claimed on May 10 that Russian forces struck the command post near Chasiv Yar (12km west of Bakhmut), killing Ukrainian Chief Advisor to the Directorate for Domestic and Humanitarian Policy Alexei Titarenko.[11] Russian milbloggers speculated that the strike may have killed other high-ranking Ukrainian commanders and officials and stated that the strike has prompted completely unsubstantiated rumors, which Ukrainian officials have explicitly denied, that it killed Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valery Zaluzhnyi.[12] Milbloggers acknowledged that the strike likely did not kill Zaluzhnyi but argued that it may be affecting his decisions to attend certain events.[13] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that all the Ukrainian commanders in question are alive and that

claims about the killing of Ukrainian commanders are a part of a Russian information operation aimed at degrading Ukrainian morale.[14] ISW assessed that Russian ultranationalists recently claimed that Russian forces struck a vehicle carrying Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces Commander General Ihor Tantsyura to frame Russian operations as limiting Ukrainian abilities to conduct counterattacks in the Bakhmut area.[15] Russian sources have also largely framed increasingly routine series of Russian air and missile strikes as similarly constraining potential upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[16] There is no evidence to support these Russian claims.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) confirmed on May 9 that Ukrainian forces successfully used the Patriot missile defense system to shoot down a Russian missile for the first time.[17] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Mykola Oleshchuk had reported that Ukrainian forces used the Patriot system to shoot down a missile in the air over Kyiv Oblast at night on May 4.[18] The Biden administration also announced a new \$1.2 billion military aid package to Ukraine on May 9. [19] The package includes additional air defense systems, 155-mm artillery rounds, and equipment to integrate Ukrainian air defense systems with Western-supplied equipment.[20]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces conducted successful limited counterattacks around Bakhmut on May 9.
- Pervasive issues with Russian combat capabilities, exacerbated by continued attritional assaults in the Bakhmut area, are likely considerably constraining the ability of Russian forces in this area to defend against localized Ukrainian counterattacks.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck a command center where Ukrainian military commanders and officials were located, likely to support an ongoing effort to frame Russian operations as constraining Ukrainian capabilities to launch a counteroffensive.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) confirmed that Ukrainian forces successfully shot down a Russian missile using the Patriot missile defense system. The Biden administration also announced a new \$1.2 billion military aid package to Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in the Kupyansk and Kreminna areas.
- Russian and Wagner Group forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut on May 10, despite Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's previous threat that Wagner would withdraw from the area at midnight.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front.
- Russian forces conducted airstrikes on Ukrainian positions in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an annual decree calling up citizens from reserves for military training.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing the removal of Ukrainian residents from their homes in occupied areas under the guise of humanitarian evacuations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 9, 2023

[Read the full report here.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, and Mason Clark

May 9, 2023, 7:15pm 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.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin declined to use his Victory Day address to make any significant rhetorical changes and reiterated existing narratives, preparing for a protracted war and framing Russia as successfully resisting the entire West. Putin stated in his annual address marking the Soviet victory over

Nazi Germany on May 9 that “a real war has been unleashed against Russia” and that Russia has repelled international terrorism and will continue to “defend” residents in Donbas.[1] Putin has previously claimed the West is waging a global “war” against Russia.[2] Putin has previously referred to the Russian military campaign in Ukraine as a “war” but this rhetoric, whether an intentional acknowledgement of the scale of the fighting or not, has not corresponded with any changes in the Kremlin’s approach to the “special military operation.”[3] Putin similarly declined to use recent notable events such as his annual New Year’s Eve address or his February 2023 address to the Federal Assembly to offer any concrete vision on how to reverse the Russian military’s setbacks in Ukraine or reframe the war.[4] Putin has instead used these events to reinforce long-standing rhetorical lines aimed at preparing the Russian public for a protracted war in Ukraine by evoking the memory of World War Two without calling on Russian society to support full mobilization.[5]

Putin additionally attempted to use Victory Day celebrations to rally Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) partners, many of which have sought to reduce their reliance on the Kremlin since February 2022. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov, and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev joined Putin at the Moscow Victory Day parade in Red Square.[6] Putin emphasized the importance of CIS leaders attending the event and repeated boilerplate Kremlin rhetoric that Russia is pursuing a multi-polar world order.[7] Putin’s latest efforts to rally CIS countries was muted by the reluctance of several Central Asian leaders initially expressed towards attending the Victory Day event, and Lukashenko did not join the rest of the leaders at an earlier wreath laying ceremony.[8] Lukashenko also did not deliver his traditional Victory Day address in Minsk, Belarus, although it is not immediately clear why.[9] Other non-Western states have largely rebuffed the Kremlin’s attempts to coalesce a potential anti-Western coalition, most notably China through its increasing rhetorical distancing from Russia.[10] ISW has previously assessed that the degradation of Russian military power in Ukraine has likely made this Russian effort even less attractive to other states.[11] The Victory Day events showcased far less military equipment than usual (including only a single World War Two-era T-34/85 and no modern tanks, which Russia badly needs in Ukraine) and demonstrated the further degradation of the Russian military, despite the Kremlin’s attempts in previous weeks to downplay Victory Day by downsizing parades and outright canceling events.[12]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seized the Victory Day holiday as an opportunity to mock Putin and question his judgement. Prigozhin referred to a “happy grandfather” figure who “thinks that he is good” during a discussion of ammunition shortages and Russia’s future prospects in Ukraine.[13] Prigozhin then rhetorically asked what Russia and future generations should do and how Russia can win if the “grandfather” turns out to be a “complete asshole.” Prigozhin also noted that unnamed figures (likely referring to Putin and the senior Russian MoD figures) should stop showing off on Red Square. Prigozhin is likely referring to Putin, who is often referred to as “grandfather” (or more specifically “Bunkernyi ded” or “bunker grandfather”), and Prigozhin has previously attacked other senior Russian officials and officers by name — but has not done so against Putin. Prigozhin has previously attempted to upstage Putin’s authority through similar rhetorical stunts.[14] Prigozhin’s escalating attacks on Putin may — if the Kremlin does not respond to Prigozhin’s thinly veiled criticism of Putin on Victory Day — further erode the norm in Putin’s system in which individual actors can jockey for position and influence (and drop in and out of Putin’s favor) but cannot directly criticize Putin.

Prigozhin announced that Wagner forces will not withdraw from Bakhmut by his previously stated deadline of May 10, despite the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) failing to provide Wagner with additional shells. Prigozhin stated on May 9 that Wagner will continue to fight for Bakhmut and will continue to uphold its demands in the next few days.[15] Prigozhin stated that Wagner did not receive the total ammunition the Russian MoD allegedly promised it in a May 7 order, and claimed Wagner only received 10 percent of the requested ammunition on May 8. Prigozhin added that the Russian MoD order threatened Wagner with treason if Prigozhin withdrew his forces from Bakhmut, likely one of the reasons why Prigozhin is not following through on his May 5 threat to withdraw from Bakhmut if the Russian MoD failed to fully supply Wagner with ammunition by May 10, a threat he dropped on May 7.[16] Prigozhin also noted that he has not been able to contact deputy theater commander in Ukraine and intermediary between the Russian MoD and Wagner, Army General Sergey Surovkin.

Prigozhin’s failure to follow through on his May 5 withdrawal threat indicates his cognizance of his dependence on the Russian MoD. Prigozhin attempted to blackmail the Russian MoD into re prioritizing the Bakhmut offensive so he could independently claim victory in the city at the expense of the Russian military’s likely preparations ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.[17] Prigozhin criticized officials in charge of allocating ammunition of pointlessly conserving shells and allowing Russian servicemen to die in battle, though the Russian MoD is likely (smartly) conserving limited ammunition to repel a Ukrainian counteroffensive. [18] Prigozhin likely expected the Russian MoD to entirely cave to his demands at the risk of abandoning their own objectives for regular Russian forces but likely realized he cannot follow through with his ultimatum at this time. Prigozhin also likely anticipated that Surovkin would be able to coerce the Russian MoD into satisfying Wagner demands; but his inability to reach Surovkin, if true, indicates that Prigozhin does not have as much leverage within the Russian MoD as he imagined.

Prigozhin continued to blame high casualties and the slow pace of advances in Bakhmut on other Russian irregular formations to frame Wagner as the only competent force operating in the area. Prigozhin accused the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 3rd Army Corps of abandoning a strategic position in Bakhmut which resulted in 500 Wagner casualties on May 9.[19] Prigozhin accused the Russian MoD (which he nicknamed “the Russian Ministry of Drama”) of focusing on internal conflicts instead of fighting, which he claimed leads forces to “run away.” Prigozhin also criticized the Russian “Potok” battalion — which is affiliated with Russian state energy company Gazprom — for fleeing. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels previously accused “Potok” of abandoning Wagner’s flanks in Bakhmut, and ISW assessed that Prigozhin launched a campaign to undermine Russian state-affiliated private military companies (PMCs).[20]

Russian forces conducted another large-scale series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of May 8 to 9. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 9 that Ukrainian air defenses shot down all 8 Kalibr cruise missiles and 15 of the 17 Kh-101/Kh-555 missiles that Russian forces launched.[21] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that three S-300 missiles struck civilian infrastructure in Kramatorsk and Kostyantynivka in Donetsk Oblast.[22] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces conducted a concentrated strike on Ukrainian temporary deployment points and ammunition depots, successfully striking all targets. [23] The continuation of Russian missile strikes at a smaller scale than the daily strikes during the failed Russian campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure likely indicates that Russian forces are more focused on sustaining a regular series of missile strikes than the actual effectiveness of the strikes.[24] Russian forces may be attempting to conduct an almost daily series of missile strikes in order to portray themselves as constraining potential upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, although the diminished effectiveness of the strikes is likely not significantly constraining Ukrainian actions.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin declined to use his Victory Day address to make any significant rhetorical changes and reiterated existing narratives, preparing for a protracted war and framing Russia as successfully resisting the entire West.
- Putin additionally attempted to use Victory Day celebrations to rally Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) partners, many of which have sought to reduce their reliance on the Kremlin since February 2022.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin likely seized the Victory Day holiday as an opportunity to mock Putin and question his judgement in one of his most direct challenges of Putin to date.
- Prigozhin announced that Wagner forces will not withdraw from Bakhmut by the previously stated deadline of May 10 despite the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) failing to resolve the claimed “shell hunger.”
- Prigozhin’s failure to abide by the withdrawal threat he made on May 5 indicates that he is cognizant of his dependence on the Russian MoD.
- Prigozhin continued to blame high casualties and the slow pace of advance in Bakhmut on other Russian irregular formations to frame Wagner as the only competent force operating in the area.
- Russian forces conducted another large-scale series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of May 8 to 9.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to make marginal gains within Bakhmut and continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka–Donetsk front.
- Russian forces targeted Ukrainian positions west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson Oblast.
- Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov opened a new military camp for the “Sever Akhmat” Special Purpose Regiment in the Republic of Chechnya.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport civilians deeper into Russian-occupied territory.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 8, 2023

[Click Here for the full report](#)

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

May 8, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile and drone strike against Ukraine on the night of May 7 to 8. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 8 that Russian forces launched 16 missiles at Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa oblasts, and that Ukrainian forces shot down all 35 launched Shahed drones.[1] Kyiv Mayor Vitaly Klitschko stated that Ukrainian forces shot down 36 Russian drones targeting Kyiv out of a 60 total launched against Ukraine, however.[2] Klitschko did not specify how many total drones Ukrainian forces shot down elsewhere in Ukraine. Klitschko’s report is more likely accurate as it was posted nearly four hours after the initial round of Ukrainian reporting on the Shahed strike. The Ukrainian Red Cross stated that one Russian missile destroyed an entire Red Cross warehouse in Odesa Oblast.[3] Russian milbloggers celebrated claims that Russian forces intensified strikes against Kyiv, with one milblogger claiming that Russian forces conducted the largest strike campaign against Kyiv since the start of the war.[4] Russian sources are likely overcompensating for ineffectiveness of the drone strikes by playing up the size and scale of the effort.

Senior Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces may be preparing to conduct counteroffensive operations in May or June. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on May 7 that Ukrainian forces are preparing for "new events" in May or June 2023.^[5] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Volodymyr Havylov stated in a May 8 interview that the timing and location of a Ukrainian counteroffensive is not significant because Russian forces and leadership will panic regardless, but that he would not be surprised if "something," possibly alluding to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, occurred in May or June.^[6] The Ukrainian Defense Forces Military Media Center stated that Russian forces continue to transfer military equipment, ammunition, and supplies to Ukraine to prepare for a defensive operation against a Ukrainian counteroffensive push.^[7]

Russian-occupied Transnistria asked Russia to increase its peacekeeping contingent in the region, likely to support the Kremlin's efforts to destabilize Moldova. A Transnistrian occupation representative to Moscow, Leonid Manakov, asked Russia to increase the number of peacekeepers in Transnistria due to claims of increasing security and terrorist risks.^[8] Manakov proposed that Transnistria increase the number of peacekeepers by involving the Russians living in Transnistria in the peacekeeping operations. Manakov's statement follows reports of Moldovan prosecutors detaining and cracking down on the members of the pro-Russian "Shor" party in mid-April and May.^[9] Chisinau detained 27 protestors from the "Shor" party on May 7.^[10] Kremlin's Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov did not comment on Manakov's proposals.^[11] White House officials warned in March that individuals linked with Russian intelligence were planning to stage protests against the Moldovan government in order to install a pro-Russian administration. Manakov's statements are likely a continuation of the Kremlin's effort to destabilize Moldova.^[12] Russia remains unlikely to deploy additional forces to Transnistria given its ongoing need for forces in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use the Moscow Victory Day parade to show Russia's continued influence in Central Asia. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon are reportedly attending the Victory Day parade in Moscow on May 9.^[13] Kremlin-affiliated news outlet *Vedomosti* reported Japarov's visit to Moscow for Victory Day on April 23, while Russian media reported Tokayev's, Mirziyoyev's, and Rakhmon's visits on May 8, only one day before the Victory Day parade in Moscow.^[14] Russian independent news outlet SOTA reported that Rakhmon's press service initially announced that Rakhmon would celebrate in Dushanbe, but later stated that Rakhmon had arrived in Moscow for Victory Day.^[15] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Putin also invited Turkmen President Serdar Berdymukhamedov but he did not confirm his attendance.^[16] No foreign leader attended Moscow Victory Day in 2022, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan did not hold Victory Day parades in 2022 with some citing health risks from the coronavirus pandemic.^[17] The late announcement of Central Asian leaders' attendance likely indicates their reticence to show direct and public support of the war despite Kremlin efforts to project power. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan reportedly also flew to Moscow to attend the Victory Day parade.^[18]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile and drone strike against Ukraine on the night of May 7 to 8.
- Senior Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces may be preparing to conduct counteroffensive operations in May or June.
- Russian-occupied Transnistria called on Russia to increase its peacekeepers in the region likely to support the Kremlin's efforts to destabilize Moldova.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use the Victory Day parade to show Russia's continued influence in Central Asia.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces have made marginal advances within Bakhmut as of May 8 amid reports of intensified Wagner Group forces offensive operations and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian authorities have reportedly escalated their campaign targeting ethnic minorities for contract service in the Russian military.
- Russian occupation authorities continue

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 7, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 7, 2023, 6:25pm ET

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Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov may have compelled the Russian theater commander in Ukraine, Army General Valery Gerasimov, to resume artillery ammunition distribution to the Wagner forces in Bakhmut despite Gerasimov's desired de-prioritization of that effort. Prigozhin announced on May 7 that he had obtained a document from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) that promised to supply Wagner forces with the ammunition and weapons necessary to maintain offensive operations in Bakhmut.^[1] Prigozhin has not published the official document and ISW cannot verify Prigozhin's claims at this time. The Russian MoD likely has not fundamentally changed its intention of deprioritizing offensive operations and conserving munitions across the theater, as ISW has recently assessed. Prigozhin and Kadyrov likely effectively blackmailed the Russian MoD into allocating resources to Wagner forces in Bakhmut by threatening to pull Kadyrov's Chechen forces from other parts of the theater to relieve Wagner forces in Bakhmut.^[2] Prigozhin also claimed that the MoD gave Wagner complete freedom of operations in Bakhmut and appointed Army General Sergey Surovkin as an intermediary between the MoD and Wagner, actions that would indicate that Gerasimov and possibly Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu lack the ability to command Prigozhin and Kadyrov as subordinates but must instead negotiate with them as peers.^[3] This assessment assumes that Prigozhin's claims that the MoD was withholding shells but has now agreed to supply them are true—the MoD has made no official statements regarding those claims—and Ukrainian officials report that they have not observed a decline in Wagner shelling during this period (see below).^[4]

Kadyrov's threats to transfer his forces to Bakhmut may have blackmailed the Russian military command into allocating ammunition to Wagner mercenaries. Kadyrov published a letter on May 6 asking Russian President Vladimir Putin to order Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Director of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) Viktor Zolotov to authorize the transfer of Chechen "Akhmat" units from "other directions" to assume Wagner's positions in the Bakhmut direction.^[5] Kadyrov's letter to Putin bypassed the Russian chain of command, and the withdrawal of Chechen forces from other parts of the theater likely posed a risk to Russian defensive lines, a risk that Gerasimov and Shoigu, or Putin, appear to have been unwilling to take. ISW previously observed Akhmat units operating in the Bilohorivka area on the Svatove-Kremminna line and in Zaporizhia Oblast, and their withdrawal from those positions might undermine Russia's defensive preparations ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.^[6] Shoigu and Gerasimov, who have been consistently loyal to Putin's orders, may alternatively have decided to allocate ammunition to Wagner at Putin's direction. Kadyrov's and Prigozhin's apparently successful joint blackmail efforts further indicate that Gerasimov does not actually control all the Russian forces in Ukraine, despite being the nominal theater commander. Gerasimov likely attempted to assume control over all Russian irregular forces over the winter of 2023 but had failed in that endeavor even before losing favor with Putin in the spring.^[7]

Kadyrov likely supported Wagner's blackmail efforts against the Russian military command in order to reestablish his position within the circle of power in the Kremlin. Kadyrov had previously held an influential position within Putin's close circle until apparently losing favor recently, likely because his forces played a limited role in active combat operations in Ukraine throughout the late fall of 2022 and winter of 2023.^[8] Putin belittled Kadyrov during their meeting on March 13 where Kadyrov appeared visibly nervous when reporting on the Chechen fighters' role in Ukraine.^[9] Kadyrov likely saw Prigozhin's threats to withdraw from Bakhmut as an opportunity to play up the effectiveness of his forces against the backdrop of Gerasimov's and Shoigu's failures to deliver decisive victories during the winter-spring offensive.

Gerasimov's apparent need to negotiate with subordinate commanders and those commanders' ability to force his hand suggests that chain of command problems are having a significant impact on the Russian military's ability to conduct coherent theater-wide operations. The position of overall theater commander should in principle allow Gerasimov to command any Russian unit or ground forces commander in Ukraine, even those in charge of irregular formations such as Wagner and Akhmat. Prigozhin and Kadyrov appear to be able to largely make independent decisions concerning their forces, however, a phenomenon that appears to have become more pronounced the longer these forces have had *de facto* control over certain sectors of the frontline. Wagner and the Russian MoD appeared to have recently reached an agreement about the delineation of responsibilities between conventional and irregular forces. The Russian military command deployed Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) to defend the flanks around Bakhmut around when Wagner began advancing in the city itself, for example.^[10] ISW previously assessed that the Russian military command had likely recently decided to reprioritize efforts and resource allocation to prepare to receive potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations but did not set conditions to appease Prigozhin or offset Wagner's likely degradation in the Bakhmut area.^[11] The subsequent upheaval over the de-prioritization of Bakhmut and the Russian military command's reversal on supplying Wagner is likely to undermine this theater-wide effort.

These events raise questions about Russia's ability to coordinate a coherent theater-wide defensive campaign. The Russian military command appears to be increasingly delegating responsibilities for different sectors of the front in Ukraine to various Russian commanders while the power of the theater commander continues to wane.^[12] Gerasimov's degraded abilities to control his commanders will likely further limit the Russian military's ability to conduct coherent operations involving different areas of responsibility. ISW has previously assessed that factional dynamics within the Russian military are shaping decision-making to an unusual degree, and the increasing erosion of the Russian chain of command is likely caught in a self-reinforcing feedback loop with the Russian military's growing factionalism.^[13] ISW assesses that Putin is unlikely to remove Gerasimov as overall theater commander for reputational reasons, and therefore Prigozhin's and Kadyrov's public undermining of Gerasimov may have lasting impacts on the power of the overall theater commander's position.^[14] Putin may seek to reward commanders he favors with responsibility beyond their official positions instead of outright appointing them to higher positions.^[15] The Russian military is highly unlikely to solve these chain

of command issues in the near term, and these problems will likely influence how Russian forces on different axes respond to potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.

Prigozhin's and Kadyrov's ability to significantly influence the Russian military command decisions relies on Putin's willingness to appease them and his reliance on their forces, both of which will likely degrade after further blackmail efforts. Both Prigozhin and Kadyrov retain likely differing amounts of favor and personal contact with Putin despite their individual tensions with the Russian military command.[16] The decision to blackmail and subsequently humiliate the Russian military command may have expended a fair amount of Prigozhin's and Kadyrov's political capital to influence operational and strategic-level military decision-making. Such high-profile blackmailing is likely not a feasible long-term strategy for Prigozhin and Kadyrov given their reliance on Putin's favor to bend the MoD to their demands. Prigozhin has already lost favor with Putin in recent months, with recent events appearing to demonstrate that he needed Kadyrov's own capital to successfully blackmail the Russian military command into additional ammunition provision. Putin notably avoids firing members of his inner circle, however, instead rotating them into and out of favor, influence, and resources.[17] Prigozhin and Kadyrov are unlikely to generate such extreme effects again without damaging their relationships with Putin.

Prigozhin's continued fight to complete the capture of Bakhmut contradicts his consistent narrative that capturing Bakhmut lacks strategic value. Prigozhin released a 41-point letter on May 6 (prior to his announcement about the provision of additional ammunition) criticizing the Russian MoD for intentionally refusing to support Wagner in Bakhmut.[18] Prigozhin claimed that he and Surovkin organized "Operation Bakhmut Meatgrinder" in October 2022 to provoke Kyiv into throwing Ukrainian forces into Bakhmut en masse.[19] Prigozhin reiterated that Wagner's main task in Bakhmut has always been to exhaust Ukrainian forces in a meat-grinder, and not to capture the settlement.[20] Prigozhin claimed that completing the capture of Bakhmut is not operationally significant, rejecting Shoigu's March 7 claim that taking Bakhmut would open the way for further Russian offensive efforts in Donbas, a narrative that Prigozhin has consistently maintained since November 2022.[21] Prigozhin's long-standing claims that Bakhmut is not of strategic importance contradict his demand that the Russian MoD provides Wagner with the necessary ammunition to allow it to complete the capture of Bakhmut, suggesting that Prigozhin continues to prioritize his own personal aims over those of the Russian military command and the good of the overall Russian war effort.[22]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov may have compelled the Russian theater commander in Ukraine, Army General Valery Gerasimov, to resume artillery ammunition distribution to Wagner forces in Bakhmut despite Gerasimov's desired de-prioritization of that effort.
- Kadyrov's threats to transfer his forces to Bakhmut may have blackmailed the Russian military command into allocating ammunition to Wagner mercenaries.
- Kadyrov likely supported Wagner's blackmail efforts against the Russian military command to reestablish his position within the circle of power of the Kremlin.
- Gerasimov's apparent need to negotiate with subordinate commanders and those commanders' ability to force his hand suggests that chain of command problems are significantly impacting the Russian military's ability to conduct coherent theater-wide operations.
- These events raise questions about Russia's ability to coordinate a coherent theater-wide defensive campaign.
- Prigozhin's and Kadyrov's ability to significantly influence Russian military command decisions relies on Putin's willingness to appease them and his reliance on their forces – both of which will likely degrade after further blackmail efforts.
- Prigozhin's continued fight to complete the capture of Bakhmut contradicts his consistent narrative that capturing Bakhmut lacks strategic value.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces made some territorial gains in Bakhmut as of May 7 and continued limited offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk front.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces launched up to 23 drones at Crimea on the night of May 6 to 7.
- Russian federal subjects are continuing to recruit and form regional armed formations and volunteer battalions.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to plan and carry out forced evacuations from Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 6, 2023

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Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov stated their intent on May 6 for Chechen "Akhmat" troops to replace Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut on May 10. Prigozhin published a letter to Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu on May 6 declaring that Wagner will hand over its positions to Akhmat units at exactly midnight on May 10, when Prigozhin claims Wagner will have entirely run out of combat potential.^[1] Prigozhin expressed his confidence that Akhmat forces can capture the remaining 2.5 square kilometers of Bakhmut that remain under Ukrainian control.^[2] Kadyrov responded to Prigozhin by stating he has addressed a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin signaling his readiness to take Bakhmut and claimed that Chechen units are already working on a strategy with the Russian MoD for the Chechens to take over Wagner's positions.^[3]

Prigozhin and Kadyrov likely aim to frame the Russian MoD and regular Russian troops as ineffective and set conditions to blame the MoD for any Russian setbacks in the Bakhmut area. Prigozhin's decision to hand responsibility for Bakhmut over to the forces of a fellow *silovik* deliberately excludes the conventional Russian airborne (VDV) troops already operating on Wagner's northern and southern flanks around Bakhmut, framing the battle of Bakhmut strictly as a Wagner – and now Akhmat – concern. This decision reflects Prigozhin's ongoing distrust of the Russian military command, and postures himself as independent from the Russian military establishment and allows him to save face if Wagner forces cannot capture Bakhmut and avoiding a repeat of the capture of Soledar – where the Russian MoD took credit for what Prigozhin claimed was a Wagner success.^[4] Kadyrov, in turn, could benefit from the positive reputational effect of entering such a high-profile operation with the backing of Prigozhin's personal notoriety. Kadyrov recently met with several high-ranking Russian officials in Russia, likely to ameliorate his own reputation within Russian political circles.^[5] The switch from Wagner to Akhmat troops may also set conditions to blame the Russian MoD for future failures down the line — if Akhmat forces experience similar difficulties to Wagner and are unable to completely capture Bakhmut, Prigozhin and Kadyrov may feasibly blame the MoD for failing to adequately support their efforts. Alternatively, if the Russian MoD prevents Akhmat forces from relieving Wagner (as it is unclear if Prigozhin and Kadyrov can execute this maneuver without any Russian MoD support as they claim), the two *siloviki* and their allies will likely brandish the hypothetical that if only the Russian MoD had supported the maneuver, Chechen forces would have captured Bakhmut quickly.

While the potential deployment of Akhmat troops to Bakhmut could increase Russian combat power to some degree, the claims made by Prigozhin and Kadyrov are greatly exaggerated. Akhmat forces have deployed throughout Ukraine, mostly in the Bilohorivka area in Luhansk Oblast and in scattered areas in the south, over the course of 2023 but have not been majorly committed to decisive offensive operations.^[6] The Chechen forces that would deploy to Bakhmut are therefore likely substantially fresher and less degraded than Wagner forces which have remained on the front for months. However, Kadyrov's suggestion that Akhmat will be able to rapidly advance in and occupy Bakhmut in "a matter of hours" is typical Kadyrov braggadocio and ignores the tactical situation on the ground in Bakhmut.^[7] Additionally, Prigozhin's suggestion that Wagner will lose its combat potential at exactly midnight on May 10 is a rhetorical point selected to avoid withdrawing before Victory Day on May 9 - fighting forces do not precipitously exhaust all their combat capabilities in one discrete instant.

The Russian MoD has yet to respond to Prigozhin and Kadyrov's coordinated posturing about Bakhmut and may have been caught flatfooted by Prigozhin and Kadyrov's statements. ISW assesses that the Russian military is likely reprioritizing logistics and sustainment processes to transition to defensive operations in most areas of the theater ahead of an expected Ukrainian counteroffensive, and Prigozhin's focus on Bakhmut may be at odds with changing Russian MoD priorities.^[8] Russian forces likely do not have reserves they could commit to Bakhmut should Wagner's ability to sustain operations in the city completely collapse, as Prigozhin is claiming.^[9] The Russian MoD continues to claim that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) are defending the flanks around Bakhmut, and ISW has not observed VDV elements directly contributing to Wagner's offensive within the city itself.^[10] The Russian military likely intends for these VDV elements to stabilize the wider Bakhmut salient given Wagner's increasingly degraded combat effectiveness in the area, and Russian forces are unlikely to commit these elements to a final phase of attritional fighting in Bakhmut ahead of expected Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[11] The capture of the last remaining section of Bakhmut offers no wider operational benefits and would only provide limited informational benefits for the Kremlin. The MoD's silence is likely reflective of a conscious decision to not offset Wagner's degradation or placate Prigozhin's expected anger, although the lack of response is allowing Prigozhin more maneuver space to shape the overall reaction to the de-prioritization of the Bakhmut offensive.

At least one individual with claimed but unconfirmed affiliation to the Ukrainian government attempted to assassinate Russian "A Just Russia" State Duma party co-leader and prominent nationalist voice Zakhar Prilepin on May 6. The attackers targeted Prilepin with an improvised explosive device (IED) on or near Prilepin's car in Pionerskoye, Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, killing Prilepin's driver and severely injuring Prilepin.^[12] The Russian Investigative Committee announced it is investigating the attack as a terrorist attack and stated Russian security forces arrested Oleksandr Permyakov, who Russian state-affiliated media claimed conducted the attack on the orders of Ukrainian Special Services (SBU).^[13] Russian news aggregator Channel 112 claimed that Russian authorities detained a second

unspecified attacker in a nearby forest area, but Russian authorities have not corroborated this report.[14] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Ukraine and the West of orchestrating the attack, though Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that it is too early to know the attackers and orchestrators.[15] The Atesh Ukrainian-Tatar resistance movement claimed indirect responsibility for the attack, though Ukrainian and Russian officials have not corroborated this claim.[16] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has reportedly fostered ties with "A Just Russia" party leadership, though it is uncertain if the attack against Prilepin is related to Prigozhin.[17]

Many prominent Russian nationalist information space voices expressed anger at another attack against a prominent pro-war voice in Russia itself and connected the attack to the assassinations of Darya Dugina and Maxim Fomin (Vladlen Tartarsky).[18] Many milbloggers blamed Ukraine and Western states for orchestrating the attack and called on Russia to increase law enforcement measures.[19] Some milbloggers called on Russia to provide personal security for prominent milbloggers or to re-establish the Soviet-era SMERSH counterintelligence umbrella to combat enemy penetration attempts.[20]

CNN reported that Russian electronic warfare (EW) jamming has limited the effectiveness of Ukrainian HIMARS strikes in recent months.[21] CNN cited five US, UK, and Ukrainian sources as saying that US and Ukrainian forces have had to adapt workarounds to counter "evolving" Russian EW jamming efforts, and that Russian forces have subsequently developed countermeasures to those workarounds.[22] US officials stated that destroying Russian EW systems is a high priority in maintaining the battlefield effectiveness of HIMARS.[23] ISW is unable to confirm this report, but Russian forces retain at least some ability to adapt to battlefield conditions despite significant degradation.

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov stated their intent on May 6 for Chechen "Akhmat" troops to replace Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut on May 10.
- Prigozhin and Kadyrov likely aim to frame the Russian MoD and regular Russian troops as ineffective and set conditions to blame the MoD for any Russian setbacks in the Bakhmut area.
- While the potential deployment of Akhmat troops to Bakhmut could increase Russian combat power to some degree, the claims made by Prigozhin and Kadyrov are greatly exaggerated.
- The Russian MoD has yet to respond to Prigozhin and Kadyrov's coordinated posturing about Bakhmut and may have been caught flatfooted by Prigozhin and Kadyrov's statements.
- At least one individual with claimed but unconfirmed affiliation to the Ukrainian government attempted to assassinate Russian "A Just Russia" State Duma party co-leader and prominent nationalist voice Zakhar Prilepin on May 6.
- CNN reported that Russian electronic warfare (EW) jamming has limited the effectiveness of Ukrainian HIMARS strikes in recent months.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and in the Kreminna area.
- Russian forces continued to make marginal gains within Bakhmut and Ukrainian forces likely conducted a successful limited counterattack southwest of Avdiivka.
- Russian occupation officials claimed that Ukrainian forces targeted Crimea with Hrim-2 short-range ballistic missiles.
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian authorities are continuing various measures to forcibly mobilize residents of occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials continue to plan for mass forced evacuations in Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 5, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 5, 2023, 6pm ET

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The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to have deprioritized the Bakhmut offensive in favor of preparing to defend against an anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive, putting the Wagner Group and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in a potentially difficult position. Prigozhin released a series of videos on May 4 and 5 announcing that Wagner will withdraw from Bakhmut on May 10 unless Wagner receives necessary supplies and launched particularly acerbic and emotional attacks against Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, and the

Russian MoD establishment writ large.[1] Prigozhin's palpable desperation in the videos, one of which shows the corpses of recently deceased Wagner fighters, marks a significant rhetorical inflection in his continued pleas for increased Russian MoD support for Wagner in Bakhmut. His visible and visceral anger suggests that the Russian MoD has likely deprioritized Bakhmut and shifted operational focus elsewhere in the theater in ways that may seriously compromise Wagner's ability to operate effectively. Wagner has not ceased efforts to completely capture Bakhmut despite reduced access to ammunition and other necessary supplies, however. Prigozhin has shown no willingness to switch to the defensive within the city.

Wagner's continued persistence within Bakhmut is incongruent with the overall slow-down in the pace of Russian offensive operations elsewhere in Ukraine as conventional Russian forces appear to be largely shifting focus to prepare to receive the much-anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive.[2] Aside from very limited and localized attacks in the Kremenna area and near Donetsk City, Russian forces have largely ceased offensive operations throughout the theater, likely signifying a transition to the defensive.[3] It would be an operationally sound decision for the Russian MoD to begin withholding and stockpiling ammunition and supplies in order to prepare for any Ukrainian counteroffensive actions, and Prigozhin's desperate statements indicate that the Russian MoD is likely doing so. ISW has recently reported that Prigozhin began appealing to the Russian MoD to provide Wagner with necessary ammunition once again after a brief period during which it seemed that relations between Prigozhin and Russian military leadership had improved.[4] Prigozhin's renewed anger reached its peak in the May 4 video of Prigozhin essentially screaming at Gerasimov and Shoigu and accusing them of the deaths of Wagner fighters.[5]

The losses suffered by Wagner in Bakhmut, alongside the likely de-prioritization of the Bakhmut effort by the Russian MoD, may leave Prigozhin and Wagner in a particularly bad spot. It is not immediately clear whether Prigozhin actually intends to withdraw from Bakhmut on May 10 or whether he made the announcement in a last-ditch attempt to secure MoD support. If Wagner does withdraw, then it will likely need Russian MoD equipment to protect and facilitate the retrograde. The Russian military lacks the reserves needed to man positions Wagner might abandon in Bakhmut, moreover. The massive losses suffered by Wagner in Bakhmut for the sake of tactical gains, as well as the overall shift of the Russian military towards a more cautious posture preparing for defensive operations, appears to be offering Ukrainian forces opportunities for fruitful counterattacks in various areas of the front. Ukrainian forces appear to be seizing some of these opportunities, as noted below, but ISW does not assess that these counterattacks are necessarily part of the anticipated counteroffensive. **NB: ISW uses the term "counterattack" to describe tactical actions by Ukrainian forces to make limited gains in local areas. It uses the term "counteroffensive" to describe operational-level undertakings composed of many distinct tactical actions intended to achieve operationally or strategically significant gains. ISW has so far observed reporting only of Ukrainian counterattacks.**

Recently dismissed former Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev is reportedly serving as deputy commander of the Wagner Group, likely as part of Wagner's campaign to retain access to Russian military supplies. A Wagner-affiliated Russian milblogger published footage on May 4 and 5 purporting to show Mizintsev acting as Wagner deputy commander and discussing logistical and tactical issues with Wagner fighters in the Bakhmut area. [6] Prigozhin publicly offered the command position to Mizintsev following his dismissal on April 27, and Prigozhin claimed on May 5 that Mizintsev in his capacity as head of logistics supplied Wagner with low quality ammunition.[7] Prigozhin may have appointed Mizintsev as Wagner deputy commander in an effort to leverage Mizintsev's understanding of and relationships within the Russian military's logistics apparatus to retain access to ammunition and supplies amid an apparent reprioritization away from Wagner's area of responsibility. Mizintsev was reportedly dismissed after Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Mikhail Teplinsky, a likely anti-Gerasimov figure, conducted readiness checks that revealed that the Russian Northern Fleet lacked supplies, possibly indicating that Mizintsev fell out of favor with both factions within the MoD and joined Wagner to retain a command role in Ukraine.[8] The changes likely occurring within the Russian military's logistics apparatus associated with the reprioritization of supplies for defensive operations will likely impede Mizintsev's presumed efforts to retain Wagner's access to supplies.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered newly-appointed Deputy Minister for Logistics Alexei Kuzmenkov to control the supply of weapons and equipment to Russian forces in Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on May 5 that Shoigu gave Kuzmenkov the order during an inspection of forces and military equipment in the Southern Military District.[9] The Russian MoD reported that Kuzmenkov presented Shoigu with new tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and other equipment and claimed that Russian military-industrial enterprises have repaired equipment at a rate faster than that of equipment losses. Shoigu likely met with Kuzmenkov to accelerate the conservation and reprioritization of logistics and sustainment processes ahead of expected upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. Shoigu's meeting with the new head for logistics amid Wagner's attempt to retain access to the Russian military's logistics apparatus further suggests that Wagner will struggle to maintain its current level of provisions from the MoD.

Russian occupation authorities announced the forced removal of 70,000 civilians in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to areas deeper in the Russian-occupied rear under the guise of evacuations. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation Head Yevgeny Balitsky and Deputy Head Andriy Kozenko announced on May 5 that Russian authorities will conduct a partial evacuation of 70,000 Ukrainian civilians of vulnerable populations, including families with children, the disabled, and the elderly, from 18 settlements along the southern bank of the Kakhovka Reservoir and along Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) roughly 20-40 kilometers from the front line.[10] Kozenko claimed that authorities have already begun evacuating civilians from the Polohy Raion to Berdyansk.[11] The locations of these settlements so far from the current front lines suggest that Russian forces plan to conduct a controlled, fighting withdrawal from their current positions to a prepared line of defense rather than trying to hold the current line of contact in the event of a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive. Kherson Oblast occupation authorities had similarly used the guise of evacuation to justify the forced relocation of Ukrainians from the frontlines in Kherson Oblast during Ukraine's counteroffensive in October and November 2022, citing threats of Ukrainian strikes and frontline hostilities.[12] These Russian preparations do not necessarily indicate that Ukrainian forces will attack in or

prioritize this area. Russian and occupation authorities will likely capitalize on growing Russian fear over a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive to justify further mass relocations of Ukrainian civilians.

The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) proposed a draft bill aimed at appealing to growing anti-migrant sentiments in Russia and supporting the Russian military's efforts to recruit migrants. The MVD submitted a draft bill on May 5 that would allow employers to deprive migrant employees of their work permits and create expanded administrative supervision over the residence of foreign citizens in Russia.^[13] The draft bill states that the administrative supervision regime is aimed at establishing the whereabouts of foreign citizens illegally staying in Russia, although a Russian source claimed that the measure will allow Russian officials and police to freely enter the homes of migrants.^[14] The MVD added an explanatory note to the bill in which it argued that "illegal migration is closely related to such negative phenomena as terrorism, extremism, human trafficking, [and] drug trafficking."^[15] The reasoning offered for the bill is similar to Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin's recent accusation that migrants destabilize Russia by importing terrorism and extremist ideologies.^[16] The bill is reflective of growing domestic ramifications from the wide acceptance of the Kremlin's "Russification" ideology, which ISW previously assessed is increasingly manifesting itself in how Russian authorities and ultranationalists negatively portray ethnic minorities and migrants in Russia.^[17] Russian officials also disproportionately focus recruitment efforts on migrant communities, and the bill could set conditions for Russian officials to leverage jeopardized migration statuses to coerce migrants into signing contracts with the Russian military.^[18]

Russian Human Rights Council head Valery Fadeev reportedly stated that Russian authorities should regulate Telegram channels similarly to how Russia censors state-controlled media. Kremlin newswire TASS reported on May 5 that Fadeev called for Russian authorities to "analyze the activities of Telegram channels" to consider introducing legislation to regulate Telegram.^[19] Russian First Deputy Chairman of the Civic Chamber on Media and Mass Communication Alexander Malkevich supported the regulation of Telegram channels claiming that traditional forms of media and "new media" should be on an equal footing because "new media" has "only rights and no obligations." Fadeev's support of Telegram censorship is also notable because prominent Russian milblogger Alexander Kots also serves on the Russian Human Rights Council. ISW has previously reported on efforts on the part of Russian authorities to stimulate self-censorship in the information space.^[20]

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to have deprioritized the Bakhmut offensive in favor of preparing to defend against an anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive, putting the Wagner Group and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in a potentially difficult position.
- Wagner's continued persistence within Bakhmut is incongruent with the overall slow-down in the pace of Russian operations elsewhere in Ukraine as conventional Russian forces appear to largely be shifting focus to prepare to receive the much-anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Recently dismissed former Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev is reportedly serving as deputy commander of the Wagner Group, likely as part of Wagner's campaign to retain access to Russian military supplies.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered newly-appointed Deputy Minister for Logistics Alexei Kuzmenkov to control the supply of weapons and equipment to Russian forces in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities announced the forced removal of 70,000 civilians in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to areas deeper in the Russian-occupied rear under the guise of evacuations.
- The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) proposed a draft bill aimed at appealing to growing anti-migrant sentiments in Russia and supporting the Russian military's efforts to recruit migrants.
- Russian Human Rights Council head Valery Fadeev reportedly stated that Russian authorities should regulate Telegram channels similarly to how Russia censors state-controlled media.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Kreminna and Avdiivka and made marginal gains within Bakhmut.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited counterattacks near Bakhmut.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed it prevented a Ukrainian assassination attempt against an occupation deputy of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on May 5.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues his own personal force generation efforts aimed at securing Russian President Vladimir Putin's favor.
- Russian occupation authorities continue measures to strengthen social control of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 4, 2023

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

May 4, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russia conducted another Shahed-131/136 strike against Ukraine on May 4. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 24 Shahed-131/136s at Ukraine from the direction of Bryansk Oblast and the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov and that Ukrainian air defense destroyed 18 of the drones above northern, central, and southern regions of Ukraine.^[1] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that Russian forces launched 15 of the Shaheds at Odesa Oblast, 3 of which struck an educational institution.^[2] Russian milbloggers claimed that the drones struck military facilities throughout Ukraine.^[3] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that Russian forces attacked Kyiv overnight with Shaheds and unidentified missiles for the third time in the last four days, noting that Kyiv has not experienced such a high intensity of air attacks since the beginning of 2023.^[4]

Russian sources continued to respond to the May 3 drone strike on the Kremlin. The Russian Investigative Committee announced that it opened a criminal case "on the fact of a terrorist attack in connection with an attempt to strike the Kremlin" and further amplified the claim that Kyiv is to blame for the strike.^[5] Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly hold a Security Council meeting to discuss the incident on May 5.^[6] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev called for the "physical elimination" of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in retaliation for the strike.^[7] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov baselessly claimed that the US is behind the attack.^[8] Several Russian authorities, including the heads of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Leningrad, and Pskov oblasts introduced bans on drone launches and flights.^[9] State Duma Deputy Aleksandr Khinshtain sent an appeal to the Russian Ministry of Transport and Federal Air Transport Agency to introduce a total temporary moratorium on drone use due to the increased threat of drones associated with the "special military operation."^[10] Russian media aggregator *Baza*, citing unidentified internal sources, claimed that residents of Moscow suburbs noticed the drones flying at very low altitudes well in advance of the moment of contact with the Kremlin Senate Palace building on May 3 but that authorities ignored their reports as "drone hysteria."^[11] Another Russian source amplified this report and noted that if it is true, it demonstrates how impenetrable the Russian bureaucratic apparatus is.^[12] The milblogger praised the Kremlin's response as being thoughtful and logical and dismissed other voices in the information space for being irrational and hysterical.^[13]

Russian officials are likely using the May 3 drone strike on the Kremlin to expand cancellations of parades for the May 9 Victory Day holiday. Russian sources reported that Russian officials have canceled May 9 parades in 21 cities in Russia and occupied Crimea either without offering official justification or citing security reasons.^[14] Russian officials in several cities claimed that they were canceling May 9 events and parades out of concern for participants of the "special military operation."^[15] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin will use the May 3 strike to cancel May 9 events and augment its informational effort to frame the war in Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia.^[16] The Kremlin likely hopes to limit typical May 9 events to conceal the degradation of the Russian military because such events demonstratively showcase advanced Russian military equipment, much of which is either critical to Russian operations in Ukraine or has been destroyed in 14 months of attritional fighting.^[17] The Kremlin also likely hopes to curb May 9 events out of fears that celebrations honoring deceased servicemembers could become a potential source of domestic backlash for Russia's high casualty figures in Ukraine. Russian officials have canceled immortal regiment memorial events in recent weeks likely for such reasons.^[18]

The Kremlin is reportedly continuing its overhaul of domestic security organs. Russian media aggregator *Baza* reported that Russian authorities expanded prior mass investigations into the Moscow Central District Internal Affairs Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to other district MVD directorates in Moscow.^[19] *Baza* reported that Russian authorities detained the Bibirevo Raion's deputy chief of police on allegations of leaking information as well as two other employees at unspecified MVD departments.^[20] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the MVD Security Service reportedly started mass checks of MVD departments in Moscow due to the "leakage of data from Russian security forces at the request of Ukrainian citizens."^[21] The Kremlin appears to be also overhauling elements of the Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) amid a series of recent arrests and dismissals of prominent Rosgvardia officials.^[22] The Kremlin likely intends to use these investigations and arrests to oust officials who have fallen out of favor and to consolidate control of internal security organs.^[23] ISW has previously assessed that Russian authorities may use a series of new laws expanding punishments for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces, the misappropriation of military assets, and trespassing at facilities operated by security organs to support these efforts.^[24]

US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated that Russian forces are likely unable to conduct a “significant offensive” in 2023 due to munitions and manpower shortages regardless of the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[25] Haines testified on May 4 to the Senate Armed Services Committee that it will be increasingly challenging for Russia to sustain “even modest offensive operations” if the Kremlin does not initiate mandatory mobilization or obtain third-party ammunition supplies in addition to existing deliveries from Iran and other unspecified countries. Haines stated that Putin has “probably” reduced his short-term goals in Ukraine to consolidate control over occupied territories and is unlikely to consider negotiations with Ukraine. Haines’ statements support and expand on ISW’s prior assessments that Russian forces are unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.[26]

Russia and India reportedly suspended efforts to trade in rupees. Reuters reported on May 4 that Russia and India suspended months of negotiations because Moscow does not want to accumulate over \$40 billion in rupees by the end of 2023. Russia reportedly views rupees as not convertible.[27] An unnamed Indian government official stated Russia would prefer to settle bilateral trade with India in Chinese yuan or another currency and that Russia is increasingly trading in United Arab Emirates dirhams. The suspended negotiations likely concern India’s payment to Russia for spare parts and two S-400 air defense systems.[28]

Key Takeaways

- Russia conducted another Shahed-131/136 strike against Ukraine on May 4.
- Russian officials are likely using the May 3 drone strike on the Kremlin to expand cancellations of parades for the May 9 Victory Day holiday.
- The Kremlin is reportedly continuing its overhaul of domestic security organs.
- US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated that Russian forces are likely unable to conduct a “significant offensive” in 2023 due to munitions and manpower shortages regardless of the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russia and India reportedly suspended efforts to trade in rupees.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made territorial gains south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian forces likely conducted a limited counterattack southwest of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Kremlin is attempting to increase the production quotas of military supplies despite reportedly lacking the necessary manpower.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to announce new security measures in an effort to prevent partisan attacks in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 3, 2023

[Click Here for the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 3, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russia accused Ukraine of conducting a drone strike against the Kremlin on May 3. Social media footage circulated on May 3 shows a drone detonating near a flagpole on top of the Kremlin Senate Palace building in Moscow as two unidentified people climbed up the dome of the building.[1] The Kremlin accused Ukraine of orchestrating “a planned terrorist attack” with the intent of assassinating Russian President Vladimir Putin and clarified that Putin was not at the Kremlin at the time of the attack and was therefore unharmed.[2] Ukrainian officials, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, stressed that Ukraine did not conduct the attack.[3]

Russia likely staged this attack in an attempt to bring the war home to a Russian domestic audience and set conditions for a wider societal mobilization. Several indicators suggest that the strike was internally conducted and purposefully staged. Russian authorities have recently taken steps to increase Russian domestic air defense capabilities, including within Moscow itself, and it is therefore extremely unlikely that two drones could have penetrated multiple layers of air defense and detonated or been shot down just over the heart of the Kremlin in a way that provided spectacular imagery caught nicely on camera. Geolocated imagery from January 2023 shows that Russian authorities have been placing Pantsir air defense systems near Moscow to create air defense circles around the city. [4] A strike that avoided detection and destruction by such air defense assets and succeeded in hitting as high-profile of a target as the Kremlin Senate Palace would be a significant embarrassment for Russia. The Kremlin's immediate, coherent, and coordinated response to the incident suggests that the attack was internally prepared in such a way that its intended political effects outweigh its embarrassment. The Kremlin immediately accused Ukraine of conducting a terror attack, and Russian official responses coalesced rapidly around this accusation.[5] If the drone attack had not been internally staged it would have been a surprise event. It is very likely that the official Russian response would initially have been much more disorganized as Russian officials scrambled to generate a coherent narrative and offset the rhetorical implications of a clear informational embarrassment. The Kremlin has notably failed to generate a timely and coherent informational response to other military humiliations not of its own making, including the falls of Balakliya and Kherson City in September and November 2022.[6]

The rapid and coherent presentation of an official Russian narrative around the strike suggests that Russia staged this incident in close proximity to the May 9th Victory Day holiday in order to frame the war as existential to its domestic audience. The Kremlin may use the strike to justify either canceling or further limiting May 9th celebrations, actions that would likely augment the information effort framing the war in Ukraine as directly threatening Russian observance of revered historical events. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is employing an array of measures to frame the war in Ukraine as existential to Russia's domestic audience and to prepare for wider societal mobilization.[7]

Some Russian nationalist milbloggers seized on the Kremlin drone strike to call for Russian escalation in the war despite the fact that Russia currently lacks the military capability to do so. Many pro-war milbloggers, including ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin, criticized the Kremlin for allowing Ukraine to cross multiple Russian "red lines" with no adequate retaliation and called for Russia to escalate in response, including by targeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and other Ukrainian decision-makers.[8] This sect of milbloggers emphasized their own embarrassment at the Kremlin strike, comparing it to the humiliation of a single German civilian pilot landing a small aircraft near the Kremlin in 1987.[9] Other Russian milbloggers, including those with close Kremlin affiliations, criticized the high degree of outcry in the Russian information space.[10] These milbloggers largely advocated against retaliatory military escalation on the grounds that this strike does not change the operational or strategic situation in the war, instead calling for a cautious response while acknowledging the sting of embarrassment over the strike.[11] This messaging from pro-Kremlin milbloggers could support the assessment that the purpose of this false-flag attack was to justify increased mobilization measures rather than any sort of escalation.

The Kremlin may be planning to conduct other false flag operations and increase disinformation ahead of a Ukrainian counteroffensive in order to increase domestic support for the war. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on May 2 that Russian forces in Bryansk and Kursk oblasts received Ukrainian uniforms in order to conduct a false flag operation in border areas.[12] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on May 3 that Russian forces may simulate a hostage taking and noted that "Storm" detachments of the Russian 13th Guards Tank Regiment (4th Guards Tank Division) and 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment (2nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division) of the 1st Guards Tank Army of the Western Military District arrived in Ivaniivske in Kursk Oblast and Yamnoye in Bryansk Oblast.[13] The 13th Guards Tank Regiment suffered massive losses early in the war in Chernihiv Oblast and in fall of 2022 during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast.[14] This report that elements of the 13th Guards Tank Regiment are in Bryansk or Kursk Oblast suggests that the regiment is not in Ukraine and is unready to return to battle. Russian milbloggers amplified a claim from state-run media outlet RT that Ukrainian forces are preparing a provocation against Transnistria and will attempt to enter Transnistria between May 9 and 15.[15] The Kremlin has previously attempted to portray Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia's territorial integrity and to warn of supposed Ukrainian provocations to be conducted in Moldova.[16]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin baselessly claimed on May 3 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has already begun, likely in order to exploit information space anxieties and call for increased Russian military support for Wagner's Bakhmut offensive. In an audio recording posted on May 3, Prigozhin says that he believes that Ukraine has already begun its counteroffensive and cited an increase in Ukrainian activity "along the perimeter" of the Bakhmut front.[17] Prigozhin also claimed that Wagner's flanks, currently held by conventional Russian airborne (VDV) troops, are "not in the best way" and stated that he will not speculate on how reliable they are to maintain "politeness." [18] Prigozhin's comment on the state of the flanks is likely a thinly-veiled criticism of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and its ability to help Wagner hold Bakhmut and suggests that Prigozhin is blaming the MoD for being unable to hold off Ukrainian localized counterattacks in Bakhmut. Prigozhin concluded that he anticipates a more "active phase" of counteroffensive actions to begin in the next few days.[19] Prigozhin is likely using this claim to benefit from continued concerns in the Russian information space regarding a Ukrainian counteroffensive and to lobby for increased support for Wagner amid continued pleas for the Russian MoD to provide Wagner more ammunition for its offensive on Bakhmut.[20] ISW has observed no additional evidence to support Prigozhin's claims and does not assess that a Ukrainian counter-offensive has begun around Bakhmut.

Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike against Ukraine on the night of May 2 to 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 3 that Russian forces attacked Ukrainian territory from Bryansk Oblast and the southeast coast of the Sea of Azov with 26 Iranian-made Shahed-131/136 drones and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 21 of the 26 drones.[21] The Kyiv Oblast Military Administration stated that Russian forces attacked Kyiv Oblast for the third time in six consecutive days.[22] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Shahed drones also targeted Kirovohrad and Mykolaiv oblasts.[23]

Key Takeaways

- Russia accused Ukraine of conducting a drone strike against the Kremlin.
- Russia likely staged this attack in an attempt to bring the war home to a Russian domestic audience and set conditions for a wider societal mobilization.
- The rapid and coherent presentation of an official Russian narrative around the strike suggests that Russia staged this attack in close proximity to the May 9th Victory Day holiday in order to frame the war as existential to its domestic audience.
- Some Russian nationalist milbloggers seized on the Kremlin drone strike to call for Russian escalation in the war despite the fact that Russia currently lacks the military capability to do so.
- The Kremlin may be planning to conduct other false flag operations and to increase disinformation ahead of a Ukrainian counteroffensive in order to increase domestic support for the war.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin baselessly claimed on May 3 that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has already begun, likely in order to exploit information space anxieties and call for increased Russian military support for Wagner's Bakhmut offensive.
- Russian forces conducted a Shahed-131/136 drone strike on the night of May 2 to 3.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks near Kremminna.
- Russian forces continued to make gains in and around Bakhmut and continued to conduct ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces conducted heavy air and artillery strikes against west (right) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian officials continue to incentivize military service by providing social benefits to families of participants in the war.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that it prevented a “terrorist” attack against three Crimean officials.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 2, 2023

[Click Here for the full report](#)

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

May 2, 2023, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is increasing its production of precision missiles for use against Ukraine. Shoigu highlighted the state-owned Tactical Missiles Corporation as a model defense enterprise, stating that is successfully beginning mass production of missiles and will develop plans to double its current production output in the near term.[1] Shoigu's focus on precision missile production aligns with a shift in Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s rhetoric focusing on Russia's use of precision missiles to strike military infrastructure targets in Ukrainian rear areas, likely aiming to similarly appear proactive and demonstrative positive Russian actions amid growing concerns in the Russian information space about a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.[2]

Shoigu likely seeks to deflect intensifying accusations that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) cannot provide sufficient ammunition to Russian forces. Shoigu stated that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) increased its production pace and output volumes, and claimed that Russian forces have received enough ammunition to date in 2023 to inflict extensive damage on Ukrainian forces.[3] ISW previously reported that the Russian military command is reshuffling the leadership of command organs associated with logistics and force generation efforts after commanders that oppose Gerasimov and the core of the Russian MoD partially regained Russian President Vladimir Putin's favor in late March.[4] Russian milbloggers also began naming specific Russian MoD officials in their accusations of poor supply provisions to Russian forces in this period.[5] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to claim that the Russian MoD is

deliberately setting Wagner mercenaries up for failure in Bakhmut by refusing to provide their requested number of shells, which his commanders claim is leading to high casualties and slow progress on the battlefield.[6] A Wagner serviceman also claimed that he delivered 39 boxes with complaints from Wagner servicemen about lack of ammunition to the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee on May 2.[7]

Russian reactions to a claimed strike against a vehicle carrying Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces Commander Major General Ihor Tantsyura suggest Russian ultranationalists seek to frame any Russian operations as delaying potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on May 2 that Wagner forces struck a Ukrainian armored vehicle carrying Tantsyura enroute to Bakhmut, and published a video purporting to show the strike.[8] Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces Spokesperson Denys Zelinsky denied Prigozhin's claim and stated that "everyone is alive and well." [9] Prigozhin responded that Wagner will continue to operate in the area.[10] Milbloggers widely circulated Prigozhin's claims and framed the strike as an informational victory.[11] A prominent milblogger claimed that Tantsyura received an order to transfer reserves to Bakhmut and prepare Ukrainian forces to conduct counterattacks in the area, likely to frame the Russian strike as an operationally significant event which delayed potential upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.[12] Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian strike on Pavlohrad on May 1 impacted a critical Ukrainian logistics and accumulation hub and similarly suggested that the strike would delay Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[13]

The Kremlin reportedly distributed a new manual instructing Russian state media on how to cover an upcoming potential Ukrainian counteroffensive that, if real, indicates the Kremlin is setting informational conditions both for an effective Russian defense and to mitigate shocks in the Russian information space from Ukrainian successes. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on May 2 that it attained the manual, which reportedly instructs Russian state media to "not lower the expectations of the announced Ukrainian counteroffensive" or claim that Ukraine is not ready to conduct a counteroffensive – instead treating the possibility of a Ukrainian offensive as a given[14] The manual instead reportedly stresses that Russian media should focus on Western security assistance and support for Ukraine.[15] *Meduza* reported that sources close to the Russian presidential administration stated that the coverage aims to allow the Kremlin to announce a military victory in the event of an unsuccessful Ukrainian counteroffensive and establish justifications for a successful counteroffensive by claiming that Russian losses will be understandable because "the entire West has concentrated huge efforts on the front." [16] The alleged document suggests the Kremlin is preparing for – if not expecting – Ukrainian successes and is planning to mitigate demoralization in the Russian information space. This is an important Russian adaptation from previous Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kherson and Kharkiv, which produced dramatic shocks and demoralization in both the Russian military and the Russian information space that the Kremlin likely seeks to mitigate[17]

UN member states, including key Russian partners like China, India, and Brazil, voted to adopt a resolution on April 26 acknowledging Russia as the aggressor in the war in Ukraine.[18] The resolution preamble states that the UN aims to more closely align with the Council of Europe amid "unprecedented challenges now facing Europe following the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and against Georgia prior to that." This resolution is reportedly the first such resolution in which China recognized Russia as the aggressor in the war in Ukraine.[19] Voting in favor of this resolution by itself does not likely reflect the broader opinion of Russian allies towards Russia, however.

Correction: ISW reported on May 1 that US officials assessed that Russian forces have suffered 100,000 casualties – 80,000 wounded and 20,000 dead – in fighting for Bakhmut since January 2023 based on statements from National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby.[20] National Security Council deputy spokesperson Sean Savett later clarified on May 1 that the figures account for Russian casualties throughout Ukraine since January 2023.[21]

Key Takeaways

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is increasing its production of precision missiles for use against Ukraine.
- Shoigu likely seeks to deflect intensifying accusations that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) cannot provide sufficient ammunition to Russian forces.
- Russian reactions to a claimed strike against Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces Commander Major General Ihor Tantsyura suggest Russian ultranationalists are attempting to frame any Russian operations as delaying potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.
- The Kremlin reportedly distributed a new manual instructing Russian state media on how to cover an upcoming potential Ukrainian counteroffensive that, if real, indicates the Kremlin is setting informational conditions both for an effective Russian defense and to mitigate shocks in the Russian information space from Ukrainian successes.
- UN member states, including key Russian partners like China, India, and Brazil, voted to adopt a resolution on April 26 that acknowledges Russia as the aggressor of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Russian forces made marginal gains near Bakhmut but did not advance within the city itself.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited and local counterattacks in the Avdiivka area.
- Ukrainian forces continue to operate on and around islands in the Dnipro River delta in Kherson Oblast.

- Russian government officials are continuing to introduce new social benefits to veterans and their families to incentivize further military recruitment efforts in Russia.
- Likely Ukrainian partisans targeted an unspecified Zaporizhia Oblast occupation Ministry of Internal Affairs deputy head in Melitopol.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 1, 2023

[Click Here to read the full report](#)

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

May 1, 2023, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike against Ukraine on the night of April 30 to May 1. Ukrainian sources reported that nine Tu-95 and two Tu-160 strategic bombers took off from Murmansk Oblast and near the Caspian Sea and launched 18 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles at Ukraine.^[1] Ukrainian air defense shot down 15 of the missiles.^[2] Geolocated footage from Pavlohrad, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, shows that one of the missiles struck the Pavlohrad Chemical Plant and caused a massive explosion on impact.^[3] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 1 that the strikes targeted Ukrainian military-industrial objects and successfully disrupted the production of military resources.^[4] The Russian MoD has recently shifted its rhetoric and is actively describing strike campaigns, likely in an effort to portray a proactive approach to growing concerns in the Russian information space regarding a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian milbloggers claimed that the missiles struck Ukrainian air defense systems and a transportation hub in Pavlohrad.^[5] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that the fact that both the Tu-95 and Tu-160s carried far fewer missiles than their maximum load suggests that Russia continues to struggle with adequate production of such munitions.^[6]

The White House assessed on May 1 that Russian forces have suffered 100,000 causalities—80,000 wounded and 20,000 killed—in fighting for Bakhmut since January 2023.^[7] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby announced that half of the 20,000 killed in action were Wagner Group fighters. Kirby also assessed that Russia's offensive on Bakhmut has failed.^[8]

Ukrainian officials continue to signal Ukraine's readiness for potential counteroffensive operations. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated on May 1 that Ukraine is "reaching the finish line" in terms of when it will be ready to launch counteroffensive actions.^[9] Reznikov noted that the ratio of available ammunition still does not favor Ukraine but stated that Russian capabilities continue to be limited.^[10] Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov emphasized on April 30 that the main goal of the Ukrainian counteroffensive remains the liberation of all Ukrainian territory and stated that he hopes Ukraine will be able to improve its positions along the entire frontline in order to effectively threaten Russian logistics in occupied Crimea and Donbas.^[11]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely using his rehabilitated standing with Russian leadership to amplify his self-promotion efforts and his longstanding issues with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russian sources began circulating an alleged letter from the MoD to Prigozhin on April 30 responding to Prigozhin's April 29 interview wherein he threatened to withdraw Wagner forces from Bakhmut if the Russian military fails to provide more ammunition to Wagner.^[12] The letter, dated April 23, lists all the artillery ammunition and equipment that the Russian MoD provides to Wagner.^[13] A Russian official may have released the letter to stop Prigozhin from using the issue of artillery shortages to criticize the MoD as he has done in the past.^[14] Prigozhin responded by stating that

the figures provided by the unverified document are still not sufficient for what Wagner needs to complete its assigned tasks.[15] Prigozhin then claimed on May 1 that Wagner is in possession of large stocks of weapons it captured from Ukrainian forces during the seizure of Soledar in January 2023, and Prigozhin rhetorically boasted that he has enough arms to support a million-strong army.[16] Prigozhin suggested that he would offer to exchange these stocks of weapons for the resources that Wagner requires.[17] Prigozhin will likely continue to rely on his existing informational lines of attack to promote himself and seek further privileges from the Russian military as he retains a rehabilitated standing with Russian leadership.[18]

The Russian MoD confirmed on April 30 the replacement of Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev with Colonel General Aleksey Kuzmenkov. The MoD provided no justification for the replacement nor did it specify whether Mizintsev has a new role. Russian milbloggers began speculating about the replacement of Mizintsev with Kuzmenkov, who was then Deputy Head of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), on April 27.[19] Regular changes to the Russian military command have resulted in increasingly factionalized Russian military and disorganized command structures that degrade Russia's military capability, as ISW has recently assessed.[20]

The Russian MoD opposition faction is likely attempting to remove select MoD officials by publicly criticizing their war efforts. Russian milbloggers complained that Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-bek Yevkurov visited the Kherson direction months ago and did not fulfill his promise to allocate 140 to 150 boats to Russian forces to defend the islands in the Dnipro River Delta.[21] One milblogger claimed that the lack of watercraft prompted Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo to order his administration in mid-April to start commandeering civilian boats for Russian military use.[22] Milbloggers' criticism of Yevkurov follows the dismissal of the Russian Deputy Defense Minister for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev on April 27.[23] Mizintsev was reportedly dismissed after Commander of the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces and Wagner affiliate Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky's inspection of the Northern Fleet troops revealed significant issues with supply provisions.[24] Teplinsky reportedly assumed command of Russian forces in southern Ukraine in mid-April and may be using his new appointment to remove Russian MoD officials with the justification that they are failing to adequately supply troops. ISW assessed on April 30 that Teplinsky likely gained Russian President Vladimir Putin's favor in late March, and the milbloggers' criticisms against Yevkurov is likely an ongoing effort to weaken or remove a group of Russian military commanders and officials who are loyal to Russian Chief of General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov.[25]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another large-scale missile strike against Ukraine on the night of April 30 to May 1.
- The White House assessed on May 1 that the Russian offensive against Bakhmut has failed.
- Ukrainian officials continue to signal Ukraine's readiness for potential counteroffensive operations.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely using his rehabilitated standing with Russian leadership to amplify his self-promotion efforts and his longstanding issues with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- The Russian MoD confirmed the replacement of Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev with Colonel General Aleksey Kuzmenkov.
- The Russian MoD opposition faction is likely attempting to remove select MoD officials by publicly criticizing their war efforts.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremmina line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Wagner Group and other Russian forces are struggling to maintain their pace of offensive operations in Bakhmut.
- Russian sources continue to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting raids across the Dnipro River.
- The recent increased prevalence of Russian private military companies (PMCs) operating in Ukraine may be necessitating certain changes in the overall command structure.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue efforts to integrate occupied territories into the Russian socio-economic system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 30, 2023

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

ISW is publishing a special edition campaign assessment today, April 30. This report details changes in the Russian military command since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine without a clear and doctrinal command structure and his reluctance to appoint an overall theater commander have had lasting effects on the structure of the Russian command in Ukraine. Putin's regular command changes have led to an increasingly factionalized Russian military and disorganized command structures that are degrading the Russian military's ability to conduct a cohesive campaign in Ukraine. Factions are not a phenomenon particular to the Russian military, although their current dynamics within the Russian military are shaping decision making to an unusual degree. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin have been deliberately vague about most of these command changes. ISW's timeline of the changes is based on official Russian statements as well as analysis

of unconfirmed claims and reports from Russian, Ukrainian, and Western sources. The exact dates of command changes are based on the first reporting of a change and may not correspond with the formal date on which a change occurred. These command changes were likely not discrete events resulting from decisions made suddenly but were instead drawn-out bureaucratic affairs.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's reluctance to appoint an overall theater commander for his invasion of Ukraine has had cascading effects on the Russian military including fueling intense factionalization, disorganizing command structures, and feeding unattainable expectations. Western officials reported in April 2022 that Russia had not have a single military commander of its forces in Ukraine since the start of the invasion on February 24, 2022. Putin likely sought to present himself as the commander-in-chief and the mastermind of the successful invasion of Ukraine. Captured Russian military plans revealed that the Kremlin expected Russian forces to capture Kyiv in mere days, and Putin had likely wanted to declare this speedy invasion a personal geopolitical victory. Putin may have been reluctant to appoint a commander for this invasion to avoid crediting a military commander with the military victory in Ukraine – a dynamic similar to the one between Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgy Zhukov during World War II. Stalin had limited and outdated wartime experience and was reportedly jealous of Zhukov's military exploits and fame. Putin has no military experience, which may have further contributed to his decision not to appoint a commander for his invasion who could have upstaged him by claiming credit for the expected dramatic victory.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on April 30:

- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line on April 30. Ukrainian National Guard Spokesperson Rulan Muzychuk stated that Russian forces are using more artillery but conducting fewer assaults in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions than in Bakhmut and Marinka.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on April 30. Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Ukrainian forces continue to have access to logistics routes to Bakhmut.
- A Russian source suggested on April 30 that Russian forces will likely conduct their own offensive in southern Ukraine if the potential Ukrainian counteroffensive fails. The Russian source cited the fact that top Russian officials and law enforcement are discussing possible candidates to lead various districts in Zaporizhia Oblast which are currently under Ukrainian control as further evidence of Russian plans to move in the southern direction.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov reported that Russia is seeking to take control of numerous Russian paramilitary groups and is trying to create a new structure that would subordinate private military companies (PMCs) to the Russian General Staff.
- A Russian milblogger claimed that Russia is forming new brigades of the airborne forces (VDV), elite units that have conducted joint operations with Wagner forces in Bakhmut.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 29, 2023

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

Angela Howard, Grace Mapes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 29, 4:25 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin threatened to withdraw Wagner forces from Bakhmut if the Russian military command fails to provide more ammunition to the Wagner mercenaries. Prigozhin stated in an interview with a Kremlin-affiliated milblogger on April 29 that the Wagner mercenaries will continue to fight in Bakhmut but will need to "withdraw in an organized manner or stay and die" if the situation does immediately not improve.^[1] Prigozhin stated that Wagner needs about 80,000 shells per day — its previous shell allowance prior to apparent Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) efforts to reduce Wagner's influence. Prigozhin added that Wagner is only receiving 800 of the 4,000 shells per day that it is currently requesting. Prigozhin claimed that Wagner and Deputy Commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin developed a plan to "grind" the Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut that deprived Ukraine of its initiative on the battlefield. Prigozhin's mention of Surovikin is likely an attempt to publicly affiliate with Surovikin as Russian President Vladimir Putin's favor is shifting away from Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov's network.^[2] Prigozhin is likely attempting to regain access to more ammunition as Putin is once again reshuffling the Russian military leadership in a way that may favor Prigozhin.

Prigozhin also continued his efforts to convince the Kremlin to go over to the defensive in eastern Ukraine. Prigozhin claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive could take place before May 15 but that the Russian military is not rushing to prepare to repel attacks.^[3] Prigozhin's threat to withdraw from Bakhmut may also indicate that Prigozhin fears that the Russian positions in Bakhmut's rear are vulnerable to counterattacks.

Prigozhin offered a position as First Deputy Commander of Wagner forces to former Russian Deputy Defense Minister for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, who was reportedly dismissed from his position on April 27.^[4] Prigozhin claimed on April 29 that the Wagner commanders' council decided to offer Mizintsev a position as deputy commander under Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin.^[5] Prigozhin also stated in the interview that Mizintsev was operating on the frontlines and was fired for his intractability.^[6] Russian milbloggers previously claimed that Mizintsev's dismissal could have resulted from the Russian Northern Fleet's lack of supplies revealed by Wagner-affiliated Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces Mikhail Teplinsky's readiness checks.^[7] Mizintsev's affiliation with Wagner is unclear at this time. It is possible that his firing was an attempt to improve military supplies to the forces within or affiliated with Teplinsky's command — such as Wagner forces. Prigozhin has previously mockingly offered command positions to figures he dislikes, such as former Russian officer Igor Girkin, and Prigozhin's offer may have been an attempt to humiliate Mizintsev.^[8] Unconfirmed Russian sources claimed that Teplinsky assumed the position of deputy commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine, and Mizintsev's dismissal, if it occurred, suggests that Teplinsky has sway with Putin that allows him to shape decisions about command changes.^[9]

Ukrainian forces likely attacked an oil storage facility in Sevastopol reportedly with a wave of Mugin-5 UAVs on April 29. Footage posted on April 29 shows a large fire at an oil storage facility at Kozacha Bay on April 29.^[10] Occupation governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev stated on April 29 that a Ukrainian UAV struck an oil tank near Kozacha Bay and caused a fire over 1,000 square meters in extent.^[11] A prominent Russian milblogger based in Sevastopol reported that two Ukrainian UAVs destroyed four fuel tanks.^[12] Another Russian military blogger reported that at least 10 Ukrainian Mugin-5 drones conducted the attack from Shkolny Airfield in Odessa and that a combination of electronic warfare, small arms, and Pantsir-S1 air defense systems downed most of the UAVs upon approach to their target.^[13] Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov stated the attack did not result in any casualties.^[14] Ukraine has not formally taken credit for the attack. A Ukrainian intelligence official claimed the attack destroyed 10 oil tanks with a total capacity of 40,000 tons of fuel and that the fuel destroyed was intended for use in the Black Sea Fleet.^[15] This official also insinuated the attack was retribution for the Russian missile strike against Uman on April 28.^[16] Some social media users noted that the Black Sea Fleet's main fuel depot is in a different location on the east end of Sevastopol Bay.^[17] Razvozhaev claimed that the fire will not affect the supply of fuel in Sevastopol as the destroyed reserves were not used to fuel gas stations.^[18] Some milbloggers argued that this attack highlights the effectiveness of using low-cost drones for swarm attacks and underscores the need for Russian forces to saturate the Crimean air space with more air defense systems.^[19]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin threatened to withdraw Wagner forces from Bakhmut if the Russian military command fails to provide more ammunition to Wagner mercenaries.
- Prigozhin also continued his efforts to convince the Kremlin to go over to the defensive in eastern Ukraine.
- Prigozhin offered the position of First Deputy Commander of Wagner forces, possibly sarcastically, to former Russian Deputy Defense Minister for Logistics Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev who was reportedly dismissed from his position on April 27.
- Ukrainian forces attacked an oil storage facility in Sevastopol reportedly with a wave of Mugin-5 UAVs on April 29.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces made limited gains in Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces conducted a sea-based missile strike against the command post of the Ukrainian Kherson Group of Forces. Ukrainian officials have so far not confirmed this claim.
- The Russian MoD continues to pursue measures to expedite the conscription process and increase the difficulty of evading summonses.
- Russian occupation authorities and border area officials have expanded security measures and filtration efforts likely in anticipation of increased Ukrainian partisan activity in support of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 28, 2023

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

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

April 28, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces launched a series of missile strikes against rear areas of Ukraine on the night of April 27. Ukrainian military sources confirmed that Russian forces launched 23 Kh-101/Kh-555 missiles from Tu-95 aircraft over the Caspian Sea and struck civilian infrastructure in Uman, Cherkasy Oblast; Dnipro City; and Ukrainka, Kyiv Oblast.[1] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian air defense shot down 21 of 23 missiles and two UAVs.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) acknowledged the strike and claimed that the Russian aerospace forces conducted a coordinated missile strike against Ukrainian reserve deployment points and struck all intended targets.[3] Geolocated footage shows large-scale damage to a residential building in Uman, with the death toll reaching 20 civilians, including children, as of 1700 local time on April 28.[4]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the appointment of Vice Admiral Vladimir Vorobyov as the new commander of the Baltic Fleet on April 28 following the transfer of former Baltic Fleet Commander Admiral Viktor Liina to the Pacific Fleet. Russian state media reported that the Russian MoD introduced Vorobyov as the new Baltic Fleet commander thereby confirming that Liina replaced Admiral Sergei Avakyants as Pacific Fleet command.[5] ISW had previously reported that Liina may have been replacing Avakyants because of Pacific Fleet failures exposed during recent combat readiness exercises, and Russian officials claimed that Avakyants was moved to a new position as head of Russian military sports training and patriotic education centers after aging out of military service. [6] Vorobyov has previously served as Chief of Staff and First Deputy Commander of both the Baltic and Northern Fleets.[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on April 27 codifying conditions for the further large-scale deportation to Russia of residents of occupied areas of Ukraine. Putin signed a decree entitled "On the Peculiarities of the Legal Status of Certain Categories of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Russian Federation" that defines those who are living in Russian-occupied territories who have declared their desire to retain their current citizenship and refuse to accept Russian passports as "foreign citizens and stateless persons currently residing in the Russian Federation." [8] The decree holds that such individuals may continue to reside in occupied territories until July 1, 2024, suggesting that these individuals may be subject to deportation following this date.[9] This decree codifies coercive methods to encourage residents of occupied areas to receive Russian passports and also sets conditions for the deportation of Ukrainians who do not agree to become Russian citizens. Russian authorities are also continuing other efforts to deport Ukrainians, particularly children, to Russia under various schemes.[10] ISW continues to assess that all lines of effort aimed at deporting Ukrainians to Russia may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, as well as a potential deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign.

Russian Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu promoted the Kremlin's efforts to form a potential anti-Western coalition during a meeting of the defense ministers of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states in New Delhi, India. Shoigu stated on April 28 that the SCO meeting occurred against the backdrop of the establishment of a new multipolar world order, which the collective West is actively opposing.[11] Shoigu argued that the US and its allies are provoking conflicts with Russia and China and that the West is attempting to defeat Russia and threaten China through the war in Ukraine.[12] Shoigu invited SCO member states to participate in the 11th Moscow Conference of International Security and called on the SCO to develop a framework for exchanging military information, cooperation in joint military exercises, and the development of partnerships between the SCO and Russian-favored multilateral organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[13]

The Kremlin has previously identified multilateral organizations without significant Western participation as its preferred bodies for international decision making and will likely continue to use such bodies to promote Russian President Vladimir Putin's envisioned geopolitical conflict with the West.[14] ISW assessed that Putin tried to use Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow from March 20 to 22 to promote the idea of an anti-Western Russian-Chinese-based geopolitical bloc, but that Xi rebuffed Putin's rhetorical overtures.[15] The Kremlin is likely aware that the attractiveness of such a bloc lies more with China's economic and political power than with Russia's increasingly isolated economy and degraded military capacity, which is why it likely chose the Chinese-favored SCO to promote the idea of a potential anti-Western coalition. The Kremlin is also likely attempting to secure through multilateral engagement with China desired benefits of a Chinese-Russian bilateral relationship that Putin was unable to obtain in his meeting with Xi. The Kremlin's attempts to use the SCO to support these efforts are unlikely to be more successful than its previous efforts to rally the rest of the world against the West and convince China that Russia is a reliable and equal security partner.

Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow defrocked a Russian Orthodox Church protodeacon who did not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russian Orthodox Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev posted an order dated April 28 defrocking him for "anti-church activities" signed by Patriarch Kirill.[16] The Russian Orthodox Church had previously defrocked Kuraev in December 2020, but Patriarch Kirill imposed a moratorium on the execution of this decision to give Kuraev time to "rethink his position." [17] Kuraev reportedly does not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the invasion.[18] Russian authorities fined Kuraev 30,000 rubles for discrediting the Russian military in August 2022 after Kuraev wrote a blog post about the current war in Ukraine.[19] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty additionally reported that Kuraev has criticized the Russian Orthodox Church's structures and Patriarch Kirill, accusing the Russian Orthodox Church of being distant from its parishioners, bureaucratic, and inert.[20] Kuraev's defrocking supports ISW's assessment that the Russian Orthodox Church is not an independent religious organization but rather an extension of the Russian state and an instrument of Russian state power.[21] Russian forces in Ukraine have reportedly gone out of their way to punish individual Russian Orthodox priests in Ukraine who were not fully cooperative with Russian military forces.[22]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched a series of missile strikes against rear areas of Ukraine on the night of April 27.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the appointment of Vice Admiral Vladimir Vorobiov as the new commander of the Baltic Fleet following the transfer of former Baltic Fleet commander Admiral Viktor Liina to the Pacific Fleet.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree codifying conditions for the further large-scale deportation of residents of occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia.
- Russian Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu promoted the Kremlin's efforts to form a potential anti-Western coalition during a meeting of the defense ministers of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states in New Delhi, India.
- Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow defrocked a Russian Orthodox Church protodeacon who did not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Kreminna and have made an incremental advance northwest of Kreminna as of April 28.
- Russian forces are increasing pressure against the T0504 Kostyantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway.
- Russian forces continued routine indirect fire and defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin tasked Russian officials with developing Russia's domestic drone industry likely as part of the Kremlin's effort to gradually mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian occupation authorities continue to announce patronage programs with Russian federal subjects.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 27, 2023

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

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

April 27, 3:30pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Russian military command appears to be reshuffling the leadership of command organs associated with force generation, sustainment, and logistics. Several prominent Russian milbloggers claimed on April 27 that Colonel General Aleksey Kuzmenkov, Deputy Head of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), has replaced Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev as Deputy Defense Minister of the Russian Federation for Logistics.^[1] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Mizintsev's dismissal may be a result of a combat readiness check of troops of the Northern Fleet carried out by former commander of the airborne (VDV) forces and Wagner affiliate Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, who was recently re-appointed to an unspecified command role in Ukraine.^[2] The milblogger claimed that Teplinsky's inspection revealed that troops in certain places of the front were not receiving necessary weapons.^[3] The Wagner Group has experienced significant issues with dealing with the Russian logistics enterprise, and Teplinsky's reported role in identifying issues with supply may portend a renewed focus of Russian sustainment organs on providing Wagner with necessary logistical support, as Teplinsky's affiliations with Wagner are well-established.^[4] ISW previously reported on September 24, 2022, that Mizinstev replaced Army General Dmitry Bulgakov as Head of Logistics and that Mizintsev previously was the head of the Russian National Defense Control Center and oversaw command of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) during Russian operations in Mariupol in spring 2022.^[5] Russian milbloggers additionally reported that former Head of the 8th Directorate of the Russian General Staff (State Secret Protection) Yuri Kuznetsov will become Head of the Main Directorate of Personnel of the Russian Ministry of Defense and that Stanislav Gadzhimagomedov, Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the Russian General Staff will replace General Oleg Gorshenin as Head of the National Defense Control Center.^[6] Official Russian sources have not yet confirmed these changes.

The three command organs that are reportedly receiving new leadership as part of this reshuffle are noteworthy because they are associated with managing aspects of Russian force generation, troop sustainment, and logistical oversight. The Russian National Defense Control Center is the body responsible for coordinating the actions of the Russian Armed Forces and is essentially the nerve center of the entire Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Alongside the coordination actions of the National Defense and Control Center, the organs responsible for personnel and logistical oversight facilitate critical troops sustainment functions. The Russian General Staff may be scrambling to enact these changes as fear over a Ukrainian counteroffensive mounts in the Russian information space. These changes also suggest that existing commanders in charge of these functions failed to properly facilitate Russia's winter offensive, which has largely culminated without making substantial gains. However, these changes are unlikely to effectively set conditions for Russian forces to respond to a Ukrainian counteroffensive in a timely manner. These changes may be part of a wider effort to reform and formalize the Russian Armed Forces over the long term.

Western officials expressed confidence in Ukraine's ability to conduct a successful counteroffensive. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on April 27 that NATO has trained and equipped more than nine new Ukrainian brigades, emphasizing that Ukrainian forces are in a "strong" position to retake captured territory in their upcoming counteroffensive.[7] Stoltenberg also stated that NATO and its partners have delivered over 98 percent of promised combat vehicles to Ukraine, totaling over 1,550 armored vehicles, 230 tanks, and other unspecified equipment.[8] US European Command (EUCOM) Commander General Christopher Cavoli stated that the US has been working closely with Ukrainian forces to develop a counteroffensive plan, including developing techniques to surprise Russian forces.[9]

Russian forces are reportedly using new tactics to complicate Ukrainian air defenses' ability to detect Russian missiles. Russian forces conducted four Kalibr missile strikes on Mykolaiv City on April 27, and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces directed the missiles using different terrain features, different heights of launches, and multiple trajectory changes to complicate their detection by Ukrainian air defenses.[10] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) acknowledged that Russian forces conducted a sea-based, long-range, high precision missile strike on April 27, following its recent notable silence about Russian missile and air strikes as part of its broader missile campaign in Ukraine.[11] ISW previously assessed that Russia's missile campaign to degrade Ukraine's unified energy infrastructure definitively failed and that Russian forces appear to have abandoned the effort.[12] Russian forces maintain the capability to renew their missile campaign if they desire, and Russian forces may employ these tactics in order to conserve their stocks of high precision missiles in the event of a renewed missile campaign.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have launched a renewed campaign for national attention. Kadyrov publicized that he met with several prominent Russian officials – including Russian National Guard Federal Service Director Viktor Zolotov, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, Presidential Administration Head Anton Vaino, and Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov – on April 26. Kadyrov claimed that he discussed topics including relations between Russian regions and the federal government with Bortnikov and that Bortnikov thanked him personally for the stable situation in Chechnya. [13] Kadyrov also continues to draw heavily on Chechen soldiers' role in Ukraine to bolster his own image. Kadyrov claimed on April 26 that Chechen Akhmat-1 Special Purposes Mobile Unit (OMON) security officers with extensive combat experience departed to replace their comrades in Ukraine.[14]

Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin met with Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu and Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani in New Delhi, India on April 27.[15] Belarus's ongoing efforts to build relationships with countries that have either supported or not condemned Russia's war in Ukraine likely aim to build a coalition of non-Western countries and deepen pathways to help Russia evade Western sanctions, on which ISW has previously reported.[16] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that Khrenin and Li discussed the status of an "all-weather" comprehensive strategic partnership between Belarus and China as well as prospects for cooperation in military and general spheres.[17] The Belarusian MoD's mention of an "all-weather" partnership closely mirrors Russian efforts to frame the Sino-Russian relationship as a "no limits" partnership despite existent Chinese reservations. The Belarusian MoD stated that Khrenin and Ashtiani noted the existence of "significant potential and prospects" to strengthen military contracts and increase practical cooperation.[18]

Key Takeaways

- The Russian military command appears to be reshuffling the leadership of command organs associated with force generation, sustainment, and logistics.
- The three command organs that are reportedly receiving new leadership as part of this reshuffle are noteworthy because they are associated with managing aspects of Russian force generation, troop sustainment, and logistical oversight.
- Western officials expressed confidence in Ukraine's ability to conduct a successful counteroffensive.
- Russian forces are reportedly using new tactics to complicate Ukrainian air defenses' ability to detect Russian missiles.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have launched a renewed campaign for national attention.
- Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin met with Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu and Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani in New Delhi, India on April 27.
- Russian forces conducted defensive operations in the Kupyansk direction and limited ground attacks near Kreminna.
- Russian forces did not make any confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut but may be transferring additional reserves to the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces are further militarizing the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to defend against possible Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- *The Washington Post* reported that leaked US intelligence documents state that Russian military leaders aim to enlist 815,000 soldiers while balancing concerns about critical labor shortages.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted three separate attacks in occupied territories on April 26-27.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 26, 2023

[Click here for the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 26, 5pm ET

Russia appears to be continuing a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied areas of Ukraine in order to facilitate the repopulation of Ukrainian territories with Russians. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on April 26 that Russia is trying to change the ethnic composition of Ukraine by actively conducting a large-scale resettlement of people mainly from poorer and remote regions of Russia into Ukraine.^[1] Malyar noted that the most intensive efforts are ongoing in occupied Luhansk Oblast and remarked that Russia is also deporting Ukrainians and forcibly resettling them in Russia.^[2] ISW previously reported on specific instances of Russian authorities overseeing the depopulation and repopulation of areas of occupied Ukraine, particularly in occupied Kherson Oblast over the course of 2022. Ukrainian sources remarked in October 2022 that Russian authorities in then-occupied parts of Kherson Oblast deported large groups of Ukrainian residents to Russia under the guise of humanitarian evacuations and then repopulated their homes with Russian soldiers.^[3] Russia may hope to import Russians to fill depopulated areas of Ukraine in order to further integrate occupied areas into Russian socially, administratively, politically, and economically, thereby complicating conditions for the reintegration of these territories into Ukraine. ISW has previously assessed that such depopulation and repopulation campaigns may amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing effort and apparent violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.^[4]

Competition among Russian private military companies (PMCs) is likely increasing in Bakhmut. A video appeal addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin by personnel of the "Potok" PMC (reportedly one of three volunteer detachments from Russian-state owned energy company Gazprom) claims that Gazprom officials told members of "Potok" that they would be signing contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) but then forced personnel to sign contracts with PMC "Redut."^[5] One Potok soldier claimed that Gazprom created two other units — "Fakel" and "Plamya," which were attached to the Russian MoD.^[6] A Russian milblogger claimed that "Potok" is not a PMC, but a BARS (Combat Reserve) unit, however.^[7] The "Potok" personnel also reported poor treatment by Wagner fighters who threatened to shoot "Potok" personnel if they withdrew from the line of contact. A Wagner fighter claimed in an interview published on April 26 that "Potok" fighters abandoned Wagner's flanks at night.^[8] A Russian milblogger claimed that "Potok" fighters abandoned their positions in Bakhmut due to a lack of ammunition.^[9] ISW previously assessed that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin likely views the proliferation of PMCs around Bakhmut as competition, and it appears that the increased prevalence of other PMCs around Bakhmut may be causing substantial friction.^[10]

The Kremlin continues measures to codify conditions for domestic repression. The Russian Federation Council approved three bills on April 26 which would allow for the deprivation of Russian citizenship for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces and for actions that threaten national security, allow for life sentences for high treason, and allow for five-year sentences for those who promote the decisions of international organizations in which Russia does not participate.^[11] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin has supported laws strengthening punishments for trespassing at facilities run by certain federal bodies, misappropriation of Russian military assets, and discreditation of all Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine to expand pretexts for the arrests of Russian citizens and the removal of officials who have fallen out of favor.^[12] The Kremlin is likely setting numerous conditions for domestic crackdowns to give Russian officials to have *carte blanche* in prosecuting anyone perceived to be against Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. The harsh punishments stipulated by these laws likely aim to promote widespread self-censorship amongst the Russian population. ISW has also assessed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) appears to be conducting a large-scale overhaul of domestic security organs, and Russian authorities may use these new laws to support these efforts.^[13]

Comments made by Russian officials and prominent voices in the Russian information space continue to highlight a pervasive anxiety over potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin remarked on April 26 that as soon as weather conditions improve in Bakhmut, Ukraine will launch a counteroffensive, which may coincide with Russia's May 9 Victory Day holiday (the commemoration of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945).^[14] A prominent Russian milblogger insinuated that Ukraine may be planning counteroffensive actions in order to ruin May 9 celebrations on Russia.^[15] The invocations of May 9 suggest that the Russian information space continues to place symbolic importance on dates associated with Russia's Great Patriotic War, which continues to shape discourse on the prospects of the war. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated during a press conference in New York on April 25 that discussions about the potential for negotiations after a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive are "schizophrenic."^[16] Increasingly despondent and panicked rhetoric emanating from prominent information space figures suggests that the Russian information space has not yet settled on a line about how to address significant and growing concerns about the near future.

Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity are foundational to Ukrainian-Chinese relations in a conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Xi's statement made China's position on Ukrainian independence clear, rejecting Chinese Ambassador to France Lu Shaye's April 22 statements that post-Soviet states lack a basis for sovereignty.^[17] Both Ukrainian and Chinese government readouts of the call mentioned a possible role China could play in negotiating nuclear issues.^[18] Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova expressed broad agreement with China's peace plan and blamed Ukraine for rejecting it.^[19] The tepid Russian response to Zelensky and Xi's call is likely further evidence of Russia's displeasure at China's unwillingness to establish a no-limits bilateral partnership. It is not clear that Chinese actions match Chinese rhetoric, however. According to US government statements and investigative journalism reports, China may be providing non-lethal military assistance to Russia.^[20]

The Kremlin is likely attempting to reassure Armenia that it is a reliable partner despite the fact that the war in Ukraine is limiting Russia's ability to play a larger role in mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on April 26 in which they reportedly discussed the development of the situation around Nagorno-Karabakh.^[21] The brief Kremlin read out for the conversation called for strict compliance with the agreements made by Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani leaders considering the increasing tensions in the Lachin corridor.^[22] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on April 26 that Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces Colonel General Alexander Lentsov is the new commander of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh and will oversee operations at the 30 observation posts that Russian forces operate in the area.^[23] The Russian MoD likely announced the appointment to signal to Armenia a commitment to meet Russia peacekeeping responsibilities and to augment Putin's effort to reassure Pashinyan.

The Kremlin may attempt to use conscripts to maintain peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh and preserve relations with Armenia and other Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states. ISW previously assessed that Russia's redeployment of elements of its peacekeeping force from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is likely eroding Russia's influence with Armenia.^[24] Pashinyan accused Russian peacekeeping forces of not meeting their obligations in December 2022 and stated on March 16, 2023, that Armenia should appeal to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) if Russia is unable to uphold the November 9, 2020, ceasefire agreement.^[25] The Kremlin efforts are likely failing to convince Armenia that it will uphold its obligations under the ceasefire agreement, and Russia's potential inability to do so may severely degrade Russia's standing with other Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states. The Russian State Duma approved on April 4 the first draft of a bill that would allow all Russian personnel, including conscripts, to participate in Russian peacekeeping operations, likely in an effort to send conscripts to sustain the peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.^[26] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on April 24 that the Kremlin made a decision to replace the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh with a contingent of conscripts, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Russian conscripts serving in Nagorno-Karabakh.^[27]

Key Takeaways

- Russia appears to be continuing a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied areas of Ukraine in order to facilitate the repopulation of Ukrainian territories with Russians.
- Competition among Russian private military companies (PMCs) is likely increasing in Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin continues measures to codify conditions for domestic repression.
- Comments made by Russian officials and prominent voices in the Russian information space continue to highlight a pervasive anxiety over potential Ukrainian counteroffensive actions.
- Chinese President Xi Jinping explicitly recognized Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, stating that mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity are foundational to Ukrainian-Chinese relations in a conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.
- The Kremlin is likely attempting to reassure Armenia that it is a reliable partner despite the fact that the war in Ukraine is limiting Russia's ability to play a larger role in mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Kremlin may attempt to use conscripts to maintain peacekeeping operations in Nagorno Karabakh and preserve relations with Armenia and other Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states.
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces made gains within Bakhmut and north of Avdiivka.
- Russian milbloggers continue to argue amongst themselves about Ukrainian activity along the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian authorities have started sending military registration summonses that include threats of "restrictive measures."
- Russian sources claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) prevented an attempted attack in Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 25, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan
April 25, 7pm ET

Senior US and EU officials assess that Russian President Vladimir Putin would remain unwilling to negotiate in response to a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on April 24 that a senior European official stated that the chances of Putin "backing down" in response to a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive are "less than zero."^[1] The official stated that Putin would likely mobilize more soldiers to fight in Ukraine. US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said that there is "very little evidence" to suggest that Putin would alter his strategic goal of subjugating Ukraine "politically, if not fully militarily." US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby told *Voice of America* on April 25 that the US is increasing security assistance to Ukraine because the US expects that Russia will attempt to go on the offensive as the weather improves.^[2]

A Ukrainian military official claimed on April 25 that Ukrainian forces are achieving “impressive results” in counter-battery combat against Russian forces on the Russian-occupied eastern (left) bank of the Dnipro River.[3] Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Southern Operational Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Ukrainian forces hit and destroyed Russian artillery systems, tanks, armored vehicles, and air defense systems. Humenyuk added that Ukrainian forces are working to clear the frontline on the east bank in a “counter-battery mode.” Humenyuk added that Russian forces are evacuating civilians from the Dnipro River bank area to move in Russian units, which is simplifying Ukrainian operations.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied ISW’s April 22 assessment about limited improvements in Wagner’s relations with the Russian military command ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive. ISW previously assessed that the Russian military command may have partially repaired its strained relationship with Prigozhin to persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to halt offensive operations ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.[4] ISW had also observed a dramatic change in the nature of Prigozhin’s public interactions with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin as early as beginning of April. [5] Prigozhin stated that ISW’s assessment is a “fake,” noting that he would not “exchange ammunition for [his] guys even for friendship with God.”[6]

Prigozhin’s continued instance on his distaste for the Russian military leadership contradicts the change in Prigozhin’s rhetoric as well as the sudden influx of artillery ammunition after months of reported shell hunger in Bakhmut.[7] Russian independent outlet *Mozhem Obyasnit* (We Can Explain) also reported that Prigozhin’s companies earned a record amount of income in 2022 from their contracts with the Russian MoD despite his feud with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu. [8] Prigozhin has repeatedly acknowledged cooperation with troops subordinated to the Russian MoD and is receiving mobilized personnel to reinforce his flanks. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov confirmed that his eldest son fought in the war with Wagner, which ISW assessed to be an information operation to mend the relationship and possibly increase or demonstrate Prigozhin’s loyalty to the Kremlin.[9] All these factors indicate that Prigozhin – despite his claimed independence and pride – needs to retain the favor and support of the Kremlin and the Russian MoD to sustain his operations.

Russian ultranationalists are continuing to advocate for the Kremlin to adopt Stalinist repression measures. Russian State Duma Parliamentarian Andrey Gurulyov – a prominent Russian ultranationalist figure within the ruling United Russia Party – stated that Russia needs to reintroduce the concept of the “enemy of the people.”[10] This concept designated all the late Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s opposition figures as the enemies of society. Gurulyov frequently shares extreme opinions on Russian state television but the rhetoric among the ultranationalists is increasingly emphasizing the need for the targeting and elimination of Russia’s internal enemies. Former Russian officer Igor Girkin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin often echo similar calls to prosecute Russian officials who are hoping to end the war via negotiations with the West. Such attitudes indicate that the ultranationalist communities are expecting Russian President Vladimir Putin to expand repression and fully commit to the war.

The Kremlin continues to avoid adopting overtly repressive measures likely out of concern for the stability of Putin’s regime. The Russian government withdrew a bill from the Russian State Duma that would have increased taxes from 13 to 30 percent for Russians who have fled the country.[11] Russian ultranationalists have repeatedly called on the Kremlin to nationalize property belonging to Russians who had “betrayed” the country by fleeing, but the Kremlin appears to remain hesitant to introduce such unpopular measures. Unnamed sources told Russian independent outlet *Verska* that the Russian presidential administration does not support the return of capital punishments in Russia – another issue that recently reemerged in Russian policy discussions.[12] The Kremlin could use the threat of the death penalty to scare Russians into supporting the war effort (or remaining passively resistant to it), but Putin likely remains hesitant to destroy his image as a diplomatic and tolerant tsar. ISW previously assessed that Putin relies on controlling the information space to safeguard his regime much more than the kind of massive oppression apparatus of the Soviet Union and that Putin has never rebuilt an internal repression apparatus equivalent to the KGB, Interior Ministry forces, and the Red Army.[13]

Russian civil rights groups OVD-Info, Memorial, and Rus Sidiashchaya (Russia Behind Bars) issued a legal challenge to the Russian censorship law against discrediting the Russian military on April 25. OVD-Info announced that its lawyers filed 10 of 20 planned complaints against the law to the Russian Constitutional Court in hopes that the court will rule the law unconstitutional.[14] The complaints centered around individual cases of alleged discreditation, including one case wherein authorities fined a man 50,000 rubles (about \$612) for holding a sign calling for peace.[15] A fringe group of at least 20, mostly smaller, pro-war Russian milbloggers amplified a call for the Russian government to repeal the censorship laws on April 11 following the prosecution of a Russian medic for telling battlefield truths.[16] OVD-Info and other human rights organizations are most likely to face prosecution under Russian censorship laws. The Russian government is unlikely to repeal or strike down these laws without direction from the Kremlin, but challenges like OVD-Info’s demonstrate continued resistance to domestic censorship and repression.

Key Takeaways

- Senior US and EU officials assess that Russian President Vladimir Putin would remain unwilling to negotiate in response to a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- A Ukrainian military official claimed on April 25 that Ukrainian forces are achieving “impressive results” in counter-battery combat against Russian forces on the Russian-occupied eastern (left) bank of the Dnipro River.

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied ISW's April 22 assessment about limited improvements in Wagner's relations with the Russian military command ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian ultranationalists continue to advocate for the Kremlin to adopt Stalinist repression measures.
- The Kremlin continues to avoid adopting overtly repressive measures likely out of concern for the stability of Putin's regime.
- Russian civil rights groups OVD-Info, Memorial, and Rus Sidiyashchaya (Russia Behind Bars) issued a legal challenge to the Russian censorship law against discrediting the Russian military on April 25.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Svatove-Kremmina line.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian milbloggers continued to issue vehement denials that Ukrainian forces established sustained positions on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is attempting to financially incentivize Russian prisoners to fight in Ukraine, offering them compensation equivalent to that of Russian volunteers.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Ukrainian partisans detonated a Russian military checkpoint near Oleshky.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 24, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 24, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian milbloggers speculated that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered additional military command changes on April 20. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Putin signed a decree on April 20 about a series of military command changes and formally dismissed Commander of the Eastern Military District Colonel General Rustam Muradov.^[1] The milblogger noted that Muradov's dismissal likely resulted from his disastrous offensive on Vuhledar that resulted in many casualties among Russian personnel and the loss of much military equipment. The milblogger added that the decree also forced Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov — who reportedly commanded Russian forces in Ukraine in April 2022 — to retire. The milblogger claimed that Putin forced former commander of the Western Military District Colonel General Alexander Zhuravlyov into retirement alongside other unnamed commanders as well. The milblogger claimed that the Kremlin is now relying on newly reappointed Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky to achieve decisive results.

These reports about command changes and dismissals follow the Kremlin's reported dismissal of Russian Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Sergei Avakyants on April 19.^[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that Avakyants was not fired as a result of poor performance during military drills in the Pacific, but that he will be forming a new "organization" under the rumored control of the "gas sector."^[3] It is unclear if this was an intentionally vague reference to the reports about Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom's formation of a private security company. The milblogger noted that he is not sure if the organization will cooperate with the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF) or the Young Cadets National Movement (Yunarmiya). ISW previously reported that Russian state gas companies — namely Gazprom — are forming new military formations and that DOSAAF has been proactive in Russian military recruitment efforts.^[4]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has launched an information operation to undermine the credibility of Russian state-affiliated private military groups (PMCs). Prigozhin claimed to visit the positions of "Potok" and the "Alexander Nevsky" units - which Prigozhin characterized as "micro-PMCs" - and harshly criticized the poor condition of these units on April 24.^[5] The Potok battalion is reportedly one of three volunteer detachments of the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom and is analogous to the Russian State Combat Reserve (BARS).^[6] The Potok battalion is reportedly subordinated to the Russian Ministry of Defense PMC Redut.^[7] Prigozhin claimed that these units are supposed to cover Wagner's flanks and asked how these units can conduct combat operations if they lack the proper supplies and weapons. Prigozhin also criticized the general proliferation of such PMCs, which likely suggests that Prigozhin views these new entities as Wagner's competition.

Wagner-affiliated sources claimed on April 24 that Wagner forces tasked Potok with defending unspecified newly captured positions to allow Wagner to regroup, but that Potok abandoned these positions and allowed Ukrainian forces to recapture the area.^[8] Alleged personnel of the Potok unit posted a video message on April 24, blaming the leadership of Gazprom and PMC Redut for failing to provide Potok with proper weapons and supplies as well as blaming Wagner for forbidding the Potok personnel from leaving their positions.^[9] Some milbloggers — including Wagner-affiliated milbloggers — criticized the Potok unit for blaming leadership and instead

attributed their poor combat performance to their status as volunteers.[10] The milbloggers' and Prigozhin's reports indicate that Wagner has authority over Russian MoD-owned entities, which in turn indicates that Prigozhin has regained some favor with the Kremlin.

Kremlin authorities proposed equalizing pay between mobilized personnel and volunteers likely in an attempt to incentivize military service. Russian President Vladimir Putin met with United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak on April 24 to discuss initiatives to provide benefits to Russian military personnel. Putin expressed support for Turchak's proposal to equalize the salary of "all participants" of the war in Ukraine.[11] Turchak claimed that mobilized personnel currently receive 195,000 rubles (about \$2,400) monthly no matter where they serve, whereas contract soldiers receive the same amount only when serving on the frontlines. Turchak claimed that contract soldiers serving in the rear are receiving salaries "several times less" than those received by soldiers in the same role on the front line. Turchak also proposed to implement other social benefits including: setting an admission quota at Russian universities for veterans, for those awarded Hero of Russia of three Orders of Courage, and for children of participants in the war; reducing or canceling the commission fees for withdrawing or transferring money; and extending or canceling loans for parents, spouses, and children of veterans in the event of death or severe disability. ISW previously reported on conflicts between different groups of Russian servicemen regarding unequal payments and social benefits, and the Kremlin is likely attempting to appear to resolve these discrepancies to encourage enlistment.[12]

The Saratov Oblast Investigative Committee detained a former Wagner Group commander who told Russian human rights organization *Gulagu.net* about Wagner's murder of children and other civilians in Bakhmut. *Gulagu.net* founder Vladimir Osechkin reported on April 24 that the Saratov Oblast Investigative Committee arrested Wagner commander Azamat Uldarov, who detailed Wagner's practice of killing children in Bakhmut and the group's treatment of prisoners of war on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's orders (which Prigozhin denied).[13] Osechkin stated that four other Wagner mercenaries accompanied the Investigate Committee and threatened Uldarov with death for his testimony against Prigozhin.[14] Wagner's cooperation with local investigative authorities indicates that Wagner and Prigozhin are able to influence certain local authorities and security organs. This anecdote further suggests that Wagner is deeply invested in encouraging participation in atrocities in order to build social cohesion among the group and indicates that Wagner uses the threat of retribution to discourage dissenting voices that expose Prigozhin to discredit the wider group.[15]

Ukrainian forces likely conducted a naval drone attack against the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) base in Sevastopol in the early morning of April 24. Geolocated footage shows a likely Ukrainian naval drone detonating in the port of Sevastopol reportedly around 3:30am on April 24.[16] The extent of damage from the strike is unclear. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on April 24 that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack the BSF base in Sevastopol with three unmanned surface vehicles and claimed that Russian forces destroyed all three vehicles.[17] Russian occupation governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev reported that of the two of the three unmanned surface vehicles entered Striletsky Bay and that one of them detonated on its own, damaging four residential buildings. [18] Razvozhaev reported that the attack did not damage any military infrastructure.[19] Ukrainian forces have likely targeted the Russian BSF before: the Ukrainian forces likely attacked a Grigorovich-class frigate of the BSF near Sevastopol with unmanned surface vehicles on October 29, 2022.[20]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov arrived in New York City on April 24 to chair a session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).[21] Lavrov led a session on April 24 entitled "maintenance of international peace and security" and was met with widespread condemnation by other members of the session. [22] ISW has previously assessed that Russia uses its position at the UNSC as a method of power projection and forecasted that Russia would likely exploit its one-month UNSC presidency to amplify Kremlin talking points about the war in Ukraine.[23]

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on April 24 that Russian ships are ferrying Iranian ammunition across the Caspian Sea to resupply Russian troops fighting in Ukraine.[24] The WSJ, citing unnamed Middle Eastern officials, stated that cargo ships have carried over 300,000 artillery shells and a million ammunition rounds from Iran to Russia via the Caspian Sea over the past six months. The unnamed officials reportedly said that the last known shipment left Iran for Astrakhan in early March and carried 1,000 containers with 2,000 artillery shells. The WSJ noted that the Iranian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has a contract with Russian state-owned joint stock company Rosobronexport for the sale of 74,000 artillery shells at a price of \$1.7 million. A prominent Russian milblogger responded to the report and claimed that he has not yet seen the arrival of this ammunition on the front despite continued Russian–Iranian defense cooperation.[25]

Krasnoyarsk Krai deputy Konstantin Senchenko resigned on April 24 following the resignation of Krasnoyarsk Krai Governor Aleksandr Uss on April 20. Senchenko reportedly left Russia over a year ago and actively criticized the war, earning himself a fine in January for "discrediting the army." [26] Uss reportedly resigned following an offer by Russian President Vladimir Putin to work on the federal level.[27] Senchenko's and Uss's resignations may signal discontent with Kremlin leadership on more regional levels of Russian government.

Key Takeaways

- Russian milbloggers speculated that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered additional military command changes on April 20.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has launched an information operation to undermine the credibility of Russian state-affiliated private military groups (PMCs).
- Kremlin authorities proposed equalizing pay between mobilized personnel and volunteers, likely in an attempt to incentivize military service.
- Saratov Oblast Investigative Committee detained a former Wagner Group commander who told Russian human rights organization *Gulagu.net* about Wagner's murder of children and other civilians in Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces likely conducted a naval drone attack against the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) base in Sevastopol in the early morning of April 24.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov arrived in New York City on April 24 to chair a session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).
- The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 24 that Russian ships are ferrying Iranian ammunition across the Caspian Sea to resupply Russian troops fighting in Ukraine.
- Krasnoyarsk Krai deputy Konstantin Senchenko resigned on April 24 following the resignation of Krasnoyarsk Krai Governor Aleksandr Uss on April 20.
- Ukrainian forces have made marginal gains south of Kreminna as of April 24 and continue to target Russian logistics nodes in rear areas of Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Some Russian sources denied claims from other Russian milbloggers that Ukrainian forces established enduring positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues crypto-mobilization efforts likely in an attempt to avoid a second wave of formal mobilization.
- The Wagner Group may be attempting to fill law enforcement roles in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 23, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 23, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

ISW is publishing a special edition campaign assessment today, April 23. This report outlines the current Russian order of battle (ORBAT) in Ukraine, assesses the offensive and defensive capabilities of Russian force groupings along the front, and discusses major factors that may complicate Russian defensive operations in the event of a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

This report is based on a number of assumptions about Ukrainian capabilities that ISW does not, as a matter of policy, attempt to assess or report on. It assumes, in particular, that Ukraine will be able to conduct a coordinated multi-brigade mechanized offensive operation making full use of the reported nine brigades being prepared for that operation. That task is daunting and larger than any offensive effort Ukraine has hitherto attempted (four Ukrainian brigades were reportedly used in the Kharkiv counter-offensive, for example). It also assumes that Ukraine will have integrated enough tanks and armored personnel carriers of various sorts into its units to support extended mechanized maneuver, that Ukrainian mechanized units will have sufficient ammunition of all sorts including artillery, and that Ukraine will be able to conduct long-range precision strikes with HIMARS and other similar systems integrated with and supporting maneuver operations as it has done before. It further assumes that Ukrainian forces will have the mine-clearing and bridging capabilities needed to move relatively rapidly through prepared defensive positions. ISW sees no reason to question any of these assumptions given the intensity with which Ukraine has reportedly been preparing for this operation and the time it has taken to do so, as well as the equipment reportedly delivered to Ukrainian forces by Western countries. If any significant number of these assumptions prove invalid, however, then some of the assessments and observations below will also be invalid, and the Russians' prospects for holding their lines will be better than presented below. **ISW offers no assessment of or evidence for these assumptions, and thus offers no specific forecast for the nature, scale, location, duration, or outcome of the upcoming Ukrainian counter-offensive. Ukraine has attractive options for offensive operations all along the line, and ISW does not assess that the information presented in this report or any observations ISW has made below lead obviously to the conclusion that Ukrainian forces will attack in one area or another.**

Russian forces in Ukraine are operating in decentralized and largely degraded formations throughout the theater, and the current pattern of deployment suggests that most available units are already online and engaged in either offensive or defensive operations. ISW assesses that Russian forces are currently operating along seven axes: Kupyansk; Luhansk Oblast; Bakhmut; Avdiivka-Donetsk City; western Donetsk/eastern Zaporizhia; western Zaporizhia; and Kherson Oblast. Russian forces are pursuing active offensive operations on at least five of these axes (Kupyansk, Luhansk, Bakhmut, Avdiivka-Donetsk City, and western Donetsk/eastern Zaporizhia) and predominantly pursuing defensive operations on the western Zaporizhia Oblast and Kherson Oblast axes. The forces currently

committed to both offensive and defensive operations in Ukraine are both regular (doctrinally consistent based on Russian pre-war units) and irregular (non-standard and non-doctrinal) forces, and it is *highly likely that the majority of Russian elements throughout Ukraine are substantially below full strength due to losses taken during previous phases of the war. This report will discuss “elements” of certain units and formations deployed to certain areas, but it should not be assumed that any of these units or formations are operating at full strength.*

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 22, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan
April 22, 9pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian milbloggers have provided enough geolocated footage and textual reports to confirm that Ukrainian forces have established positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast as of April 22 though not at what scale or with what intentions. Geolocated footage published by a Russian milblogger on April 22 shows that Ukrainian forces have established positions on the Dnipro River bank north of Oleshky (7km southwest of Kherson City) and advanced up to the northern outskirts of the settlement on the E97 highway, as well as west of Dachi (10km south of Kherson City).^[1] This footage also indicates that Russian forces may not control islands in the Kinka and Chaika rivers less than half a kilometer north of the geolocated Ukrainian positions near the Antonivsky Bridge. Russian milbloggers claimed on April 20 and 22 that Ukrainian forces have maintained positions in east bank Kherson Oblast for weeks, established stable supply lines to these positions, and regularly conduct sorties in the area—all indicating a lack of Russian control over the area.^[2] Another milblogger's battle map claimed that Russian forces do not control some Dnipro River delta islands southwest of Kherson City as of April 22, suggesting possible Ukrainian advances on these islands.^[3] Some milbloggers complained that the slow rate of Russian artillery fire due to the over-centralization of the Russian military command allowed Ukrainian forces to land on the east bank.^[4] Russian forces may be prioritizing maintaining defenses in urban areas such as Oleshky and Nova Kakhovka, leaving the islands in the Dnipro River delta unmanned. The extent and intent of these Ukrainian positions remain unclear, as does Ukraine's ability and willingness to maintain sustained positions in this area. ISW is recoding territory on the east bank of the Dnipro River to Ukrainian-held only now because this is the first time ISW has observed reliable geolocated imagery of Ukrainian positions on the east bank along with multi-sourced Russian reports of an enduring Ukrainian presence there.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely attempting to persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to go over to the defensive ahead of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive. Prigozhin argued on April 21 that Russia needs to “anchor itself in such a way that it is only possible to tear out [Russian forces from their positions] with the claws of the opponent.”^[5] Prigozhin’s comment followed a discussion of the Ramstein meeting results, Western commitments to train more Ukrainian personnel and continuous military support for Ukraine. Prigozhin also noted that Ukraine will try to “tear” Russian forces apart and that Russia needs to resist such attacks. Prigozhin has been increasingly alarmist in his recent rhetoric and has made similar statements about the uncertain future of Russian offensive operations in Donbas.^[6] Prigozhin’s calls for strengthening Russian defenses in occupied territories and frequent discussions of the prospects of Ukrainian counteroffensives are notable as they indicate that he is trying to amplify the discussion in the Russian domestic information space. Russia, however, continues to conduct offensive operations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Prigozhin is also advocating for Russia to focus on holding the current frontlines rather than seeking more gains so that Russian forces can regain their combat effectiveness for later offensive operations. Prigozhin is not arguing for Russia to end the war and negotiate with Ukraine and the West as some Russian and Western sources reported, as ISW previously observed, but is instead condemning the faction within the Kremlin that is hoping to end the war in negotiations.^[7] Prigozhin is actually arguing that Russia needs to meet the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive at full strength and try to hold the current frontlines without ending the war or entering into peace negotiations.^[8] He argues that a pause after the Ukrainian attack culminates would allow Russia to regain combat power and build nationalist support within the Russian society for renewing the fight even in the event of a defeat.^[9] Prigozhin is also attempting to redefine and undermine some of Putin’s key maximalist goals in Ukraine—namely the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine—likely to minimize the informational impact that might result from going over to the defensive and abandoning efforts to gain more ground now.^[10] Russian far-right paramilitary formation Rusich (Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group), which facilitates recruitment of Russian ultranationalist and irregular forces, echoed Prigozhin’s rejection of the “denazification” and “demilitarization” goals.^[11] Rusich noted that Russia is fighting Ukraine to avenge Donbas, for living space, and for combat experience—rather than fighting claimed Ukrainian “fascism” and “Nazism.” By reframing Putin’s goals, Prigozhin and some factions within the ultranationalist community may be attempting to condition the Russian domestic information space for the prospect of frozen frontlines, potentially near the initial lines of February 23, 2022.

The Russian military command is likely attempting to convince Putin to turn to defensive operations as well—but may be unable to bluntly deliver this message to Putin. Some ultranationalist figures argued that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) signaled efforts to recruit 400,000 contract servicemen to ensure that Russia has enough military personnel to defend existing frontlines and to efficiently freeze the current frontlines in Ukraine.^[12] The Russian military command is also reportedly transferring conscripts to hold Russian lines in Crimea and may be planning to prepare other resources to ensure that Russia can retain some lines once the potential Ukrainian counteroffensive culminates.^[13] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov are likely sensible to the threat of the Ukrainian counteroffensive but are likely continuing to send contract servicemen to reinforce senseless offensive operations at Putin’s insistence.^[14] Kremlin sources previously revealed that Putin favors loyalty over competence, and this sentiment likely prevents Shoigu and Gerasimov from focusing on setting optimal conditions for an efficient defense by refusing to expend Russian elite units in grinding attritional battles for marginal gains.^[15] ISW previously observed that Shoigu and Gerasimov were likely unable to convince Putin to conduct mobilization in May 2022—despite the fact that Russia needed such a measure to reconstitute forces necessary to maintain offensive operations in Ukraine.^[16]

The Russian military command may have partially repaired its strained relationship with Prigozhin to persuade Putin to halt offensive operations via the Russian information space. ISW has observed a sudden improvement in Prigozhin's relations with the Russian MoD and the Kremlin since early April. The Russian MoD, for example, began to directly acknowledge Wagner forces in its daily situational reports and provided Wagner with ammunition and mobilized personnel as reinforcements in early April 2023.[17] Prigozhin and Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers amplified claims that Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's son Nikolai Peskov is reportedly serving with Wagner in Ukraine—likely an information operation to publicly mend the relationship and possibly elevate Prigozhin's loyalty to the Kremlin. [18] Prigozhin had previously been able to impact Putin's decision-making by engineering the appointment of Wagner-affiliated commanders and the dismissal of inept military officials and breaking through Putin's close circle with his critiques of the progress of the war.[19] A Russian political expert observed that different Kremlin officials have historically voiced their plans and projects publicly to convince Putin to implement changes, and it is likely that Prigozhin follows the same model of influence.[20] The Russian military command and select Kremlin officials who are advocating for Putin to freeze the war may have reapproached Prigozhin to influence Putin one more time.

Putin's continued insistence on Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine suggests that the group that wants to freeze the war along the current front lines has not fully persuaded Putin. Russian forces are continuing attritional offensives to capture Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka in Donetsk Oblast as well as limited offensive operations in Luhansk and western Donetsk Oblast, despite increasing Russian fears about the threat of a potential imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive.[21] The Russian winter offensive failed to achieve the Kremlin's ambitious goals of seizing the Donetsk and Luhansk oblast administrative borders by March 31, but it appears that Russian forces have not subsequently deemphasized their operational focus on tactical gains, no matter how marginal and costly those gains are.[22] Russian forces suffered significant manpower and equipment losses during the winter offensive campaign that are currently constraining their abilities to maintain offensive operations along more than one axis and that will likely limit the Russian military's ability to respond to possible Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[23] Russian forces have not responded to these constraints by prioritizing one axis or by conducting an operational pause along any axis that would allow Russian forces to replenish and reconstitute for a decisive defensive effort. Russia forces are continuing to deploy contract servicemen and remaining combat-effective units to support offensive operations in eastern Ukraine instead of conserving this critical pool of combat power to respond to a Ukrainian counter-offensive. [24] Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka offer no significant operational benefits to Russian forces, and any marginal tactical gains along any axis are unlikely to improve the Russian military's ability to defend against a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Putin may be hesitant to commit to a ceasefire due to the influence of select unknown pro-war figures or out of concern for the implications for his regime's stability. The insistence on tactical gains suggests that the pro-war camp advocating for maintaining offensives at any cost is likely still influencing Putin's decision-making for the war. A possible shift to preparing for defensive operations ahead of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive would likely indicate that Putin had finally rejected the pro-war camp's views in favor of the more pragmatic group's. The possible success of the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive could determine the outcome of this struggle for influence over Putin's decisions.

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to oppress Roman Catholics in occupied Ukraine, likely in an effort to suppress Ukrainian religious institutions beyond Moscow's control. Head of the Ukrainian Berdyansk City Military Administration Viktoriya Halitsina reported on April 22 that Russian forces seized the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in occupied Berdyansk.[25] Halitsina stated that Russian propagandists accused the clergy of hiding weapons and collaborating with Ukrainian forces because of their previous service as chaplains for the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2015. ISW has also reported on two other instances of Russian occupation authorities persecuting Roman Catholics in occupied Ukraine.[26] ISW has previously reported on Russian authorities' weaponization of religion in occupied territories as part of an ongoing cultural genocide.[27]

Russian authorities continue to arrest personnel associated with the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) likely to justify crackdowns and further conceal DIB activities. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on April 22 that it arrested the deputy head of the testing laboratory at the Promtehnologiya weapons plant in Moscow on suspicion of treason.[28] The FSB did not provide additional details about the alleged treasonous act. The Promtehnologiya plant participates in the development and modernization of high-tech weapons. The Promtehnologiya plant claimed that it had not employed the arrested employee since March 2021.[29] ISW has reported on other recent arrests that are part of an ongoing crackdown using the pretext of threats to Russia's DIB.[30]

A Russian fighter-bomber accidentally bombed Belgorod on April 21 with two FAB-500 bombs, one of which likely malfunctioned. Russian authorities announced on April 22 the presence of a second, undetonated bomb that landed in Belgorod.[31] Belgorod authorities evacuated 3,000 civilians from the city while sappers extracted and later detonated the bomb.[32] Russian authorities have so far provided no further explanation as to the cause of the accidental bombing. The Russian fighter bomber either intended to drop the bombs on a different target and one bomb failed to detonate, or the fighter bomber did not arm the bombs to drop them, and one bomb improperly detonated.

Key Takeaways

- Russian milbloggers have provided enough geolocated footage and textual reports to confirm that Ukrainian forces have established positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast as of April 22 though not at what scale or with what intentions.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely attempting to persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to go over to the defensive ahead of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- The Russian military command is likely attempting to convince Putin to turn to defensive operations as well—but is unable to bluntly deliver this message to Putin.
- The continued insistence on Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine suggests that the group that wants to freeze the war along the current front lines has not fully persuaded Putin of its views.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing to oppress Roman Catholics in occupied Ukraine, likely in an effort to suppress Ukrainian religious institutions beyond the Kremlin's control.
- A Russian fighter-bomber accidentally bombed Belgorod on April 21 with two FAB-500 bombs, one of which likely malfunctioned.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and near Siversk.
- Russian forces continued to advance around Bakhmut on April 22, although Russian forces have not completed a turning movement around the city.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front and conducted a limited ground attack in western Donetsk Oblast.

- Russian authorities have made headway in their attempts to compel international recognition of Russian ownership over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Continued Russian efforts to block evacuations of wounded soldiers, likely to prevent soldiers from leaving the combat zone, have contributed to the deaths of some Russian soldiers.
- Russian occupation officials are expanding patronage networks in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 21, 2023

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

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

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces used a new delivery of Shahed drones to strike Ukraine for the third consecutive day, targeting Kyiv for the first time in 25 days. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 26 drones on April 20, of which Ukrainian forces shot down 21 and 12 drones on April 21, of which Ukrainian forces shot down eight.[1] Russian forces targeted Kyiv, Odesa, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv oblasts overnight on April 19 to 20 and 20 to 21.[2] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported no damage from the strikes in Kyiv.[3] Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated on April 20 that Russian forces waited until a new shipment of Shahed drones arrived to use them for further strikes and noted that Russian use of missiles has also decreased.[4]

Commander of the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet Admiral Viktor Liina reportedly assumed command of the Russian Pacific Fleet on April 21 following the completion of Russian drills in the Pacific on April 20. Kremlin newswire TASS, citing an unnamed source, reported that Liina replaced Admiral Sergei Avakyants who had commanded the Russian Pacific Fleet since 2012.[5] Unofficial reports of Liina's appointments coincide with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) announcement that the Pacific Fleet and elements of the Russian Aerospace Forces completed drills in the Pacific under the supervision of Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov.[6] The Russian MoD may have named Yevmenov as the supervisor for these drills following milblogger and nationalist discourse about Avakyants' abrupt termination amidst the combat readiness checks.[7] ISW previously assessed that Avakyants' dismissal may have been a result of his inability to recreate pre-war, large scale Pacific Fleet combat readiness checks due to the Pacific Fleet's significant combat losses in Ukraine.[8]

A Russian fighter-bomber accidentally bombed Belgorod on April 20. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on April 20 that a Russian Su-34 bomber accidentally dropped a bomb while flying over Belgorod City.[9] The explosion left a crater with a 20-meter (65-foot) radius in the southern part of the city and injured three civilians.[10] The cause of the accidental bombing remains unclear, as does the reason for flying an armed bomber over a populated city. Russian milbloggers did not react to the bombing with the same vitriolic anger they often use with Russian battlefield failures. One milblogger compared the accidental bombing to the Su-34 crash in Yeisk, Krasnodar Krai, in October 2022, claiming that Belgorod residents should be thankful that the bomb did not hit a residential building.[11] Another milblogger expressed appreciation for the MoD taking responsibility for the accident and characterized the act as an atypical sign of health in the MoD.[12] A Rossiya-1 broadcaster, speaking about the event, stated that "modern military equipment allows Russian units to eliminate extremists in the special operation zone from a minimal distance"-- likely an error that indicates confusion in Russian state media on how to frame the accident in the information space.[13]

The Angry Patriots Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of supporting efforts to freeze the war in Ukraine. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin and his Angry Patriots Club posed 40 direct questions addressed towards the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Russian military command about Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine, foreign affairs, and domestic power struggles.[14] Girkin asked why Russian authorities are not arresting Prigozhin for his "direct calls" to freeze the war at the current frontlines, which Girkin characterized as calls to "violate the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation".[15] Girkin notably mentioned Prigozhin when asking who was responsible for Russian withdrawal from Kherson Oblast – an operation overseen by Wagner-affiliated former Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine at that time Army General Sergey Surovikin.[16] Girkin and Prigozhin have a long-standing feud – likely as a result of competition for patronage – and Girkin's accusations against Prigozhin may be an attempt to discredit his rival.[17]

This accusation may also indicate that Prigozhin has found a patron – possibly affiliated with the Russian MoD – who supports the temporary freeze of the war in Ukraine for political reasons. The Angry Patriots Club previously amplified a forecast that miscontextualized Prigozhin's April 14 essay as a call to end the war in Ukraine, stating that Prigozhin's essay was the start of a political campaign to move to the defense of new territories and freeze the war.[18] The forecast noted that the Russian MoD and Russian private military companies (PMCs) are already recruiting contract servicemen to defend occupied positions, while Russian propagandists are entertaining news about the counteroffensive to possibly present a major victory to Russians if Ukrainians are unsuccessful.[19] The forecast argues that Russia would freeze the war for 2024 for political reasons such as the presidential elections if Russia is successful in repelling Ukrainian counteroffensives. Prigozhin's essay notably called on Russia to commit to a decisive battle in Ukraine or embrace a temporary defeat that would allow Russia to set conditions for a future victory without negotiations.[20] It is possible that Girkin and his patrons are fearful that Prigozhin has joined the political faction that is urging Russian President Vladimir Putin to stop the war on current lines following planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.[21]

Prigozhin publicly restored his cooperation with the Russian MoD and seemingly regained some Kremlin-allocated privileges at the start of April after a months-long feud with the Russian military command.[22] The Russian MoD and the Russian military command could be interested in freezing the war to reconstitute Russian

forces. ISW previously assessed that the Russian MoD had likely advised Putin early on about measures such as mobilization that could have changed the course of the war earlier, and the Russian MoD had previously ordered a short-lived operational pause over the summer of 2022, for example.[23] Prigozhin's recent cooperation with the Russian MoD indicates that he may have reached an agreement with the Russian military command – possibly offering to advocate to Putin for a temporary ceasefire to regain the ability to grow his forces and expand his political standing ahead of Russian gubernatorial and presidential elections. Prigozhin had also been criticizing Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine and offering grim forecasts about Russia's need for years-long grinding attacks to capture Donbas, which are likely part of the ceasefire narrative.[24]

A temporary ceasefire in Ukraine and protraction of the war will only benefit Russia by allowing it to reconstitute its forces and wear down Western support for Ukraine. Russia will use occupied territories in Ukraine as a springboard for future offensive operations after it restores its combat capabilities. Russia is continuing to weaponize information operations in the West to discourage military aid provisions, and such efforts will only intensify if Russia is able to establish a strong defensive line with contract servicemen and conscripts that will slow Ukrainian advances.[25]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law aimed at supporting the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to set conditions for domestic crackdowns and the removal of officials who have fallen out of favor. Putin signed a bill on April 14 increasing administrative liabilities for unauthorized entry into critical energy infrastructure facilities and facilities operated or protected by Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard), the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), the Russian penitentiary system, the federal executive body for mobilization, and the Russian Armed Forces.[26] The Kremlin likely intends to use these increased punishments to obscure the activities of Russian military and security organs while also expanding these entities' ability to oust officials and crack down on Russian citizens under accusations of trespassing. Putin recently signed bills expanding legal punishments for the discreditation of all Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine and for the misappropriation of Russian military assets, and Russian security organs have increasingly used these laws as pretexts for the arrest of Russian citizens.[27] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin may be using the pretext of threats to Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) to justify crackdowns, and the new law likely aims to broaden the guises under which Russian authorities justify internal repressions.[28] ISW previously assessed that the FSB appears to be conducting a large-scale overhaul of domestic security organs, which the new law may further augment.[29]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces used a new delivery of Shahed drones to strike Ukraine for the third consecutive day, targeting Kyiv for the first time in 25 days.
- Commander of the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet Admiral Viktor Liina reportedly assumed command of the Russian Pacific Fleet following the completion of Russian drills in the Pacific.
- A Russian fighter-bomber accidentally bombed Belgorod on April 20.
- The Angry Patriots Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of supporting efforts to freeze the war in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law aimed at supporting the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to set conditions for domestic crackdowns and the removal of officials who have fallen out of favor.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Russian forces continued to advance in and around Bakhmut, although Russian forces have not completed a turning movement around the city.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk front and conducted a limited ground attack in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces have established positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects are forming new cross-regional volunteer formations to support the ongoing force generation campaigns.
- Russian authorities are expanding the logistics capabilities and security measures on the Arabat Spit likely to prepare for a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 20, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark
April 20, 6pm ET

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The Kremlin demoted the commander of the Russian Pacific Fleet on April 19 amid an ongoing surprise readiness check that began on April 14. Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev announced on April 19 the "appointment" of Russian Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Sergei Avakyants to the headquarters overseeing Russia's military sports training and patriotic education centers, a clear demotion for one of the seniormost commanding officers in the Russian Navy.[1] It is unclear why a Kremlin official initially announced Avakyants' reappointment instead of the Ministry of Defense. The Russian Pacific Fleet reported on April 20 that Avakyants is changing position due to his reaching the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) age limit for military service (65 years).[2] However, Russian state media outlet TASS reported that its sources claimed that Avakyants' demotion was not due to his old age. [3] Several Russian general officers – including current Russian theater commander in Ukraine and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and Commander-in-chief of the Ground Forces Oleg Salyukov – have served in the Russian armed forces beyond turning 65. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced a surprise readiness check of the Pacific Fleet on April 14 that is still ongoing as of April 20.[4] Russian state wire TASS reported on April 20 that two

sources close to the Russian Pacific Fleet's management stated that current Commander of the Russian Baltic Fleet Admiral Viktor Liina may take command of the Pacific Fleet and that Deputy Chief of the General Staff Vice Admiral Vladimir Vorobyov may command the Baltic Fleet.[5]

The Kremlin clearly demoted Avakyants from a senior operational commander to a military bureaucrat overseeing programmatic work, despite Russian officials' framing of the shift as a new "appointment." Avakyants' demotion may be connected to the poor performance of Pacific Fleet naval infantry (such as the 155th and 40th naval infantry brigades) around Vuhledar since early 2023. Avakyants alternatively may have failed in some manner to conduct large-scale drills in the Pacific. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin linked Avakyants' dismissal to the Pacific Fleet drills and sarcastically questioned if someone could conduct drills within the Russian MoD, likely advocating for the dismissal of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.[6] Another milblogger welcomed Avakyants' dismissal, stating that Russia needs to appoint younger commanders like Ukrainian intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov.[7]

A prominent Russian milblogger criticized the Russian military's ineffective use of Russian airborne (VDV), naval infantry, and Spetsnaz forces in Ukraine. The milblogger argued on April 20 that Russian forces are relying on VDV, Spetsnaz, and naval infantry units to conduct ground attacks in Ukraine due to a lack of high-quality infantry, despite VDV and Spetsnaz units not initially being prepared for conducting combined arms operations.[8] The milblogger argued that VDV, Spetsnaz, and naval infantry units need to carry out their intended purposes and not serve as the Russian military's elite infantry and assault groups in Ukraine.[9] The milblogger particularly criticized Spetsnaz units for not conducting enough sabotage and targeting operations and VDV units for being too large and requiring expensive specialized equipment that is not useful in the current tactical realities in Ukraine.[10] The milblogger asserted that the Russian military will not be able to normalize command, management, and planning for major operations until it establishes clear roles for VDV, naval infantry, and Spetsnaz units.[11] The milblogger additionally admitted that the Russian military has in practice formed light infantry units without transports for some time, despite the Russian military's doctrinal focus on "motorized rifle" (mechanized infantry) units. ISW previously assessed that Russia's most elite forces – VDV and Spetsnaz – are diluting their combat effectiveness and doctrinal specialties with poorly trained mobilized personnel and volunteers due to high casualties sustained in Ukraine.[12] The milblogger's criticism of the use of these elite forces further suggests that these units' reputation as Russia's elite fighting force in Ukraine is questionable.

The Russian State Duma adopted a law on April 20 that grants members of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's (DNR and LNR) Militias veterans' status and could apply to select PMC or other irregular personnel but fails to explicitly address the status of PMC groups as legal entities.[13] The law (adopted in its third reading) provides veteran status to members of the DNR and LNR Militias who have fought since Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, as well as to personnel who served in unspecified organizations which "contribute to the tasks of the Russian Armed Forces" in Ukraine. This framing will likely allow the Kremlin to provide veteran status to select PMC personnel without recognizing the legality of PMCs like the Wagner Group, for which Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has long campaigned.[14] Prigozhin focused on the lack of recognition of the Wagner Group, though this law would have been an unusual way for the Kremlin to legally recognize Wagner. Prigozhin griped that unnamed Russian entities seek to "forever remove [Wagner] from the history of Russia."[15] Prigozhin claimed that he is happy for the DNR and LNR militiamen and that he is okay not receiving recognition until authorities eventually punish the individuals who stole Wagner's recognition.

Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnulin to resolve issues at the Gukovo checkpoint on the Ukrainian-Russian border during a meeting with government officials on April 19.[16] Putin claimed that he personally traveled through the Gukovo checkpoint, which connects Rostov and Luhansk oblasts, when returning from his recent trip to occupied Luhansk and Kherson oblasts.[17] Putin stated that poor road conditions at the checkpoint caused a civilian backup and forced trucks delivering perishable goods to wait for hours before passing through, causing shipment delays and price increases in occupied territories.[18] Putin added that some trucks must bypass the checkpoint entirely as the roads are too narrow and practically nonexistent. [19] Putin called on Russian special services and law enforcement to increase the number of inspection complexes and employees at checkpoints and ordered Russian officials to improve roads around checkpoints and establish routes from Rostov-on-Don to Luhansk Oblast.[20]

Putin's orders indicate that Russia intends to maintain customs checkpoints with the illegally annexed eastern regions out of security concerns. ISW previously reported that Russian milbloggers complained that Russian checkpoints at the international customs line significantly slowed down Russian deliveries of ammunition to the frontlines in Donetsk Oblast.[21] The Kremlin's failure to implement meaningful integration policies and secure occupied Ukraine is likely undermining Russia's ability to provision forces on the front line, as ISW has previously assessed.[22] Putin is likely attempting to remedy the delays by expanding staffing to speed up inspections at the checkpoints and is not entertaining the possibility of removing these obstructions. Russia previously intensified security measures and inspections around the Kerch Strait Bridge, the Kremlin likely continues to use these checkpoints for similar security reasons.[23] The Kremlin may also use these checkpoints to prevent the mass movement of men from occupied Ukraine escaping forced mobilization, to stop Russian mobilized personnel from fleeing to Russia, and to maintain Russian filtration measures. The existence of these checkpoints further highlights that Russian officials do not view the residents of occupied Ukraine as Russian nationals and are governing as the occupying power they are, despite ongoing claims the illegally annexed territories are part of Russia.

Krasnoyarsk Krai Governor Aleksandr Uss announced his resignation on April 20, reportedly in response to an offer from Russian President Vladimir Putin to work at the federal level.[24] The reason for Uss' promotion is currently unclear but may be part of Putin's efforts to strengthen control over regional officials.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin demoted the commander of the Russian Pacific Fleet Sergei Avakyants amid an ongoing surprise readiness check that began on April 14. It is unclear if the Kremlin demoted Avakyants due to his poor performance in the ongoing drills or for other reasons.
- A prominent Russian milblogger criticized the Russian military's use of Russian airborne (VDV), naval infantry, and Spetsnaz forces as frontline infantry in Ukraine.
- The Russian State Duma adopted a law granting members of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Militias veterans' status which could possibly cover PMC personnel but does not formally recognize PMC formations.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnulin to resolve issues at the Gukovo checkpoint during a meeting with government officials, indicating continued Russian challenges integrating illegally annexed Ukrainian territory.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Kremenchuk area.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued reconnaissance activity northwest of Svatove.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk frontline, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued defensive preparations in southern Ukraine out of concern for a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.

- The Kremlin may be eliminating or deprioritizing formal force structures controlled by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and permitting private military companies (PMCs) to absorb their soldiers.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to target Ukrainian youth to consolidate societal control of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 19, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 19, 5pm ET

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The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) appears to be conducting a large-scale overhaul of domestic security organs. Russian state-controlled outlet TASS reported on April 19 that the FSB and the Main Directorate of the Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) have been conducting mass checks at the Moscow Central District Internal Affairs Directorate and several Moscow district police offices for the past several weeks due to "the leakage of data from Russian security forces at the request of Ukrainian citizens."^[1] Another Russian source noted that the FSB and MVD have already detained police officers as part of this investigation.^[2] Russian outlets reported that the suspected police officers leaked personal data on Russian security forces to external individuals, some of whom are Ukrainian citizens.^[3] The reported FSB and MVD raids on the Moscow police departments are occurring against the backdrop of a series of arrests and dismissals of prominent members of Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) leadership.^[4] The Kremlin may be pushing for such arrests and investigations in order to conduct an overhaul of the domestic security apparatus to oust officials who have fallen out of Kremlin favor and consolidate further control internal security organs.

Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on April 19 that Ukrainian forces are already conducting some counteroffensive actions. Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces will never preemptively announce when the counteroffensive starts and reiterated that Ukrainian forces aim to liberate all Ukrainian territory.^[5] Malyar also reported that Russian forces are concentrating on offensives in the Lyman, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka directions and that Russian forces have concentrated weapons, equipment, and all professional units – including Wagner Group forces, Spetsnaz, and airborne forces (VDV) – around Bakhmut.^[6] Malyar noted that Ukrainian counteroffensive actions will be both offensive and defensive in nature given the complex nature of the battlefield.

Russian forces continue to use Shahed drones and other lower-precision systems to offset the degradation of Russia's precision munition supply. Russian forces launched 12 Shahed-131/136 drones at southern Ukraine from the Sea of Azov on the night of April 18 to 19, 10 of which Ukrainian air defense shot down.^[7] Ukrainian United Coordination Press Center of the Southern Defense Forces Head Nataliya Humenyuk noted on April 19 that the Shahed strike was a deliberate attempt to find and destroy Ukrainian air defense systems.^[8] Russian milbloggers have recently discussed the importance of targeting Ukrainian air defense capabilities in advance of any potential Ukrainian counteroffensives, and the Shahed strikes were likely intended in part to set conditions to do so.^[9] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat noted that Russia has used almost all of its strategic missile stockpile since September 11, 2022, and that Ukrainian forces have shot down 750 of the total 850 missiles that Russian forces have launched at Ukraine during this period.^[10] Ihnat noted that Russian forces have switched to cheaper and shorter-range options such as guided aerial bombs and have removed Kh-50 type missiles from storage for restoration.^[11] Ihnat was likely referring to Kh-55 Soviet-era air launched cruise missiles, as Russia is slated to begin production on newer Kh-50 cruise missiles in summer 2023.^[12] Russia may be removing Kh-55 cruise missiles from storage to refit them for future strikes on Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) appears to be conducting a large-scale overhaul of domestic security organs.
- Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on April 19 that Ukrainian forces are already conducting some counteroffensive actions.
- Russian forces continue to use Shahed drones and other lower-precision systems to offset the degradation of Russia's precision munition supply.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk frontline, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continue to prepare to send electronic summonses and establish a digital registry for those eligible for military service.
- A State Duma deputy proposed a bill that would expand contract conditions for the OMON and SOBR units of Rosgvardia and set conditions for the mobilization of Rosgvardia reservists.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue efforts to further integrate occupied territories into the Russian economic system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 18, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 18, 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.

[Click here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a wartime leader in anticipation of a planned Ukrainian counteroffensive during his visit to occupied Kherson and Luhansk oblasts. The Kremlin announced on April 18 that Putin visited the headquarters of the Russian Dnepr Group of Forces in Kherson Oblast and the Vostok National Guard headquarters in occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that Putin visited occupied territories on April 17. Putin, however, stated that Orthodox Easter holiday is “coming up” in one of the videos, which suggests that his visit occurred prior to April 16. [2] The Kremlin later edited the video to exclude Putin’s statement about the then-upcoming East holiday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the Avdiivka frontline on April 18, and it is possible the Kremlin deliberately released footage of Putin’s visit to overshadow Zelensky’s visit in the information space.^[3] ISW reported on Russian milbloggers criticizing Russian officials for failing to visit the frontlines like Zelensky, and Putin had previously visited occupied Mariupol on March 19 to improve his appearance as a wartime leader.^[4] Russian occupation officials and milbloggers celebrated Putin’s visit and claimed that he boosted the morale of Russian servicemen preparing to repel Ukrainian counteroffensives.^[5] Geolocated footage shows that Putin visited Arabat Spit in southwestern Kherson Oblast - at least 130km from the nearest frontline.^[6]

Putin’s visit likely also intended to publicly identify potential scapegoats ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. Putin received briefings from Commander of Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, Commander of the Dnepr Group of Forces Colonel General Oleg Makarevich, and other unnamed military commanders regarding the situation along the Kherson and Zaporizhia frontlines.^[7] Putin also met with Colonel General Alexander Lapin and other unnamed top-ranking officers to discuss the situation on the Luhansk frontline. Putin likely deliberately singled out Teplinsky and Makarevich as commanders responsible for southern Ukraine, and Lapin as a commander overseeing the Luhansk direction. Putin, Kremlin sources, and milbloggers have been increasingly discussing the prospects for a Ukrainian counteroffensive, and it is likely that the Kremlin is preparing the domestic information space for either military failures or the defeat of the counteroffensive threat.^[8]

Putin’s demonstrative meetings with Teplinsky, Makarevich, and Lapin likely confirm another change in military command and possibly within the Kremlin’s inner circle. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger observed that the Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu did not attend Putin’s meetings in occupied Ukraine.^[9] The milblogger claimed that Teplinsky and Lapin – both of whom had reportedly been placed on a leave – returned to the Russian military command likely against the wishes of Gerasimov and Shoigu. Russian sources previously claimed that the Kremlin replaced Wagner-affiliated Teplinsky with Makarevich as the VDV commander on January 13, likely after the Russian MoD and Gerasimov regained Putin’s favor in the lead up of Russia’s unsuccessful winter-spring offensive operation in Donbas.^[10] The meeting confirms previous Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s hints at Teplinsky’s reappointment.^[11] ISW previously assessed that Teplinsky’s confirmed reappointment suggests that the Kremlin is likely seeking to work with Wagner to achieve a decisive victory in Bakhmut.^[12] The confirmation may further indicate that Prigozhin has at least partly regained Putin’s favor by overriding Gerasimov and Shoigu’s efforts to eliminate Wagner in Bakhmut.^[13]

Putin may be attempting to balance Wagner’s influence by reappointing Lapin to command the Luhansk sector of the frontline. The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Lapin assumed the role of the commander of the Vostok National Guard formation and noted that the Putin-Lapin meeting confirms Lapin’s return to the frontlines.^[14] Prigozhin and Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov had led a successful campaign to remove Lapin from his position as the commander of the “center” group of Russian forces, likely due to personal conflicts during the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk and Luhansk offensive operations in the summer of 2022.^[15] The milblogger speculated that Putin reappointed Lapin to reinforce command in the area or to help Putin avoid conflicts with the Russian Defense Ministry.

Select members of the “Club of Angry Patriots” are advocating for a revolution in Russia if the Kremlin freezes the war or pursues peace negotiations with Ukraine and the West. Self-proclaimed former “People’s Governor of Donetsk Oblast” Pavel Gubarev defined the “Club of Angry Patriots” as a “potentially revolutionary power” that will prevent “betrayal” if the government decides to freeze the current frontlines in Ukraine.^[16] Gubarev also noted that Russia cannot win the war without a revolution – either from within the government or in society – because oligarchs, agents, ethnic mafias, and nationalist separatists will not allow for the reformation of social-economic institutions to support the war effort. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin noted that Gubarev’s opinion does not represent the collective vision on the “Club of Angry Patriots” and noted that any revolution begins with a “coup from the top” over which he and other members of the group have no control over since they do not have connections to the Kremlin.^[17]

The official “Club of Angry Patriots” Telegram account amplified a forecast regarding possible political changes within the Kremlin as a result of a Ukrainian counteroffensive, which may represent the group’s concerns over the progress of the war.^[18] The group amplified a post from the leader of the Russian “Civil Solidarity” movement Georgiy Fedorov, who stated that the political situation in Russia largely depends on frontline realities. Fedorov assessed that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s recent statements about the end of the “special military operation” is the start of the campaign to freeze the war in Ukraine.

Fedorov stated that if Russians are able to defeat Ukrainian counteroffensives over the summer, then Russian President Vladimir Putin may freeze the war to avoid calling up mobilization ahead of the 2024 presidential election cycle. Fedorov claimed that Russia would likely present a suppressed Ukrainian counteroffensive as a victory and is likely intensifying volunteer recruitment efforts to generate enough contract servicemen to hold existing frontlines. Fedorov claimed that the Kremlin will continue to intensify censorship and repressions and will not replace officials in the Kremlin or within the military command under the conditions of unsuccessful counteroffensive operations. Fedorov stated that if Ukrainians are successful, then political situation within the Kremlin will lead to a deeper conflict between different parties for influence and the Kremlin will conduct personnel changes. Fedorov claimed that despite potential mobilization and disruption in society and the Kremlin, Putin’s system is capable of eliminating all threats “associated with the interception of power.” Fedorov noted that the most unlikely scenario is the imminent dissolution of Putin’s power system, but noted that different financial, regional, and industrial figures may be preparing for such an outcome.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met to discuss unspecified strategic partnership and military cooperation in Moscow on April 18. Shoigu claimed that mutual Russian-Chinese efforts aim to stabilize and reduce conflict and that each state significantly values deepening military cooperation.^[19] Shoigu also claimed that Russia and China can deepen their partnership by firmly supporting each other on national security

issues. Li stated that his first visit to Russia as Defense Minister demonstrates the determination to strengthen cooperation between the Russian military and the Chinese People's Liberation Army.[20] Shoigu's and Li's remarks largely echoed Li's and Russian President Vladimir Putin's remarks on April 16.[21]

The Kremlin continued efforts to portray Russia as a respected international partner by meeting with China against the backdrop of the G7 meeting in Japan on April 18. The G7 communique condemned Russian nuclear blackmail rhetoric, Russia's possible deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, destabilizing Wagner Group activities in Africa, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine, Russia's suspension of the New START Treaty, and Iran's provision of combat UAVs to Russia.[22] The Russian Ministry of Defense published footage of two Russian strategic bombers flying in international airspace over the Bering and Okhotsk Seas as part of the Pacific Fleet's ongoing readiness check.[23] ISW previously assessed that the Pacific Fleet's ongoing readiness checks are likely meant to posture that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in the Pacific ahead of the G7 meeting.[24]

Russian authorities detained Russian public relations specialist Yaroslav Shirshikov, an associate of detained *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, in Yekaterinburg on April 18. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on April 18 that Russian authorities detained Shirshikov and charged him with justifying terrorism possibly for his social media posts about prominent Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin's (alias Vladlen Tatarsky) assassination.[25] Shirshikov spoke to Gershkovich shortly before Gershkovich's arrest and was one of the first people to report Gershkovich as missing.[26] Shirshikov previously stated that Gershkovich had traveled to Yekaterinburg to report on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's criticisms of Yekaterinburg History Museum Director Igor Pushkarev and locals' opinions on the war.[27]

The Russian State Duma approved a series of possibly unconstitutional amendments to the Russian Criminal Code on April 18 aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship and repressing the Russian public. The Russian State Duma approved amendments to the Russian Criminal Code that increase the maximum prison sentence for high treason from 20 years to life and authorize the revocation of Russian citizenship for discrediting the Russian military and participating in designated undesirable nongovernmental organizations.[28] The amendment also stipulates that a Russian citizen may not renounce their citizenship if the citizen has an outstanding duty to the state, such as mobilization.[29] These measures appear to violate the Russian Constitution, as Article 6 states that a Russian citizen may not be deprived of their citizenship or of the right to change citizenship status.[30] The State Duma also approved an amendment that criminalizes advising international organizations in which Russia does not belong or foreign states bodies.[31] Russian opposition media outlet *OVD-Info* states that this amendment would criminalize facilitating international war crimes investigations.[32] International Humanitarian Law, to which Russia is a party, stipulates that states have a duty to investigate and prosecute war crimes.[33]

The Russian Immortal Regiment Central Headquarters announced the cancellation of the annual Immortal Regiment Victory Day march, likely in an effort to reduce public discussion of deaths in the current conflict. Russian State Duma Member Deputy and Co-Chair of the Immortal Regiment Central Headquarters Elena Tsunaeva announced the cancellation of the march, which memorializes Russian war dead, on April 18, for unspecified security reasons.[34] Tsunaeva stated that citizens can instead submit photos of relatives to a centralized online database to participate in a "virtual procession," which Russian authorities will likely use to hide the number of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. Tsunaeva also invited people to share pictures of their deceased family members online, on clothes, and on cars.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a wartime leader in anticipation of a planned Ukrainian counteroffensive during his visit to occupied Kherson and Luhansk oblasts.
- Putin's visit likely intended to publicly identify scapegoats ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- Putin's demonstrative meetings with Teplinsky, Makarevich, and Lapin likely confirm another change in military command and possibly within the Kremlin's inner circle.
- Select members of the "Club of Angry Patriots" are advocating for a revolution in Russia if the Kremlin freezes the war or pursue peace negotiations with Ukraine and the West.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met to discuss on strategic partnership and military cooperation in Moscow on April 18.
- The Russian State Duma approved a series of amendments to the Russian Criminal Code on April 18 aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship and repressing the Russian public.
- Russian authorities detained Russian public relations specialist Yaroslav Shirshikov, an associate of detained *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, in Yekaterinburg on April 18.
- The Russian Immortal Regiment Central Headquarters announced the cancelation of the annual Immortal Regiment Victory Day march, likely in an effort to reduce public discussion of war dead.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued to make gains in Bakhmut and conducted ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue defensive preparations in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to integrate proxy formations with conventional Russian forces.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian civilians to Russia under healthcare and rehabilitation schemes.
- Belarus may begin economically supporting Russian-occupied Donetsk Oblast with a patronage system.

April 17, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is seemingly regaining some favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin, likely as a result of the Russian conventional military's inability to accomplish the tasks Putin had set for it during the winter offensive in Donbas. Wagner forces appear to be receiving reinforcements, ammunition, and political recognition – which is a stark deviation from the Kremlin's previous efforts to expend Wagner forces and Prigozhin in Bakhmut since at least January 2023.^[1] Wagner-affiliated sources announced on April 17 that Wagner is training up to three motorized rifle brigades of mobilized personnel to reinforce Wagner's flanks in Bakhmut.^[2] Prigozhin also confirmed that Russian airborne forces (VDV) are operating alongside Wagner and indicated that Wagner is actively receiving artillery shells.^[3] Prigozhin advocated for Wagner to receive more artillery shells, which indicates that Prigozhin has reestablished his supply of ammunition from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). The Russian State Duma will also consider amendments to the Russian law on veterans' rights to grant veteran status to private military companies (PMCs) and volunteers.^[4] Prigozhin had been routinely advocating for Wagner personnel to be recognized as participants of the "special military operation" in Ukraine, and the adoption of this bill would signify that Prigozhin's position in the Kremlin inner circle has improved.

The extent of Putin's trust and favor for Prigozhin is unclear at this time, but it is likely that Putin halted the Russian MoD's efforts to avenge Wagner by denying Wagner reinforcements and ammunition.^[5] *The New York Times*, citing leaked Pentagon documents, reported that Putin personally attempted to resolve the feud between Wagner and the Russian MoD by holding a meeting between Shoigu and Prigozhin on February 22.^[6] Putin could be turning back to Prigozhin after experiencing another disappointment with Russian conventional forces, which did not capture Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts frontlines before the April 1 date that Putin had reportedly set for them.^[7] Putin is reportedly once again reappointing select Wagner-affiliated commanders such as VDV commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, which if true, suggests that he is prioritizing a decisive victory at least in Bakhmut in the near term.^[8] Putin likely needs an immediate victory in Bakhmut ahead of Victory Day on May 9 or the rumored "Direct Line" press conference he is preparing to hold in June to assert his authority among domestic audiences.^[9]

Putin's improving relations with Wagner may also be a symptom of his hesitance to increase mobilization and signal a return to crypto mobilization. Putin increased the annual conscription quota from 134,000 conscripts to 147,000 men for the spring 2023 cycle, and likely is experiencing shortages of trainers to prepare conscripts, remaining mobilized personnel, and volunteers.^[10] The Kremlin may be hoping to use Wagner trainers to prepare its mobilized forces. ISW had previously reported that the Kremlin outsourced recruitment of personnel to nationalist groups and is currently carrying out large-scale volunteer recruitment campaigns.

[11] Wagner is currently recruiting across Russia, and it is possible that the Kremlin may still see Wagner as a feasible source of combat power.

An interview with two former Wagner Group fighters on their treatment of Ukrainian children and other civilians and prisoners of war (POWs) further highlights how Wagner has institutionalized systematic brutality as part of its fundamental modus operandi. Russian human rights organization *Gulagu.net* released a video interview on April 17 with two former convicts who finished their contracts with Wagner and returned to Russia.^[12] One Wagner fighter, Azamat Yaldarov, admitted that Prigozhin ordered his unit to kill children while taking control of Soledar, and that he buried 18 children that he killed in Krasnodar Krai and Saratov and Kirov oblasts.^[13] Yaldarov emphasized that Prigozhin gave the order for Wagner fighters to "eliminate" everyone in Soledar, and that Yaldarov was specifically ordered to kill children. Another Wagner fighter and commander of a reconnaissance unit, Aleksey Savich, told the interviewer that he fired on his own men for disobedience and that he personally witnessed the executions of 80 Wagner fighters for refusing to follow orders. Savich claimed that Wagner command gave the order to kill all civilians in Bakhmut aged 15 and older, and that his unit killed 23 civilians, 10 of whom were unarmed teenagers. Savich recounted other instances from operations in Bakhmut and Soledar in which he murdered children as young as five years old and other civilians. Savich also claimed that Prigozhin has a personal preference for recording videos of the execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war.

The extremely graphic atrocities described by Yaldarov and Savich underscore a slate of recent reports of Wagner's systematic use of brutality as a method of waging war.^[14] Prigozhin and Wagner's command may actively encourage active engagement in atrocities in an attempt to build social cohesion and reputation within Wagner units. This type of engrained violence is likely to have escalating domestic impacts on Russian domestic society, especially as Wagner fighters complete their contracts and return to their homes. Russian society will have to increasingly work to handle the normalized brutality committed by its forces as they reintegrate into the domestic sphere, which will likely have generational domestic societal ramifications.

The *Gulagu.net* interview with the two former Wagner fighters provides valuable insight into Wagner's force structure and operational prioritization. Yaldarov claimed that he was the commander of Wagner's 5th Assault Detachment and that he trained with a special unit that specifically taught him to kill.^[15] Yaldarov stated that the higher Wagner command gave his unit the order to place a flag on likely the Bakhmut administrative building and that he was not allowed to leave Bakhmut until after its capture. Considering the fact that Yaldarov gave the interview from his home in Russia because he was released from his contract, his anecdote about the administrative building may suggest that Wagner considered the capture of the administrative building and the central Bakhmut area to be threshold for announcing the capture of the city. The apparent return of Putin's favor to Prigozhin may have resulted in part from Prigozhin's ability to claim the capture of Bakhmut — his objective — while the Russian MoD's conventional forces failed to achieve any of their objectives. Yaldarov's account of Prigozhin's orders for Wagner troops to massacre civilians and everyone they came across in Soledar in early January additionally indicates that Prigozhin pushed for the quick capture of the settlement and ordered his fighters to take it essentially at any cost. Both Yaldarov and Savich emphasize the way that the Wagner command demands brutal treatment of Wagner dissenters within the ranks and the operational reliance on attritional assaults carried out by convict recruits.

The Moscow City Court sentenced Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison on the charge of high treason for Kara-Murza's criticism of the Kremlin and the war in Ukraine.^[16] The 25-year sentence is the longest and harshest for an opposition activist to date.^[17] Kara-Murza's sentencing comes as the Kremlin has continued to intensify domestic repression of dissenting voices through escalated legislative manipulations.^[18] The Russian State Duma previously approved amendments to the Russian Criminal Code on April 13 that will introduce life sentences for high treason and increase prison

sentences for terrorist activity.[19] Kara-Murza's high-profile case and sentencing are emblematic of the wider trend in Russia towards total and codified authoritarianism.

Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on April 16 and pledged to strengthen military exchanges and cooperation between Russia and China. Li stated that he had arrived in Moscow to implement Chinese President Xi Jinping's agreement with Putin from late March and claimed that Russian-Chinese relations "have already entered a new era."[20] Li noted that China is prepared to work with Russia to "strengthen strategic communication between the two militaries, strengthen multilateral coordination and cooperation, and make new contributions to safeguarding regional and global security for peace."[21] Official Russian and Chinese readouts did not include any mentions of Russia's war in Ukraine. Spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Wang Wenbin reiterated China's intent to promote peace talks in Ukraine and continuation of cooperation which Xi and Putin agreed upon previously. [22] ISW previously assessed that Putin was unable to secure a no-limits bilateral partnership with China during Xi's visit to Moscow, and it is likely that the meeting between Li and Putin did not further expand the scope of Russian-Chinese cooperation.

Putin continued efforts to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China and a Pacific naval power amidst Li's visit. Putin stated that the Russian military is prioritizing the war in Ukraine but continues to develop the Russian Pacific Fleet during his meeting with the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu on April 17.[23] Shoigu stated that recent Russian combat readiness drills involved 25,000 military personnel, 167 warships and support vessels, and 89 planes and helicopters. Shoigu stated that Russian forces are currently conducting maneuver exercises and are moving to the southern part of the Sea of Okhotsk. Shoigu claimed that the final drills will begin on April 18, a day before Li's departure from Russia. ISW assessed on April 14 that the Russian Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks are likely meant to signal to China that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in the Pacific, especially ahead of the G7 meeting in Japan between May 19 and May 21.[24]

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" published its manifesto focused on protecting pro-war factions in the Kremlin from possible "sabotage" and "betrayal." The "Club of Angry Patriots" published its manifesto on April 17 on its newly created Telegram channel, which emphasizes protecting pro-war factions in the Kremlin instead of efforts to win the war in Ukraine.[25] The manifesto claims that unspecified actors who remain in power in Russia have transferred their money and allegiance to the West and may be preparing for a coup and the "dismemberment" of the Russia Federation. The manifesto likens the Kremlin's pro-war and anti-war factions to the fight between the Reds and Whites in the Russian Civil War following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The manifesto also claims that Russia is currently fighting the war in a mediocre way and is unable to defeat Ukraine in its current state. ISW previously assessed that Girkin and the "Club of Angry Patriots" may be attempting to advance the political goals of unnamed figures in Russian power structures who want to influence Putin's decision making through public discourse.[26]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is seemingly regaining some favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin likely as a result of the Russian conventional military's inability to accomplish the tasks Putin had set for it during the winter offensive in Donbas. The extent of Putin's trust and favor for Prigozhin is unclear at this time, but it is likely that Putin halted the Russian MoD's efforts to avenge Wagner by denying Wagner reinforcements and ammunition.
- An interview with two former Wagner Group fighters on their treatment of Ukrainian children and other civilians and prisoners of war (POWs) further highlights how Wagner has institutionalized systematic brutality as part of its fundamental *modus operandi*.
- The *Gulagu.net* interview with the two former Wagner fighters provides valuable insight into Wagner's force structure and operational prioritization.
- The Moscow City Court sentenced Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison on the charge of high treason for Kara-Murza's criticism of the Kremlin and the war in Ukraine.
- Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on April 16 and pledged to strengthen military exchanges and cooperation between Russia and China. Putin continued efforts to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China and a Pacific naval power amidst Li's visit.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin's newly formed "Club of Angry Patriots" published its manifesto focused on protecting pro-war factions in the Kremlin from possible "sabotage" and "betrayal."
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces have made further gains in Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued defensive preparations in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin's transition to electronic summonses distribution is continuing to complicate Russian conscription procedures.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to discuss the provision of Russian passports in occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 16, 2023

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

April 16, 2:30pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Russian military command appears to be increasingly shifting responsibility for offensive operations in Ukraine to the Russian Airborne troops (VDV). The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on April 16 that it is highly likely that VDV commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky has returned to a “major” but unspecified role in Ukraine after reports that the Russian MoD replaced him on January 13.[1] UK MoD noted that Teplinsky’s return to command in Ukraine will not be limited to just VDV units, but that it is also likely that Teplinsky will try to promote the VDV’s traditional role as an elite force.[2] ISW previously assessed on April 1 that milblogger speculation that the Russian MoD recalled Teplinsky from “leave” suggests that Russia may be preparing to reshuffle senior commanders following the failed winter offensive and in preparation for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.[3] The UK MoD’s apparent confirmation of Teplinsky’s reappointment to a senior command position supports ISW’s assessment, and additionally suggests that the Russian military command is likely seeking to place an increased emphasis on the role of VDV elements in Russian offensive operations. VDV units are actively engaged along critical sectors of the front in Luhansk Oblast and near Bakhmut and have recently received TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems, further indicating that the Russian military command may seek to elevate the VDV to greater operational prominence.[4]

News of Teplinsky’s reappointment suggests that the Russian MoD is seeking to work more closely with the Wagner Group in order to complete the capture of Bakhmut, despite obvious tensions between Prigozhin and the traditional MoD establishment. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seemingly confirmed Teplinsky’s Wagner affiliations in a public show of support for Teplinsky following Teplinsky’s reported dismissal over a disagreement with Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander Army General Valery Gerasimov in January.[5] Teplinsky became embroiled in the rising tensions between Prigozhin and the Russian MoD establishment (represented by Gerasimov and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu) as the Russian MoD appeared to be actively trying to cut the Wagner Group off from artillery shell supply and otherwise interfere with Wagner’s ability to operate around Bakhmut.[6] Over the past few weeks, however, it appears that the Russian military command has been working more closely with Wagner, likely in an effort to expedite the capture of Bakhmut. The Russian MoD and Prigozhin publicly acknowledged on April 11 that VDV elements are engaged in the Bakhmut area and holding Wagner’s flanks north and south of Bakhmut while Wagner pursues the main offensive effort in the city itself.[7] ISW has recently observed that elements of the 106th VDV division are operating in the Bakhmut area.[8] Prigozhin has also scaled down his explicit rhetorical attacks on the MoD in recent days. Russian milbloggers have reported that Wagner forces are operating T-90 tanks within Bakhmut, suggesting that Russian leadership has allocated more modern assets to Wagner in their efforts to take the city.[9] Teplinsky’s reappointment is therefore likely also an attempt by the Russian MoD to posture itself better to work with Wagner to finish the task of taking Bakhmut.

Teplinsky remains highly unlikely to restore the VDV to its prior status as an elite force due to widespread losses to the most elite Russian units. VDV units suffered extraordinarily high losses in the early phases of the war in 2022, and a prominent milblogger claimed on Russian state television on January 31 that VDV forces lost 40 to 50 percent of their personnel between the start of the war and September 2022.[10] BBC Russia Service confirmed the deaths of 1,669 VDV personnel as of April 14, 2023.[11] Widespread losses to previously elite units that are now being restaffed with poorly trained mobilized personnel are likely to have long-term impacts on the combat effectiveness of these units, and the replacement of a single commander is highly unlikely to be able to solve such pervasive damage.[12]

Russian milbloggers seized on an opportunity to denigrate St. Petersburg Mayor Alexander Beglov in a manner that indicates that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s anti-Beglov campaign has permeated the Russian ultra-nationalist information space. Russian milbloggers criticized Beglov for standing in front of a Ukrainian flag at a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Interparliamentary Assembly in St. Petersburg on April 13.[13] The milblogger-amplified image shows Beglov standing on the left side of the podium as another official speaks, and the angle of the image shows Beglov standing directly in front of the Ukrainian flag—a perspective likely not indicative of Beglov’s actual location relative to the flag.[14] The milbloggers claimed that a “high-ranking Russian official” such as Beglov should not stand in front of the Ukrainian flag, with one even claiming that the act was analogous to a Leningrad City head standing in front of the flag of Nazi Germany during World War II.[15] The milbloggers also criticized Beglov for standing in front of the flag just a few weeks after the assassination of Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin (Vladlen Tartarsky) in St. Petersburg.[16] Prigozhin himself claimed that the Russian “deep state” is responsible for the flag’s presence, implying that Beglov is part of this deep state.[17] Other milbloggers claimed that the inclusion of the Ukrainian flag at the meeting suggests that Russia has failed to put itself on a wartime footing.[18] One milblogger claimed that CIS protocol required the inclusion of the Ukrainian flag but noted the strangeness of the protocol given the current conflict.[19] Ukraine ended its affiliation with the CIS in 2018 and has never been a full CIS member state.[20]

Russian officials may have included the Ukrainian flag in an attempt to convey the fact that the Kremlin does not recognize Ukraine’s withdrawal from the CIS and refusal to conform to Kremlin-controlled international structures, falsely anticipating that the Russian information space would praise this underlying message. The Russian information space appears to be so poisoned against Beglov, however, that milbloggers jumped at the chance to criticize him regardless of the subtle Kremlin messaging. This attack against Beglov also suggests that Prigozhin’s Russian “deep state” narrative, about which also he notably warned in an April 14 essay, has the potential to similarly permeate the Russian information space.[21]

The Wagner Group returned 130 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) on April 16, suggesting that Wagner may have engaged in the exchange independent of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[22] Ukrainian sources confirmed that 130 Ukrainian POWs returned to Ukraine but did not specify how many Russian POWs were exchanged in turn.[23] The Russian MoD deviated from its normal routine and did not confirm the prisoner exchange at all. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin posted a video showing Wagner forces preparing Ukrainian POWs for the exchange.[24] The lack of Russian MoD confirmation contrasted with Prigozhin’s engagement with the exchange may suggest that the Wagner Group maintains a level of autonomy from the Russian MoD and was able to negotiate the exchange with the Ukrainian government independent from the Russian MoD. In the posted video, Prigozhin claimed that he ordered Wagner forces to provide Ukrainian POWs with food and water before their release and personally wished them good luck and health. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger noted that Wagner’s kindness to Ukrainian prisoners is particularly uncharacteristic for a unilateral prisoner exchange that was purportedly not coordinated with the Russian MoD or another entity.[25] Wagner is notorious for the mistreatment of POWs, engaging in several high-profile and widely circulated executions of both returned Wagner POWs and Ukrainian POWs under Wagner’s control.[26] The milblogger also criticized Prigozhin’s decision to release such a large number of Ukrainian servicemen ahead of the anticipated large-scale Ukrainian counteroffensive.[27] Prigozhin’s decision to release so many Ukrainian POWs at such a time likely suggests that the exchange returned high-value Wagner members whom he intends to redeploy on the battlefield. Prigozhin has previously accused Wagner POWs of being traitors and supported their execution, but the conditions of the April 16 prisoner exchange likely imply that he is prioritizing replenishing diminished Wagner units over his continued effort to project Soviet brutalist strength and appeal to Russian ultranationalists.[28]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov also commented on the prisoner exchange on April 16. Kadyrov reported that five Chechens returned as part of the prisoner exchange but that he refused to meet them upon their arrival in Grozny.[29] Kadyrov claimed that the five Chechen fighters should prove their honor by

returning to the frontlines, stating that Chechens do not interpret capture as an excuse to lay down arms but instead as an action forced upon them.[30] Kadyrov is likely using the POW exchange to fortify his own reputation as a capable and brutal *silovik*.

The Wagner Group may be attempting to force mobilized Russian personnel to sign contracts with Wagner, possibly in an effort to offset Wagner's losses in Ukraine. Mobilized personnel from Moscow and Ivanovo oblasts alleged in a public complaint released on April 16 that the Wagner Group forced 170 mobilized personnel to sign contracts with Wagner.[31] Russian sources previously claimed that 100 mobilized personnel in Luhansk Oblast disappeared as of April 7 after refusing to sign contracts with the Wagner Group, and geolocated footage published on April 11 shows Wagner personnel detaining the mobilized personnel in Kadiivka before escorting the personnel to an unspecified training ground.[32] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may allow mobilized personnel to fulfill their service obligations by signing contracts with Wagner, although the status of mobilized personnel initially assigned to conventional Russian units who have signed contracts with Wagner is unclear. Wagner's reported impressment of poorly trained mobilized personnel, in addition to its change in approach to prisoner exchanges, suggests that Wagner is increasingly desperate for manpower as it continues to conduct highly attritional offensive operations in and around Bakhmut.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian military command appears to be increasingly shifting responsibility for offensive operations in Ukraine to the Russian Airborne (VDV) troops.
- News of Teplyansky's reappointment suggests that the Russian MoD is seeking to work more closely with the Wagner Group in order to complete the capture of Bakhmut, despite obvious tensions between Prigozhin and the traditional MoD establishment.
- Russian milbloggers seized on an opportunity to denigrate St. Petersburg Mayor Alexander Beglov in a manner that indicates that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's anti-Beglov campaign has permeated the Russian ultra-nationalist information space.
- The Wagner Group returned 130 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) on April 16, suggesting that Wagner may have engaged in the exchange independent of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- The Wagner Group may be attempting to force mobilized Russian personnel to sign contracts with Wagner, possibly in an effort to offset Wagner's losses in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks south of Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces reportedly intensified the rate of artillery strikes in southern Ukraine.
- Russian mobilized personnel continue to publish public complaints against Russian commanders alleging mistreatment.
- A Russian source stated that the Wagner Group is involved in the removal of Ukrainian children from Bakhmut.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 15, 2023

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

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

April 15, 5pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Reporting from some Western sources that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin called for Russia to end its war against Ukraine is inaccurate.

[1] Some Western reports covering Prigozhin's April 14 essay on a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive and the future of the war miscontextualized a rhetorical statement in which Prigozhin established a strawman argument he attributed to Russia's "internal enemies" who seek to rationalize Russia ending the war in Ukraine now.[2] The point of his essay was to attack this strawman, not to advance it. Prigozhin actually called on Russia to commit to a decisive fight that will either defeat Ukraine or result in a temporary Russian defeat that will catalyze Russia's nationalist rebirth and set conditions for future victory.[3] A full reading of Prigozhin's essay, titled, "Only an Honest Fight: No Negotiations," does not lend itself to any reasonable interpretation that Prigozhin advocated for an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Reading Prigozhin's public communications is not a straightforward undertaking. Much of the nuance included in Prigozhin's speech is lost when translating Russian to English. Prigozhin has an idiosyncratic rhetorical and writing style that relies heavily on deadpan sarcasm, selective ambiguity, aphorisms, vulgarity, and ironic slang. Prigozhin's isolated quotes separated from the full context of his messages often lose their initial meaning.

Certain Russian players in the information space have also misinterpreted Prigozhin's essay, further exposing fissures between some Russian milbloggers. Pro-Kremlin news aggregator Readovka noted on April 15 that some unspecified Russian-language Telegram channels – like some Western media – simply repeated Prigozhin's strawman argument about the seduction of settling for negotiations without "reading any further" into Prigozhin's call for a protracted struggle.[4] Readovka endorsed Prigozhin's actual argument that the "uncomfortable truth" is that Russia must continue to fight, concurring that negotiations to end the war would "do more harm than good." [5] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin – an enemy of Prigozhin – leaned into the misinterpretation of Prigozhin's essay (possibly on purpose) as part of their ongoing blogging feud. Girkin sarcastically asked, "Do I understand correctly that the Black Clown [Prigozhin] called for the Russian Federation to reject half of the Donetsk People's Republic and a third of Zaporizhia Oblast...?"[6] Girkin also implied that that Russian prosecutors should investigate Prigozhin for his essay, likely for discrediting the Russian "special military operation," given that the strawman argument advocates that Russia should simply retain only territory it currently occupies in Ukraine.[7] Prigozhin's essay may continue to fuel debate along existing cleavages in the Russian

information space where Prigozhin's supporters and competitors may use selective readings of the essay to either praise or malign Prigozhin while advancing their own arguments.

The Russian information space is reckoning with demographic transitions within Russia in a way that indicates that the nationalist ideologies underpinning the war in Ukraine will continue to have reverberating domestic impacts. Russian outlet *RBC* reported on April 13 that a study published by the Russian New Economic Association found that an increase in the number of migrants from 390,000 to 1.1 million annually would help stabilize Russia's population, which is in decline due to domestic levels of fertility and life expectancy as well as population outflow.^[8] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrey Medvedev responded to the study and accused "lobbyists" of advocating for uncontrolled migration from Central Asia, which Medvedev claimed will bring more violence and extremism to Russia at great social and economic cost.^[9] Medvedev called instead for a new law on the repatriation of ethnic Russians from all over the world in order to stabilize demographic shifts and save them from "Russophobia" abroad.^[10] Russian State Duma Deputy for Defense Dmitry Kuznetsov reportedly reported on April 15 that Voronezh Oblast may begin a pilot program on the social integration of refugees and noted that this program is intended for pro-Russian refugees who left Ukraine for Russia.^[11] Kuznetsov's proposed bill underlines the same brand of staunch nationalism that Medvedev is advocating for and seeks to uphold and codify a sense of exceptionalism for ethnic Russians in Russia at the expense of all ethnic minority populations. The war in Ukraine has had, and will continue to have, substantial population and demographic impacts within Russia.^[12] These impacts will leave the door open for the continued weaponization of intensely nationalist rhetoric as the war continues to empower the most staunchly xenophobic (and vocal) factions of Russian society.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party intends to recruit Russian military personnel who have served in Ukraine as candidates for elections in 2023 and 2024, likely in an effort to establish itself as the definitive pro-war party in Russia. United Russia Central Executive Committee Head Alexander Sidiyakin announced on April 14 that the Young Guard of United Russia (United Russia's youth wing) launched an educational module about participating in primaries for Russian military personnel and volunteers who have fought in Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine.^[13] Sidiyakin reportedly stated that Russian military personnel and volunteers will be on United Russia candidate lists for upcoming regional elections in September 2023.^[14] The United Russia party is currently nominating candidates for primaries until April 27, and primaries will run from May 22 to 28.^[15] Young Guard of United Russia Chairman Anton Demidov reportedly stated on April 14 that Russian military personnel and volunteers will become the main speakers of the party during Russia's 2024 presidential election.^[16]

The recruitment of military personnel as political candidates during a time of war is typical for a society that holds elections, regardless of the fairness or significance of those elections. The Kremlin likely intends to recruit military personnel as candidates to a greater extent than is usual even for a war time country, however. The Kremlin likely aims to use candidates who have served in Ukraine as the public face of the United Russia party in upcoming elections to court the support of military constituents and their family members and to establish United Russia as the definitive political party for the pro-war movement. The potential "militarization" of the United Russia party likely does not presage a Kremlin effort to escalate the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin is likely aiming to co-opt military personnel to support its ongoing effort to curry favor with the pro-war Russian ultranationalist community without fulfilling the community's extreme demands.

Key Takeaways

- Reporting from some Western sources that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin called for Russia to end its war against Ukraine is inaccurate.
- Certain Russian players in the information space have also misinterpreted Prigozhin's essay, further exposing fissures between some Russian milbloggers.
- The Russian information space is reckoning with demographic transitions within Russia in a way that indicates that the nationalist ideologies underpinning the war in Ukraine will continue to have reverberating domestic impacts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party announced its intention to recruit Russian military personnel who have served in Ukraine as candidates for elections in 2023 and 2024, likely in an effort to establish itself as the definitive pro-war party in Russia.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kreminna and may be preparing to defend territory in the Kupyansk direction.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- A Russian opposition news source reported that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head Leonid Pasechnik signed a decree on April 14 authorizing spring and fall conscription in occupied Luhansk Oblast.
- The Russian State Security Service (FSB) is likely involved in efforts to target Ukrainian youth in occupied territories for law enforcement and counter-partisan purposes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 14, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 14, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China ahead of Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu's visit to Moscow from April 16 to 18. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on April 14 that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu will meet with Li to discuss bilateral defense cooperation as well as issues of regional and global security.^[1] Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang stated on April 14 that China will not sell weapons

to Russia and will regulate the export of items to Russia that have dual civilian and military uses.[2] Qin's comments represent a continuation of China's efforts to rhetorically downplay its support for Russia and demonstrate that there are limits to the "no limits" partnership that Russia and China declared before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[3] ISW assessed that Putin was unable to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Moscow from March 20 to 22.[4]

The Kremlin is likely hoping to make itself more attractive to China by launching Russian Pacific Fleet exercises to project Russia's naval power in the Pacific. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on April 14 that the Russian military raised the Pacific Fleet of the Eastern Military District (EMD) to the highest level of combat readiness for combat readiness checks.[5] Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, also stated that elements of the Pacific Fleet will conduct combat exercises.[6] The Russian Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks are likely meant to signal to China that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in the Pacific and that Russia remains an equal military partner that can operate as a Pacific power despite the degradation of Russian military power in Ukraine.

The Kremlin also likely intends to use the Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks to attempt to deter further Japanese support for Ukraine ahead of the G7 meeting from May 19 to 21. Shoigu stated on April 14 that Russian forces declared that combat readiness checks are intended to work out methods to prevent enemy forces from deploying in the southern part of the Sea of Okhotsk and to repel a landing on the southern Kuril and Sakhalin islands, both signals to Japan (which claims part of the archipelago that the Soviet Union seized at the end of World War II).[7] Russia's Eastern Military District (EMD) recently deployed a battery of Bastion coastal defense missile systems to Paramushir Island in the northern portion of the Russian-occupied Japanese Kuril Islands, which ISW assessed was likely a warning to Japan about further supporting Ukraine.[8] Russia likely intends to use military posturing in the north Pacific to raise fears about military escalation with Japan in an increased effort to prevent Japan from further supporting Ukraine when it hosts the G7 meeting in Hiroshima. Russia has employed similar information operations and demonstrative actions against the West aimed at preventing further Western security assistance to Ukraine by stoking concerns about escalation, although these efforts have never presaged any real escalation.[9]

The Russian military is in no position to threaten Japan at this time. ISW previously reported that elements of the 40th and 155th Naval Infantry Brigades of the Pacific Fleet suffered heavy losses near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast in early 2023 and in late 2022, with the 155th being reconstituted as many as eight times in the past year.[10] The Pacific Fleet likely lacks the available combat power in the Pacific region to posture in a way that would be truly threatening to Japan or suitable for Russia power projection attempts that would be able to convince China that it is an equal military power.

It is noteworthy that Prigozhin – one of most extreme thought leaders among Russia's pro-war faction – considers that Russia can incur a defeat in Ukraine and that such a defeat in the short run would actually benefit Russia.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is setting information conditions to exploit a Russian military failure if the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive is successful. Prigozhin published an essay on April 14 in which he argues that Ukraine's coming counteroffensive is more likely to succeed than fail.[11] Prigozhin warned that a selfish Russian "deep state" (which he defines as "a community of near-state elites that operate independently of the political leadership of the state and have close ties and their own agenda") is currently in crisis due to the Russian military's failures to secure a victory quickly.[12] Prigozhin accused members of this deep state embedded in the Russian bureaucracy of deliberately sabotaging Russian success in the war because they seek to resume their privileged lives of comfort. [13] Prigozhin stated that these Russian deep state "internal enemies" will push the Kremlin to "make serious concessions" tantamount to "betraying Russian interests," including even possibly returning occupied Ukrainian territory to Ukraine over the course of a few years.[14]

Prigozhin explicitly rejected the notion of any negotiations to end the war and urged Russians to continue fighting, even if it results in Russia's temporary defeat. Prigozhin stated that Russia must ignore the Russian deep state's temptations to cut Russian losses and settle.[15] Prigozhin stated the Russian military cannot stop fighting now despite current Russian territorial gains because the Ukrainian state has transformed, and unoccupied Ukraine is now politically opposed the Kremlin. Prigozhin stated that Russia must continue to fight relentlessly in Ukraine regardless of how adverse conditions become. He stated that any scenario in which Russia faces defeat will result in a groundswell of "radical national feelings" in Russia that will serve as the catalyst for a reinvigorated Russian patriotism and enable the Russian nation to undergo the baptism by fire necessary to emerge victorious and defeat Ukraine.[16] Prigozhin's essay is thematically and logistical consistent with his previous stated effort to transform Wagner Group into a hardline ideological elite parallel military organization to advance Russian interests.[17]

The Russian nationalist discourse about the acceptability of Russia suffering defeat in Ukraine deviates from some Western assertions of the need to preserve Russia from humiliation and allow Russia to "save face." Prigozhin's argument that the Kremlin must resist the temptation to settle and instead remain committed to winning in Ukraine is not compatible with the idea that the Kremlin must be given a way to save face lest it conduct a massive, possibly nuclear, escalation.[18] It is noteworthy that Prigozhin – one of most extreme thought leaders among Russia's pro-war faction – considers that Russia can incur a defeat in Ukraine and that such a defeat in the short run would actually benefit Russia. Prigozhin's comments, together with those of other radical pro-war voices, highlight the priority that the pro-war community places on galvanizing Russian society and energizing it for a long fight against the West. That agenda is not advanced by courting thermonuclear destruction.

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin denied speculations that he is facing charges in St. Petersburg for the discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces – a denial that likely further indicates his protection by unknown *siloviki* patrons. A Russian news aggregator claimed on April 14 that a Novosibirsk resident asked the St. Petersburg Investigative Committee to investigate Girkin's social media content for discreditation of Russian forces – a crime punishable by a fine of up to five million rubles (\$65,530), up to five years of correctional or forced labor, or up to seven years in prison.[19] Girkin denied receiving a criminal charge notice, claiming that he will not alter his behavior and is not intimidated by authorities.[20] Girkin denied receiving any charges from the Russian Ministry of Interior (MVD) and hypothesized that the MVD could "theoretically" investigate him for discreditation.[21] Girkin added that if someone has the "political will" then he could be framed for humanitarian aid fraud. Girkin noted that everyone will soon find out if the "authorities are ready to stop [him]."[22] Girkin's response is consistent with his ruthless criticisms of the Kremlin and may indicate that he likely continues to benefit from some protection from within the Russian force structures – the *siloviki*. Girkin has every reason to believe that he would be convicted without such protection, as his vitriolic assaults on the Russian military's performance in Ukraine almost self-evidently violate the discreditation law.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to apply pressure on Girkin's patronage networks by responding to accusations against Girkin. Prigozhin stated that Girkin would not be recruited into Wagner as Wagner is no longer recruiting prisoners – likely implying that Girkin would remain in prison for his behavior.[23] While it is unclear if Prigozhin or Wagner-affiliated figures are involved in sparking an investigation against Girkin, it is notable that the complaint was filed in St. Petersburg - a city where Prigozhin has connections and a city where Prigozhin is attempting to push his political aspirations.[24] Girkin is reportedly based out of Moscow, which makes the St. Petersburg venue of the complaint more unusual.[25] Prigozhin and Girkin have a history of personal attacks and feuds, and Prigozhin may want to expose or strain Girkin's patronage networks, which are allowing him to be unscathed despite ongoing censorship measures in Russia. ISW also previously assessed that Prigozhin and Girkin are likely competing for influence and patronage within the pro-war faction, and a public investigation into Girkin might burden Girkin's patrons as they attempt to deflect or quash these accusations.[26]

Russian elite forces are diluting their combat effectiveness with poorly trained mobilized personnel and volunteers due to high causalities sustained in Ukraine. *The Washington Post* reported that leaked classified US intelligence documents revealed that Russia's 22nd Separate Guards Special Purpose (SPETSNAZ) Brigade (Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff) and two other unspecified SPETSNAZ brigades suffered an estimated 90-95% attrition rate in Ukraine.[27] *The Washington Post* also reported that the 346th SPETSNAZ Brigade lost almost its entire complement, with only 125 servicemen remaining active out of 900 initially deployed.[28] These high casualty rates suggest that Russia's most elite forces - Airborne and SPETSNAZ forces - are likely no longer elite. Russian forces have recently deployed elements of airborne brigades and SPETSNAZ formations to frontline areas in Ukraine that operate as volunteer battalions or that are almost entirely comprised of mobilized personnel.[29] It is highly unlikely that mobilized personnel or volunteers received training on how to conduct aerial landing operations and special forces operations, which would suggest that these Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and SPETSNAZ elements do not differ markedly from other combat ineffective Russian formations staffed by mobilized personnel or volunteers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely host his annual June press conference in early June 2023. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced on April 14 that the Kremlin expects to hold the "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," a live forum at which Putin addresses questions from the Russian public, on an unspecified date likely in June 2023.[30] Putin cancelled his "Direct Line" in 2022 due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as in 2020 due to COVID-19.[31] Putin notably cancelled his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly in December 2022 and regurgitated boilerplate rhetoric at his annual New Year's speech, indicating that Putin was uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space amidst criticism of the Russian military's performance in the war.[32] This year's event will likely be highly filtered to support Putin's current rhetorical lines and avoid exposing any challenges to the Kremlin or to Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine.

The Russian State Duma is intensifying its efforts to censor Russian cultural figures who fled Russia and criticize the war, likely aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship. Russian State Duma Vice Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy announced on April 14 that the State Duma has created a working group to find a "fair solution" to prevent these cultural figures as well as designated foreign agents from receiving income from creative endeavors in Russia.[33] Tolstoy claimed that some deputies are making "radical proposals...because it's not worth making money in a country that you hate." Prior Duma proposals included withholding state funding, royalty payments, advertising revenue and copyrights, and confiscating the property of Russians who fled.[34] State Duma Vice Speaker Irina Yarovaya chairs the committee, and other members include Tolstoy and the chairs of the State Duma committees for Security and Anti-Corruption, State Building and Legislation, Information Policy, Information Technology and Communications, and Culture.[35] Measures that punish Russians abroad or foreign agents for criticizing the war in Ukraine also demonstrate to domestic audiences the range of punishments they may also suffer for airing their own criticisms.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin is likely attempting to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China ahead of Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu's visit to Moscow from April 16 to 18.
- The Kremlin is likely hoping to make itself more attractive to China by launching Russian Pacific Fleet exercises to project Russia's naval power in the Pacific.
- The Kremlin also likely intends to use the Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks to attempt to deter further Japanese support for Ukraine ahead of the G7 meeting from May 19 to 21.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is setting information conditions to exploit a Russian military failure if the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive is successful.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin denied speculations that he is facing charges in St. Petersburg for the discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces – a denial that likely further indicates his protection by unknown *siloviki* patrons.
- Russian elite forces are diluting their combat effectiveness with poorly trained mobilized personnel and volunteers due to high causalities sustained in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely host his annual June press conference in early June 2023.
- The Russian State Duma is intensifying its efforts to censor of Russian cultural figures who fled Russia and criticize the war, likely aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations in the Kremenna area as Ukrainian forces targeted rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to advance in Bakhmut and conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continue to endanger the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) amidst continued Russian efforts to establish control over the ZNPP.
- The Kremlin reportedly continues to use private military companies (PMCs) and nationalist networks to support its force generation campaigns.
- Russian security personnel continue to arrest Ukrainian citizens under allegations that they associate with claimed illegal formations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 13, 2023

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

A senior Ukrainian official warned that Russia can reconstitute itself as a serious threat to Ukraine in the long run despite facing severe force generation problems at this time. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov stated on April 13 that Russian crypto-mobilization efforts are stagnating due to Russians' growing awareness that causality rates for Russian soldiers in Ukraine are high. Hromov stated that Volgograd and Saratov oblasts have only met seven percent (134 of the 7,800 recruits) and 14 percent (270 of the 7,600 recruits) of their regional recruitment quotas for the first quarter of 2023 respectively.^[1] Hromov also stated that Moscow is creating "alternative" private military companies (PMCs) to fill these gaps, but that these PMCs will not be as powerful as the Wagner Group in the near future, partially supporting previous ISW forecasts.^[2] Hromov noted that Ukraine and its allies must not underestimate Russian force generation capabilities in the long run for a protracted war of attrition. ISW has previously warned that the US and NATO should not underestimate Russian capabilities in the long run, as Russia can regenerate by leveraging its population and defense industrial base (DIB) to threaten Ukraine and NATO if Russian President Vladimir Putin decides to fundamentally change Russia's strategic resource allocation over the long run.^[3] Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced plans on January 17 to form 12 new maneuver divisions over the course of several years, for example.^[4]

The Kremlin has not yet undertaken the necessary reorganization of its war effort to effectively leverage economies of scale to support large-scale Russian force generation, however. Current Russian half-measures and decentralized recruitment efforts to regenerate forces such as crypto-mobilization, leaning on Russia's regions to generate volunteers, relying on new small PMCs, and pressuring various Russian state-owned enterprises to sponsor and pay for recruitment campaigns seek to shift the resource burden to generate forces among different *siloviki* and elements of the Russian state.^[5] The Kremlin is reportedly billing the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom for its volunteer recruitment efforts in occupied Donetsk Oblast, offering volunteers 400,000 rubles (approximately \$4,900) salary per month.^[6] A Russian State Duma official proposed the institution of a new 2–3% "military tax" on Russian citizens' income — a provision that would allow Putin to reduce the burden on existing federal funds but would likely anger more Russians.^[7] These various Russian groups' resources are finite. The Kremlin's currently unsustainable effort to commandeer them will exhaust itself without fundamental resource generation and resource allocation reform. These current efforts will generate some additional combat power in the short term, to be sure, but will do so with diminishing marginal returns at increasing cost. The Russian state's current model of resource allocations and economies of scale do not synergize disjointed efforts to tap discrete resource pools. The Kremlin's decision to continue relying on financially incentivizing voluntary recruits with both one-time payments and accrued lifetime benefits will create large long-term structural costs and will not be sustainable indefinitely.^[8]

Ukrainian assessments confirm ISW's longstanding assessment that Russia cannot conduct multiple offensive operations simultaneously at this time. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov stated on April 13 that Russian forces deployed unspecified Russian forces from the Avdiivka area of operations to reinforce offensive operations around Bakhmut and that Russia has lost about 4,000 Wagner and conventional personnel in Bakhmut since around March 30.^[9] Hromov's statement supports ISW's longstanding assessment that the Russian military — in its current form — is unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.^[10]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly personally approved the arrest of *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich. Bloomberg reported on April 12 that Putin personally approved the arrest of Gershkovich on espionage charges before the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast on March 30 for collecting information constituting a state secret about the activities of a Russian military-industrial complex enterprise.^[11] Putin's reported personal involvement in the arrest suggests that the arrest was likely a retaliatory response to the US arrest of Russian national Sergey Cherkasov on March 24 on charges of acting as agent of a foreign power.^[12] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied that Putin ordered Gershkovich's arrest and stated that Russian special services independently decided to arrest Gershkovich.^[13] ISW has previously reported that the FSB has made other recent arrests in connection with information about defense enterprises in Sverdlovsk Oblast, and ISW assesses that the Kremlin may use the pretext of threats to Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) to justify crackdowns and further conceal the activities of Russian defense industrial enterprises.^[14] Putin's reported personal involvement in the first arrest of a US journalist since the Cold War may indicate that the Kremlin viewed the arrest as a calculated escalation that it will attempt to use as leverage for extracting concessions from the United States.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed to have identified the individuals allegedly responsible for assassinating milblogger Maxim Fomin (known under the alias Vladlen Tatarsky) on April 13.^[15] The FSB claimed that alleged Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) agents Darya Trepova and Yuriy Denisov worked with Russian Anti-Corruption Foundation associates Leonid Volkov and Ivan Zhdanov — both located abroad — to track Fomin for months and eventually assassinate him.^[16] The FSB stated that it added Denisov to the international wanted list after he fled Russia.^[17] Anti-Corruption Foundation Director Ivan Zhdanov claimed on April 13 that the FSB released this version of events to justify extending Anti-Corruption Foundation founder and Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny's prison sentence.^[18]

Key Takeaways

- **A senior Ukrainian official warned that Russia can reconstitute itself as a serious threat to Ukraine in the long run despite facing severe force generation problems at this time.**
- **The Kremlin has not yet undertaken the necessary reorganization of its war effort to effectively leverage economies of scale to support large Russian force generation.**
- **Ukrainian assessments confirm ISW's longstanding assessment that Russia cannot conduct multiple offensive operations simultaneously at this time.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly personally approved the arrest of *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich.**
- **The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) on April 13 identified the individuals allegedly responsible for assassinating milblogger Maxim Fomin (alias Vladlen Tatarsky).**

- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to make gains in Bakhmut, and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continue to reinforce and strengthen their positions in southern Ukraine in preparation for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters continue to feud with St. Petersburg authorities and advertising companies allegedly obstructing Wagner Group recruitment efforts.
- Wagner Group are reportedly training Ukrainian children to use weapons as part of the Russian Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmiya) in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 12, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan
April 12, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin's campaign of "Russification" in Ukraine is burning back into Russia itself as it continues to empower and amplify overtly nationalist voices and ideologies. Russia is engaged in a campaign of deliberate "Russification" within Ukraine aimed at the destruction of Ukrainian identity through a multitude of military, social, economic, legal, bureaucratic, and administrative lines of efforts.^[1] The ideologies that underpin the basis of this "Russification" also form the rhetorical backbone of the pro-war information space, which frequently mirrors its militarism with staunch Russian nationalism and intense xenophobia that is directed both at Ukraine and Ukrainian identity as well as at domestic minorities within Russia itself.

The domestic ramifications of the acceptance of the ideology of "Russification" are manifested in the responses by Russian authorities and prominent Russian milbloggers to ethnic minorities in Russia. Several Russian milbloggers and commentators published their reactions to a recent news story about the murder of a 17-year-old Russian student by a group of Tajik migrants in Chelyabinsk and used the story to criticize Central Asian migrants and ethnic minority communities for failing to integrate into Russian society.^[2] Head of the Russian Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin accused migrants of destabilizing Russia by importing terrorism and extremist ideologies and emphasized the role of migration policy in ensuring public order.^[3] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin amplified a criticism that authorities of the Tuva Republic are returning the indigenous Tuva names to 104 administrative-territorial units, which one milblogger decried as "pushing boundaries" unnecessarily during wartime.^[4] Social media footage circulated on April 12 shows a group of Russian men reportedly giving the Nazi salute and walking past administrative buildings in Ufa, Bashkortostan while shouting "Russia is for Russians."^[5] These instances of xenophobia and racism exemplify the crux of domestic "Russification." The war in Ukraine has empowered the most virulent voices in the information space to consolidate their ideology and project it both towards the Ukrainian people and towards non-Slavic minorities in Russia itself. This dynamic will likely escalate as the war continues and will outlive Russia's invasion of Ukraine, pervading the Russian domestic space for years to come.

These domestic-facing ramifications of "Russification" ironically continue to place the onus of the war effort on the communities that it marginalizes. Bastrykin has previously called for military authorities to specifically recruit migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus who received Russian citizenship because these migrants have a "constitutional obligation to protect the country that received them."^[6] Russian officials at the Sakharovo migrant center in Moscow are reportedly requiring the center's employees to offer migrants contracts for military service, as ISW previously reported.^[7] Russian officials have continuously targeted migrant and ethnic minority communities in ongoing force generation efforts, which largely places the military burden of the "Russification" project in Ukraine on communities and individuals that are its targets domestically.^[8]

Russian milbloggers offered a muted response to a Kaluga Oblast court's refusal to hear a case against Russian military doctor and "Union of Donbas Volunteers" member Yuri Yevich for "discrediting the Russian armed forces." The Kozelsky District Court in Kaluga Oblast issued on April 12 a decision on the "return of the protocol" of Yevich's administrative offense and other materials of the case to Russian law enforcement agencies, which permits those agencies to resolve any issues associated with the case materials.^[9] Russian authorities may still decide to pursue legal prosecution against Yevich for the charge of "discrediting Russian armed forces" after reviewing and formalizing those case materials. Russian milbloggers had previously widely decried the charging of Yevich and voiced concerns that Russian authorities could use the law as *carte blanche* to suppress any Russian soldier, volunteer, or "patriot."^[10] A very limited number of Russian milbloggers amplified the court's decision without additional commentary on April 12, however.^[11] The court's refusal to hear the case partially met Russian milbloggers' previous demands, and the milbloggers' failure to recognize this fact reflects the fact that this community focuses on promoting salient controversies to criticize Russian officials and institutions. Russian milbloggers' responses to the court's refusal to hear the case may also be muted because they are worried that the charges against Yevich represent a trial run for using the law against the "discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces to suppress segments of the ultranationalist pro-war community. Russian milbloggers may view the court's refusal to hear the case as a pause in a possible Kremlin plan to begin censoring some segments of the Russian pro-war information space that have been highly critical of the Kremlin, and milbloggers will be unlikely to admit any satisfaction about this controversy until the case against Yevich is completely dropped.

The Russian nationalist community continues to glorify atrocities and advocate for the expansion of brutality. Russian milbloggers responded to widely circulated footage of a Russian soldier beheading a Ukrainian prisoner of war. A Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel attempted to excuse the beheading by claiming that both sides engage in brutal acts and asserted that this beheading would not be the last violent execution during the war.^[12] The channel claimed that being accused of brutality during war is like getting fined for speeding during a car race—a claim it used when discussing two previous Wagner executions videos.^[13] Russian forces' continued use of such violent tactics and its support in the Russian information space undermines professionalism and discipline in the Russian military.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin's campaign of "Russification" in Ukraine is burning back into Russia itself as it continues to empower and amplify overtly nationalist voices and ideologies.
- The domestic ramifications of the acceptance of the ideology of "Russification" are manifested in the responses by Russian authorities and prominent Russian milbloggers to ethnic minorities in Russia.
- These domestic-facing ramifications of "Russification" ironically continue to place the onus of the war effort on the exact communities that it marginalizes.
- Russian milbloggers offered a muted response to a Kaluga Oblast court's refusal to hear a case against Russian military doctor and "Union of Donbas Volunteers" member Yuri Yevich for "discrediting the Russian armed forces."
- The Russian nationalist community continues to glorify atrocities and advocate for the expansion of brutality.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk line.
- Russian forces continue to construct defenses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast and Crimea.
- Russian officials continue to advance a law aimed at improving the effectiveness of issuing summonses and cracking down on Russian draft dodgers.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center released a report detailing the extent of illegal deportations of Ukrainian children from Donbas to the Russian Federation.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 11, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, George Barros, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan
April 11, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin passed legislation to use tools of digital authoritarianism to digitize and improve the effectiveness of issuing summonses and crack down on Russian draft dodgers. The Russian State Duma adopted a bill in its third reading on April 11 to create a digital unified register of Russian citizens eligible for military service.^[1] Russian military recruitment offices will use the digital register to issue summonses to military service. The unified register harvests Russian citizens' personal identification information—including medical, educational, and residence history, foreign citizenship status, and insurance and tax data—from multiple Russian legal entities, including Russia's Federal Tax Service, investigative bodies, courts, medical institutions, the Russian Pension and Social Insurance Fund, the Central Election Commission, and federal and local authorities.^[2] Summoned individuals may not leave Russia and must appear at a military recruitment office within 20 days of being summoned. The law bans summoned individuals who are 20 days delinquent for reporting from driving vehicles, buying or selling real estate, and taking out loans. A senior Russian legislator stated that the law will correct some of the bureaucratic shortcomings that appeared during Russia's partial mobilization in September 2022.^[3] Some Russian milbloggers who have long agitated for more aggressive force generation policies praised the law and stated that it exemplifies healthy interactions between Russian civil society and government.^[4] ISW previously forecasted that the Kremlin would marry Soviet-style societal control measures with big data and 21st-century information technology to intensify control over the Russian population after Russia used facial recognition, QR codes, and mobile device geo-tracking technology to enforce a draconian COVID-19 quarantine in 2020.^[5]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged each other's roles in the Bakhmut effort on April 11. The Russian MoD and Prigozhin claimed that Wagner fighters comprise the main effort to take territory and push Ukrainian forces in central Bakhmut, whereas unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) elements comprise the supporting effort on Wagner's flanks north and south of Bakhmut, including near Zalizhnyanske, Sakkov Vantsetti, and Mykolaivka.^[6] The Russian VDV forces on the flanks likely aim only to hold the flanks rather than make any significant advances. This array of forces suggests that the Russian MoD intends to use the Wagner Group to capture Bakhmut while minimizing casualties among conventional Russian forces—supporting ISW's prior assessments that the MoD seeks to use Wagner forces to capture Bakhmut then supplant them and take credit for the victory.^[7] Prigozhin reiterated that Wagner forces are making gains within Bakhmut, however, claiming that Russian forces control 80 percent of Bakhmut due to Wagner advances.^[8] Russian forces occupy at least 30.68 square kilometers (about the size of the Chicago O'Hare airport) or 76.5 percent of Bakhmut based on ISW's control of terrain assessment. However, this area increases to 34.5 square kilometers or 86.1 percent of Bakhmut when factoring in all Russian-claimed territory in Bakhmut, including contradictory claims.

A small, fringe group of pro-war Russian milbloggers called for the Russian government to repeal the censorship laws against discrediting the Russian military. A group of at least 20 Russian milbloggers amplified a blanket statement expressing solidarity with "angry patriots" and others enraged at and weary of the poor application of the Russian censorship laws.^[9] These milbloggers, many of whom have limited social media followings, represent a small fraction of the Russian information space and their statement does not indicate broader anger over the mere existence of these laws. However, this faction of milbloggers is the most likely to face prosecution under these laws because they lack Kremlin affiliation, are among the most critical of the Russian war effort, and would likely be among the first targets of an expanded application of the law. The pro-war information space has expressed continued outrage over Russian authorities prosecuting a Russian medic under these censorship laws, which ISW has assessed will likely be a growing source of discontent in the pro-war information space.^[10]

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin passed legislation to use tools of digital authoritarianism to digitize and improve the effectiveness of issuing summonses and to crack down on Russian draft dodgers.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged each other's roles in the Bakhmut effort.
- A small, fringe group of pro-war Russian milbloggers called for the Russian government to repeal the censorship laws against discrediting the Russian military.
- Russian forces appear to hold positions northeast of Kupyansk and have made gains in the forest area south of Kreminna.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces conducted defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu visited defense industrial enterprises in Tula Oblast as part of the ongoing effort to portray the resilience of Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to confirm that Russian authorities are taking a number of actions *vis-a-vis* Ukrainian children in an attempt to exculpate herself from the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s warrant for her arrest.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 10, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 10, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is reportedly advancing his political aspirations by seeking to gain control of a Russian political party. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's growing cooperation with members of the A Just Russia — For Truth party likely indicates that Prigozhin seeks to gain control over the party.^[1] *Meduza* noted that four members of the party left to form a new movement, with some members citing the rapprochement between party leader Sergey Mironov and Prigozhin as the reason for their exit.^[2] ISW has consistently reported on the growing relationship between Mironov and Prigozhin and assessed that Mironov's advocacy for recognition of Wagner in Russia could trigger further fractionalization within the Kremlin.^[3] Two Kremlin sources and one St. Petersburg government insider claimed that Prigozhin is pursuing a leadership position within A Just Russia — For Truth's St. Petersburg branch to compete with St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for influence in the city. *Meduza*'s sources claimed that Prigozhin previously was interested in investing in the "Motherland" political party and may be interested in pursuing a position on the federal level. Mironov, in turn, is likely attempting to revive his political influence and use Prigozhin as a patron for his political ambitions. *Meduza*'s interlocutors indicated that the Russian Presidential Administration is unlikely to allow Prigozhin to gain control of the A Just Russia — For Truth party due to Prigozhin's conflict with administration officials and with Beglov.

The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) directly responded to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's criticisms of its agenda for Russia's presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), marking the first time that a Russian government institution has formally responded Prigozhin's criticism. Prigozhin criticized the MFA's work in Africa on April 7, claiming that the Russian MFA does "absolutely nothing" and that Wagner forces face "enormous difficulties" when interacting with the MFA and other government institutions in the region.^[4] The MFA responded to Prigozhin's criticism on April 9 and said that it is ready to cooperate with Russian businesses and entrepreneurs to promote Russian businesses abroad and that a number of upcoming events under Russia's UNSC chairmanship are dedicated to African issues.^[5] Prigozhin then responded to the MFA, questioning its ability to solve problems through the UNSC, and published a list of 15 issues that Prigozhin believes require urgent discussion at the UNSC, most of which relate to support for Russia's actions in Ukraine and Africa.^[6]

The Russian MFA's attack on Prigozhin is a continuation of the Kremlin's efforts to discredit and undermine Prigozhin. The MFA, other Russian government institutions, and Kremlin affiliates likely seek to shut down any attempts by Prigozhin to garner public or political support. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) refused to name Wagner forces as participants in the battle of Bakhmut, referring instead to "assault detachments."^[7] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov indirectly accused Prigozhin of deliberately exposing conflicts between the MoD and Wagner.^[8] Russian political scientist Aleksey Mukhin — who contributes to the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club and Russian state media — criticized Prigozhin for pursuing political objectives that endanger Wagner forces in Bakhmut.^[9] Prigozhin likely criticized the Russian MFA agenda in the UNSC in an effort to portray himself as a capable statesman able to influence foreign affairs and to garner support from the Russian ultranationalist community. Prigozhin continues to attempt to aggrandize himself by exaggerating Wagner forces' role in Russian successes in Ukraine and using his prominence in the Russian nationalist information space to criticize the Russian government.^[10]

Russian milbloggers adamantly decried the charging of Russian military doctor and "Union of Donbas Volunteers" member Yuri Yevich for "discrediting the Russian armed forces," suggesting that the broad applications of this new law will likely be a growing source of discontent in the pro-war information space. Russian authorities reportedly charged Yevich under the discreditation law because of a lecture on tactical medicine he gave to Rosgvardia employees, which someone reported to the authorities as offering a "negative assessment" of Russian forces.^[11] Yevich fought with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) militias in Donbas after 2014 and was a part of the "Union of Donbas volunteers" following the full-scale invasion in 2022.^[12] Yevich became popular in the pro-war Russian information space for popularizing and advocating for the application of tactical combat medicine on the battlefield.^[13] Several pro-war milbloggers and commentators seized on the news of Yevich's arrest and criticized Russian authorities for targeting someone whom they deem to be a true Russian patriot.^[14] Many milbloggers noted that Yevich's charging will become a *carte blanche* for Russian authorities to sanction every Russian soldier, volunteer, and patriot and questioned the legitimacy of both

the case against Yevich and the law itself.[15] Yevich likely presented an important truth regarding the state of Russian combat medicine to an internal audience and was arrested for it. If the Kremlin uses this law to shut down honest critiques of the performance of Russian forces or the Russian government even during internal discussions it runs a very high risk of repeating the kinds of fundamental errors that led to the failure of the initial Russian plans and campaign in February 2022.

The Russian State Duma will consider an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code increasing criminal penalties for high treason and terrorist activities on April 13.[16] The Russian State Duma Committee on State Construction and Legislation approved amendments to the Russian Criminal Code that would introduce life prison sentences for high treason and increase prison sentences for terrorist activities, including conducting terrorist activities, aiding terrorist activities, sabotaging transport and health infrastructure and, organizing and participating in a terrorist society.[17] The Russian Criminal Code's definition of treason is likely intentionally vague, including espionage, passing state secrets to foreign governments or their representatives, and providing financial, logistical, consulting, or other assistance to foreign organizations engaged in activities directed against Russian state security.[18] Such legislative manipulations are part of a larger domestic effort to encourage self-censorship and codify conditions for domestic repressions, as ISW has previously reported.[19]

Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus, on April 10. Shoigu and Lukashenko mainly used the meeting to reiterate boilerplate rhetoric that emphasized the strength of Russian and Belarusian bilateral cooperation and blamed NATO and the collective West for threatening Belarusian territorial integrity.[20] Lukashenko expressed his gratitude that Russia maintains a military presence in Belarus and accused Poland and Lithuania of threatening the Belarusian borders, while Shoigu thanked Lukashenko for providing Belarusian training grounds for the use of Russian troops. [21]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is reportedly advancing his political aspirations by seeking to gain control of a Russian political party.
- Putin may be unable to satisfy the role of a patron to loyalist figures to the same extent as he had been able to before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) directly responded to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's criticisms of its agenda at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), marking the first time that a Russian government institution has formally responded to Prigozhin's criticism.
- The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) attack on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is a continuation of the Kremlin's efforts to discredit and undermine Prigozhin.
- Russian milbloggers adamantly decried the charging of Russian military doctor and "Union of Donbas Volunteers" member Yuri Yevich for "discrediting the Russian armed forces," suggesting that the broad applications of this new law will likely be a growing source of discontent in the pro-war information space.
- The Russian State Duma will consider an amendment to the Russian Criminal Code increasing criminal penalties for high treason and terrorist activities on April 13.
- Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus, on April 10.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to make territorial gains in and around Bakhmut, and continued ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued defensive preparations in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin criticized Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) prisoner recruitment efforts, likely in an effort to advertise ongoing Wagner volunteer recruitment campaigns.
- Wagner forces are reportedly continuing to commit war crimes by beheading Ukrainian servicemen in Bakhmut.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to deport children to Russia under the guise of medical, rehabilitation, and voluntary evacuation schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9, 2023

[Click here for the full report](#)

George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko with Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Daniel Mealie, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher

April 9, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

ISW is publishing a special edition campaign assessment today, April 9. This report discusses Russia's religious repressions throughout occupied Ukraine since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia continues to weaponize religion in an effort to discredit Ukraine in the international arena and is using information operations about religion to advance military objectives despite itself committing gross violations of religious freedom in occupied Ukraine. Russia may use the upcoming Orthodox Easter holiday on April 16 in an effort to delay Ukrainian counteroffensives by calling for a ceasefire out of respect for the Orthodox religion despite the fact that Russia has shown no such respect for religion in areas its forces occupy. Russian religious persecutions are likely also part of an ongoing Russian cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing campaign aimed at extirpating the idea of an independent Ukrainian nationality or Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Russian occupation authorities are likely conducting a campaign of systematic religious persecution in occupied Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Russian soldiers or occupations authorities have reportedly committed at least 76 acts of religious persecution in Ukraine.[1] Russian authorities have closed, nationalized, or forcefully converted at least 26 places of worship to the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, killed or seized at least 29 clergy or religious leaders, and looted, desecrated, or deliberately destroyed at least 13 places of worship in occupied Ukraine.

[2] These cases of religious repression are not likely isolated incidents but rather part of a deliberate campaign to systematically eradicate “undesirable” religious organizations in Ukraine and promote the Moscow Patriarchate.

This study contains only a small subset of all reported Russian religious persecution events against religious groups in Ukraine. ISW did not include events where indirect fire may have unintentionally killed religious leaders or destroyed places of worship.[3] (This report specifically does not include all 494 religious buildings that the Russian military reportedly wholly destroyed, damaged, or looted, according to the independent Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom as of February 2023 because ISW cannot assess intentionality in all those cases, for example.)[4] The events included in this study are drawn from reports of Russian forces – usually infantry, security personnel, or occupation officials – deliberately coercing religious groups. This report also excludes many instances of Russian religious repressions in areas Russian forces have occupied from spring 2014 to February 24, 2022, to focus on more recent persecutions in newly-occupied areas.

Russian authorities systematically repress religious liberty in Russia as a matter of state policy. Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified the “Yarovaya Law” in 2016 requiring all religious organizations and churches in Russia to be registered with the Russian government. The law bans “missionary activities,” broadly defined as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially state-approved sites under the pretense of precautions against “extremism” and “terrorism.”[5] The Russian government refuses to register undesirable religious organizations it seeks to suppress.[6] Since 2016 Russian authorities have used the Yarovaya Law’s sweeping provisions to prosecute American Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries operating in Russia, outlaw most Mormon missionary work, and burn foreign-distributed Bibles not properly registered with the state.[7] Russian authorities have persecuted several other Russian religious minorities, including members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Falun Gong members, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Old Believers (Pomorian Old Orthodox), Lutherans, the Ukrainian Reformed Orthodox Church, and the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).[8] Russian authorities jailed at least 48 Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2022, arrested and deported two American Mormon missionaries in 2019, and fined a Sochi-based Buddhist leader for organizing “collective meditation” for “about a dozen” people in 2019.[9] Russian authorities have also targeted Russian Muslims for “illegal missionary activities” despite the fact that Islam is legally recognized as one of Russia’s “traditional religions” (along with Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism and Buddhism).[10]

Russia is exporting its state policies of systematic religious persecution to Russian-occupied Ukraine. The Kremlin annexed Russian-controlled portions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 30, 2022, recognizing them as Russian federal subjects.[11] Russian authorities enforce Russian federal laws – including the Yarovaya and other “anti-extremist” laws – in Russian-occupied Ukraine. Russia’s Prosecutor General’s Office declared four evangelical Christian groups from Latvia and Ukraine “undesirable” organizations in 2021, effectively banning the organizations in Russia.[12] Russian authorities in occupied Melitopol raided a Ukrainian evangelical pastor’s home in August 2022 and accused the pastor of being associated with the same undesirable organizations that Russian authorities banned in Russia 2021.[13] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in occupied Kherson Oblast reported that it eliminated an underground Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation in Novosofivka, Kherson Oblast, in January 2023.[14] The officials reported that Russian authorities found over 4,000 pieces of “forbidden literature” in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ possession and emphasized that Russian law designates Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist organization banned in Russia.[15] A Ukrainian Baptist congregation in Chernihivka regained permission to use its seized building after the congregants sent deed documents to Russian occupation authorities - possibly as part of the church’s reregistration under the Yarovaya Law.[16]

Russian occupation officials have been repressing Ukrainian religious communities in proxy republics in eastern Ukraine and in illegally occupied Crimea since 2014. Former Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Oleksandr Zakharchenko declared in May 2015 that Ukrainian Orthodox Church (OCU) members, Greek Catholics, and Evangelical Christians were “sectarians” within the DNR.[17] Zakharchenko announced that occupation authorities would only recognize the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. Occupation authorities forced many religious groups to reregister under the Russian Yarovaya law, bureaucratically eradicating religions such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahrir.[18] A Russian court ordered the only remaining Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Russia to be demolished at the expense of the Ukrainian diocese in 2019.[19]

Moscow’s religious persecution campaign seeks to eradicate the Autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which Moscow views as schismatic despite the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2019 granting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian occupation authorities are likely systematically eliminating OCU churches in occupied Ukraine. ISW’s research found that 34 percent of the reported persecution events targeted the OCU, making it the single most targeted religious group. The high percentage of persecution events aimed at the OCU is not surprising on the one hand because it is the most popular confession in Ukraine. It is surprising on the other hand because the Kremlin has been posturing as the defender of Christianity in general and Eastern Orthodoxy in particular.[20] Witness reports indicate that Russian authorities are seemingly targeting the OCU for its Ukrainianess. The Russians pursued such targeted attacks on the OCU even during the short-lived Russian partial occupation of Kyiv Oblast early in the war, suggesting that this targeting was an intentional component of the Russian invasion from the outset.[21]

Russian occupation officials are systematically seizing UOC property to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and are eliminating worship in the Ukrainian language. The synod of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a decision to officially annex the OCU’s dioceses in Dzhankoi, Simferopol, and Feodosia in Crimea on June 7, 2022, “out of the need to maintain an effective canonical and administrative connection with the central church authorities.”[22] Six Russian FSB agents raided an OCU church in Melitopol, detained and deported its priest for conducting the liturgy in the Ukrainian language, and then closed the church in November 2022.[23] Russian authorities have converted several OCU churches in occupied Ukraine to the Moscow Patriarchate.[24] The full extent of Russian efforts to forcibly convert Ukrainians in occupied territories to Russian Orthodoxy is unclear. Russian occupation authorities have made no explicit statement allowing the OCU to coexist with the Russian Orthodox Church in occupied Ukraine, which is alarming given the documented instances of repression and forced conversion of OCU churches.

Russian occupation forces have also targeted other denominations that are distinctly culturally Ukrainian. Russian forces captured two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests in Berdyansk in November 2022, deporting them and effectively closing the main Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Melitopol in December 2022. [25] Russian soldiers arrested a Protestant pastor and closed his congregation in Melitopol, reportedly because of his pro-Ukrainian views.[26]

Russia’s campaign also represses Ukraine’s Protestant minority. Available open-source reporting indicates that the most common victims of Russian religious persecution after Ukrainian Orthodox are Protestants, particularly evangelical Baptists. Protestants of all denominations were the victims of 34 percent of the reported persecution events that ISW observed. Baptists made up 13 percent of victims – the largest single group after Ukrainian Orthodox. ISW observed reports of persecutions of Baptists near the occupied cities of Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Mariupol, and Melitopol. Russian forces’ persecution of Protestants is most intense in

southern Ukraine. Protestants were the victims of 35 percent and 48 percent of the reported persecution events in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts respectively. Protestants suffered two-thirds of the reported repression events in occupied Mariupol City.

Witness reports indicate that Russian soldiers' conduct towards Protestants in occupied Ukraine is brutal. Russian troops commandeered a Kherson-based Ukrainian evangelical Baptist educational institute from March - November 2022 and established a garrison and crematorium there to cremate killed Russian soldiers. [27] The institute's rector stated that Russian soldiers repeatedly harassed the Baptists, calling them "American spies," "sectarians," and "enemies of the Russian Orthodox people." [28] One Russian officer reportedly told workers at the institute, "Evangelical believers like you should be completely destroyed...a simple shooting will be too easy for you. You need to be buried alive," and another Russian soldier reportedly said, "We will bury [Baptist] sectarians like you." [29] Russian soldiers raided and closed another Baptist Church in Chkalove, Zaporizhia Oblast, in September 2022. [30] Congregants reported that armed Russian soldiers interrupted their worship service and stated, "Your feet will not be here after the referendum. We have only one faith, Orthodoxy." [31] Russia's Yarovaya Law does not recognize Protestantism as a "traditional religion" and imposes regulations on its practice. [32]

Russia's systematic religious persecution supports a larger Russian campaign of cultural genocide against Ukraine. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is conducting mass deportations of Ukrainian children and depopulating Ukrainian territory in what likely amounts to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign. [33] ISW has assessed that this ethnic cleansing campaign is part of a larger Kremlin campaign of cultural genocide that seeks to eradicate the notion of a unique Ukrainian cultural identity. Ethnic cleansing has not been specified as a crime under international law, but a United Nations Commission of Experts has described ethnic cleansing as "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." [34] The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide declares that genocide includes "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." This definition aligns with current Russian efforts to eliminate "undesirable" Ukrainian religious groups in occupied Ukrainian territories. [35] Russian deliberate attacks and vandalism against places of worship in occupied Ukraine may also constitute war crimes. [36]

The Kremlin continues an information operation aimed at falsely portraying Russia as a religiously tolerant state while deliberately repressing religious freedoms in Ukraine. Putin consistently presents Russia as the defender of traditional "Christian values" that also supports Orthodox, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism religions. [37] The Kremlin uses this information operation to accuse Ukraine of religious intolerance towards the Moscow Patriarchate and gain favor with religious communities worldwide. This information operation is at odds with Russian religious repressions on the ground. The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration's indicated that Russians have reduced religious diversity by over 50 percent in Crimea, for example. [38] **The Kremlin continues to use long-standing false narratives that the Ukrainian government is oppressing religious liberties as a moral justification for its refusal to negotiate with Ukraine, likely in the hopes of turning international public opinion against Ukraine.** [39] The Kremlin is especially keen on accusing the Ukrainian government of persecuting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP). [40]

The UOC MP is not an independent religious organization but rather an extension of the Russian state and an instrument of Russian hybrid warfare. [41] The UOC MP is the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church's subordinate element in Ukraine. The UOC MP provided material support for Russia's initial invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. [42] Russian soldiers used UOC MP churches as military storage depots, garrisons, field hospitals, and even fighting positions during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. [43] One UOC MP priest in Lysychansk, Luhansk Oblast, collected information on his OCU clergy rivals and gave instructions to Russian soldiers to murder a Ukrainian priest. [44] Russian forces have reportedly gone out of their way to punish individual UOC MP priests in Ukraine who were not fully cooperative with Russian forces. Russian troops reportedly searched the UOC MP Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Melitopol in February 2023 to register UOC MP priests who refused to pray for the Russian military's success in Ukraine or for Russian Orthodox Church Head Patriarch Kirill's health. [45] Russian soldiers reportedly abducted a UOC MP priest who actively distributed humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians in Kherson City in April 2022. [46] **Russia will continue to weaponize the UOC MP and religion to incite social tensions in Ukraine and influence battlefield realities.**

The Kremlin may call for a ceasefire around Orthodox Easter on April 16 as it did for Orthodox Christmas in January 2023. [47] The Kremlin has selectively called for ceasefires around religious holidays to influence the situation on the frontlines. The Kremlin, for example, refused a ceasefire during Orthodox Easter of 2022 "in order not to give the Kyiv nationalists a break" during the Battle of Mariupol. [48] The Kremlin likely refused a ceasefire because Russian forces still held the initiative on the frontlines at the time, but sought a ceasefire months later over Orthodox Christmas to obtain additional time to prepare Russian forces for the winter offensive. The Kremlin may call for an Easter ceasefire because such a pause would disproportionately benefit Russian troops and allow them to secure their gains in urban Bakhmut and to prepare defenses against Ukraine's spring 2023 counteroffensive

Putin may call for a ceasefire to frame Ukraine as unaccommodating and unwilling to take the necessary steps towards negotiations. A ceasefire on religious grounds additionally reinforces the two-fold Russian information operation that frames Ukraine as suppressing religious groups and positions Putin as the true protector of the Christian faith. The invocation of a ceasefire on distinctly religious grounds in line with Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition is a subcomponent of this information operation. No combatant is obligated to accept a ceasefire on religious or any other grounds, however. Should Russia offer and Ukraine refuse a ceasefire over Orthodox Easter the Kremlin will not thereby have demonstrated any greater devotion to the defense of Christianity or Christian values nor shown that Kyiv rejects those values. Putin will merely have demonstrated, once again, his cynicism.

Supporters of international religious liberty should support Ukraine's efforts to liberate its territories. Religious freedom in Ukraine – especially the freedom of religious minorities – are far better defended in Ukrainian-controlled territories than in Russia or Russian-occupied Ukrainian lands. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found that Russia is one of the worst violators of religious freedoms due to its restrictive state policies and prosecution of peaceful religious activities that are legal under Ukrainian law. [49] Ukraine's Evangelical Baptist community, for example, expanded to encompass 2,272 churches and over 113,000 believers between 1991 and 2017. [50] Conversely, the Russian government has effectively outlawed foreign missionary work in Russia and persecuted Baptists along with many other Protestant sects since 2016. [51] Russia's campaign of religious repression relentlessly targets Ukrainian churches and "undesirable" Russian minorities in occupied Ukraine on a systematic basis. Russian forces will likely intensify this campaign and seek to eradicate religious organizations independent of Kremlin control, as Russian forces have done with Crimea's Muslim Crimean Tatar population since occupying the peninsula in 2014. [52]

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on April 9:

- Russian sources reacted with outrage to Russian authorities charging “Union of Donbas Volunteers” member Yuri Yevich with discrediting Russian forces.[53] Russian sources claimed that Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs officials accused Yevich of delivering a tactical medicine class to Rosgvardia employees that negatively portrayed Russian forces in Ukraine.[54]
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly criticized the Russian Foreign Ministry’s approach to Russia’s presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and offered his own list of agenda items for the UNSC, likely a demonstrative act aimed at supporting his standing in the Russian ultranationalist community and furthering his oblique efforts to portray himself as a suitable president of Russia at some point in the future. [55]
- Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavriisk Direction Head Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces have concentrated 113 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the Zaporizhia direction and 205 BTGs in the Donetsk direction.[56]
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.[57] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated that seven engagements occurred in these directions.[58]
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut, and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.[59] Cherevaty stated that Russian Airborne (VDV) forces have appeared in Bakhmut.[60] Russian forces likely made marginal gains in southern Bakhmut on April 9.[61]
- A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a reconnaissance-in-force operation in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[62]
- Head of the independent Russian human rights organization “Rus Sidiyashchaya” (Russia Behind Bars) Olga Romanova claimed on April 8 that convict recruits have begun signing 18-month contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[63]
- Russian occupation officials are likely continuing to use medical relocation schemes to deport Ukrainian children to Russia. Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed that Russian medical specialists have examined more than 94,000 children in Luhansk Oblast and that occupation officials have sent thousands of children from Luhansk Oblast to Russian federal clinics, the majority of which are likely in Russia. [64]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 8, 2023

[Click here for the full report.](#)

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

April 8, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Ukrainian and Russian sources discussed the decreased rate of Russian offensive operations along the entire frontline on April 8, supporting ISW’s assessment that the overall Russian offensive is approaching culmination.[1] Council of Reservists of the Ukrainian Ground Forces Head Ivan Tymochko reported on April 8 that Russian forces are fighting along the entire frontline, but that Russian offensive potential continues to decline and that current Russian attacks are focused on distracting and dispersing Ukrainian troops in anticipation of counteroffensive operations.[2] Tymochko stated that Russian forces are not making serious advances anywhere on the frontline, noting that the pace of attacks in and around Bakhmut has slightly decreased in some areas and stagnated entirely in others.[3] Tymochko also assessed that the Russian offensive on Avdiivka has “choked” and reported that Russian forces still do not control Marinka despite having reduced the city to rubble.[4] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that the pace of Russian offensive operations along the entire Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline has decreased over the past day and emphasized that Russian forces are struggling to advance anywhere in Ukraine.[5] Several Russian commentators are emphasizing Russian preparations for an anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive, suggesting that the overall focus of the Russian information space is shifting away from discussing Russian offensive capabilities and towards assessing Ukraine’s potential to regain significant ground.[6]

The dynamics of battlefield artillery usage in Ukraine reflect the fact that Russian forces are using artillery to offset their degraded offensive capabilities. Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Security Minister and current Vostok Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky reported that the Russian command has decided to stop the daily issue of ammunition to areas of the front where there are no active offensive operations almost entirely.[7] Khodakovsky noted that the artillery shortage on the frontline results in part from preparations for a Ukrainian counteroffensive.[8] Khodakovsky's statement indicates that the Russian command must prioritize artillery ammunition supplies rigorously due to shortages. High demand for shells indicates that Russian forces are still heavily relying on artillery to offset key shortcomings in combat capability, including poor Russian targeting skills, insufficient ground assault capabilities, and inadequate availability of airpower in Ukraine. Russian forces use heavy artillery barrages to flatten settlements before seizing them with ground attacks, offsetting the need to conduct effective infantry attacks or to conduct an airstrike using scarce precision munitions and putting airframes and pilots at risk of Ukrainian air defenses. Continuing Russian shortages in artillery ammunition will undermine the Russian military's ability to continue offsetting its other weaknesses and limitations. *The Washington Post* reported on April 8 that by contrast, Ukrainian forces are using one-third as many shells as Russian forces and that Ukrainian forces are conserving shells by carefully prioritizing targets.[9] Ukrainian forces are more accurate in their targeting, but also likely benefit from being on the defensive in most areas--offensive operations normally generate increased artillery requirements.

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin launched a new effort likely aimed at protecting the influence of the Russian pro-war faction within the Kremlin. Girkin formed the "Club of Angry Patriots" social movement along with seven prominent proxy and ultranationalist figures on April 1 seeking to help Russia to win the war and avoid an internal conflict within Russia.[10] Members of the club stated that Russia will imminently face defeat in Ukraine and may experience a pro-Western coup or civil war if Moscow does not drastically improve the situation on the frontlines. The members claimed that Russian officials are unable to improve the war effort and its effects on Russian society because most Kremlin officials belong to an anti-war faction. The anti-war faction reportedly advocates for a peace settlement with the West to regain access to its overseas wealth and is not actively attempting to improve the war effort – not out of a fundamental disagreement with war aims or genuine desire for peace. The club claimed that it seeks to help Russian authorities – likely implying the pro-war grouping within the Kremlin – complete the "special military operation" in a timely manner, claiming that a protracted war in Ukraine could prompt the anti-war officials to revolt. The group also stated that it is attempting to build a defense network to resist a coup in Russia in such an event. The members declared that the group is functioning within the framework of Russian law and will not engage in armed conflict, but will instead focus on raising public awareness in Russia so that Russian executive officials realize the danger to the Russian regime. Members of this club had previously warned Russian President Vladimir Putin in May and September 2022 about the negative repercussions on the battlefield if Russia did not immediately declare mobilization.[11]

Girkin's movement is already reportedly facing resistance from Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin. A Russian milblogger claimed Pushilin ordered DNR officials to spread rumors about the "Club of Angry Patriots," claiming bizarrely that the movement is preparing a pro-Western coup.[12] A member of the movement also accused Pushilin's administration of discrediting the movement.[13]

The "Club of Angry Patriot's" creation may offer several important insights into Kremlin dynamics and the danger to Putin's regime elements within his inner circle fear. ISW previously reported that successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman in September-October 2022 exposed a rift between the Kremlin's anti-war and pro-war factions.[14] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin also made similar remarks about the schisms among Kremlin officials.[15] The club's preoccupation with the anti-war faction may indicate that the rift within the Kremlin deepened during the failed Russian winter offensive campaign or ahead of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The concern over the expansion of the anti-war faction may also indicate that there is concern that Putin may be driven to accept a peace settlement by the threat of replacement. The group may be attempting to preempt the anti-war faction's efforts to reduce the urgency of full-scale war in Ukraine.

Girkin may be advancing political goals of unnamed figures within Russian power structures, possibly within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Girkin has been ruthlessly criticizing Putin throughout the war, and it is likely that he is receiving some protection from a *silovik*. Russian independent outlet *The Insider* and *Bellingcat* have previously reported that Girkin had been consistently using passports under fictitious names that he received from the FSB.[16] While it is unclear which *silovik* is protecting Girkin and what his motivations might be, Girkin's protector may be attempting to gain Putin's attention and shape his decisions via public discourse. Prigozhin and Wagner had previously showed that the Kremlin monitors and reacts to the public's attitudes, which prompted notable changes within the Russian military command in the fall of 2022.[17] Prigozhin similarly announced plans for a Wagner-affiliated social movement on April 4.[18]

Russian nationalists seized on assassinated Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin's (also known as Vladlen Tatarsky) funeral to promote pro-war narratives. Footage from Fomin's funeral at Troekurovsky Cemetery in Moscow shows hundreds to thousands of people in attendance including Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Russian Liberal Democratic Party Leader Leonid Slutsky.[19] Images showing the Order of Courage medal, Wagner awards, and an engraved sledgehammer at Fomin's coffin circulated in Russian nationalist media.[20] Prigozhin commended the "difficult work" of war reporters and claimed that he would do everything to ensure that Fomin's work continues to resonate.[21] Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Spokesperson Eduard Basurin used Fomin's funeral to reiterate the narrative that Russia must reject negotiations and pursue the unconditional surrender of Ukraine.[22] Footage from the funeral service and burial show Russian forces giving Fomin military honors.[23] Fomin's funeral could be the first instance of a Wagner-affiliated funeral receiving official Russian military honors.

Russia's missile campaign to degrade Ukraine's unified energy infrastructure has failed definitively, and Russia appears to have abandoned the effort. Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko announced on April 8 that Ukraine is resuming energy exports for the first time since October 11, 2022. [24] Russian authorities began efforts in October to degrade Ukrainian energy infrastructure to a significant extent by the end of winter, which Russians consider March 1;[25] however, the series of large-scale Russian missile strikes on energy infrastructure failed to achieve the assessed Russian aims of causing a humanitarian disaster, weakening Ukrainian military capabilities, and forcing Ukraine to negotiate. State-run Russian media acknowledged this failure on March 1.[26] Russia likely abandoned the effort soon after. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) noted on April 8 that the frequency of Russian large-scale, long-range attacks on energy infrastructure has decreased since March 2023. The UK MoD assessed that Russia continues small-scale strikes (strikes using fewer than 25 munitions) with predictably less effect.[27] Russia maintains the capability to renew such strikes though, if it so desired. Halushchenko stated that Ukraine has the flexibility to adjust Ukrainian energy exports if the situation changes.[28]

The Kremlin is likely intensifying legal punishments for terrorism-related crimes as part of a larger effort to promote self-censorship and establish legal conditions for intensified domestic repressions. Duma Chairman of the Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Vasily Piskarev stated on April 7 that the State Duma has introduced amendments to increase prison terms for committing acts of terrorism, assistance to terrorist activities or organizations or participation in a terrorist community, sabotage, and acts of international terrorism.[29] Russian President Vladimir Putin also recently signed two bills expanding legal punishment for the discreditation of all Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine and for the misappropriation of Russian military assets, likely to promote self-censorship and facilitate crackdowns on anti-war dissent.[30] Russian sources have previously reported that the Federal Security Service (FSB) is increasingly detaining Russian civilians under suspicions of financially assisting Ukrainian forces and that Russian authorities appear to be cracking down against bars in urban areas that host Russian civil society groups.[31] The Kremlin has introduced indefinite terrorism warning regimes in occupied territories and maximum, medium, and elevated levels of martial law in many western Russian oblasts, and Russian authorities in these areas may more readily apply the expanded terrorism terms to further stifle resistance to occupation authorities as well as dissent in Russia itself.[32]

Russian authorities are likely planning to further expand what they deem to be terroristic and extremist affiliations to encourage self-censorship. Duma Deputy Head of the Committee on Information Policy Oleg Matveichev stated on April 4 that he has prepared a bill to recognize feminism as an extremist ideology and argued that feminists overwhelmingly oppose the “military operation” in Ukraine.[33] Matveichev argued that Ukrainian feminism consists of women serving together with men fighting against Russians and alleged that the woman accused of killing of Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin (Vladlen Tartarsky) was motivated by feminist ideology. [34] Matveichev has not specified how the bill would define feminism, and the bill may use a vague overarching definition in order to further promote widespread self-censorship. Russian authorities may increasingly portray other ideologies and groups not explicitly aligned with the Kremlin as being against the war in Ukraine in order to set conditions for increased crackdowns and self-censorship. Ukrainian “feminism” would appear to be giving Ukraine an advantage in this war since, as Matveichev notes, it has brought many talented and determined Ukrainian women into the fight.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be setting conditions for a false flag attack in Sumy Oblast. The Russian MoD claimed on April 8 that Ukrainian forces have been delivering dead bodies from morgues to Okhtyrka, Sumy Oblast and applying toxic chemicals to the remains and the area in order to allege that Russian forces used chemical weapons.[35] Russian forces may be attempting to set informational conditions for future chemical weapons attacks in Sumy Oblast or to justify previous chemical weapons use, although ISW has not observed Russian forces recently using chemical weapons in the area. It is unclear what overarching effect the Kremlin intends to achieve with increasingly outlandish and ineffective Russian information operations alleging Ukrainian false flag attacks.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian and Russian sources discussed the decreased rate of Russian offensive operations along the entire frontline on April 8, supporting ISW’s assessment that the overall Russian offensive is approaching culmination.
- The dynamics of battlefield artillery usage in Ukraine reflect the fact that Russian forces are using artillery to offset their degraded offensive capabilities.
- Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin launched a new effort likely aimed at protecting the influence the Russian pro-war faction within the Kremlin.
- The “Club of Angry Patriot’s” reveals several key implications about the Kremlin dynamics and the perceived danger to Putin’s regime.
- Girkin may be advancing the political goals of unnamed figures within Russian power structures possibly within the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).
- Russian nationalists seized on assassinated Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin’s funeral to promote pro-war narratives.
- Russia’s missile campaign to degrade Ukraine’s unified energy infrastructure has failed definitively, and Russia appears to have abandoned the effort.
- The Kremlin is likely intensifying legal punishments for terrorism-related crimes as part of a larger effort to promote self-censorship and establish legal conditions for intensified domestic repressions.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be setting conditions for a false flag attack in Sumy Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces have continued to make gains around Bakhmut, and tensions between the Wagner Group and conventional Russian forces over responsibility for tactical gains in Bakhmut appear to be intensifying.

- Russian sources continued to speculate about the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine, including hypothesizing about the possibility of a Ukrainian amphibious landing across the Kakhovka Reservoir.
 - The Russian Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) on April 6 proposed a defense industrial base (DIB) deregulation reform that could expedite defense production but will more likely facilitate corruption and embezzlement.
 - Ukrainian officials reported that 31 children returned to Ukraine after having been deported to Russia as Russian officials continue to discuss the adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.
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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 7, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark
April 7, 5:30pm ET

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Russian milbloggers responded with speculative anxiety to reportedly leaked (and possibly altered) classified US military documents about the war in Ukraine, indicating continued fear over the prospect of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Russian information space. *The New York Times* reported on April 6 that a slate of five-week-old, classified US military documents are circulating on various social media platforms, reportedly depicting operational reports and assessments of the capabilities of the Ukrainian military.^[1] Bellingcat analyst Aric Toler noted that the documents circulated online as early as March 4, and it remains unclear why these documents reached mainstream Western media over a month later.^[2] Clearly doctored versions of the documents which reduce reported Russian losses and inflate Ukrainian casualty numbers are additionally circulating on Russian Telegram channels.

Regardless of the veracity of the reportedly leaked documents, which ISW will not speculate on, the response of Russian milbloggers to the *New York Times* story highlights the fear of prospective Ukrainian counteroffensives pervading the Russian pro-war information space. While several prominent Russian milbloggers immediately rejected the validity of the documents and suggested that they are fakes, they fixated on the possibility that the released documents are disinformation intended to confuse and mislead Russian military command.^[3] One milblogger stated that the document leak could be part of a larger Ukrainian campaign to mislead Russian forces before a counteroffensive.^[4] Another Russian milblogger noted that there is historical precedent for militaries disseminating false planning information prior to starting surprise offensives.^[5] The milblogger urged their audience to be cautious in discussing where Ukrainian counteroffensives may take place due to document leak.^[6] *The New York Times* story has therefore exposed a significant point of neuralgia in the Russian information space, and responses to the documents suggest that Russian milbloggers may be increasingly reconsidering the validity of their own assessments and speculations regarding any potential Ukrainian counteroffensives and their ability to forecast Ukrainian operations.

The Kremlin continues to indicate that it is not interested in legitimate negotiations and places the onus for any negotiations on the West. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated at a press conference in Ankara, Turkey on April 7 that Russia does not refuse to negotiate but that negotiations can only be based on Russia's claimed "legitimate" interests and concerns.^[7] Lavrov claimed the West has arrogantly ignored Russia's interests "with disdain."^[8] The Kremlin retains Putin's original maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine and maintains that Russia's "legitimate" interests include international recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, regime change in Kyiv under Russia's calls for "denazification," and the "demilitarization" of Ukraine.^[9] Concerns about losing more occupied territory in Ukraine during an expected upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive may be prompting the Kremlin to intensify an ongoing information operation intended to pressure the West to offer preemptive concessions and coerce Ukraine into negotiations on conditions more favorable to Russia.^[10]

A Ukrainian official reported that Russian aviation units are changing tactics, possibly due to aviation losses and depleted stocks of high-precision weapons. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuri Ihnat reported on April 7 that Russian aviation units are reducing their operations in the immediate vicinity of Ukrainian positions and are increasingly relying on more remote aviation strikes with guided aerial bombs.^[11] Ihnat stated that Russian Su-35 aircraft can use these munitions from more than 50km away from the line of contact and that Ukrainian forces are unable to drive Russian aviation units away from Ukraine's borders at this range.^[12] These modified aerial bombs are likely less precise than other munitions that Russian aviation units have previously used in Ukraine. Russian forces may be changing aviation tactics to mitigate the risk of further aviation losses by operating out of the range of most Ukrainian anti-aircraft and air defense systems, at the cost of the ability to conduct close air support.

Former Russian proxy commander and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin revealed on April 7 that a volunteer battalion that he previously actively promoted is essentially a sham. Girkin posted an angry rant to Telegram on April 7 claiming that the "Nevsky" volunteer battalion that he advertised throughout 2022 has deployed as a "brigade" consisting of three battalions and 1,186 total personnel.^[13] A single Russian battalion typically consists of around 800-900 personnel, so Girkin's remark suggests that "Nevsky's" leadership sought to erroneously portray the volunteer battalion as a larger formation by designating it as a brigade. Girkin noted that "Nevsky" deployed to the frontline near Avdiivka with the forces of a "reinforced company" without promised equipment or training and quickly found itself conducting costly assaults.^[14] Girkin accused "Nevsky's" commander of being more interested in "political and commercial machinations" and suggested that "Nevsky" was created for the sole purpose of generating profit.^[15] Girkin's tirade against a formation that he once ardently supported suggests that even volunteer formations held in high regard face corruption and training issues that are endemic to the Russian force generation apparatus.

High-ranking Russian officials including ministers and department heads can reportedly only leave Russia with permission from Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. Independent Russian news outlet *The Bell* reported on April 7 that Mishustin restricted international travel by his subordinates to official business

and with his permission.[16] *The Bell* reported that employees of the presidential administration are not subject to the same travel restrictions. ISW previously reported that Russian security services are reportedly confiscating the passports of Russian officials, ex-officials, and state company executives to prevent flight from Russia. [17]

Key Takeaways

- Russian milbloggers responded with speculative anxiety to reportedly leaked (and possibly altered) classified US military documents about the war in Ukraine, indicating continued fear over the prospect of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Russian information space.
- The Kremlin continues to indicate that it is not interested in legitimate negotiations while placing the onus for negotiations on the West.
- A Ukrainian official reported that Russian aviation units are changing tactics, possibly as a result of aviation losses and depleted stocks of high-precision weapons.
- High-ranking Russian officials reportedly can only leave Russia with permission from Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.
- Former Russian officer and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin revealed on April 7 that a volunteer battalion that he previously promoted is essentially a sham.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian forces continue to build defenses in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts.
- Russian officials continue measures to support Russia's ongoing spring conscription cycle amid continued crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian occupation officials are accelerating passportization efforts in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 6, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

April 6, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Moscow on April 5 and 6 to discuss further Union State integration, with Putin likely focused on strengthening Russian economic control over Belarus. Putin and Lukashenko held a one-on-one meeting on April 5 and attended a meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State on April 6 to address Union State integration efforts on security, economic, defense, cultural, and humanitarian topics.[1] Putin claimed that Russian and Belarusian officials have fulfilled 74 percent of 28 Union State programs and highlighted the creation of a joint system for indirect taxes, measures to form general standards for Russian and Belarusian industrial enterprises, and efforts to unify Belarusian and Russian trade legislation.[2] Putin and Lukashenko both noted that Russian and Belarusian officials are focused on import substitution measures (likely to mitigate Western sanctions) and supporting microelectronic industries.[3] Putin stated that Russian and Belarusian officials are continuing the process of creating a joint oil and gas market and are working on drafting an agreement for the formation of a single electricity market.[4] The Kremlin is likely advancing longstanding efforts to subsume elements of Belarus' defense industrial base (DIB), and both states are likely using Union State economic integration efforts to augment their ongoing sanctions evasion measures.[5] Putin and Lukashenko also likely highlighted strengthening economic cooperation to support their ongoing efforts to falsely reassure the Russian and Belarusian publics that Western sanctions regimes will not have long-term consequences.[6]

Putin and Lukashenko also discussed bilateral security issues during their one-on-one meeting and at the Supreme State Council meeting, but official Kremlin and Belarusian readouts offered little concrete details on these discussions. Putin and Lukashenko stated that Russian and Belarusian officials began work on a Security Concept for the Union State, but offered no details for what the joint security document would include.[7] Lukashenko stated that a single joint Russian–Belarusian regional air defense system is already operating, likely referring to the recent deployment of Russian S-400 air defense systems to Belarus.[8] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on April 6 that Lukashenko and Putin did not discuss the placement of Russian strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus following Putin's March 25 announcement that Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.[9]

Lukashenko delivered boilerplate rhetoric that continues to indicate that he has no intention of involving Belarus further in Russia's war effort. Lukashenko stated that NATO is conducting a purposeful buildup of forces along the borders of the Union State and that the West has unleashed an informational, political, and economic war against Belarus and Russia.[10] Lukashenko has previously employed such rhetoric in an attempt to justify resisting Kremlin pressure to further support the Russian war effort in Ukraine by arguing that Belarus needs to protect the western flank of the Union State.[11] ISW has written at length about why Lukashenko is extraordinarily unlikely to further involve Belarus in the war in Ukraine.[12] ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko is increasingly losing maneuvering room with the Kremlin amid the Kremlin's steady pressure campaign to formalize the Russian-Belarusian Union State, and Lukashenko may be acquiescing to further integration measures while rejecting Putin's likely larger demand for the direct participation of Belarusian forces in Russia's war against Ukraine.[13]

Russian commanders are reportedly constructing specialized company-size units within key frontline formations engaged in urban combat to reinforce the diminished combat effectiveness of most Russian units. A reliable Ukrainian reserve officer released a reportedly captured document on April 6 detailing the recruitment of personnel (who receive the status of BARS reservists) to form new "Storm Z" companies within elements of the 8th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) and the 1st Army Corps, the armed forces of the Donetsk People's Republic.[14] Each "Storm Z" company is created outside of conventional army unit structure and apparently is formed of newly recruited reservists and attached in some manner to existing Russian regiments and brigades, rather than adding

additional assets or providing specialized training to existing frontline companies. It is unclear at this time how these "Storm Z" units fit into Russian command structures at the battalion level and above and why Russian units are forming new companies, continuing a standing Russian tendency throughout the war in Ukraine to break down doctrinal unit structures. Each company is comprised of 100 personnel, broken into four capture squads (10 personnel each), four fire support squads (10 personnel each), a 2-person company command element, a 5-person combat engineering group, an 8-person reconnaissance group, a three-person medevac group, and a 2-person UAV crew.[15] "Storm Z" companies are intended to conduct urban combat operations or operations in complicated geographic areas to capture important and strategic objects such as strongholds, command posts, and communication centers.[16] The Ukrainian reserve officer noted that the personnel that staff these companies receive 10 to 15 days of refresher training, a remarkably short amount of time to adequately train personnel (even reservists with some experience) to perform complex combat tasks and create unit cohesion.

The "Storm Z" companies will likely primarily deploy along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline, where Southern Military District (SMD) units are heavily committed to continuously unsuccessful offensive operations. The Ukrainian reserve officer stated that the document requires the establishment of "Storm Z" companies in various separate motorized rifle brigades of the 1st Army Corps (forces of the Donetsk People's Republic) and motorized rifle regiments, tank regiments, and separate motorized rifle brigades of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (part of the 8th Combined Arms Army).[17] ISW has observed the heavy commitment of DNR forces along the entire Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline and noted that the 150th Motorized Rifle Division has been particularly active in Marinka, on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.[18] Russian offensive operations along this frontline remain largely unsuccessful and have failed to secure more than tactical advances in the area.[19] Russian military command likely seeks to create "Storm Z" companies and attach them to already-committed elements in order to reinforce minor tactical success and encourage further offensive operations and gains. However, due to the ramshackle construction of yet more ad hoc Russian units, as well as the already degraded quality and poor morale that is pervasive within DNR units in this area, it is unlikely that the use of these formations will lend Russian forces on this frontline a significant offensive edge.

China continues to rhetorically downplay its support for Russia and demonstrate that there are limits to the declared "no limits" Russian–Chinese partnership, but it will not be a true neutral arbiter in the war. French President Emmanuel Macron met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on April 6 and urged Xi to "bring Russia to its senses" and "bring everyone back to the negotiating table." [20] Xi stated that China "advocates for peace talks and seeks a political solution" without going into significant detail or assigning blame.[21] China's maintained neutral status and ongoing talks with Western leaders, refusal to blatantly condemn the West, and minimization of relations with and withholding of concrete support to Russia are likely a source of ongoing frustration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, as ISW has previously assessed.[22] However, Xi's equivocating comments do not indicate any serious intent by Beijing to overtly pressure Russia to end the invasion of Ukraine, as would be necessary for serious peace talks.

Key Takeaways

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Moscow on April 5 and 6 to discuss further Union State integration, with Putin likely focused on strengthening Russian economic control over Belarus.
- Lukashenko delivered boilerplate rhetoric that continues to indicate that he has no intention of involving Belarus further in Russia's war effort.
- Russian commanders are reportedly constructing specialized company-size units within key frontline formations engaged in urban combat to reinforce the diminished combat effectiveness of most Russian units.
- Russian forces will likely deploy these "Storm Z" units along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline.
- China continues to rhetorically downplay its support for Russia and demonstrate that there are limits to the declared "no limits" Russian–Chinese partnership, but it will not be a true neutral arbiter in the war.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Russian forces are able to maintain a suitable rate of artillery fire in prioritized areas of the front at the expense of other sectors.
- Russian forces may have withdrawn equipment from occupied Crimea for redeployment elsewhere in southern Ukraine out of fear of a Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu visited Russian Defense Industrial Base (DIB) enterprises in Nizhny Novgorod Oblast to monitor the implementation of state defense orders.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin held one-on-one meetings with Russian occupation authorities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 5, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

April 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces will withdraw from Bakhmut to avoid encirclement if necessary, but do not yet assess the need to do so. Zelensky stated during a press conference in Poland on April 5 that Ukrainian troops face a very challenging situation in Bakhmut, and that Kyiv will make the "corresponding decisions" if Ukrainian troops risk encirclement by Russian forces.[1] Zelensky's statement is in line with other recent statements by Ukrainian officials that Ukrainian military command will order a withdrawal from Bakhmut when and if they deem a withdrawal to be the most strategically appropriate option. While it remains to be seen whether Ukraine's defense of Bakhmut and its efficacy in fixing Russian forces in the area is worth Ukrainian losses (and we will

likely be unable to assess this until observing the Ukrainian spring counteroffensive), Ukrainian military leadership continues to clearly signal that Ukrainian forces are still not encircled and have the option to withdraw as necessary.[2]

Russian President Vladimir Putin framed Russia's efforts to consolidate control of occupied territories of Ukraine as a matter of internal security and rule of law during a meeting with the Russian National Security Council on April 5. Putin called for the continued economic, legal, and social integration of occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts into the Russian Federation and emphasized the importance of Russian "restoration" efforts in occupied areas in facilitating the integration process.[3] Putin also accused Ukraine of threatening civilians in occupied areas and highlighted recent "terrorist attacks" against occupation officials and law enforcement agencies, referring to Ukrainian partisan attacks against occupation organs.[4] Putin emphasized the need for intensified law enforcement operations to guard against such attacks and called for the increased participation of local Ukrainian citizens in law enforcement processes, explicitly encouraging collaborators and informants in occupied areas. Putin has notably invoked the concept of "terrorism" and threats to Russian domestic security to justify domestic repressions and is likely setting conditions for further repressions and law enforcement crackdowns in occupied territories using similar framing.[5]

Putin also attempted to portray Russia as a respected world power against the backdrop of Chinese officials downplaying close relations with Russia. Putin held a televised meeting presenting ambassador credentials to the heads of 17 diplomatic missions on April 5, during which he highlighted Russia's close relationship with Syria and cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), likely as part of ongoing Russian efforts to appeal to non-Western states.[6] Putin stated that Syria is a reliable partner with whom Russia reached several unspecified agreements during Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's recent trip to Russia on March 14. Putin berated ambassadors from the United States and European Union states and claimed that the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine and geopolitical confrontation with Russia.

Chinese Ambassador to the EU Fu Cong stated on April 5 that the Russian–Chinese joint statement declaring there were "no limits" to their ties released in February 2022 was misrepresented, calling "no limits" a "purely rhetorical statement." [7] Fu added that China does not support Russia's war in Ukraine and is not providing Russia weapons. Fu's statement is consistent with ISW's March 21 assessment that Putin has not been able to secure the benefits from the no-limits bilateral partnership with China which he likely hoped for when meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Moscow between March 20 and March 22.[8]

The Kremlin is likely increasingly struggling to maintain loyalty among lower-level regional authorities as it continues to place the onus on funding the war on Russian federal subjects. Independent Russian outlet *Verstka* reported on April 5 that the Kremlin is developing a "program of privileges" in regional administrations to maintain loyalty among lower-level local officials.[9] *Verstka* stated that the Russian presidential administration demanded that regional administrations create "initiative groups" to cater to the needs of regional civil servants, and that regional vice-governors are being encouraged in an oddly framed measure to install vending machines in administration buildings, secure preferential bank loans for employees, and offer officials free city parking.[10] *Verstka* reported that these measures in large part are meant to mitigate growing discontent about the continued costs of the war.[11] ISW has previously observed that the Kremlin has repeatedly placed the onus on Russian regional authorities to mobilize and fund the war, and Russian regions continue to bear the brunt of the Kremlin's decision-making demographically and economically.[12] Such efforts are likely meant to pay lip service to the burden placed on regional entities but are unlikely to stimulate a significant increase in support for the war at the regional and local levels.

Putin dismissed Colonel-General Nikolai Grechushkin from his post as Deputy Head of the Ministry of Emergency Situations on April 5.[13] ISW has also previously reported on recent investigations into and arrests of Russian Rosgvardia leadership, including Rosgvardia's naval department head and Deputy Commander of Rosgvardia's Central District.[14] Rosgvardia was notably created using personnel and resources from a variety of Russian security and military services, including the Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM). The Kremlin may be attempting to oust a slate of Rosgvardia and EMERCOM officials that have fallen out of Putin's favor in an effort to crack down on Russian domestic security control.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko arrived in Moscow on April 5 to meet with Putin and will meet with the Supreme Council of the Russia-Belarus Union State on April 6. Neither the Russian nor Belarusian governments published readouts by the data collection cutoff for this publication. ISW will provide updates on the meeting in the April 6 update.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces will withdraw from Bakhmut to avoid encirclement if necessary, but do not yet assess the need to do so.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin framed Russia's efforts to consolidate control of occupied territories of Ukraine as a matter of internal security and rule of law during a meeting with the Russian National Security Council.
- Putin also attempted to portray Russia as a respected world power against the backdrop of Chinese officials downplaying close relations with Russia.
- Putin dismissed Colonel-General Nikolai Grechushkin from his post as Deputy Head of the Ministry of Emergency Situations on April 5.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to engage in positional battles along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces likely made gains in and around Bakhmut and continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian businessmen may be assuming a larger role in supporting the Russian MoD's efforts to form irregular volunteer formations.
- Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to deny international allegations that Russia is forcibly deporting Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 4, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

April 4, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin will likely attempt to coerce Belarus into further Union State integration when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko meet in Moscow on April 5 and 6. The Kremlin announced on April 4 that Putin and Lukashenko will meet for private bilateral discussions on April 5 and attend a meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State in Moscow on April 6.^[1] The Kremlin stated that the Union State Supreme State Council meeting will address the implementation of the Union State Treaty through 28 different Union State programs from 2021 to 2023—likely the package of 28 integration roadmaps that Lukashenko ratified in November 2021.^[2] The Kremlin stated that Russian and Belarusian officials also plan to agree on other unspecified “practical issues of further integration,” possibly in the area of intelligence sharing, as Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin met with Lukashenko in Minsk and discussed Russian-Belarusian intelligence sharing on April 4.^[3] The Kremlin may pressure Belarus for more integration concessions under the rubric of defending the Union State from claimed Western military and/or terrorist threats.^[4]

The Kremlin continues to attempt to employ nuclear threats to deter Western military aid provisions to Ukraine ahead of Ukraine's planned counteroffensive. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu justified Russia's decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by accusing NATO of intensifying combat training and reconnaissance activities near the Russian and Belarusian borders and accused the West of escalating the war in Ukraine by providing additional military aid to Ukraine on April 4.^[5] Shoigu reinforced existing Russian nuclear threats by stating that Belarus has nuclear-capable attack aircraft and nuclear strike-capable Iskander-M systems.^[6] Shoigu also stated that Belarusian missile forces began training in Russia to operate Iskander-M systems, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons, on April 3.^[7] Shoigu's statements do not present any new information on Belarusian training and are likely part of an information operation. ISW previously reported that Belarusian servicemen were training with Iskander systems in Russia as of February 2023.^[8] Shoigu's reinvigorated nuclear blackmail rhetoric coincides with Finland joining NATO and a new US aid package to Ukraine.^[9] ISW continues to assess that the risk of nuclear escalation remains extremely low and that Russian deployments of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus are highly unlikely to affect battlefield realities in Ukraine.^[10] Russian-deployed nuclear weapons in Belarus additionally will almost certainly remain under the control of Russian personnel permanently deployed in Belarus.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's demonstrative response to the assassination of Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky) indicates Prigozhin likely believes that the attack was in part directed at himself. Prigozhin held an event on April 4 at the remnants of the restaurant where Fomin was killed by an improvised explosive device on April 2.^[11] Prigozhin claimed that he arrived at the scene from the Bakhmut frontline as quickly as he could to commemorate Fomin. Prigozhin announced that he intends to expand “Kiber Front Z”—the Wagner-affiliated ultranationalist group that held Fomin's fatal event—into a social movement that fights against external threats.^[12] Prigozhin stated that the Wagner Group has been thwarting attempts by unnamed actors to eliminate the group since 2014.^[13] Prigozhin also noted that he will offer financial compensation to the event's attendees. Prigozhin's publicly demonstrative response and vague accusations of a campaign against Wagner suggest that Prigozhin is likely attempting to indirectly frame the incident as an attack on him.^[14] Prigozhin's response also shows that he intends to continue to pursue a central position within the Russian pro-war ultranationalist community, despite the threat of violence and pushback.

The Kremlin continued efforts to (falsely) reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long-term economic consequences. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Tula Railway Engineering Plant and attempted to address workers' economic concerns on April 4.^[15] Putin later held a State Council Presidium meeting to discuss developing Russian industry in the face of sanctions pressure, during which he claimed that sanctions are having positive outcomes by forcing Russian firms to embrace import substitution, an argument the Kremlin has made sporadically since the 2014 annexation of Crimea.^[16] Putin suggested in both meetings that Russian industry as a whole will be able to grow like the Russian agricultural sector did following the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014.^[17] Putin has previously relied on the example of post-2014 Russian agricultural growth to assuage Russians of their economic anxieties but has yet to offer concrete proposals for how Russian industry would increase domestic production in a similar way.^[18] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin will likely struggle to reassure Russians about their economic concerns while also setting informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine and mobilizing a wider portion of Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).^[19]

The Kremlin is likely trying to shift responsibility for expanding Russian industry onto regional bodies to insulate itself from possible criticism about Russia's deteriorating economic situation. Putin emphasized the need for regionally based industrial development funds to assume a greater role in supporting Russian industry and stated that the Russian government should consider refinancing regional funds for these efforts, including from federal reserve funds.^[20] Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov also attempted to reassure the Russian public on April 3 by stating that there will be no problems financing budget obligations and that reserves will cover falling oil and gas revenues for the federal budget.^[21] Siluanov stated that Russian officials are unlikely to replenish reserves in the National Welfare Fund in 2023.^[22] A growing Russian overreliance on funding through reserves could lead to further economic instability.

Key Takeaways

- **The Kremlin will likely attempt to coerce Belarus into further Union State integration when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko meet in Moscow on April 5 and 6.**
- **The Kremlin continues to attempt to employ nuclear threats to deter Western military aid provisions to Ukraine ahead of Ukraine's planned counteroffensive.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's demonstrative response to the assassination of Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin indicates that Prigozhin likely believes that the attack was in part directed at himself.**
- **The Kremlin continues to attempt to (falsely) reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long-term economic consequences.**
- **The Kremlin is likely trying to shift more responsibility for growing Russian industry onto regional bodies to insulate itself from possible criticism about Russia's deteriorating economic situation.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.**
- **Russian forces continue to prepare for a rumored pending Ukrainian counteroffensive in the southern direction.**

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russia's ongoing spring conscription cycle is going according to plan, progressing as quickly as planned, and has completed initial military registration.
- Russian occupation officials denied Ukrainian reports that Russian occupation authorities are preparing evacuation plans from occupied regions of Ukraine.
- Belarusian state media claimed that the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) reportedly arrested two men under the suspicion of attempted terrorist attacks in Grodno.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 3, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

April 3, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Wagner Group fighters made further advances in central Bakhmut and seized the Bakhmut City Administration Building on the night of April 2. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin raised a Russian flag with an inscription in memory of assassinated milblogger Maksim Fomin across from the Bakhmut City Administration building the night of April 2 and claimed that Wagner "legally controls" Bakhmut, though Ukrainian troops remain in the western part of the city. [1] Russian forces made further advances on April 3, with drone footage posted on April 3 depicting Wagner Group and Russian flags planted over the rubble of the destroyed administration building. [2] Several Russian milbloggers additionally circulated an image of a Wagner fighter standing in front of the Bakhmut City Administration building before its destruction. [3] The Wagner Group likely will continue attempts to consolidate control of central Bakhmut and attempt to push westward through dense urban areas toward Khromove.

Russian authorities are blaming Ukrainian government entities and Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny for the April 2 assassination of Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin, also known as Vladlen Tartarsky. The Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee claimed that Ukrainian special services collaborated with the Anti-Corruption Fund, which Navalny founded in 2011, to plan the attack against Fomin. [4] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the Ukrainian government may be behind Fomin's death and claimed that Ukraine has killed others since 2014, such as Daria Dugina, which Peskov spuriously used as justification for the "special military operation." [5] The Russian Investigative Committee reclassified the case as a terrorist attack and claimed that it was planned in Ukrainian territory. [6] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) confirmed that the sculpture handed to Fomin prior to his death contained hidden explosives. [7] The Russian Investigative Committee confirmed on April 3 that Russian authorities detained Daria Trepova in a St. Petersburg apartment on suspicion of the attack. [8] Authorities released an excerpt of their interrogation of Trepova, in which Trepova stated that authorities questioned her about giving a sculpture to Fomin, but she did not answer on camera whether she knew the sculpture contained explosives. [9] The range of various official responses is notably disjointed, with a lack of consensus among official Russian sources regarding Trepova's involvement or association with either Ukrainian special services or Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund.

Official Russian responses to Fomin's death failed to generate a single narrative in the information space and led to disjointed responses from prominent pro-war voices. Several prominent milbloggers and news aggregators fixated on the reported investigation into Daria Trepova and analyzing footage of the lead-up to and aftermath of the explosion. [10] Other milbloggers claimed that the attack was carried out by Ukrainian special services and amplified news of the investigation without offering additional commentary into the situation. [11] The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia posted a simple message mourning Fomin without engaging with the Kremlin's informational response. [12] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed that unspecified attackers targeted Fomin because he listened to both the Russian and Ukrainian perspectives, had over 500,000 Telegram subscribers, and effectively organized donation drives for Russian forces. [13] Russian Orthodox Church head Patriarch Kirill connected Fomin's murder to the ongoing conflict over the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, despite no obvious connection between the two incidents. [14]

As Russian officials try to galvanize an official narrative around the National Anti-Terrorism Committee's investigation, Russian milbloggers will likely increasingly criticize the results and conclusions of the investigation, and Fomin's death is likely to become a major point of information space neuralgia. One Russian milblogger and political analyst overtly criticized the official Russian response to Fomin's death and noted that Russian officials have likely predetermined the final findings of the investigation. [15] The absence of a coherent narrative in the pro-Russian information space is reminiscent of responses to Ukraine's successful Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive in fall 2022, when the Kremlin's propaganda machine initially failed to define a rhetorical line to respond to massive Ukrainian gains and caused an information space breakdown that manifested in disjointed responses across the entire pro-war community. [16]

Russian security services reportedly continue to confiscate the passports of senior officials and state company executives to limit flight from Russia. *Financial Times* reported on April 2 that the Russian security services seek to prevent senior officials, ex-officials, and state company executives from traveling abroad, indicating that the Kremlin continues to fear elites will flee Russia. [17] *Current Time TV* and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*-associated investigative project "Sistema" reported on March 10 that the Russian security officials told government officials and employees of state-owned companies to hand over their passports on threat of forcibly revoking an individual's passports or forced resignation. [18]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group fighters made further advances in central Bakhmut and seized the Bakhmut City Administration Building on the night of April 2.
- Russian authorities are blaming Ukrainian government entities and Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny for the assassination of Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (also known as Vladlen Tartarsky).
- Official Russian responses to Fomin's death failed to generate a single narrative in the information space and led to disjointed responses from prominent pro-war voices.
- Russian security services reportedly continue to confiscate passports of senior officials and state company executives in an effort to limit flight from Russia.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian sources reported on April 3 that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) units received TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems for the first time.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian officials likely remain concerned about a potential Ukrainian threat to Crimea amid continued fortification and logistical efforts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree establishing a state fund to support military personnel who participate in the war in Ukraine and their families.
- Likely Ukrainian partisans used an improvised explosive device (IED) to target a former Russian occupation official in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 2, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

April 2, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, April 2. This report discusses the assassination of prominent pro-war Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (also known as Vladlen Tatarsky) in St. Petersburg on April 2. Fomin was one of the most significant Russian milbloggers with a Telegram platform of 560,000 followers and deep connections with the Wagner Group, the Kremlin, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), and the Russian nationalists who have been dominating the Russian information space since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Fomin's assassination at a Wagner-affiliated bar in St. Petersburg may reveal further fractures within the Kremlin and its inner circle. Fomin was a vocal critic of the Russian military command and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Fomin's death marks the first high-profile assassination of an ultranationalist milblogger in Russia since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Unknown actors killed Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin in a deliberate and targeted attack during an event in a St. Petersburg bar reportedly belonging to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on April 2. Social media footage showed Fomin receiving a statue as a gift from a female audience member who introduced herself as a sculptor moments before the explosion.^[1] Fomin was making a public presentation at the Street Food Bar #1 Café in downtown St. Petersburg. Russian authorities reported that the explosion killed Fomin and wounded 30 audience members who had gathered to listen to Fomin discuss his experience as a frontline correspondent.^[2] The event was advertised as open to the public and had approximately 100 attendees. Prigozhin confirmed that he had offered his Street Food Bar #1 Café to the Russian ultranationalist movement "Kiber Front Z," to hold Fomin's event and other nationalist gatherings.^[3] Witnesses stated that the woman who presented the statue to Fomin identified herself as Nastya and told the audience that the event's security asked her if there was a bomb inside the statue during a Q&A session.^[4] Witnesses noted that there was no security when entering the event, however, and that the explosion occurred within three to five minutes after the exchange between Fomin and the woman.^[5] Russian Interior Ministry sources told Russian state media that the explosive may have remotely detonated and that the woman or other unknown individuals may have been responsible for this attack.^[6] Russian state media published unconfirmed information that Russian police detained St. Peterburg resident Daria Trepova, who had previously been arrested for anti-war protests in February 2022.^[7] Russian Interior Ministry sources also revealed that Russian special services had known about assassination plans against Fomin for a long time.

Russian officials and propagandists have accused Ukraine of staging a “terrorist attack” to assassinate Fomin. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Kyiv of Fomin's assassination and praised Russian milbloggers for their war coverage—seemingly ignoring the fact that Fomin and other milbloggers routinely criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA).^[8] Russian propagandist Tina Kandelaki stated that Russia needs to punish terrorists who still have “power, water, working railways, restaurants, and internet”—likely referring to Ukrainians who survived the Russian missile campaigns against the Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the fall of 2022 and the winter of 2023.^[9] Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan echoed Kandelaki's calls for retribution against Ukraine for this assassination.^[10] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian agents have likely been attending similar milblogger events, blaming the attack on Ukrainian special forces and the failures of Russian security.^[11]

Prigozhin oddly stated on April 2 that he would not “blame the Kyiv regime” for the deaths of Fomin and Russian ultranationalist figure Daria Dugina, suggesting that Ukrainian agents were not in fact responsible.^[12] Dugina was assassinated on August 20. Prigozhin noted that a group of radicals unaffiliated with the Ukrainian government may be responsible for such attacks. Advisor to Ukrainian Presidential Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Fomin's death was a result of infighting and political competition among Russian actors.^[13]

Fomin was a prominent figure in the Russian pro-war nationalist information space, although not more so than some others. Fomin was a Wagner-affiliated convict who escaped from prison in Donetsk Oblast at the outset of Russia's invasion of Donbas in 2014.^[14] Fomin also claimed to have served in proxy armed

formations, regularly expressed ultranationalist views, and balanced his allegiance to Wagner with remaining loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Fomin attended Russian President Vladimir Putin's event announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions on September 30 where he stated: "We will defeat everyone, we will kill everyone, we will rob everyone we need; Everything will be as we like."^[15] ISW also uncovered that Fomin had been involved with Islamic jihadist propaganda, likely in order to expand Russian recruitment efforts.^[16] Fomin co-hosted a TV show with another prominent milblogger, appeared on Russian state media platforms, and participated in numerous Russian state broadcasts.^[17] Fomin had also led numerous crowdfunding and recruitment campaigns, promoted violent militarism, and supported Putin's ideology and maximalist goals to "denazify" and "demilitarize" Ukraine.

Fomin shared his ideology and activities with many other Russian milbloggers, however, and does not appear to have been a target worthy of special attention from Kyiv. A number of the milbloggers ISW regularly uses and cites are not only war correspondents, but also participants in efforts to fund, recruit for, and advance the Russian war effort through various parastatal and private organizations.^[18] This cadre of milbloggers not only speaks to but also represents a constituency critical for Putin's war effort. ISW has long assessed that the role these milbloggers play in all their capacities is a key factor explaining the surprising degree of tolerance Putin has hitherto shown them. Fomin's assassination could be evidence that Putin's tolerance toward these milbloggers, in general, is waning, but it could also have resulted instead from Fomin's proximity to Prigozhin.

Fomin's assassination at Prigozhin's bar is likely part of a larger pattern of escalating Russian internal conflicts involving Prigozhin and Wagner. Fomin had attended another event earlier in the day without incident, so it appears that the attack was deliberately staged in a space owned by Prigozhin.^[19] Advisor to Ukrainian Presidential Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Fomin's death was a result of antifighting and political competition among Russian actors.^[20] Some Russian political analysts also speculated that Prigozhin was supposed to attend Fomin's event, although there is no confirmation of that speculation.^[21]

Fomin's assassination may have been intended as a warning to Prigozhin, who has been increasingly questioning core Kremlin talking points about the war in Ukraine and even obliquely signaling an interest in the Russian presidency, whether in competition with Putin or as his successor.^[22] Fomin's biography and behavior bear a resemblance to Prigozhin's as both became prominent ultranationalist figures after being imprisoned and receiving pardons.

Russian officials may be intending to use Fomin's assassination to drive the self-censorship of a growing Russian civil society questioning the progress of the war in bars. ISW previously observed FSB raids of bars in Moscow and St. Petersburg in March launched on the basis of accusations that individuals in those bars were providing financial assistance to Ukrainian forces and involving minors in "anti-social acts."^[23] Putin had instructed the FSB to intensify counterintelligence measures and crackdown against the spread of pro-Ukrainian ideology on February 28—an order that has been used to dismantle gatherings in Moscow and St. Petersburg bars. The Wagner-affiliated Kiber Front Z movement has been spearheading discussions about the war in Prigozhin-owned bars for months, and it is possible this high-profile assassination will discourage people from attending similar events. This attack may also be an effort to intimidate other Wagner-affiliated milbloggers.

The assassination is already deepening a divide within the Russian milblogger space, which may ultimately be beneficial to the Kremlin's efforts to consolidate control of the information space. Prominent Russian milbloggers exposed the identity of a smaller milblogger publishing under the handle MoscowCalling who joked that the woman involved in Fomin's murder was Dugina.^[24] The milbloggers claimed that former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) fighter Andrey Kurshin has been accusing Russia of war crimes in Ukraine using the handle MoscowCalling while residing in Moscow.^[25] The milbloggers claimed that the Russian police and FSB have failed to prevent milbloggers such as Kurshin from fostering anti-government attitudes online, thereby allowing Ukrainian intelligence to stage attacks in Russia. The milbloggers also called for the arrests and executions of other milbloggers who have expressed similar views against Putin, his regime, and the conduct of the war.^[26] The Kremlin may use such divisions to justify censorship of certain milbloggers who are vocal critics of Putin.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on April 2:

- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.^[27] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made marginal gains northwest of Kremenna.^[28]
- Russian forces continued to attack Bakhmut and its environs.^[29] Russian forces likely seized the AZOM plant in northern Bakhmut as ISW has previously assessed. Ukrainian forces conducted a missile strike on the plant on April 2.^[30]
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.^[31] Ukrainian Tavriisk Direction Forces Joint Press Center Spokesperson Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces retreated from unspecified positions in the Donetsk direction.^[32]
- Ukrainian forces conducted a HIMARS strike against a rail depot in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, the third strike against the city in the past week.^[33]
- The UK Ministry of Defense assessed that a significant minority of Russia's 200,000 casualties in Ukraine are due to poor discipline and training outside of combat, including due to excessive alcohol consumption and mishandling of small arms.^[34]
- Former Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) official Rodion Miroshnik denied ISW's April 1 report citing Miroshnik that Russian authorities are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia under rest-and-rehabilitation schemes.^[35] Miroshnik claimed that mothers and children from Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast went to Russian sanatoriums for medical treatment.^[36] Miroshnik denied being closely affiliated with the current occupation regime, claiming that he has not served as advisor to the Head of the LNR for a year.^[37] LNR People's Militia Press Service called Miroshnik "advisor to the LNR Head" as recently as January 29, 2023, however.^[38] Miroshnik claimed on his Telegram channel that he served as LNR Ambassador to Russia as recently as November 13, 2022.^[39]

Correction: ISW incorrectly called May 9 the "Soviet Labor Day" in its April 1 update. The correct holiday is "Victory Day."

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 1, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian, Ukrainian, and Western sources observed on April 1 that the Russian winter offensive has failed to achieve the Kremlin's goals of seizing the Donetsk and Luhansk oblast administrative borders by March 31. Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov had announced on December 22 that Russian forces were focusing most of their efforts on seizing Donetsk Oblast, and Russian forces launched their winter offensive operation in early February along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna-Lyman line and on select frontlines in western Donetsk Oblast.^[1] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) observed that Gerasimov has failed to extend Russian control over Donbas during his appointment as the theater commander in Ukraine and has achieved only marginal gains by expending mobilized personnel.^[2] Ukrainian intelligence representative Andriy Yusov stated that Gerasimov missed the Kremlin's deadline to capture Donbas by March 31.^[3]

Russian milbloggers fretted that Russian forces must finish their offensive operations in Bakhmut and Avdiivka to prepare for the Ukrainian counteroffensives they expect between Orthodox Easter on April 16 and Soviet Victory Day on May 9.^[4] Milbloggers highlighted their disappointment that there have not been any decisive battles throughout the winter and observed that Russia will not be capable of continuing a large-scale offensive operation if it is unable to secure Bakhmut and Avdiivka in the coming weeks. Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) in occupied Donetsk Oblast Alexander Khodakovsky stated that he agrees with former theater commander Army General Sergey Surovkin that Russia needs to shift to defensive positions.^[5] (ISW is not aware of any publicly reported statement Surovkin has made along these lines) Khodakovsky noted that failures during the offensive cause manpower losses and spark negative sentiments among the personnel, and argued that unnamed actors may be attempting to continue the offensive for personal reasons rather than taking a rational approach to the issue. Khodakovsky's comment likely implies that Gerasimov is pursuing personal interest in sustaining the offensive in order to retain favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Khodakovsky's recent appointment on March 30 as regional Rosgvardia deputy head and the return of Surovkin (at least by proxy) to the information space may indicate that Gerasimov's unsuccessful theater-wide offensive may already be costing him favor with Putin.

Khodakovsky's and milbloggers' requests for Russian forces to prioritize defensive operations are not unreasonable and indicate that nationalist groups are sensible to the changing dynamics on the frontlines. ISW had long assessed that the Russian winter offensive is unlikely to be successful due to persistent failures of the Russian command to comprehend the time and space relationships involved in such a campaign.^[6] ISW also assessed that Russia would lack the combat power necessary to sustain more than one major offensive operation in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and ongoing recruitment campaigns in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories may indicate that Russia is preparing for reserve shortages.^[7]

Growing Russian speculation about Russian military command changes likely indicates that Russia may soon reshuffle its senior military command due to the failed winter offensive. Russian milbloggers claimed on April 1 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) recalled Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky from leave on March 30 after the Russian MoD reportedly replaced him with Lieutenant General Oleg Makarevich on January 13.^[8] The Russian MoD never confirmed Teplinsky's dismissal, and it is likely that the MoD placed him on leave so it could recall him to command the VDV whenever it deemed necessary. Russian milbloggers claimed that Teplinsky immediately flew to the Russian Joint Grouping Headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, Krasnodar Krai to assume command of the VDV and that he is already planning future operations.^[9] One milblogger claimed that Chief of the General Staff of the Ground Forces and former Central Military District (CMD) Commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin flew with Teplinsky to the Joint Grouping Headquarters.^[10] The Russian MoD replaced Lapin with Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev as CMD commander officially on February 17 following intense public criticism of Lapin for his management of the Svatove-Kremenna line in the fall of 2022.^[11] It remains to be seen if Lapin will regain a role commanding forces in Ukraine, however. Russian sources speculated starting on March 27 that the Russian MoD has also recently dismissed Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov in response to intense criticism of his command over significant losses in offensive operations near Vuhledar in early 2023.^[12] ISW has previously observed that intensified Russian speculation about changes in military command has corresponded with real changes in Russian commanders, although not necessarily following the exact claims of Russian sources.

Key Takeaways

- Russian, Ukrainian, and Western sources observed that the Russian winter offensive has failed to achieve the Kremlin's goals of seizing all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by March 31.
- Growing Russian speculation about Russian military command changes likely indicates that Russia may soon reshuffle its senior military command due to the failed winter offensive.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces did not make any confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut and continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian forces continued to build defenses in occupied southern Ukraine.
- Russia began its semi-annual conscription on April 1, the largest conscription call-up since 2016.
- Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under rest and rehabilitation schemes.
- Russian nationalist figures criticized Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for failing to pursue the Union State between Russia and Belarus efforts since mid-1990s.

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 31, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a new Russian Foreign Policy Concept on March 31 that likely aims to support the Kremlin's attempts to promote a potential anti-Western coalition. The new Foreign Policy Concept paints the West as an anti-Russian and internationally destabilizing force to a far greater extent than Russia's previous 2016 Foreign Policy Concept and explicitly states that the US and its "satellites" have unleashed a hybrid war aimed at weakening Russia.^[1] The new document also heavily stresses Russia's goal of creating a multipolar world order and subordinates under that goal Russia's broad foreign policy objectives, which include ending the United States' supposed dominance in world affairs.^[2] The document asserts that most of humanity is interested in constructive relations with Russia and that a desired multi-polar world will give opportunities to non-Western world powers and regional leading countries.^[3] Putin previously used meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 20 through 22 to increase attempts to rhetorically rally the rest of the world against the West, and the new document likely aims to support the Kremlin's attempts to intensify proposals to non-aligned countries to form a more coherent anti-Western bloc.^[4] ISW assessed that Putin's proposal to form an anti-Western bloc during Xi's visit to Moscow was not positively received as Xi refused to align China with Putin's envisioned geopolitical conflict with the West.^[5] Russia's declining economic power and degraded military effort in Ukraine continue to offer little incentive to countries to express serious interest in the proposal. The Kremlin likely decided to release the new Foreign Policy Concept on the eve of assuming the presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in order to set informational conditions for future rhetorical efforts at the UN aimed at forming an anti-Western coalition.^[6] ISW previously assessed that Russia will likely weaponize its presidency of the UNSC as a method of Russian power projection.^[7]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continues to use high-profile public statements to portray Belarus as a sovereign state despite its current de-facto occupation by Russian forces. Lukashenko reiterated boilerplate rhetoric about how he is Russian President Vladimir Putin's equal partner in defense of Russia and Belarus by explicitly painting Belarus as the target of a Western hybrid war – a narrative Lukashenko has promoted since 2020.^[8] Lukashenko stated that he and Putin mutually agreed to deploy Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus to protect Belarus' "sovereignty and independence."^[9] Lukashenko also stated that he and Putin mutually decided to partially deploy elements of the Union State's Regional Grouping of Troops (RGV) to an unspecified area.^[10] Lukashenko stated that nobody should worry that Russia "captured something" in Belarus and stated the Russian forces training in Belarus under Belarusian officers are subordinated to Belarusian forces'.^[11] Lukashenko likely seeks to use the narrative that Belarus is a fully sovereign state and Russia's equal partner in the Union State so that he can use informational leverage to request that Russian forces leave Belarus after Russia's invasion of Ukraine concludes. Lukashenko also stated that he supports peace negotiations "as soon as possible" and offered to help mediate negotiations.^[12]

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov promptly rejected Lukashenko's suggestion of a ceasefire and indicated that the Kremlin is not interested in serious negotiations. Peskov responded to a question about Lukashenko's suggestion on March 31 and stated that Russian forces will continue to carry out their missions in Ukraine.^[13] Peskov emphasized that Russian military operations in Ukraine are the only means by which Russia can achieve its goals.^[14] Peskov likely aimed to leave open the possibility for launching new information operations about Russian interests in a ceasefire by stating that Putin and Lukashenko may discuss the proposal for a truce in Ukraine.^[15] The Kremlin may decide to promote ceasefire narratives in coming weeks in an attempt to freeze the frontlines in Ukraine out of fears that a Ukrainian counteroffensive could result in Ukrainian forces liberating more territory.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev leveraged comments about sending peacekeeping forces to Ukraine to continue information operations that portray the West as escalatory. Medvedev likely responded to Viktor Orban's March 31 statements regarding alleged European discussions about sending peacekeeping forces to Ukraine and stated that Russian forces would target the hypothetical peacekeepers.^[16] Medvedev argued that a Western-led peacekeeping mission to Ukraine would end in tragedies reminiscent of Yugoslavia and other conflicts.^[17] There are no indications outside of Orban's comments that Western officials are seriously discussing such a proposal, and Medvedev likely used Orban's comments to construct a straw man proposal to paint the West as trying to escalate the war in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a new Russian Foreign Policy Concept on March 31 that likely aims to support the Kremlin's attempts to promote a potential anti-Western coalition.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko continues to use high-profile public statements to portray Belarus as a sovereign state despite its current de-facto occupation by Russian forces.
- Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov promptly rejected Lukashenko's suggestion of a ceasefire and indicated that the Kremlin is not interested in serious negotiations.
- Russian Security Council deputy chairman Dmitry Medvedev leveraged comments about sending peacekeeping forces to Ukraine to continue information operations that portray the West as escalatory.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremmin line.
- Russian forces made gains within Bakhmut and Ukrainian forces regained positions in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk frontline.
- Ukrainian strikes against Russian concentration areas in southern Ukraine are likely causing the Russian grouping in the area to change tactics to avoid the risk of strikes.
- Russian officials continue to state that Russian forces have no plans for a formal second wave of mobilization.
- Russian officials continue to send Ukrainian children to camps in Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 30, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 30, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on March 30 authorizing Russia's semiannual spring conscription which will induct 147,000 Russians between April 1 and July 15.^[1] Russia conducts two conscription cycles per year with the spring conscription cycle usually conscripting 134,000 Russian men. [2] Russia may use Belarus' training capacity to support the increase of 13,000 conscripts from previous years. A Ukrainian military official reported on March 4 that Russian personnel training in Belarus do not exceed 9,000 to 10,000 at a time, and ISW previously observed Russian forces training up to 12,000 troops in Belarus. [3] Satellite imagery indicates that Russian forces training in Belarus at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground recently redeployed to Russia in mid-March, freeing up space for new Russian trainees.^[4] The new conscripts will not increase Russian combat power in the short term, as Russian conscripts must undergo months of training and service before they see combat.

Putin remains unlikely to deploy newly conscripted troops to participate in combat in Ukraine due to concerns for the stability of his regime. Chairman of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee Andrey Kartapolov stated on March 30 that spring conscripts will not deploy to Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine during the spring 2023 conscription cycle.^[5] Kartapolov also noted that Russian forces will not conscript men from occupied territories. Kartapolov's statements may be true given that ISW has not observed the Russian military use conscripts on any significant scale on the frontlines since the first months of the war and especially since the sinking of the Russian Black Sea Fleet's flagship, the *Moskva*, which had some conscripted sailors aboard.^[6] Putin's use of conscripts during the winter-spring period of 2022 sparked social tensions in Russia, and Putin is unlikely to risk his regime's stability by deploying newly conscripted servicemen to the frontlines. [7] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Putin even publicly instructed Russian authorities to investigate alleged incidents of Russian conscript deployments to Ukraine on March 9, 2022 (which were technically illegal at that time).^[8] Putin likely perceives the political cost of deploying conscripts to the frontlines as being higher than that of Russia's September 2022 mobilization. **Putin did not deploy conscripts from the spring 2022 conscription cycles in response to Ukraine's September 2022 counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast but instead mobilized reservists to stabilize collapsing frontlines. This decision indicated Putin's policy preference for mobilizing reservists rather than committing conscripts to battle — likely for political reasons — even though conscripts entering the final months of their annual service obligation might fight more effectively than civilian reservists.** A prominent Russian news aggregator criticized the Russian conscription system, noting that Russia's current staffing levels for contract servicemen are insufficient even though Russia has 250,000 available conscripts.^[9] The aggregator added that it is "unacceptable" that "half of the Russian army is fighting with all its strength, while the other part is sitting in the barracks."

The start of the new conscription period, even with a slightly increased number of conscripts, may actually reduce Russian training capacity for reservists and other personnel recruited via crypto-mobilization campaigns. Russia has limited training capacity and allocating it to training conscripts who will not fight in 2023 deprives the Kremlin of the opportunity to train reservists and volunteers who would. The Kremlin may seek to increase its combat personnel in Ukraine by coercing spring 2022 conscripts who are finishing their one-year service into signing military contracts, since these freshly discharged conscripts would need less additional training before deploying to Ukraine. It is far from clear how successful such an effort will be.

Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed a prominent milblogger and Russian proxy battalion commander as a regional Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) official for occupied Donetsk Oblast, advancing several Kremlin efforts. Multiple Russian milbloggers reported on March 30 that Putin signed a decree appointing former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Security Minister and current Vostok Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovskiy as deputy head of the Main Directorate of Rosgvardia in occupied Donetsk Oblast, making him responsible for Rosgvardia's special rapid response and riot police (OMON and SOBR) in the region.^[10] Khodakovskiy announced on March 30 that he received this appointment in early February 2023 and posted a public recruiting ad for Rosgvardia OMON and SOBR units now under his command.^[11] Khodakovskiy publicly praises Putin and has been a loyal pro-Russian Ukrainian separatist since March 2014. [12] Khodorkovsky was a Ukrainian SPETSNAZ commander for the Donetsk Oblast Alpha Group under the Ukrainian State Security Service before participating in Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014.^[13] Khodakovskiy's appointment is analytically significant for several of ISW's running assessments:

- Khodakovskiy's appointment indicates a Russian effort to generate more forces from occupied Donetsk Oblast. Putin passed a bill on March 27 removing the upper age limit and other barriers to entry for Rosgvardia recruits from occupied Ukraine.^[14] Khodakovskiy - a native of Donetsk City - is well connected with Donetsk People's Republic militia fighters, veterans, and pro-Russian patriot groups in Donbas, and can help facilitate recruitment drives.^[15]
- The appointment advances a Kremlin effort to formalize legacy irregular Russian proxy forces in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and subordinate them to Kremlin-controlled structures.^[16]
- Putin may use Khodakovskiy's appointment to ensure that Putin maintains reliable control over new Rosgvardia elements in Donetsk Oblast. ISW assessed that Russian authorities may be conducting a sweeping corruption probe within Rosgvardia, possibly to weed out actors who are perceived to be unreliable to Putin.^[17]
- The appointment could help Putin divide and conquer influential communities that the Kremlin does not fully control. Mixed reactions to Khodakovskiy's appointment from various Russian milbloggers' — notably among Russian military veterans — indicate a significant fracture within the Russian nationalist veteran community.^[18] ISW has previously assessed the Russian nationalist veteran community within the blogosphere to be more or less unified.

Khodakovsky's appointment also indicates that Putin continues to prioritize loyalty over competence in his subordinates. One Russian milblogger criticized Khodakovsky's appointment and stated that Khodakovsky's incompetence as the Vostok Battalion commander in 2014 resulted in an especially bad friendly fire incident in which Khodakovsky's troops destroyed a Russian volunteer detachment, killing 42.[19] Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin accused Khodakovsky of being a swindler and a "corrupt slug-traitor" and stated that the Kremlin's "failed personnel policy" of advancing "traitors, scum, and mediocrities" will lead Russia to ruin.[20] Putin has appointed loyalists ahead of competent people before. Putin replaced relatively competent Army General Sergey Surovikin, who effectively conducted a politically unpopular but militarily necessary withdrawal from upper Kherson in fall 2022, with Putin loyalist and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov — who green-lit the disastrous campaign plan for the initial full-scale invasion of Ukraine — as theater commander for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in January 2023.[21]

Western officials reported that Wagner Group and conventional Russian forces have likely lost a substantial amount of manpower in the Bakhmut area, which will further constrain Russia's offensive on Bakhmut. US Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley reported on March 29 that the Wagner Group has around 6,000 professional personnel and 20,000 to 30,000 recruits, mostly convicts, fighting in the Bakhmut area.[22] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported in late December 2022 that the Wagner Group had 50,000 personnel in Ukraine including 10,000 contractors and 40,000 convict recruits.[23] The Wagner Group has deployed the vast majority of its force to support the offensive to capture Bakhmut, and it is likely that the difference between Kirby's 50,000 figure in Ukraine and Milley's 26,000 to 36,000 figure in the Bakhmut area is the result of casualties from Wagner's attritional offensive on Bakhmut. Kirby reported on February 17 that the Wagner Group had suffered 30,000 casualties, with 9,000 dead, in operations in Ukraine.[24] The Wagner Group may lose thousands more convict recruits in the upcoming weeks as convicts finish their six-month military contracts, and the Wagner leadership appears for now to be allowing pre-pardoned convicts to return from the frontlines to Russia at the conclusion of those contracts.[25]

The senior military advisor to the United Kingdom's mission to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ian Stubbs, reported on March 30 that 30,000 Russian military and Wagner personnel have died or been injured in the Bakhmut area since the Battle of Bakhmut began in July 2022.[26] Stubbs stated that Russian and Wagner forces have particularly suffered significant losses in and around Bakhmut in recent weeks and that they urgently need to replenish their personnel.[27] These losses in manpower will continue to constrain Russian offensive operations in the Bakhmut area as well as the wider theater, and Wagner's significant losses will likely threaten its ability to maintain its influential role among Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast on charges of espionage on March 30. The FSB claimed that Gershkovich collected information constituting a state secret about the activities of a Russian military-industrial complex enterprise on behalf of the US, and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that FSB officers caught Gershkovich "red-handed." [28] Russian authorities may have arrested Gershkovich as a retaliatory response to the US arrest of Russian national Sergey Vladimirovich Cherkasov on March 24 on charges of acting as an agent of a foreign power.[29] The Kremlin will likely use Gershkovich's detention to attempt to extract some type of concession from the United States and possibly may seek to replicate a prisoner exchange similar to the December 2022 exchange of US basketball player Brittney Griner for Russian illegal arms dealer Viktor Bout. [30]

The reported site of Gershkovich's arrest is noteworthy. Yekaterinburg hosts 12 Russian defense enterprises that specifically produce anti-aircraft rocket systems, long-range anti-aircraft missiles, radio systems, ground support equipment for missiles and aircraft, electronic control systems for missile complexes, missile-related guidance systems and radars, self-propelled artillery systems, highly enriched uranium, rare earth metal alloys, heavy machinery, and optical systems for military aircraft.[31] These enterprises include Russia's primary producer of self-propelled artillery systems, Uraltransmash; one of Russia's leading optical enterprises, Urals Optical-Mechanical Plant; and Uralmash, which mass produced tanks during and after the Second World War.[32] It is not evident which military industrial enterprise is associated with the FSB's claims about Gershkovich's arrest, but many of them produce systems and equipment that Russian forces have lost or used in significant quantities in Ukraine. Others use microchips, which are in critically short supply in Russia and the object of intense smuggling and sanctions-evasion efforts. ISW assesses that significant equipment shortages are likely constraining the Russian military's ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare in Ukraine and that the Kremlin is trying to gradually mobilize Russia's Defense Industrial Base (DIB) to meet the Russian military's needs without conducting full economic mobilization. [33] ISW also previously assessed that the FSB may be trying to penetrate the Russian DIB in a way that is reminiscent of the KGB's involvement and surveillance of the Soviet military establishment.[34]

Ukrainian National Security Defense Council Secretary Oleksii Danilov stated on March 30 that Ukrainian authorities do not intend to expel the Kremlin-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra by force.[35] Independent Russian news outlet Meduza reported that parishioners of the UOC MP prevented a Ukrainian Ministry of Culture commission from entering the Lavra to conduct an inventory of the property.[36] Meduza reported that Ukrainian officials ordered the UOC MP to leave the Lavra on March 10 by March 29, and the UOC MP stated that it did not intend to comply.[37]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on March 30 launching the semiannual spring conscription cycle, which will conscript 147,000 Russians between April 1 and July 15.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed a prominent milblogger and Russian proxy battalion commander as a regional Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) official for Donetsk Oblast.
- Western officials reported that Wagner Group and conventional Russian forces have likely lost a substantial amount of manpower in the Bakhmut area.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast on charges of espionage.
- Ukrainian National Security Defense Council Secretary Oleksii Danilov stated that Ukrainian authorities do not intend to expel the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra by force.
- Russian authorities arrested Bryansk Oblast Acting Deputy Head Elena Egorova and Second Deputy Governor Tatyana Kuleshova for reportedly receiving bribes.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut as well as along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- International Atomic Energy Agency Director (IAEA) Rafael Grossi stated that plans to ensure the safety of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) have evolved.
- Pardoned Wagner Group convicts are continuing to commit crimes in Russia following the end of their contract service with Wagner.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to set conditions for September 2023 elections by further integrating occupied territories into the Russian legal apparatus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 29, 2023

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

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 29, 2023

Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 29, 5:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow on March 29 to review strategic and long-term cooperation agreements that will likely intensify Russia and Iran's bilateral security relationship. Abdollahian stated that Russian and Iranian officials are in the final stage of signing a cooperation agreement.^[1] Lavrov promoted Iran's "Hormoz Peace Plan" for security in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and stated that the Kremlin demands an immediate return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).^[2] Abdollahian and Lavrov likely discussed continued Russian efforts to procure Iranian weapon systems for use in Ukraine and a finalized agreement for Russia to provide Iran with Su-35 attack aircraft.^[3] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 29 that Iranian Pouya Air Transport resumed regular flights between Tehran and Moscow on March 13 likely to support weapons transfers.^[4] The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported that Iranian officials are planning to deliver Shahed-131 drones to Wagner Group personnel and that Wagner personnel have started training to operate the drones, although ISW has not observed confirmation that Wagner Group personnel have used Iranian-made drones in Ukraine.^[5] ISW previously assessed that Russia is relying on Iran for military and technological support in Ukraine and that some Iranian personnel are likely in Ukraine directly supporting Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure.^[6] Iran is likely attempting to solidify a bilateral security relationship with Russia in which the two are more equal partners and will likely increase weapons transfers to Russia in pursuit of this goal.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seized on the recent story of the sentencing of a Tula Oblast father for his 12-year-old daughter's antiwar drawing to promote the Wagner Group's reputation and ameliorate his own personal image. Prigozhin's press service posted a letter on March 28 signed by Prigozhin, Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin, and Wagner-affiliated director of the "Liga" veteran's organization Andrey Troshev addressed to Tula Oblast prosecutor Alexander Gritsaenko stating that the signatories consider Gritsaenko's issuance of a two-year prison sentence to Aleksey Moskalev unfair.^[7] Moskalev was charged with "discrediting the armed forces" after his 12-year-old daughter Masha drew an antiwar picture with a Ukrainian flag in her school art class in April 2022.^[8] Masha was taken into state custody and now lives in a juvenile shelter, and Moskalev fled house arrest the night before his sentencing and was sentenced to two years in prison *in absentia*.^[9] Prigozhin's letter suggests that Tula Oblast check the legality of Gritsaenko's sentencing and recommends that Wagner-affiliated lawyers participate in the case on Moskalev's side, noting that it is tragic that both Masha and children of dead Wagner fighters end up in orphanages.^[10] Prigozhin's response to Moskalev's sentencing is particularly ironic considering that Prigozhin was initially one of the biggest and loudest supporters of the law on punishing those who "discredit" Russian forces.^[11] It is therefore likely that Prigozhin seized on the discourse surrounding Moskalev to further his own reputation and advocate for the Wagner Group, especially by choosing to highlight the plight of orphans of Wagner fighters who die in Ukraine.^[12] Prigozhin may seek to maintain his own domestic relevance by continuing to closely involve himself in such developing stories, especially by affiliating his newest campaign for relevance with Utkin and Troshev—two well-established and notorious Wagner-affiliated personalities. The letter attempts to portray Wagner's leadership as a united front against elements of the Russian bureaucracy.^[13]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's demonstrative response to an attack on a police station in Chechnya suggests that he may be concerned about the stability of his authoritarian rule. Kadyrov claimed that Chechen authorities killed two unidentified men attempting to conduct an attack in Gudermes, Chechnya on the night of March 28, and Russian sources amplified footage purporting to show the two men shooting at a local police department.^[14] Kadyrov's Special Forces University is in Gudermes, although it is not clear if the attack was connected to the facility. Kadyrov published footage of himself, his 15-year-old son, and an entourage of Chechen officials and security personnel visiting the scene of the attack and inspecting the mangled bodies of the assailants.^[15] Kadyrov likely meant this demonstrative inspection of the bodies to enhance his strongman image and signal to Chechens that any form of internal resistance to his rule will be eliminated. The fact that Kadyrov's response to the attack was so immediate and heavy-handed suggests that he is concerned about the potential for internal resistance within Chechnya to undermine his authoritarian rule of the autonomous republic. Kadyrov recently met with President Vladimir Putin on March 13 to promote Chechnya's relevance in the Russian political and military sphere, and ISW assessed that Putin may seize upon Kadyrov's fears about falling out of favor with Putin to pressure Kadyrov into increasing the role of Chechen fighters in combat operations in Ukraine.^[16] Kadyrov likely sees any sign of internal instability in Chechnya as a threat to Putin's continued favor.

Russian authorities arrested Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) naval department head Colonel Sergey Volkov for corruption-related charges. The 235th Garrison Military Court in Moscow arrested Volkov on March 29 for abuse of authority charges in connection with the sale of low-quality radar systems at heavily inflated prices, and an official investigation reportedly found that his actions amounted to damages of 395.5 million rubles (roughly \$5 million).^[17] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Rosgvardia recently launched a criminal case against the Deputy Commander of the Rosgvardia's Central District, Major General Vadim Dragomiretsky, on March 20 for corruption-related charges.^[18] The recent criminal proceedings against two Rosgvardia commanders may suggest that Russian

authorities are conducting a sweeping corruption probe within Rosgvardia. The criminal proceedings are notable because commanders of conventional Russian forces have not been fired, let alone arrested, since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the same rate or in such high-profile circumstances as the Rosgvardia cases. It is highly unlikely that corruption in the Rosgvardia is more pronounced than it is in the Russian Armed Forces. The Rosgvardia notably includes elements responsible for Russia's domestic regime security. Putin likely pays very close attention to the reliability and loyalty of some Rosgvardia personnel, apart from concerns he may have about corruption in that organization.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated on March 27 that Ukrainian forces may be planning to launch a counteroffensive in April or May depending on weather conditions. In an interview with Estonian news outlet *ERR*, Reznikov stated that the Ukrainian General Staff might decide to use recently received Leopard 2 tanks in a possible spring counterattack.[19] Leopard 2 and Challenger 2 tanks arrived in Ukraine on March 27, and US officials announced the acceleration of the deployment of Abrams tanks and Patriot missile systems to Ukraine on March 21.[20] The arrival of equipment in Ukraine likely sets conditions for a Ukrainian counteroffensive, although a delay is likely between the arrival of new equipment in Ukraine's ability to use it in a counteroffensive.

Key Takeaways

- Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow on March 29 to review strategic and long-term cooperation agreements that will likely intensify Russia and Iran's bilateral security relationship.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seized on the recent story of the sentencing of a Tula Oblast father for his 12-year-old daughter's antiwar drawing to promote the Wagner Group's reputation and ameliorate his own personal image.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's demonstrative response to an attack on a police station in Chechnya suggests that he may be concerned about the stability of his authoritarian rule.
- Russian authorities arrested Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) naval department head Colonel Sergey Volkov for corruption-related charges.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated on March 27 that Ukrainian forces may be planning to launch a counteroffensive in April or May depending on weather conditions.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi visited the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) for the second time.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to implement measures to integrate occupied territories into the Russian administrative and legal system.
- The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that planned activities are ongoing to call up those liable for military service for military training and to retrain reserve servicemen in military registration specialties.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 28, 2023

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

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

March 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Wagner Group forces have likely taken the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut and continue to make gains within the city. Russian milbloggers widely claimed on March 28 that Wagner fighters have captured the AZOM complex and are working to clear the area of remaining Ukrainian forces.[1] These claims are relatively consistent with available visual evidence of Russian presence in the AZOM complex. Geolocated footage posted on March 26 shows a military correspondent from Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* moving around the territory of the complex with apparent ease, indicating that Wagner likely controls enough of the plant to host media personalities in relative safety.[2] *RIA Novosti* correspondent Sergei Shilov additionally visited AZOM on March 28 and indicated that fighting has now moved to the industrial zone south of AZOM.[3] Several Russian milbloggers also claimed on March 28 that Wagner fighters have advanced closer to Bakhmut's city center, taken control of the city market, and reached the Palace of Culture.[4] These claims are plausible considering geolocated visual evidence of Wagner's advances towards the city center posted on March 28, as well as combat footage of Ukrainian infantry engaging in small arms exchanges with Russian forces near the Palace of Culture and central market area in Bakhmut city's center.[5] Wagner is likely working to consolidate gains in northern and central Bakhmut to push towards the city center and expand its zone of control into western Bakhmut. ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced into an additional five percent of Bakhmut in the last seven days and that they currently occupy roughly 65 percent of the city.

Russian and Ukrainian sources speculated that Lieutenant General Sergei Kuzmenko will replace Colonel General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.[6] Kuzmenko previously served as the commander of the 6th Combined Arms Army from 2015 to 2019 and more recently as a department head at the Russian Armed Forces General Staff Academy.[7] Kuzmenko has never held a command position comparable to the role of a military district commander, and his appointment as EMD commander would be an unusual step. Russian military authorities reportedly dismissed Muradov due to battlefield failures and significant losses in western Donetsk Oblast, and Kuzmenko would likely inherit expectations to reverse the total lack of progress in the EMD's zone of

responsibility in Ukraine.[8] There is no indication that Kuzmenko would be better equipped to succeed in overseeing offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast with even further degraded forces than the more experienced Muradov. ISW has not observed any confirmation that Russian military officials have dismissed Muradov as EMD commander or that Kuzmenko has assumed the role.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be using his influence in Russia's mainstream media landscape to present himself as a contender in Russia's 2024 presidential elections. Prigozhin's own *Federal News Agency* published an interview that Prigozhin conducted with Russian journalists from *Russia Today*, *RIA Novosti* and *Federal News Agency* on March 14.[9] This interview was noteworthy for its unique format--during the interview Prigozhin seemed to mimic the way that Russian President Vladimir Putin films his choreographed public meetings, either to mock Putin quietly or to suggest subtly that Prigozhin could become Russian president like Putin. The choreography and staging of Prigozhin's interview places Prigozhin in the camera's frame at Prigozhin's desk across from his audience in the same way that Putin's filmed meetings and photo ops usually do.[10] This film style is unusual for Prigozhin, as Prigozhin's public video statements typically do not employ such a sterile format; Prigozhin has usually opted to film himself with wide shots on battlefields or in dynamic but staged videos that strive to appear candid and gritty.[11] Prigozhin also used this interview to reiterate his previous arguments about the need to instill hardline ideology in Russian fighters and insinuate that the Russian Ministry of Defense is deliberately depriving the Wagner Group of artillery ammunition.[12]

Prigozhin may seek to parody Putin's cinematography style as part of a larger trolling campaign to attack the Kremlin or draw tacit parallels between Prigozhin and the office of the Russian presidency. Prigozhin has previously insinuated that he could replace Putin. Prigozhin made a sarcastic announcement on March 11 that he will run for the Ukrainian presidency in 2024 — a statement that a prominent Kremlin-linked Russian scholar argued implicitly promoted a narrative that Prigozhin would run in Russia's presidential elections which are also scheduled for 2024.[13] Prigozhin directly attacked Putin's presidential administration on January 18 and insinuated that some officials working there are traitors who want Russia to lose the war in Ukraine — one of Prigozhin's boldest attacks against the Kremlin to date. [14] Prigozhin also denied the Kremlin's claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the Kremlin — and specifically Putin — constantly claims.[15] Prigozhin's recent behavior — regardless of its intent — is advancing a narrative among Russian society that Prigozhin has larger political aspirations in Russia. Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin (one of Prigozhin's critics) joked on March 26 that Prigozhin is like Julius Caesar, except that Julius Caesar first achieved military victories before agitating for his political advancement — likely referring to Prigozhin's failure to deliver on his reported promise to capture Bakhmut by September 2022.[16]

High-ranking Russian officials continue a campaign begun in December 2022 to set domestic conditions for a protracted war both in private and in public. *The Guardian*, citing anonymous internal sources, reported on March 28 that Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told a group of Russian political and cultural elite that "things will get much harder" and that the current situation (in reference to the war) "will take a very, very, long time" during a private dinner in December 2022.[17] Peskov's reported warning supports ISW's assessment that Russian authorities have been preparing multiple aspects of Russian society for a protracted war through careful setting of information conditions and engagement of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) since the end of 2022.[18] Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu relatedly visited artillery shell production facilities in Chelyabinsk and Kirov oblasts on March 28 and claimed that Russian ammunition production has increased significantly over the past year, promising that production will increase a further seven to eight times for certain unspecified artillery products by the end of the year.[19] Shoigu's visit to artillery factories is the latest in a slew of choreographed visits to DIB facilities by various Russian officials and is part of a concerted effort to present the Russian DIB as effective in advance of a protracted war effort.[20]

The Russian budget continues to reflect the overall costs of Russia's war in Ukraine. *Bloomberg* reported on March 28 that Russia has classified an unprecedented one-third of its entire budget expenditures and noted that classified spending as of March 24 is twice as high as it was during the same period in 2022. [21] *Bloomberg* also found that Russian defense and security spending is the second largest budget category after spending on social programs. [22] *Bloomberg* concluded that the classified share of the Russian budget will account for nearly a quarter of all expenditures for the whole of 2023 and will be due to an increase in expenses classed as "other expenses in the field of national defense." [23] Russian outlet *RBC* relatedly reported on March 28 that the Russian Ministry of Finance plans to submit a proposal to reduce the number of federal state institutions subordinate to federal authorities in order to increase the efficiency of budget expenditure management. [24] Such expenditure manipulations suggest that Russia is trying to cut spending in a variety of spheres to support increased defense spending, further responding to costs associated with the war and setting conditions for a long war.

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group forces have likely taken the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut and continue to make gains within the city.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources speculated that Lieutenant General Sergei Kuzmenko will replace Colonel General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.
- Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be using his influence in Russia's mainstream media landscape to present himself as a potential contender in Russia's 2024 presidential elections.
- High-ranking Russian officials continue to set domestic conditions for a protracted war.
- The cost of Russia's war in Ukraine is likely continuing to consume a substantial portion of the Russian Federal Budget.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree removing the upper age limit for Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) servicemen serving in occupied Ukraine until January 1, 2026.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to expand Russia's bureaucratic and administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine.
- The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed on March 28 Belarus' intent to host Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus as Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on March 25.

March 27, 7:15pm 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.

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Rumors about the dismissal of Russian Eastern Group of Forces (Eastern Military District) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov on March 27 generated a muted and cynical response in the Russian information space. The milbloggers claimed that Russian military authorities dismissed Muradov from his position as Eastern Group of Forces commander, but ISW cannot currently verify these claims.^[1] Muradov took command of the Russian Eastern Military District (EMD) on October 6, 2022, and has overseen a series of disastrous offensive operations led by EMD elements in western Donetsk Oblast over the past five months. ^[2] One milblogger claimed that Muradov is on "vacation," which the milblogger noted is tantamount to resignation. Others claimed that Muradov's removal is a positive step but stated that Muradov's replacement is more important than his removal.^[3] Some milbloggers noted that Muradov was responsible for significant Russian military failures in western Donetsk Oblast, including the high casualties suffered in the assault against Pavlivka in October-November 2022 and the prolonged and failed effort to take Vuhledar.^[4] Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istoryi* (iStories), citing sources close to the Russian General Staff, reported that the Russian General Staff accused Muradov of being inept due to battlefield failures and significant losses in western Donetsk Oblast, including the near obliteration of the Tatarstan "Alga" volunteer battalion.^[5] One prominent milblogger claimed that military authorities are also considering dismissing Western Military District Commander Colonel General Yevgeny Nikiforov, whose forces operate along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line in eastern Ukraine.^[6]

ISW cannot confirm the rumors of either Muradov's or Nikiforov's dismissals, but it is noteworthy that Russian milbloggers are discussing potential dismissals of commanders associated with areas of operation in which Russian forces have been largely unable to secure substantial gains or have suffered major losses. Russian milbloggers do not appear to be hypothesizing about the removal of either the Central Military District (CMD) Commander Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev or Southern Military District Commander (SMD) Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev.^[7] Neither the CMD nor the SMD are heavily committed in critical areas of the front, and Mordvichev and Kuzovlev have therefore likely avoided becoming targets of Russian command skepticism because they are not currently responsible for significant failures. The muted information space response to the reported firings is additionally indicative of broader disillusionment with Russian military command, which milbloggers have argued for months needs systemic overhauls. Many milbloggers have consistently praised former Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin despite the fall of west (right) bank Kherson Oblast under his command, however. One milblogger claimed on March 27 that Surovikin may be responsible for defending against a future Ukrainian counteroffensive and claimed that Surovikin's military strategy is better than that of Russian Chief of the General Staff and current Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Valery Gerasimov.^[8] Russian authorities and some milbloggers have fixated on identifying and punishing individual commanders for the failures of their troops, rather than interrogating and resolving endemic issues in Russian command and control, force structure, and deployment patterns.

Russian milbloggers also had a muted response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 25 announcement that Russia will deploy tactical nukes to Belarus, suggesting that Putin's messaging is aimed at Western rather than domestic Russian audiences. Many milbloggers and news aggregators simply amplified various points from Putin's March 25 interview that artificially inflate the capabilities of the Russian military and defense industrial base (DIB) to sustain a prolonged war effort, as well as the nuclear weapons deployment announcement itself.^[9] One milblogger correctly noted that deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus does not improve Russia's military situation in Ukraine, claiming that Russian forces need to instead prepare for a future Ukrainian counteroffensive, and criticized continued Russian military command and organization issues.^[10] Another milblogger recognized that Putin targeted his nuclear weapons deployment announcement at the West and praised the prospect of being the "nightmare" of the US.^[11]

Russian military leadership likely committed limited higher quality Wagner Group elements to the offensive on Avdiivka, potentially to reinforce recent limited tactical successes in the area. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated on March 25 that Ukrainian intelligence forecasts that Wagner may appear in the Avdiivka direction.^[12] A Russian VK user posted an obituary on March 26 announcing the death of Wagner Group fighter Yevgeny Malgotin in Avdiivka on March 20.^[13] The obituary claims that Malgotin had prior military experience and fought with the 2nd Russian Volunteer Detachment of the Army of Republika Srpska (commonly referred to as the Bosnian Serb Army) in 1992.^[14] Malgotin appears to have been a seasoned fighter, and likely represents the higher caliber of fighter that comprises Wagner's special operations forces. While Wagner has heavily committed a majority convict-based force to operations near Bakhmut, there is likely a contingent of higher-quality operators at various locations in Ukraine. Russian military leadership may have decided to deploy certain Wagner elements to the Avdiivka area in recent weeks to support exhausted and lower-quality Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) elements in their efforts to take the settlement. If such Wagner fighters have been fighting near Avdiivka, their involvement may help explain the limited tactical gains made in the area over the past week.

Key Takeaways

- Rumors about the dismissal of Russian Eastern Group of Forces (Eastern Military District) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov on March 27 generated a muted and cynical response in the Russian information space.
- Russian milbloggers also had a muted response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 25 announcement to deploy tactical nukes to Belarus, underscoring that Putin's messaging is aimed at Western rather than domestic Russian audiences.
- Russian military leadership likely committed limited higher quality Wagner Group elements to the offensive on Avdiivka, potentially to reinforce recent limited tactical successes in the area.
- Russian forces made marginal gains around Svatove and Russian forces continue ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and made gains within Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russia appears to be increasingly deploying elements of conventional formations in a piecemeal fashion along the entire frontline, including in southern Ukraine.

- Russian authorities continue forming new volunteer battalions subordinate to irregular formations.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against an occupation law enforcement officer in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 26, 2023

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

Frederick W. Kagan

March 26, 4:30 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 26. This report discusses Russian President Vladimir Putin's continued efforts to seek complete victory in Ukraine, which he appears confident that he can attain over time. Putin seems to reject the idea increasingly prevalent in Western discourse that the current military realities require or support a negotiated resolution of the conflict. Neither Ukraine nor the West has persuaded him that he must consider accepting any sort of off-ramp or compromise settlement. Putin instead remains focused on achieving his initial war aims through protracted conflict in which he wins either by imposing his will on Ukraine by force or by breaking Ukraine's will following the West's abandonment of Kyiv. Multiple successful Ukrainian counter-offensives are almost certainly necessary but not sufficient either to persuade Putin to negotiate on acceptable terms or to create military conditions on the ground favorable enough to Ukraine and the West that continued or renewed Russian attacks pose acceptable threats to Ukraine or NATO.

The outcomes of wars often are, in fact, determined on the battlefield with negotiations that merely ratify military realities. Putin likely has one such example vividly in his mind—World War II in Europe. That war ended only when Allied forces had completely defeated the German military and Soviet troops stood in the wreckage of Berlin. Japan surrendered a few months later after the US had demonstrated what appeared to be the ability to destroy the country completely—and only after the Japanese military had lost the ability to do more than impose casualties on the US in the process of losing. Going further back in history the peaces that ended the three Wars of German Unification, the American Civil War, and the Napoleonic Wars also merely ratified realities created by decisive military victories. Even the most recently ended war adhered to this pattern. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was followed by a decisive Taliban military victory that has ended that conflict (for now) without any formal treaty or accord ratifying this outcome. History offers many counter-examples, to be sure, including the Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian conflict and the resolution of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. But it is simply not the case that all wars end in negotiated settlements, particularly if by "negotiated settlements" is meant mutual recognition of the impossibility of achieving desired aims through military force.

Putin initiated the current war and is the key actor who must decide that he cannot achieve his aims by military power and must instead engage in a negotiated resolution of the conflict if the war is to end in this fashion. The war will protract as long as Putin believes that he can impose his will on Ukraine by fighting or by breaking the Ukrainians' will to fight following their abandonment by the West.

Putin continues to make clear by word and deed that he has come to no such conclusion yet despite the failures of his major military efforts this winter. His efforts to freeze Ukraine and Europe into surrendering over the winter came to nothing, and the Russian winter-spring offensives that were supposed to secure the borders of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are culminating.^[1] The Russian military has committed the overwhelming majority of the reportedly 300,000 reservists mobilized in Fall 2022 as well as the 40,000 convicts recruited into the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) into a multi-divisional offensive all along the line in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.^[2] The results of that effort are deeply unimpressive. Russian forces gained no significant terrain in Luhansk. Wagner troops have taken part of Bakhmut City and conducted an incomplete turning movement that has so far failed to persuade Ukrainian commanders to withdraw from the Bakhmut pocket.^[3] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces, now reinforced by conventional Russian troops, have conducted a similarly incomplete turning movement around Avdiivka.^[4] Offensives against Vuhledar in western Donetsk Oblast have made effectively no gains at staggering costs in manpower and materiel.^[5] The Russian milblogger space and Russian, Ukrainian, and Western media are full of discussions of the upcoming Ukrainian counter-offensive, about which the only real questions appear to be when and where it will occur.^[6] **This would be an appropriate moment for Putin to conclude that Russia cannot impose its will on Ukraine by force and that he must seek a compromise settlement. He has clearly come to no such conclusion, however.**

Putin is instead doubling down on his commitment to overpower Ukraine militarily and/or protract the war by mobilizing Russia's defense industrial base and renewing various crypto-mobilization schemes to generate renewed combat power. Putin's March 25 speech continued a months-long effort to mobilize Russian military industry for a protracted war.^[7] That effort and his speech also aim to portray Russia (falsely) as the modern incarnation of Stalin's Soviet Union able to overwhelm its enemies with unstoppable masses of men and materiel despite Putin's manifest unwillingness actually to put Russia fully on a war footing. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu began this effort at the end of 2022 and has continued it through this year, and Putin has been amplifying it.^[8] The Russians clearly are attempting to mobilize their military industry and will surely generate some improvements. The exaggerated claims and unrealistic goals that Putin and Shoigu have made and set are intended in part to portray greater strength and potential than Russia has. They do not, however, reflect the challenges Russia faces in acquiring essential war materiel in the face of Western sanctions and in shortages of skilled labor. The latter challenge is made more acute by the need for Russia to balance mobilizing young men to fight and keeping them in the workforce.^[9] That Putin should be mobilizing Russia's defense industry now is surprising only in that it took him this long to start. The fact that he is not accompanying this mobilization with any suggestion that he would consider a compromise peace—particularly after

Chinese Premier Xi Jinping appeared to offer to help negotiate one during a high-profile and dramatic visit to Moscow—indicates that Putin remains committed to achieving his aims by force.[10]

The continuing of Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut and Avdiivka, as well as along the Luhansk and western Donetsk front lines, is a further indicator that Putin remains committed to victory in a protracted war whose outcome is determined in large part by military realities on the ground. These attacks have now become not merely pointless, but actually harmful to Russian preparations for the next phase of this war, which will revolve around the upcoming Ukrainian counter-offensive. Russian forces may or may not be able to drive Ukrainian troops out of Avdiivka or Bakhmut, but they will gain no significant operational advantage from doing either because they lack the ability to exploit such advances. The Russians appear to have little likelihood of making any gains that are even tactically significant in western Donetsk or on most of the Luhansk line—yet attacks in all these areas continue.

Putin's continuation of these Russian offensive operations in the current operational and strategic context amounts to strategic malfeasance. It expends scarce Russian combat power in pursuit of operationally meaningless gains rather than setting conditions to receive and defeat a Ukrainian counter-offensive that everyone appears to expect imminently.

Putin's stubbornness in clinging to these offensive operations could make sense, however, in a protracted conflict during which Western support for Ukraine wanes or ends. Putin might even mean these operations to set conditions for a negotiated settlement on terms he has already articulated that include international recognition of Russia's annexation of all of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts; Ukrainian "neutrality;" the "de-militarization" of Ukraine; and the "de-Nazification" of the Ukrainian government. He may be pressing his commanders to continue attacks that are increasingly pointless in the short term because he recognizes that he can only hope to make good his claims to unoccupied areas of the four oblasts he has annexed if his forces actually take them. He may, in this sense, indeed be seeking to set conditions for a negotiated settlement. In that case, however, it becomes apparent that he must still believe that he can impose his desired resolution of the conflict on Ukraine and the West by military force—or by convincing Ukraine to surrender—and that he is unwilling to accept a resolution short of his stated aims (which include territories that Russian forces do not yet control) at this time.

A successful series of Ukrainian counter-offensives, not just one, is thus almost certainly necessary but not sufficient to persuade Putin to enter negotiations on terms other than the achievement of all of his stated objectives. Ukrainian forces must show that they can do what Russian forces cannot, namely change the realities on the ground through military action. They must further damage Russian military power in Ukraine to the point at which it becomes clear to Putin and the inner circle that supports him in this war that the Russian armed forces cannot hope to improve the outcome of the war by continued fighting. **Multiple major Ukrainian operational-level victories are therefore likely essential to creating any prospect of a negotiated settlement of the current conflict or forcing Putin to accept unfavorable military realities absent a formal settlement.**

There is reason to expect that Ukrainian forces can, in fact, make gains through counter-offensives. Ukraine has launched two major counter-offensive operations in this war, not counting the voluntary withdrawal of Russian forces from around Kyiv. Both were successful in retaking large areas, first in Kharkiv and then in western Kherson.[11] Various analysts have expressed various opinions about whether Ukrainian forces can penetrate prepared Russian defensive positions and raised other concerns about the prospects for Ukrainian successes. It remains the case, however, that whereas Russian forces have demonstrated that they cannot make significant gains at this stage of the war, Ukrainian forces have yet to fail in such an attempt.

It is far from clear that Putin ever will accept these military realities, however. He may resolve to continue fighting, with or without a pause, as long as it takes to achieve all his aims. His rhetoric and actions, as well as his past patterns, certainly suggest this possibility. A negotiated settlement may therefore be unattainable because Putin will not accept the reality that he cannot actually conquer Ukraine.

Ukraine and the West will have to create military realities that permit a cessation of hostilities on terms that they can effectively impose on Putin in that case. Ukrainian forces, properly supported by the collective West, can retake the terrain that is strategically vital to Ukraine's military and economic survival and that would be essential for renewed Russian offensives on terms favorable to Moscow. ISW has assessed the operational and strategic significance of various parts of occupied Ukrainian territory and stands by that assessment.[12] There likely is a line short of the full restoration of Ukrainian control over all of occupied Ukrainian territory that could be the basis for a protracted cessation of hostilities on terms acceptable to Ukraine and the West—but that line is not close to where the current front lines stand.

It is not a given, nevertheless, that Putin will continue fighting regardless of cost until the day he dies. He has ostentatiously and surprisingly refrained from going all-in on this war from its inception. One can dismiss his failure fully to mobilize and prepare his military before the invasion because he clearly believed that the Ukrainians would not or could not fight. He has passed by multiple moments when moving to fuller mobilization had become necessary, has delayed decisions to implement even partial mobilization for far too long from Russia's perspective, and even when he has made such decisions has sought to limit their impact on the Russian society and economy.[13] Putin's Stalinist rhetoric aside, he has shown remarkable concern about the danger of pushing Russia too far and generating a threat to the stability of his regime. Ukraine and the West should not count on Putin's will breaking by any means, but neither should they dismiss the possibility that he might at some point decide that the costs and risks of continuing the fight are no longer justified by the potential gains.

Putin is nevertheless putting no terms for negotiation on the table now other than Russia's total success. He is not taking the military measures that would be prudent were he serious about seeking some negotiated off-ramp or compromise settlement. The current frontlines would set highly favorable conditions for renewed Russian invasions if Putin were offering to accept them as a ceasefire boundary—but he clearly is unwilling to do so.

The choices before Ukraine and its Western backers at this time are thus relatively straightforward. Ukraine can unilaterally cease fighting even as Russian attacks by ground and air continue, which would lead to disastrous defeat (and which almost no one is advocating). Ukrainian forces can continue fighting in a very constrained way seeking only to hold what they now have, which will encourage Putin to continue his efforts to pursue outright military victory. Or they can launch successive counter-offensive operations with the twin aims of persuading Putin to accept a negotiated compromise or of creating military realities sufficiently favorable to Ukraine that Kyiv and its Western allies can then effectively freeze the conflict on their own regardless of Putin's decisions. Those are the options facing Ukraine and the West as long as Putin continues to believe that he can impose his will by force of Russian arms over however long a period he is willing to fight.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 26:

- Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar called for informational silence regarding a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.[14]
- Russian milbloggers largely amplified and praised Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 25 information operations.[15] One milblogger claimed that the deployment of nuclear weapons does not change Russia's military situation in Ukraine or need to defend against a future Ukrainian counteroffensive, however.[16]
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Svatove-Kremenna line.[17] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian and Ukrainian forces fought 10 battles in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.[18]
- Russian forces continued attacking Bakhmut and its environs and made marginal gains within the city.[19] Russian sources claimed that Wagner Group forces cleared the AZOM plant in northern Bakhmut.[20]
- Russian forces continued attacking along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and made marginal gains within Marinka.[21] Ukrainian intelligence stated that Wagner Group forces may arrive in the Avdiivka direction.[22]
- Russian forces continued routine fire against areas in Zaporizhia, Kherson, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.[23] Head of the Ukrainian United Coordination Press Center of the Southern Defense Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces in southern Ukraine lack adequate supplies of missiles and drones.[24]
- Russian sources reported the formation of the "Uragan" volunteer battalion of the irregular formation 1st "Wolves" Sabotage and Reconnaissance Brigade, which operates in the Avdiivka area.[25]
- United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak announced the proposal of a draft law on March 24 that would allow families of employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) who died in the war to be eligible to receive a one-time housing payment.[26]
- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian occupation authorities in Berdyansk in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast are requiring locals to obtain passes from the occupation administration by April 1 in order to move around occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[27]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 25, 2023

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

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

March 25, 10 pm ET

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Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the predictable next information operation to discourage Ukrainian resistance and disrupt Western support for Ukraine as Russian offensives culminate and Ukraine prepares to launch counter-offensives in an interview with a state-owned Russian news channel on March 25.[1]

Putin claimed that the West cannot sustain weapons provisions to Ukraine and exaggerated Russia's potential to mobilize its own defense industrial base (DIB) to create the false impression that further Ukrainian resistance and Western support to Ukraine is futile. Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces expend up to 5,000 shells a day, while the United States produces an average of 14,000–15,000 shells a month. Putin alleged that planned Western defense production increases will not match Russian planned increases. Putin announced that Russia will build over 1,600 new tanks by the end of 2023 and that Russia will have more than three times the number of tanks as Ukraine at that time.[2] Putin likely seized the opportunity to advance this narrative based on *The Financial Times*'s March 19 report that European arms manufacturers are "hobbled" by an explosives shortage.[3] Putin argued that continued Western weapons provisions to Ukraine are merely an attempt to prolong the war.[4]

Putin compared the state of the Russian wartime DIB with current Western military industrial outputs, stating that the West would need to make significant sacrifices to civilian projects to increase military production to support war in Ukraine. Putin added that unlike the West, Russia does not need excessive militarization of the economy to expand its DIB capabilities. These claims are not supportable. The US GDP alone is 10 times the size of Russia's. Germany, the UK, and France together have economies nearly five times the size of Russia's.[5] The US and its allies certainly must make choices when considering spending the large sums required to support Ukraine, but the choices they face are nothing like as hard as those confronting Russia. The balance of overall available resources and industrial capacity is decisively weighted toward the West. Russian military industrial potential is, in fact, hopelessly outmatched by Western military industrial potential. Putin's messaging is intended to persuade the West to commit less of that potential to supporting Ukraine by convincing the West, falsely, that it cannot match Russia. Russia must move to a full war footing to sustain its current military operations—something Putin has been very reluctant to do. The West does not need to shift to a wartime footing to continue to support Ukraine if it chooses to do so.

Putin's stated goals for Russian tank production in 2023 and comparisons with Ukrainian tank stocks also disregard Russia's limited industrial capacity to produce more advanced tanks rapidly and ignore Russian tank losses on the battlefield. Russia's sole tank production factory, UralVagonZavod, reportedly produces 20 tanks a month.[6] It would take over six years to meet Putin's goal at that rate. UralVagonZavod is unlikely to expand production of modern tanks such as the T-90 rapidly enough to meet these targets in nine months due to international sanctions and shortages of skilled labor.[7] The Kremlin will thus likely continue to pull archaic tanks from storage and may attempt to refurbish some older tanks to meet the stated quota. A Kremlin pundit stated on a live broadcast on March 25 that Russia would pull old T-34 tanks from storage and monuments if needed for the war effort while attempting to justify Russia's recent deployments of the T-54 and T-55 tanks to the frontlines.[8] These tanks are not comparable to modern Abrams, Challenger, or Leopard tanks, or even to T-72s, in either armament or armor protection.

Even Putin's announced (and unrealistic) production targets are actually close to the minimum level required to replace Russian battlefield losses. Russia has reportedly been losing 150 tanks per month and so would need to produce 1,350 tanks in the next nine months merely to remain at current levels.[9]

Putin's observations also ignore the fact that the West has been providing Ukraine with smaller numbers of technologically advanced systems in part to offset the requirement to send masses of ammunition and equipment. Western militaries have historically held lower stocks of conventional artillery rounds, for example, because they rely on precision long-range fires such as the HIMARS systems the US has provided Ukraine. The Ukrainian military and its Western backers can confidently expect that loss rates in tank duels between M1s, Leopards, and Challengers, on the one hand, and T-55s, T-62s, or even T-72s, on the other, will be far from one-to-one. The US military, after all, has repeatedly demonstrated the relative effectiveness of M1s and T-72s on the battlefields of Iraq.

Putin's comments are an information operation designed to revive the aura of Soviet-era military industry and massed forces. They do not reflect current Russian realities or the balance of economic power or military industrial capacity between Russia and the collective West.

Putin advanced another information operation by announcing that Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by July 1 and renewed tired information operations about the potential for nuclear escalation. Putin implied that the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to send munitions containing depleted uranium – uranium that is significantly less radioactive than natural uranium – to Ukraine triggered his decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus for fear of nuclear escalation. Putin rejected Western statements that such munitions are safe to use and do not contain radioactive components. Putin insisted that the projectile core releases "radiation dust" and may sicken Ukrainian citizens and damage Ukraine's environment.[10] Western anti-tank munitions commonly contain depleted uranium, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) notes is "very suitable for military uses."[11] Such munitions cannot be used to create either nuclear or radiological weapons.[12] Putin's argument is false-to-fact, and even some domestic audiences likely realize it. A prominent Russian milblogger on March 25 challenged Putin's argument and stated that it the Western provision of depleted uranium rounds is not a "real problem."[13] Putin's concern for the well-being of the environment in Ukraine, furthermore, appears somewhat misplaced considering the massive damage Russian forces have inflicted on Ukraine's agricultural lands, to say nothing of Ukraine's cities and people. If Putin really is so concerned about the future of Ukraine's ecology he could best serve it by withdrawing from Ukraine and allowing Ukraine and the rest of the world to begin repairing the damage the Russian invasion has caused.

The announcement of the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is irrelevant to the risk of escalation to nuclear war, which remains extremely low. Putin is attempting to exploit Western fears of nuclear escalation by deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. Russia has long fielded nuclear-capable weapons able to strike any target that tactical nuclear weapons based in Belarus could hit. ISW continues to assess that Putin is a risk-averse actor who repeatedly threatens to use nuclear weapons without any intention of following through in order to break Western resolve.[14] The *Financial Times* further reported on March 24 that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell stated that Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Russia reduced the chance that Russia forces would use nuclear weapons because Xi made it "very, very clear" to Putin that he should not deploy nuclear weapons.[15]

Putin has likely sought to deploy Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus since before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and has likely chosen this moment to do so in order to serve the immediate information operation he is now conducting. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko offered to host Russia nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory on November 30, 2021, and Belarus removed the constitutional clause enshrining Belarus' neutral status in a referendum in February 2022.[16] ISW forecasted in January and February 2022 that Putin might seek to deploy tactical or strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus as part of a broader effort to deepen Russian control over Belarus.[17] Putin likely refrained from deploying the weapons to Belarus at the start of the 2022 invasion in order to preserve the option to deploy them as part of a future Russian information operation to manipulate the West.

Putin likely chose to push these narratives now in hopes of diminishing Ukrainian morale and Western aid to diminish the effectiveness of a rumored pending Ukrainian counteroffensive. Many prominent Russian milbloggers and officials warned that Ukrainian forces will likely attempt a major counteroffensive soon.[18] Putin's actions suggest that he agrees and that he fears the potential success of a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Putin and senior Kremlin officials have previously leveraged narratives around Russian heightened nuclear readiness, false flag warnings, and vague statements about negative battlefield developments claiming that Russia is entitled to use nuclear weapons to defend itself in Ukraine in order to deter further Western support for or military aid to Ukraine.[19] ISW has previously reported on Putin's escalation of nuclear rhetoric in September and October 2022 followed by a de-escalation in early November 2022 before the Russian loss of Kherson City and west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and assessed that the Kremlin might leverage further nuclear escalation rhetoric to coerce Western states to negotiate with Russia and halt further military aid to Ukraine.[20] ISW assesses that Putin's March 25 announcement is part of this effort and continues to assess that Russia is very unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or elsewhere.

Ukrainian and Western officials offered various views of the state of the Russian offensive in Bakhmut on March 25, but all are consistent with the assessment that the Russian effort around Bakhmut is likely culminating. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed on March 25 that the Russian offensive against Bakhmut is stalling and that Russian forces may shift their focus to the Avdiivka and Svatove-Kremenna areas.[21] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty cautioned that the recent decrease in reported Russian ground assaults near Bakhmut needs further analysis. Cherevaty also stated that unspecified Russian conventional forces are reinforcing Wagner Group forces, suggesting that Russian conventional forces are intervening to prevent the Wagner offensive from culminating prematurely.[22] Cherevaty noted that Russian forces conducted 18 ground attacks near Bakhmut on March 25 but recently conducted 40–50 attacks a day in the area, suggesting that exhausted Wagner forces are unable to sustain their prior tempo of operations alone but may increase their tempo to earlier levels with assistance from Russian conventional forces.[23] Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander in Chief General Valery Zaluzhny stated that the Bakhmut situation is stabilizing.[24] These statements are not mutually exclusive, however, and the Russian effort against Bakhmut is likely culminating. Russian forces may continue to attack Bakhmut frequently and aggressively even if the offensive has culminated with little to no success, as ISW has previously assessed, as culmination does not mean the absence of fighting.[25] Russian attacks in and around Bakhmut may resume at high levels without generating significant new gains if conventional Russian forces do, in fact, enter the fray. The commitment of conventional reserves could even prevent the attack from culminating and generate operationally significant advances or persuade Ukrainian forces to withdraw, although ISW regards those eventualities as unlikely at this time.

Russian forces do not have the degree of fire control over Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and likely other areas of the front that Russian milbloggers claim, further undermining the Russian effort to take Bakhmut. Recent footage shows that Ukrainian forces remain able to drive on the Bakhmut-Chasiv Yar and Bakhmut-Khromove roads despite Russian artillery targeting the Ukrainian vehicles.[26] Russian milbloggers likely based their fire control claims on Russian artillery system ranges, but even Russian ground advances close to these GLOCs have failed to prevent Ukrainian vehicles from using them at

least on a small scale. Geolocated footage posted on March 25 shows that Wagner Group forces have crossed the T0504 but remain unable to establish sustained positions that would cut the GLOC.[27]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the predictable next information operation to discourage Ukrainian resistance and disrupt Western support for Ukraine as Russian offensives culminate and Ukraine prepares to launch counter-offensives in an interview with a state-owned Russian news channel on March 25.
- Putin pushed the false narrative that the West cannot sustain weapons provision to Ukraine due to limited Western production and hyperbolized Russia's potential to mobilize its own defense industrial base (DIB).
- Putin advanced another information operation by announcing that Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by July 1 and renewed tired information operations about the potential for nuclear escalation.
- Russian conventional forces may intervene in Wagner Group's offensive around Bakhmut to prevent the offensive from culminating prematurely.
- Russian forces do not have the degree of fire control over Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and likely other areas of the front that Russian milbloggers claim.
- Russian forces conducted limited attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and gained limited ground in the city.
- Russian forces reportedly conducted a mass rotation of forces in Nova Kakhovka on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin accused Russian authorities on March 25 of rewriting history to cut out Wagner by forcing state-controlled media outlet *RT* to cut some coverage of the Wagner Group.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 24 that Moscow elites are competing for funding to "restore" occupied territories and really plan to use the projects to further their own interests.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 24, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Angela Howard, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 24, 4:30pm ET

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Prominent voices in the Russian information space are increasingly setting information conditions to prepare for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian Security Council Deputy Head Dmitry Medvedev emphasized on March 24 that the Russian General Staff is aware that Kyiv is preparing for offensive operations and that the Russian General Staff is considering its own decisions and responses to prepare for a Ukrainian offensive.[1] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian actors are disseminating disinformation about plans for a Ukrainian attack towards Belgorod Oblast, in order to draw Russian troops to border areas and allow Ukrainian troops to launch attacks on other sectors of the front, partially echoing Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's prior warnings about a Ukrainian push on Belgorod Oblast.[2] Another Russian milblogger warned that Ukrainian forces will likely try to launch a counteroffensive before the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) gains the capacity to increase production and bolster Russian defensive potential.[3] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin similarly claimed on March 23 that he knows of plans for an extensive Ukrainian counteroffensive, as ISW previously reported.[4] The wider Russian spring offensive appears to be culminating, and the Russian information space appears to be responding to the slow-down of Russian operations and potential for Ukraine to regain the initiative with substantial anxiety.[5] Russian military command will need to commit a significant number of forces to the frontline to either prevent culmination or launch renewed offensive operations, and it is unlikely that such forces exist at sufficient scale to do either.

Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov has reportedly formed a Wagner Group-affiliated private military company (PMC) in occupied Crimea. Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* (*iStories*) reported on March 23 that Aksyonov has publicly sided with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and created PMC "Convoy" under the leadership of Prigozhin associate Konstantin Pikalov, who has led Wagner operations in Africa.[6] PMC "Convoy" is reportedly a BARS (combat reserve) unit, meaning that "Convoy" servicemembers sign two contracts—one with "Convoy" itself and one with the Russian MoD.[7] *iStories* reported that "Convoy" initially consisted of 300 people and has been deployed to occupied Kherson Oblast.[8] The *iStories* report is particularly noteworthy against the backdrop of Wagner's and Prigozhin's continually declining influence in Russia and loss of access to convict recruits. Prigozhin and Prigozhin-affiliated elements may be trying to diffuse Wagner's remaining power by creating separate PMCs and other parallel military formations in addition to launching new recruitment efforts through traditional channels.[9] Aksyonov additionally appears to have affiliated himself and the Crimea occupation administration with Prigozhin, which may have important implications for the role of forces from occupied Crimea in subsequent phases of the war.

Some prominent Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for continuing to impale Russian forces on Vuhledar with ineffective human-wave style frontal assaults. The milbloggers claimed that current Russian tactics against Vuhledar, which include an initial frontal assault followed by assaults against fortified Ukrainian flanks, result in high Russian combat losses resulting in no gains due to challenging terrain, lack of combat power, and failure to surprise Ukrainian forces.[10] The milbloggers called on Russian forces to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Vuhledar both with strikes against rear GLOCs and by encircling the settlement for a multi-vector attack, but implied that Russian forces are unable to implement these suggestions due to munitions shortages and the failure to take many settlements surrounding Vuhledar.[11] Russian forces are unable to sustain any significant rate of advance anywhere on the front line using these human-wave style attacks, and the Vuhledar area once held informational significance to Russian milbloggers during the offensive for Pavlivka in late October and early November 2022.[12] The Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade has been destroyed and reconstituted as many as eight times

since the start of the war in large part due losses sustained during the prolonged effort against Vuhledar.[13] The re-emergence of vitriolic criticism about Russian failures near Vuhledar likely reflects the information space's ongoing frustration with the Russian military command amid deep-seated fear about a prospective future Ukrainian counteroffensive. It is possible that Russian forces are undertaking a renewed and inconsistent push to take Vuhledar in the style of limited and localized ground attacks, though it is also possible that the sources claiming as such are engaging in circular reporting or re-reporting old events.[14]

Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with the Russian Security Council likely as part of his effort to portray himself as a present and effective wartime leader. The meeting centered around Russia's effort to develop its electronics industry, though the Kremlin readout provides little detail about the meeting itself.[15] Russia has been seeking ways to mitigate the effect of Western sanctions on the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), which relies on electronics to produce advanced materiel and weaponry.[16] Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has notably claimed that Belarus can produce weapons for Russia given Belarus's access to electronics, and Russia and Belarus recently signed an agreement on furthering their respective electronics industries.[17] This meeting likely aimed to portray Putin as holding the Russian Security Council responsible for mobilizing the DIB to meet wartime demands while not providing evidence of any progress towards this goal.

Key Takeaways

- Prominent voices in the Russian information space are increasingly setting information conditions to prepare for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov has reportedly formed a Wagner Group-affiliated private military company (PMC) in occupied Crimea.
- Some prominent Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for continuing to impale Russian forces on Vuhledar with ineffective human-wave style frontal assaults.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with the Russian Security Council likely as part of his effort to portray himself as a present and effective wartime leader.
- Russian forces conducted limited attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces have made gains in and around Bakhmut and conducted ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- The Ukrainian General Staff corrected its March 23 statement that Russian forces withdrew from Nova Kakhovka, occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities announced the creation of a pro-Russian militaristic youth movement aimed at brainwashing children.
- The Russian government is adopting new measures to revitalize and eliminate corruption, lethargy, and resistance in Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on March 24 that at least 1,000 Russian personnel training at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, redeployed to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 23, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov and Frederick W. Kagan

March 23, 9:30 pm ET

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Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has softened his rhetoric towards the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely out of fear of completely losing his mercenary force in Bakhmut. Prigozhin emphasized his concerns about a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in eastern Ukraine during a 23-minute interview on March 23.[1] Prigozhin claimed that Ukraine has 200,000 reserves concentrating to attack along the entire eastern frontline, into Belgorod Oblast, and in Bakhmut. Prigozhin also claimed that the Ukrainians currently have 80,000 troops in Bakhmut, Slovyansk, and Kostyantynivka to counterattack Bakhmut – a claim that former Russian officer Igor Girkin observed was dubious.[2] Prigozhin's exaggerated statements about the imminent threat to Russian forces are likely an attempt to secure more supplies and reinforcements from the Russian MoD to save his forces in Bakhmut. Prigozhin made several positive statements about the Russian MoD, even acknowledging that Russian MoD forces are fighting alongside Chechen units in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast. Prigozhin also surprisingly promoted both Russian MoD-controlled volunteer recruitment efforts and recruitment into Wagner, instead of only advertising service with Wagner formations as he has usually done. Prigozhin expressed some generalized criticism of the Russian military bureaucracy – namely the defense industrial base (DIB) - but such criticisms echo the current state propaganda narrative. Prigozhin had been an avid critic of the Russian military command, and the softening of his rhetoric may indicate that he may be attempting to partially appease the Russian MoD to gain supplies or reinforcements for Wagner forces in Bakhmut.

Prigozhin denied the Kremlin's claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the Kremlin constantly claims. Prigozhin stated that Russia is fighting "exclusively with Ukrainians" who are equipped with NATO-provided equipment and some "russophobic" mercenaries who voluntarily support Ukraine - but not NATO itself.[3] Prigozhin also noted that Russian officials most likely knew that NATO would offer Ukraine military aid, because "it is ridiculous to think that when [Russia] decided to conduct this special military operation it did not account for NATO's help to Ukraine." Prigozhin noted that he is unsure about the "denazification" objectives in Ukraine, because he does not know if there are "Nazis" in Ukraine. Prigozhin also noted that Russia will "demilitarize" Ukraine only when all of the Ukrainian military is destroyed, claiming that this effort is ongoing, but that it is unclear if it will be successful. Prigozhin stated that Russia can avoid an exhausting protracted war by deciding now which borders it wants to capture. Prigozhin also called on the Russian military and media to stop underestimating Ukrainian forces and engaging in internal conflicts. Prigozhin effectively rejected the Kremlin's pre-war and post-war claims that Russia needed to defend itself against a NATO threat in Ukraine and undermined the necessity and probability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's stated maximalist objectives for this invasion.

Bloomberg reported that Prigozhin is preparing to scale back Wagner's operations in Ukraine after the Russian military leadership succeeded in cutting key supplies of personnel and munitions, citing unspecified people familiar with the matter. Bloomberg's sources stated that Wagner is planning to shift focus back to Africa but that there is no current indication that Prigozhin is planning to redeploy the Wagner Group to Africa.^[4] Bloomberg reported, citing sources close to the Kremlin and intelligence services, that top Russian military commanders worked to undermine Prigozhin's position with Russian President Vladimir Putin by claiming that Prigozhin achieved limited and slow success despite sending waves of Russian convicts to their deaths around Soledar and Bakhmut. ISW assessed on March 12 that Putin ultimately turned away from Prigozhin following Wagner's inability to capture Bakhmut.^[5] Bloomberg's sources claimed that the Russian MoD will not allow Prigozhin to take credit for the fall of Bakhmut in state-run media, which is consistent with the MoD's ongoing effort to diminish and supplant the role of Wagner forces in territorial gains in the area.^[6] Prigozhin notably denied Bloomberg's claim of scaling back and shifting focus to Africa.^[7]

A Ukrainian intelligence official supported ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces are unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.^[8] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated on March 23 that Russian forces have demonstrated in the last year of the war that Russian forces are unable to maintain large-scale, strategic-level offensives on multiple axes of advance.^[9] Skibitsky stated that Russian forces failed to achieve expected quick or significant advances in the Donbas offensive that began in early 2023. Skibitsky stated that Ukrainian forces fixed Russian forces to multiple areas on the front line, and that Russian forces in occupied Crimea and Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts are on the defensive. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on March 21 that Russian forces will try to start another offensive, possibly even on multiple different axes, in the coming weeks.^[10]

Russian forces may be shifting their missile strike tactics to focus on Ukrainian military facilities as overall Russian missile strikes decrease, indicating the depletion of Russia's stocks of high precision missiles. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated that Russian forces may be reorienting their strikes to focus on Ukrainian military facilities and force concentrations while continuing to strike Ukrainian energy infrastructure, as opposed to prioritizing striking energy infrastructure as Russian forces did in fall 2022.^[11] Skibitsky said that the GUR assessed that currently only 15 percent of Russia's pre-February 24, 2022 high-precision weapons stocks remain. Skibitsky stated that Russia's higher end Kalibr, Kh-101, and Kh-555 cruise missiles comprise less than 10 percent of Russia's total remaining stocks. Skibitsky stated that Russian forces cannot conduct missile attacks more than twice a month due to the growing need to conserve missiles, in contrast with how Russian forces conducted large air attacks at a higher frequency of about once a week in October 2022. Skibitsky stated that Russia's defense industrial base can produce only produce 20 to 30 Kalibr and Kh-101 cruise missiles per month and that Russia's production of Iskander ballistic missiles is even lower. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces are depleting their missile arsenal, which may constrain Russian missile strikes frequency and intensity.^[12]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin outlined various measures to support Russian military personnel, the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), and Russian independence from the West in an address to the State Duma on March 23.^[13] Mishustin claimed that Russia aims to produce over 100 aircraft, likely including military aircraft, with unspecified modifications by 2026. Mishustin also claimed that Russia has made significant progress towards mobilizing the DIB for increased production and implementing social support measures to support Russian military personnel, particularly mobilized personnel, and their families. Mishustin used the bulk of his address to claim that Russia has done well but will improve even further despite needing to implement additional economic, social, political, technological and diplomatic measures to both counteract the effects of significant Western sanctions and decrease Russian dependence on the West. Mishustin's speech follows Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's March 22 speech at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) collegium, and both Mishustin and Shoigu are attempting to portray Russia as capable of maintaining a prolonged war effort at a pace and scope likely beyond Russia's actual capability, as ISW has previously assessed.^[14]

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Rosatom may be working to restore three power lines at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) that would increase Russian control over the ZNPP. IAEA General Director Rafael Grossi on March 22 commented on Russian reports that Russia's state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom is working to restore three powerlines at the thermal power plant switchyard to incorporate into the grid system in Russian occupied territory, but that the IAEA has not been able to verify this information.^[15] Grossi stated that the IAEA personnel at the ZNPP observed Russian NPP workers training with experienced ZNPP staff in the main control room of the ZNPP. Russian authorities claimed that the purpose of the training is to ensure that adequate staff are available to work at the plant in case of licensed staff shortages. ISW has previously reported on Russian efforts to use Rosatom's management and personnel to establish control over the ZNPP to force the IAEA into accepting Russian control over the ZNPP.^[16]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has softened his rhetoric towards the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely out fear of completely losing his mercenary force in Bakhmut.
- Prigozhin denied the Kremlin's claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the Kremlin constantly claims.
- Bloomberg reported that Prigozhin is preparing to scale back Wagner's operations in Ukraine after Russian military leadership succeeded in cutting key supplies of personnel and munitions.
- Ukrainian officials supported ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces are unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.
- Russian forces may be shifting their missile strike tactics to focus on Ukrainian military facilities as overall Russian missile strikes decrease, indicating the depletion of Russia's stocks of high precision missiles.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin outlined various measures to support Russian military personnel, the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), and Russian independence from the West in an address to the State Duma.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Rosatom may be working to restore three power lines at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) that would increase Russian control over the ZNPP.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces are continuing to attack Bakhmut City and areas in its vicinity and around Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids over the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to coerce Russian reservists, conscripts, and other personnel into contract service.

- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that Russia is continuing efforts to integrate newly-occupied Ukraine into Russian institutions and infrastructure.
- Russian forces in Belarus recently redeployed back to Russia ahead of Russia's spring conscription call-up on April 1.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 22, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 22, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces conducted a limited drone and missile strike campaign in Ukraine overnight on March 21-22, indicating that Russian forces continue struggling with precision missile shortages. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted 21 drone strikes targeting residential and infrastructure areas in Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhia, and Odesa oblasts, and Ukrainian forces shot down 16 of the drones.^[1] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces struck two residential high-rise buildings in Zaporizhzhia City, killing at least one civilian and injuring 33.^[2] Russian forces conducted more intensive and wider-ranging strikes during the fall 2022 air and missile campaign, suggesting that Russian forces may now be rationing their use of high-precision munitions for these strike campaigns or may simply lack the necessary munitions to sustain strike campaigns at their earlier pace and intensity. Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the Russian missile strike threat remains high but that Russian forces would likely only conduct a limited campaign.^[3]

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) intends to increase the size of Russia's air defense forces at a Russian MoD collegium on March 22. Shoigu stated that one of the Russian Aerospace Forces' (VKS) development priorities is to generate more air defense units with advanced air defense systems.^[4] He noted that in 2023 Russian forces plan to form a new air defense division and brigade, form a special purpose air defense missile brigade, form a new anti-aircraft missile regiment with more advanced S-350 systems, form a military transport aviation regiment, and complete the modernization of Moscow City's air defense systems.^[5] Shoigu also commented on Russian combat experience in Ukraine, stating that Russian pilots conducted over 140,000 combat sorties since February 24, 2022, and that 90 percent of operational-tactical and army aviation, 60 percent of strategic long-range aviation, and 85 percent of UAV operators have combat experience.^[6]

The Russian military is unlikely to generate such forces within several years, let alone by the end of 2023. Russia's defense industrial base has historically experienced multi-year delays in developing advanced air defense systems, even before the strict sanctions and exacerbated resource constraints resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Current Russian air defense brigades and regiments received their S-400 systems up to several years behind schedule.^[7] The Russian military had only fielded the S-500 system, which was reportedly supposed to enter production in 2015, in one Russian air defense army by 2021.^[8] Russia also delayed its planned delivery of a second S-400 battery to India in 2022 due to constraints caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.^[9] Russia may eventually grow its air defense forces as part of a larger effort to recreate a large conventional military in the long term, however. Shoigu's announcement is similar to his previous announcement at an MoD collegium in December 2022 in which Shoigu stated that Russia seeks to form 17 new maneuver divisions over several years.^[10]

The formation of new Russian air defense and airlift units will not increase Russian combat power in Ukraine this year. Shoigu's statement is likely intended to reassure the Russian people that the Russian MoD is continuing to develop the Russian military as a world-class military power to offset perceptions about Russian military failures in Ukraine.

Shoigu likely signaled to Japan that it should not attempt to exploit Russia's current military vulnerability in the Kuril Islands and to China that Russia remains a worthwhile military partner. Shoigu extolled the strength of Russia's Eastern Military District (EMD) at length and announced that the EMD deployed a battery of Bastion coastal defense missile systems on Paramushir Island—an island in the northern portion of the Russian-occupied Japanese Kuril Islands. Shoigu's statement was likely a warning signal to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who visited Kyiv and Bucha on March 21, about becoming too engaged in supporting Ukraine.^[11] The Russian Eastern Military District is severely degraded. Significant Russian EMD elements deployed to Belarus and were badly damaged during the Battle of Kyiv in early 2022. Russian EMD elements of the 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades recently fought and suffered heavy losses near Vuhledar in Donetsk Oblast in early 2023.^[12] The 155th has been destroyed and reconstituted as many as eight times in the past year.^[13] Shoigu's statement was also likely a signal to Chinese President Xi Jinping that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in East Asia and remains a viable military partner despite the terrible damage Ukraine has inflicted on the Russian military.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu walked away and refused to answer a question about how soon to expect peace in Ukraine. A journalist from the Russian Ministry of Defense-run media outlet TV Zvezda first asked Shoigu how the war will end, to which Shoigu responded, "any war ends in peace."^[14] The journalist then asked Shoigu how soon to expect peace in Ukraine. Shoigu did not answer the question and walked away. TV Zvezda originally aired the footage of Shoigu walking away but cut it in a later release. ISW previously reported that the Kremlin aims to set information conditions and prepare the Russian information space for a protracted war.^[15]

The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut appears to be slowing amid Western reporting that Russian forces may be attempting to launch offensives in other directions. Russian forces made additional marginal advances in southern Bakhmut, and Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks on the southwestern and northwestern outskirts of the city on March 21 and 22.[16] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 22 that Russian forces' offensive potential in the Bakhmut area is declining, and Ukrainian officials have previously reported fewer combat clashes in the city itself in recent days.[17] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on March 21 that Russian and Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize operations around Bakhmut and that Russian forces might try to conduct another offensive, possibly in many different directions.[18] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed that Russian forces may be losing momentum in the Bakhmut area because the Russian MoD is relocating units to other directions.[19] Russian forces are currently increasing the tempo of their offensive operations around Avdiivka aiming to encircle the settlement, and it is possible that Russian forces are doing so at the expense of their operations around Bakhmut and the stalled offensive around Vuhledar.

Russian personnel of the 136th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) previously stated that they were deploying to the Vuhledar area to conduct assaults, but a Russian milblogger claimed on March 21 that elements of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade are operating in the Avdiivka direction.[20] This apparent deployment change—if it is not a result of Russian misreporting—possibly indicates that Russian forces prioritized the intensification of operations around Avdiivka over restarting the offensive on Vuhledar. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated on March 19 that Russian forces started increasing assaults in the Avdiivka area to set conditions for restarting offensive operations on Vuhledar, further suggesting that current Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka are preventing the potential resumption of offensive activities near Vuhledar. [21] Russian forces appear to be drawing more combat power to the Avdiivka area which may allow them to increase their rate of advance, although there were no confirmed Russian advances in the area on March 22. ISW continues to assess that Russian advances may prompt Ukrainian forces to withdraw from Bakhmut and/or Avdiivka although neither appears likely at this time. Russian forces may choose to launch or intensify offensive operations in new directions, but these operations would likely produce few tangible results as the overall Russian spring offensive continues to near culmination. ISW has still not observed evidence of the commitment of the Russian 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army (Western Military District) despite reports that it had reconstituted in Belarus and deployed to Luhansk. The Russians may commit this unit to one or more offensives already underway or to a new offensive undertaking. The commitment of this division's two or three motorized rifle regiments is unlikely to achieve operationally decisive effects, however, given the failure of larger formations to do so.

Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from long-term storage to Ukraine to compensate for significant armored vehicle losses. The Georgia-based open-source *Conflict Intelligence Team* research group reported on March 22 that Russian forces transported a train loaded with T-54/55 tanks from Primorsky Krai towards western Russia, and social media sources speculated that Russian forces may deploy them to Ukraine.[22] Dutch open-source group Oryx assessed as of March 22 that Russian forces have lost at least 57 T-90, 448 T-80, 1,025 T-72, 53 T-64, and 73 T-62 tanks in highly attritional fighting in Ukraine.[23] Russian armored vehicle losses are currently constraining the Russian military's ability to conduct effective mechanized maneuver warfare in stalling offensives in Ukraine, and Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from storage to Ukraine to augment these offensive operations and prepare for anticipated mechanized Ukrainian counteroffensives. The Soviet Union produced tens of thousands of T-54/55 tanks after the Second World War, and the Russian military may be turning to extensive Soviet reserves of these tanks to solve its significant armored vehicle shortages. The Russian military may also be deciding to field the tanks because parts to repair the T-54/55 tanks are abundantly available and substantially cheaper. T-54/55 tanks lack the armor capabilities of more modern armored equipment, however, and originally carried a smaller main gun, although the Russian military may have modernized some vehicles. The Russian military will likely experience greater numbers of casualties by fielding these older tank systems in Ukraine. The deployment of inferior equipment to replenish the Russian military's ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare may prompt a further degradation of Russian manpower in Ukraine. Russian forces are unlikely to achieve preferable resource attrition rates on the grounds that T-54/55 are cheaper than anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) ammunition, as some have argued—each tank loss is the loss of a tank crew as well as the tank, after all, and it is not clear how effective these tanks will be against Ukrainian armored vehicles, whereas they are highly vulnerable to many anti-tank systems available to Ukraine, not all of which are expensive.

Russian authorities are cracking down against bars in urban areas, possibly to crack down against internal dissent among Russian social circles. St. Petersburg outlet *Fontanka* claimed on March 22 that St. Petersburg authorities shut down two dozen bars as part of a broader investigation into claims of involving minors in "anti-social acts," including systematic drinking, drug use, and vagrancy.[24] This excuse is implausible given normal Russian attitudes toward "systematic drinking." Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel conducted recent raids against two popular bars and forced patrons to conduct pro-war activities, after which at least one Russian businessman stepped away from his role in managing the bars, as ISW has previously reported.[25] These raids may target rich Russian businessmen like Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, who failed to deny current ownership of a St. Petersburg bar in his response to a Russian journalist who alleged that Prigozhin owned the bar in June 2022.[26] These measures may also encourage self-censorship within these circles and among bar attendees by publicly displaying the consequences of speaking out of turn.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted a limited drone and missile strike campaign in Ukraine overnight on March 21-22, indicating that Russian forces continue struggling with precision missile shortages.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) intends to increase the size of Russia's air defense forces at a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) collegium on March 22.
- Shoigu likely signaled to Japan that it should not become more engaged in supporting Ukraine by announcing the deployment of an anti-shipping missile system on one of the Kuril Islands.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu walked away and refused to answer a question about how soon to expect peace in Ukraine.
- The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut appears to be slowing amid Western reporting that Russian forces may be attempting to launch offensives in other directions.
- Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from storage to Ukraine to compensate for significant armored vehicle losses.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains within Bakhmut and continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and on the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian forces continue to clear an area on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Kremlin continued hybrid reserve callup and crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit Russians for contract service.

- Russian officials and occupation authorities continued to advocate for legislative changes in an effort to further legitimize the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 21, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 21, 7:45pm ET

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Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be setting conditions to weaponize the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a method of Russian power projection in advance of Russia's accession to the rotating UNSC presidency in April. Russian UN Ambassador Vasily Nebenya stated during a press conference on March 21 that Russia plans to hold an informal UNSC meeting in early April to discuss the "real situation" of "Ukrainian children taken to Russia."^[1] Nebenya claimed that Russia planned to hold the meeting before the announcement of the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrants for Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.^[2] Nebenya's announcement, as well as vitriolic denials of the ICC's accusations by Russian officials, come as Kremlin-appointed occupation officials continue to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under a variety of schemes and guises.^[3] Putin additionally made a number of notable comments proclaiming Russia's commitment to the UN, UNSC, and the UN charter during his press conference with Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 21.^[4] Taken in tandem, Nebenya's and Putin's comments suggest that Russia continues to use its position on the UNSC as a base of power projection as the UNSC prepares for Russia to take the UNSC presidency in April.^[5] By setting information conditions to posture about Russia's supposed commitment to the UNSC, Putin is positioning himself to continue to weaponize and exploit Russia's UNSC veto power in the coming months.

The second day of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to suggest that Putin has not been able to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for. Putin and Xi signed a "Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation, Entering a New Era" on March 21, which stressed that Russian-Chinese relations are comprehensive, strategic, and at the highest level in history.^[6] The Joint Statement outlines a variety of bilateral intentions and affirms the commitment of Russia and China to each other's state sovereignty and territorial integrity, among other diplomatic promises.^[7] The commitments made by Xi and Putin were notably lopsided, however, indicating the Xi is agreeing to a more reserved version of Russian-Chinese relations than Putin likely desires, as ISW observed on March 20.^[8] Xi praised Putin, reaffirmed China's commitment to Russia in the UNSC, and amplified China's position on a political settlement of the war in Ukraine; but Xi did not go much further than offering those statements.^[9] Putin, by contrast, announced a number of measures that signal Russia's continued orientation towards and dependence on China in the energy and economic sectors, which appear very one-sided compared to Xi's relatively tempered commitments.^[10] Xi additionally did not signal an intent to provide support for Russia's war in Ukraine beyond vague diplomatic assurances, which is likely a step down from what Putin hoped to secure in negotiations. Putin has likely failed to secure the exact sort of partnership that he needs and desires, and Xi will likely leave Moscow having secured assurances that are more one-sided than Putin intended them to be. Putin observed that Russia and China had "a very substantiative and candid exchange of views" on the prospects for the further development of the Russian-Chinese relations. Such rhetoric notably lacks the language normally used in diplomatic readouts to indicate that the two parties have come to definitive and substantive agreements.

Putin portrayed the Western provision of depleted uranium ammunition to Ukraine as a significant escalation in order to bolster information operations aiming to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine and to place the onus for negotiations on the West. Putin claimed on March 21, while discussing the Chinese peace plan, that the West is beginning to use weapons with a "nuclear" component in a response to the UK's announcement that it would provide Ukraine with shells with depleted uranium.^[11] Putin claimed that the UK's provision of depleted uranium shells indicated that the West is not ready for a "peaceful settlement."^[12] Anti-tank munitions in the West are commonly made of depleted uranium—that is, uranium that is less radioactive than natural uranium—due to its high density and the penetrative effect it generates. Such munitions cannot be used to produce either nuclear or radiological weapons. Putin seeks to portray the provision of depleted uranium shells as escalatory in order to deter Western security assistance despite the shells not containing any fissile or radiological material.

The Wagner Group may lose most of its convict force in the upcoming weeks as convicts finish their six-month military contracts. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that thousands of Wagner convicts who were recruited during fall 2022 will be pardoned and released, given that Wagner appears to be sticking to its promise of releasing convicts after six months of service.^[13] The UK MoD forecasted that the exodus of convict forces would worsen Wagner personnel shortages as the Kremlin has also blocked Wagner from recruiting additional prisoners. The Kremlin had previously confirmed on January 27 that Russian President Vladimir Putin is issuing preemptive pardon for convicts who serve in Russian combat operations in Ukraine.^[14] The Kremlin's announcement aligns with the ISW-established timeline of Putin's decision to completely distance himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin following the fall of Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, on January 12–13.^[15] The Kremlin had likely deliberately authorized publicization of pre-emptive pardons to incentivize more Wagner convicts to leave following the expiration of their contracts to further erode the Wagner force. Prigozhin has developed a brand consistently mocking the Russian MoD for its disregard for the troops' wellbeing and is unlikely to anger a convict force by retaining them on the frontlines past the expiration of their contracts.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) launched a criminal investigation into the Deputy Commander of the Rosgvardia's Central District, Major General Vadim Dragomiretsky on March 20.[16] Russian State Duma Parliamentarian Aleksandr Khinshtein stated that Dragomiretsky is suspected of receiving multimillion dollar bribes and abusing his power and will face subsequent dismissal from his position. Khinshtein said that officials forced Dragomiretsky to admit his guilt in a written confession. Dragomiretsky was suspected of having received bribes from a contractor who reconstructed a military unit in the Moscow Oblast.[17] The accusations follow Russian President Vladimir Putin's bill on March 18 that increased fines and jailtime for the misappropriation of Russian military assets.[18] Khinshtein stated that the Rosgvardia leadership's investigation proves its dedication to "purifying their ranks." The Kremlin may use the premise of misappropriation of military funds to oust officials who have fallen out of favor.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced on March 20 that it authorized a presidential drawdown to provide an additional \$350 million of security assistance to Ukraine.[19] The DoD stated that the package will include ammunition for HIMARS, 155mm artillery rounds, HARMs missiles, and other critical military equipment.[20]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be setting conditions to weaponize the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a method of Russian power projection in advance of Russia's accession to the rotating UNSC presidency in April.
- The readouts of the second day of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to suggest that Putin has not been able to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for.
- Putin falsely portrayed the Western provision of depleted uranium ammunition (not suitable for use in nuclear or radiological weapons) to Ukraine as a significant escalation in order to bolster information operations aiming to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine and to place the onus for negotiations on the West.
- Wagner Group may lose most of its convict force in the upcoming weeks as convicts finish their six-month military contracts.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) launched a criminal investigation into the Deputy Commander of the Rosgvardia's Central District, Major General Vadim Dragomiretsky.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced that it authorized a presidential drawdown to provide around \$350 million of security assistance to Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces did not make any confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut and continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- The Kremlin continues crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit men across Russia for contract service to avoid declaring second mobilization wave.
- Russian occupation officials continue to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 20, 2023

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

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

March 20, 6:45pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Russian forces made marginal gains in and around Bakhmut amid a reported increase in the tempo of Russian operations around Avdiivka. Russian forces likely made additional gains in southwestern and northern Bakhmut as well as northwest of Bakhmut between Bohdanivka and Khromove as of March 20.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 19 that Russian troops attacked toward Berdychi (10km northwest of Avdiivka), which indicates that Russian forces likely advanced west of Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka) and captured Stepove (just west of Krasnohorivka).[2] Russian forces are likely increasing the tempo of operations north of Avdiivka in an effort to set conditions for the encirclement of the settlement and are reportedly employing a greater number of aviation units in the area to support these operations.[3] Avdiivka Mayor Vitaly Barabash told AFP News on March 20 that Russian forces are increasingly using Kh-59, Kh-101, Kh-555, and S-300 missiles in the Avdiivka area.[4] A Ukrainian military spokesperson stated on March 20 that Russian forces have lost about three unspecified companies (likely referring to infantry) in assaults on Avdiivka since March 19.[5] ISW previously reported that this increased tempo of Russian operations in the Avdiivka area has reportedly led to major losses and is likely a misguided effort to pull Ukrainian forces away from other areas of the front.[6] ISW has not observed Russian forces arraying substantial combat power along the outskirts of Donetsk City, and it is unlikely that Russian forces will be able to sustain this temporary increased tempo. ISW assesses that the overall Russian spring offensive is likely approaching culmination, and Russian forces may be intensifying efforts to make even marginal gains before they lose the initiative in Ukraine.[7] It remains possible that Russian advances could prompt Ukraine to withdraw from Bakhmut and/or Avdiivka although neither appears likely at this time.

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 20 and offered a more reserved vision for Russian-Chinese relations than what Putin was likely seeking. Xi and Putin touted the strength of Chinese-Russian relations in their meeting on March 20, but offered differing interpretations of the scale of future relations in articles they published on March 19.[8] Putin published an article in Chinese state media in which he argued that Russia and China are building a partnership for the formation of a multipolar world order in the face of the collective West's seeking of domination and the United States pursuing a policy of dual containment against China and Russia.[9] Xi offered a less aggressive overarching goal for Russian-Chinese relations in his article published in Russian state media outlet *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, in which he noted that Russia and China are generally pursuing a multipolar world order but not specifically against an adversarial West.[10] Xi instead focused heavily on presenting China as a viable third-party mediator to the war in Ukraine whose plan for

negotiations "reflects the unity of views of the world community on overcoming the Ukrainian crisis."^[11] Putin wrote that Russia welcomes China's willingness to "play a constructive role in crisis management" regarding the war in Ukraine, but Putin likely was hoping for Xi to adopt a similarly aggressive rhetorical line against the West.^[12]

Xi's refusal to explicitly align China with Russia in Putin's envisioned geopolitical conflict with the West is a notable departure from China's declared "no limits partnership" with Russia preceding the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.^[13] Xi's rhetoric suggests that he is not inclined to fully give Russia the economic and political support that Russia needs to reverse setbacks in Ukraine. Putin and Xi offered somewhat similar visions for increased Chinese-Russian economic partnership, and it is likely that the two will sign bilateral trade and economic agreements during Xi's visit, some of which will likely aim to facilitate schemes for sanctions evasion.^[14] Xi will also likely offer a more concrete proposal for a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine, although it remains unclear what his proposal will entail and how receptive the Kremlin will be to it. The prospects of China supplying Russia with military equipment also remain unclear.

Putin is likely increasing his attempts to rhetorically rally the rest of the world against the West, although it remains unlikely that he will achieve decisive effects through this effort. Putin attended the International Parliamentary Conference "Russia-Africa in a Multipolar World" on March 20 and stated that Russia and states in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America uphold the norms of social principles, morality, and traditions and oppose neo-colonial ideology.^[15] Putin's depiction of an envisioned Chinese-Russian axis against the West and his comments at the conference likely amount to an intensified proposal to non-aligned countries to form a defined anti-Western bloc. Putin likely hoped that Xi would offer a similar vision to augment this proposal, and Xi's refusal to do so likely weakens the impacts of Putin's efforts. The attractiveness of a potential anti-Western Chinese-Russian-based geopolitical bloc lies more with China's economic and political power than with Russia's declining economic strength and its military power badly degraded by fighting in Ukraine. Russia's ongoing diplomatic efforts to generate support for its war in Ukraine continue to produce few tangible results, and an intensified effort to rally the rest of the world against the West will not likely be more effective.

Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to maintain powerful political leverage and regional connections within Russia despite some officials' attempts to distance themselves from the Wagner Group. Prigozhin claimed on March 20 that Krasnodar Krai Governor Veniamin Kondratyev personally invited a Wagner representative to Krasnodar Krai, overruled local refusals to bury Wagner mercenaries, and informed the representative that the Wagner Group will face no further obstacles burying its dead.^[16] Prigozhin on March 18 claimed that authorities in Goryachiy Klyuch, Krasnodar Krai, reneged on an agreement to bury Wagner personnel.^[17] A Goryachiy Klyuch official initially told a Wagner representative that Kondratyev stripped him of authority to cooperate with Wagner, which ISW assessed as an indicator of weakening connections between Prigozhin and regional officials.^[18] Prigozhin's ability to reach out to Kondratyev directly and resolve the situation suggests that his leverage in the krai remains strong. Goryachiy Klyuch officials' initial refusal to bury Wagner mercenaries and ongoing clashes between Prigozhin and St. Petersburg officials over Wagner burials indicate that some authorities do seek to distance themselves from Wagner PMC, however.^[19]

Russian authorities are likely unsure of how to redefine Wagner's new role following Prigozhin's overextension of Wagner resources and support. The destruction of Wagner forces near Bakhmut is likely forcing Prigozhin and Russian officials to reconsider the role of Wagner while Prigozhin works to rebuild his forces. Several news sources reported on March 20 that Russian political party "A Just Russia – for Truth" leader Sergey Mironov publicly advocated for the legalization of private military companies – such as the Wagner Group – and proposed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) take control of their oversight, which would likely be a major limitation on Prigozhin's current freedoms as Wagner's financier.^[20] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger on March 19 accused the Russian MoD of sabotaging Wagner efforts to replenish its ranks in Ukraine with Wagner fighters from further abroad by canceling military transport flights.^[21] If true, this report would suggest that the Russian MoD is attempting to prevent Wagner from regaining political leverage and rebuilding its military capabilities in Ukraine while maintaining Wagner's role abroad. Prigozhin himself appears to be taking every opportunity to increase his media relevance and maintain the Wagner Group's prominence in the process. Prigozhin has publicized an array of statements picking fights with local officials, amplifying disputes over Wagner burials, commenting on the expansion of Russian censorship laws, commemorating the alleged one-year anniversary of Wagner involvement in Ukraine, and more since March 18 alone.^[22]

The Russian information space continues to respond to the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s issuance of arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova with ire and anxiety. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on March 20 that the Kremlin is "calm" about Putin's arrest warrant and called its issuance "outrageous and unacceptable."^[23] The Russian Investigative Committee, however, opened a criminal case against ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan and several ICC judges on March 20, indicating that Russian leadership feels the need to posture proactively in its response to the ICC despite promises that the arrest warrants are meaningless in the eyes of the Russian government.^[24] Russian Security Council Deputy Head Dmitry Medvedev relatedly threatened a missile strike against the ICC and suggested that "it is quite possible to imagine the point of application of a hypersonic missile carrier from the North Sea from a Russian ship to the Hague courthouse."^[25] Medvedev has notably made continuous inflammatory and escalated threats against the collective West, and his threats should not be taken as more than aggressive informational posturing on the part of the Kremlin.^[26] The range of ostensibly diverging Russian responses to the ICC arrest warrants suggests that this event will likely remain a point of neuralgia in the Russian information space and will likely lead to continued legislative and informational responses.

Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on March 20 that the frequency of large Russian missile attacks has decreased. Yusov stated that Russia does not have many Kalibr, Iskander, and Kinzhal missiles left, but still has many S-300 surface-to-air missiles.^[27] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces continue to deplete their missile arsenal and may constrain how often and at what scale to conduct missile strikes but will likely continue to threaten Ukrainian critical infrastructure and civilians.^[28]

Russia requested that the UN Security Council discuss Israeli airstrikes in Syria possibly in retaliation for Israel's approval of export licenses for anti-drone jamming systems for Ukraine. Israeli news outlet *The Times of Israel* reported on March 18 that Russia's UN representative told the UN Security Council that Israel's airstrikes in Syria must stop.^[29] An Israeli official claimed that Israel had not expected Russia to call for the discussion and feared that Russia would promote a resolution against Israel. Russia's comments about Israeli airstrikes in Syria occurred after Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen notified Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky about the approval of the export licenses on Cohen's visit to Ukraine on March 15.^[30]

Key Takeaways

- Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and offered a more reserved vision for Russian-Chinese relations than Putin likely desires.
- Putin is likely increasing his attempts to rally the rest of the world against the West, although it remains unlikely that he will achieve decisive effects in this effort.
- Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to maintain powerful political leverage and regional connections despite some officials' attempts to distance themselves. Russian authorities are likely unsure of how to redefine Wagner's new role following Prigozhin's overextension of Wagner resources and support.
- The Russian information space continues to respond to the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s issuance of arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova with ire and anxiety.
- Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that the frequency of large Russian missile attacks has decreased.
- Russia requested that the UN Security Council discuss Israeli airstrikes in Syria possibly in retaliation for Israel's approval of export licenses for anti-drone jamming systems for Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued making advances in and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline and made marginal gains near Avdiivka.
- Russian sources claim that Russian forces are building up defensive fortifications and repelled Ukrainian reconnaissance-in-force operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian sources accused unknown actors of planting a bomb that exploded near a gas pipeline in occupied Simferopol, Crimea.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged Russian difficulties obtaining components for high-tech industrial production.
- Ukrainian partisans killed Russian-appointed head of the Kherson Oblast pre-detention center Serhii Moskalenko with an improvised explosive device on March 17.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19, 2023

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19, 2023

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

March 19, 5 pm ET

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ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 19. This report discusses growing Russian concern about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive near Bakhmut or in southern Ukraine, and Russian efforts to prepare mitigations for these claimed efforts. The tempo of Russian offensive operations across the theater has slowed in recent weeks, suggesting that the Russian spring offensive in Donbas may be nearing culmination. Ukrainian officials have indicated that significant Russian losses near Vuhledar are severely inhibiting Russian forces' capacity to conduct further offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast. Russian President Vladimir Putin used his first visit to recently-occupied Ukraine to portray himself as an involved wartime leader amid exaggerated responses in the Russian nationalist information space over fears of a possible future Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces likely conducted a localized counterattack southwest of Bakhmut amid growing Russian discussion about a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area. Geolocated footage published on March 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful counterattack southwest of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) and pushed Russian forces further away from the T0504 highway in the area.^[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Russian forces conducted 25 attacks in the Bakhmut area on March 19, but Russian forces likely only secured marginal gains.^[2] Russian sources amplified footage on March 18 alleging to show a column of Ukrainian armored vehicles along the T0504 southwest of Kostyantynivka (22km southwest of Bakhmut) and speculated that Ukrainian forces are preparing to launch counteroffensive operations southwest of Bakhmut.^[3] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are currently capable of intensifying counterattacks to stabilize the front line around Bakhmut.^[4] The growing Russian discussions about an imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area suggest that Russian sources are increasingly uncertain about the Russian military's ability to maintain the initiative around Bakhmut.

Statements made by Ukrainian military officials on the pace and prospects of current Russian offensive operations may suggest that the overall Russian spring offensive may be nearing culmination. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated on March 19 that Russia was unable to gather sufficient forces for the anticipated major offensive in Donbas and noted that current Russian offensive actions cannot be called a "major strategic operation."^[5] Cherevaty emphasized that Russian forces cannot even complete the tactical capture of Bakhmut, which supports ISW's assessment that the Wagner Group offensive near Bakhmut is likely nearing culmination.^[6] Russian forces are also notably struggling to secure operationally significant gains elsewhere along the frontline, particularly in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City and Vuhledar areas. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi noted on March 19 that Russian forces have been desperately attacking Avdiivka to restart offensive operations on Vuhledar, likely suggesting that continued Russian attacks in the Avdiivka area are meant partially to pull Ukrainian reserves away from western Donetsk Oblast to the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.^[7] Dmytrashkivskyi stated that this renewed offensive focus on Avdiivka has recently led to major Russian losses around Avdiivka amounting to the equivalent of one company, on which ISW has previously reported.^[8]

Ukrainian military officials additionally continue to indicate that massive Russian losses in the Vuhledar area are severely degrading Russian offensive capacity in Donetsk Oblast. Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces have reinforced elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (currently heavily committed in the Vuhledar area) with reserve forces of the 98th Guards Airborne Division.[9] The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade suffered catastrophic manpower and equipment losses during continued failed attacks on Vuhledar in November 2022 and February 2023, and Russian military leadership is likely heavily relying on reserve elements from the 98th Airborne Division to offset and compensate for the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade's losses.[10] The 98th Airborne Division is at least partially committed in the Kremenna area in Luhansk Oblast, and commitment of some of its constituent elements to the Vuhledar area is likely indicative of a level of desperation on the part of the Russian military command trying to reconstitute battered units and restart offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast.[11] The Ukrainian General Staff similarly noted that the Russian military leadership is in a hurry to send reinforcements to Vuhledar and has been creating a "Shtorm" detachment within the 37th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District), which will presumably deploy to the Vuhledar area on March 24.[12] The *ad hoc* reconstitution of existing units for deployment to Vuhledar, as well as the apparent creation of sub-brigade echelon special formations, suggests that Russian combat capabilities in western Donetsk Oblast are greatly degraded.

The overall Russian spring offensive is thus likely approaching culmination. Ongoing Russian offensives along the Svatove-Kremenna line, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City and Vuhledar frontlines have failed to make more than incremental tactical gains in the first few months of 2023. Russia has committed the approximately 300,000 mobilized soldiers, called up by partial mobilization in September 2022 for the purpose of pursuing exactly such a spring offensive, to these various offensive efforts. If 300,000 Russian soldiers have been unable to give Russia a decisive offensive edge in Ukraine it is highly unlikely that the commitment of additional forces in future mobilization waves will produce a dramatically different outcome this year. Ukraine is therefore well positioned to regain the initiative and launch counteroffensives in critical sectors of the current frontline.

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited occupied Mariupol on March 19, likely to project the image of invulnerability and to continue efforts to portray himself as an involved wartime leader. Putin's visit to Mariupol included highly staged meetings with residents, a bizarre drive around the city with Putin supposedly driving the car himself, and a briefing from Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin about restoration efforts in the city.[13] The Kremlin likely framed Putin's first visit to occupied Ukraine outside of Crimea as a spontaneous jaunt in order to portray Putin as an invincible wartime leader who can visit the zone of hostilities without concern.[14] Putin likely chose to visit Mariupol because it is a city seized since May 2022 that is far away from the frontline, where Russian forces and occupation officials have already instituted stringent security measures. Putin also likely meant his visit to be a response to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for his involvement in war crimes connected to the deportation of Ukrainian children, at least 1,000 of whom Russian officials deported from Mariupol alone.[15] Putin likely sought to portray his role in the deportation of children and the destruction of Mariupol as beyond the jurisdiction of the international community and himself as safe from the Ukrainian military 80km to the north. Putin also visited the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don, Krasnodar Krai, and received briefings from Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and other Russian military commanders.[16] Russian media publicized Putin's meetings with Gerasimov and previous theater commander Army General Sergey Surovkin to portray Putin as highly involved in the management of the war in Ukraine as well as possibly to signal that Gerasimov currently has Putin's favor and that Surovkin, with his former Wagner Group connections, is now firmly subordinated under Gerasimov.[17]

Putin's Mariupol visit likely also aimed to assuage a longstanding and pervasive fear in the nationalist space about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine. Russian milbloggers that ISW tracks claimed *en masse* on March 19 that Ukrainian forces conducted a limited and localized counterattack near Novodanylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, a disproportionate response to a frequent occurrence on other areas of the front.[18] Many of these milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to prepare for a future counteroffensive on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line, which milbloggers have been claiming with varying degrees of urgency since October 2022.[19] Some milbloggers specifically linked Putin's March 19 visit to Mariupol to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.[20] One milblogger claimed that Putin's visit shows he is not a cowardly leader who is too afraid to leave Moscow Oblast out of fear of Ukrainian intelligence and claimed that the Russian "surrender of the south [of Ukraine] will be Putin's personal defeat." [21] The milblogger added that Russian forces would have to work harder to defend against a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin instead sarcastically claimed that Russian forces would "do everything to be defeated" in order to "blame everything on Putin," noting that Putin appointed and kept in power all the Russian military commanders responsible for Russia's performance in the war thus far.[22] The Russian occupation administration declaring Melitopol rather than Zaporizhzhia City as the capital of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast also likely reflects a desire to ease the palpable fear in the nationalist and domestic information space by portraying Russian occupation as long term and certain.[23]

Former Russian officer, convicted war criminal, and prominent critical nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin indicated that there are likely deepening fractures within the top levels of Russian military leaderships. In a 12-point hyper-critical and sarcastic essay on how Russia can lose the war, Girkin remarked that never changing the leadership of the state, intelligence, and armed forces who "have already demonstrated blatant incompetence" is a sure-fire way to lose the war, and that Russia has already committed this cardinal sin.[24] Girkin called for leadership changes in the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the 5th Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, political advisors, and representatives of military industry.[25] Girkin's omission of the broader FSB organization (the FSB's 5th Service is a distinct but subordinate FSB entity concerned with intelligence targeting of Russia's foreign neighbors in the post-Soviet space) and FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov is noteworthy because it suggests that Girkin views the FSB as distinct from the failing Russian military, intelligence, and security apparatus.[26] The FSB's 5th Service was also responsible for laying the groundwork for the invasion by paying off Ukrainian collaborators.[27] Girkin's comments may indicate that there are considerable tensions between the Russian military command and the FSB, as well as within the FSB itself. Girkin's acerbic commentary continues to provide insight into growing inner circle frictions.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 19:

- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces likely secured marginal gains near Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) amidst continued Russian offensive operations in and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City and may have advanced towards Berdychi, about 10km northwest of Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continued erecting defensive fortifications throughout southern Ukraine.

- Unknown actors killed a Russian occupation Ministry of Internal Affairs Patrol Service platoon commander with a car bomb in occupied Kherson Oblast.[32] Ukrainian media hypothesized that the attack may have been a partisan attack or a result of Russian infighting.
- Russian federal communication supervisor Roskomnadzor blocked a website that helped Russians escape mobilization in continued crackdowns against resistance to mobilization.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 18, 2023

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 18, 2023

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

March 18, 7:15 pm ET

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Russian forces targeted Ukraine with 16 Shahed-136 drones overnight on March 17-18. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukrainian forces shot down 11 of the 16 drones and noted that it is difficult for Ukrainian mobile fire groups to shoot down drones at night due to the lack of visibility.[1] The drones targeted facilities in Kyiv, Zaporizhia, Dniproptetrovsk, and Lviv oblasts, reportedly including a Ukrainian fuel warehouse in Novomoskovsk, Dniproptetrovsk Oblast.[2] Russian sources claimed that Russian drone strikes also targeted Kyiv Thermal Power Plant 5, which Russian forces reportedly targeted in a strike campaign on March 9.[3]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his campaign against anti-war dissent and the misappropriation of military assets within Russia. Putin signed two bills into law on March 18 that significantly increase the fines and jail time for discrediting Russian forces in Ukraine and for selling Russian arms to foreign actors. [4] Russian sources reported that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel detained over 40 people in raids against two Moscow bars for suspicion of financing Ukrainian forces and made patrons participate in pro-war activities on March 17.[5] Russian sources have increasingly reported on FSB detaining Russian civilians under suspicion of financially assisting Ukrainian forces since February 28 after Putin instructed the FSB to intensify counterintelligence measures and crackdown against the spread of pro-Ukrainian ideology.[6]

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely attempting to set informational conditions to explain the Wagner Group's culmination around Bakhmut. Prigozhin-affiliated outlet RIA FAN published an interview with Prigozhin on March 17 in which he asserted that Ukrainian forces are preparing to launch counteroffensives in five separate directions: into Belgorod Oblast, in the Kremminna area, in the Bakhmut area, towards Donetsk City, and in Zaporizhia Oblast. [7] Prigozhin stated that Ukrainian forces will launch these operations starting in mid-April and urged Russian forces to prepare for these counteroffensives by preserving ammunition and equipment.[8] Prigozhin likely depicted Ukrainian forces as having enough combat power to launch a massive theater-wide counteroffensive to justify the Wagner Group's inability to complete an envelopment or encirclement of Bakhmut. Prigozhin stated that Ukrainian forces are preparing to counterattack Wagner's flanks in the Bakhmut area and that Wagner fighters are preparing for these counterattacks.[9] ISW previously assessed that Wagner fighters are likely conducting opportunistic attacks on easier-to-seize settlements further north and northwest of Bakhmut as their ability to make tactical gains in Bakhmut itself diminishes, and Prigozhin likely seeks to frame these activities as securing flanks in preparation for Ukrainian counteroffensives.[10] A prominent Wagner-affiliated milblogger similarly argued that Wagner fighters are conducting offensive operations northwest of Bakhmut to spoil Ukrainian counterattacks and asserted that Wagner fighters are focused on advancing towards the Siverskyi Donets Canal west of Bakhmut to complete the envelopment of the city.[11] The milblogger likely tried to rationalize the Wagner Group's failure to envelop Bakhmut by setting the necessary conditions for the envelopment further away and farther out of the Wagner Group's current operational capabilities. Prigozhin also claimed that Ukrainian forces have at least 19,000 personnel deployed within Bakhmut, likely an attempt to justify Wagner's lack of progress within the city.[12]

Prigozhin may be implying that the overall Russian offensive in Ukraine is nearing culmination by calling for Russian forces to preserve resources for Ukrainian counteroffensives. Prigozhin's forecast about five separate Ukrainian counteroffensives is mirror-imaging—Russian forces have specialized in conducting multiple simultaneous advances along diverging axes that are not mutually supporting, which is one of the reasons for Russian failures in the war so far. Prigozhin may have forecasted a Ukrainian counteroffensive in five directions to amplify the relevance of his calls for Russian forces to preserve ammunition and equipment and out of concerns that widespread ammunition and equipment shortages are constraining the Wagner Group's and the Russian military's ability to maintain offensive operations in Ukraine. Prigozhin's depiction of imminent Ukrainian counteroffensives also implies that he believes that Russian forces will lose the initiative to Ukraine soon and be forced onto the defensive rather than continuing stalled or unsuccessful offensives in the Kremminna, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, or Vuhledar areas.

Russian regional authorities may be severing their connections with Prigozhin. Prigozhin claimed that the Goryachi Klyuch, Krasnodar Krai authorities reneged on a prior agreement to bury Wagner Group deceased mercenaries in the town.[13] Goryachi Klyuch Head Sergey Belopolskyi claimed that locals do not think that the resort town Goryachi Klyuch is an appropriate place to bury Wagner fighters.[14] Prigozhin also released a phone call in which a Goryachi Klyuch official told a Wagner representative that Krasnodar Krai Governor Veniamin Kondratyev stripped him of authority to cooperate with Wagner.[15] Wagner servicemen also released a threatening video appeal to the local administration claiming that they will "personally solve the issue" with the administration if they do not respond to the appeals. [16] The Wagner Group has used training and burial grounds in Krasnodar Krai in the past, indicating that Prigozhin likely has extensive, long-term connections to regional authorities that may now be weakening.[17] Prigozhin previously fought with St. Petersburg officials over their refusal to bury deceased Wagner mercenaries in the same burial ground as conventional Russian soldiers, as ISW has previously reported.[18]

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova reiterated on March 18 that the Kremlin has not abandoned its maximalist goals in Ukraine. Zakharova stated that Russia is ready to hear Western and Ukrainian proposals for the diplomatic settlement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but noted that the West will need to remove all sanctions and lawsuits from Russia.^[19] Zakharova continued to reject Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's conditions for peace talks by noting that the removal of Russian forces from occupied Ukrainian territories, reparation obligations, and attendance at international tribunals are "unrelated" to the establishment of peace in Ukraine. Zakharova instead claimed that peace in Ukraine depends on the West ceasing its weapon deliveries to Ukraine, the international recognition "of new territorial realities," and the demilitarization and "denazification" of Ukraine. Zakharova's demands mirror Russian President Vladimir Putin's maximalist objectives announced on February 24, 2022, and are a continuation of the Kremlin's ongoing information operation to prompt the West to offer preemptive concessions and coerce Ukraine into negotiations on conditions more favorable to Russia.^[20]

BBC and Russian opposition news outlet Medazona reported on March 17 that Russian forces (excluding Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] and Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] militiamen) have suffered a confirmed 17,375 deaths, a conservative estimate of 35,000 total deaths, and 157,000 casualties. BBC claimed that total pro-Russia forces' casualties may exceed 211,500 people. BBC noted that 1,304 of the dead it has confirmed perished within the past two weeks, indicating that recent casualties are significantly higher than the 2022 average. The majority of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine reportedly come from outside of Russia's major urban centers. Moscow—which comprises 9% of the entire Russian population—has suffered only 107 confirmed deaths while Krasnodar Krai has suffered 714, Sverdlovsk Oblast has suffered 664, and Buryatia has suffered 567.^[21]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces targeted Ukraine with 16 Shahed-136 drones overnight on March 17-18.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his crackdown against anti-war dissent and misappropriation of military assets within Russia.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely attempting to set informational conditions for the Wagner Group's culmination around Bakhmut.
- Russian regional authorities may be severing their connections with Prigozhin.
- Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova reiterated that the Kremlin has not abandoned its maximalist goals in Ukraine.
- BBC and Russian opposition news outlet Medazona estimated that Russian forces have suffered at least 35,000 total deaths and 157,000 total casualties.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and on the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continue to erect defensive fortifications along ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in and near occupied Crimea.
- Conventional Russian authorities and the Wagner Group continue to invest significant resources in efforts to involve youth in the war effort and ready them mentally and physically for military service.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts russify Ukrainians in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 17, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 17, 6:25pm ET

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Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Russia from March 20 to 22 likely to discuss sanctions evasion schemes and Chinese interest in mediating a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin stated that Putin and Xi plan to sign unspecified bilateral documents and discuss topical issues in Russia's and China's comprehensive partnership.^[1] Chinese companies have reportedly sold rifles, drone parts, and equipment to Russian entities that could be used for military purposes, and Western intelligence agencies have stated that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia.^[2] Xi likely plans to discuss sanctions evasion schemes with Putin and Russian officials to support the sale and provision of Chinese equipment to Russia. ISW previously assessed that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Xi signed a package of 16 agreements on March 1 that may facilitate Russian sanctions evasion by channeling Chinese products through Belarus.^[3] Xi also likely aims to promote Chinese efforts aiming to position China as an impartial third-party mediator for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. China released a broad 12-point peace plan for the war in Ukraine on February 24, although it remains unclear what more definitive Chinese proposals for a negotiated settlement to the war would encompass. Xi may seek to parlay his success in mediating the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia into a larger effort to mediate in this war.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that Belarusian industry is supplying Russia with electronic components, potentially supporting previous ISW assessments that Belarus may assist Russia in evading Western sanctions. Lukashenko stated on March 17 that Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on establishing a joint Belarusian-Russian center for the development and production of photomasks (an intermediate good used in the production of integrated circuits), that the two states have developed a list of critically important electronic components, and that Belarusian industry has already begun shipping unspecified microelectronics to Russian enterprises.^[4] ISW previously assessed that Belarus might facilitate sanction evasion for Russia and that China might clandestinely transfer goods and/or equipment to Russia via Belarus.^[5] The US State Department sanctioned several additional Belarusian defense entities and

tightened existing export controls to Belarus as of February 24, 2023, but these sanctions may not be comprehensive enough to prevent Belarus from sending Russia electronic components used in weapon systems and other dual use technologies.[6] Lukashenko made this announcement at the Belarusian Planar Joint Stock Company technological enterprise, which the US does not appear to have sanctioned.[7]

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's rhetoric about Belgrade's refusal to sanction Russia is softening. Vucic refused to promise that Serbia will *not* sanction Russia, acknowledged that Belgrade's decision not to join European sanctions against Russia has brought Serbia "tough [economic] circumstances," and stated that he will evaluate "when we are in a deadlock and when our policy has to change" on March 17.[8] Serbian Economy Minister Rade Basta called on the Serbian government to impose sanctions on Russia and stated that Serbia is paying a "high price" for not doing so on March 14.[9] *Politico* previously reported that Vucic is seemingly reconsidering Serbia's close ties with Russia, spurred in part by ongoing Wagner Group recruitment and subversion efforts in Serbia and demonstrating the international economic and informational costs imposed on Putin by his invasion of Ukraine.[10]

The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on March 17 for alleged war crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[11]

Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that it did not submit a press request to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin concerning a rumored plot by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev against him. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* suggested that someone responsible for fabricating the request is actively engaged in fomenting conflict between different *siloviki* structures, which may support ISW's March 16 assessment that Prigozhin likely promoted the alleged plot to support informational campaigns against the Russian military establishment.[12] ISW initially assessed on March 16 that Prigozhin might have fabricated the alleged plot to support these informational campaigns, but ISW failed to observe that a Russian milblogger had posted rumors about the alleged plot on March 13.[13] Prigozhin's press service was involved in a fabrication of some kind given the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* denial, but Prigozhin does not appear to have fabricated the rumor itself. Prigozhin's press service may have received a fabricated press request or may have fabricated the press request itself. Prigozhin chose to give prominence to the rumored plot whoever fabricated the press request. ISW continues to assess that Prigozhin promoted the rumored plot to identify Patrushev and the Russian Security Council as enemies of the Wagner Group, set conditions to blame Patrushev for Wagner's failures in Ukraine, and support ongoing informational campaigns against the traditional Russian military establishment.[14]

Key Takeaways

- Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Russia from March 20 to 22 likely to discuss sanctions evasion schemes and Chinese interest in mediating a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that Belarusian industry is supplying Russia electronic components, potentially supporting previous ISW assessments that Belarus may assist Russia to evade Western sanctions.
- Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's rhetoric about Belgrade's refusal to sanction Russia is softening.
- The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on March 17 for alleged war crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.
- Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that it did not submit a press request to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin concerning a rumored plot by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev against him.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks across the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian forces along the front line in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues to call up reservists throughout Russia.
- Russian authorities reportedly detained three Ukrainian partisans in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 16, 2023

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

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

March 16, 6:15 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) appears to be trying to penetrate the Russian Defense Industrial Base (DIB) in a way that is reminiscent of the KGB's involvement with the Soviet military establishment. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Center for the Research of Trophy and Prospective Weapons and Military Equipment of the Ukrainian General Staff Andrii Rudyk remarked on March 16 that Ukrainian experts have found FSB markings on many Russian weapons components that Ukrainian forces have destroyed or captured on the battlefield.[1] Rudyk noted that these markings appear not only on equipment such as T-90M tanks, but also on weapons' microcircuits, and suggested that this means that the FSB conducted an equipment inspection of such weapons and components. [2] Rudyk concluded that this means that the FSB does not trust Russian military leadership and is conducting inspections of Russian equipment accordingly.[3] FSB markings on Russian equipment and weapons components, if confirmed, would have broader implications for the relationship between the FSB, the Russian DIB, and the broader Russian military apparatus. Either FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov has instructed the FSB to conduct these investigations at the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin, or Bortnikov has issued this directive independent of Putin. In either case the FSB appears to be directly inserting itself into the inner

workings of the Russian DIB, likely penetrating equipment acquisition and inspection processes. The KGB (the FSB's predecessor) notably penetrated the Red Army and Soviet defense industry in a similar fashion.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that he received a press question exposing a plot spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to undermine and “neutralize” the Wagner Group. Prigozhin’s press service published a claimed request for comment on March 16 from Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* asking if Prigozhin was aware of alleged discussions between Putin and Patrushev regarding the future of the Wagner Group.[4] The press comment claims that information on these discussions has recently circulated on Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels and alleges that Patrushev suggested to Putin that there will be “nothing left” of Wagner in “one and a half to two months.”[5] The post goes on to claim that Patrushev suggested that upon Wagner’s destruction in Ukraine, Prigozhin will try to “unite the former and remaining active Wagner fighters under a far-fetched pretext,” arm them, and “send them to the territory of Russia in order to seize power in the regions bordering Ukraine with a possible advance inland.”[6] The post concludes that Patrushev has already ordered observation and control over the movement of former Wagner fighters and that Putin reportedly agreed with this step and thanked Patrushev for his efforts to “neutralize Wagner in general and Yevgeny Prigozhin in particular.”[7] Prigozhin posted an audio clip in response to the claimed press comment saying that he had not heard about these supposed negotiations or observed speculation on Telegram channels, remarking that Russian special services should work to neutralize threats to Russia regardless of where they come from.[8]

ISW has not observed any information to suggest that these discussions have happened, nor has ISW captured any speculation in the Russian information space about them. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has not published the press comment on its own site, and no record of the comment is visible anywhere other than in references to the post by Prigozhin’s press service. The lack of external confirmation on this subject suggests that Prigozhin has fabricated the alleged plot to further several information operations on behalf of Wagner and his own reputation. First, this exchange clearly identifies Patrushev and possibly the Russian Security Council as enemies of the Wagner Group. Prigozhin appears to be setting careful information conditions to blame Patrushev for Wagner’s failures and potential crackdowns against the group, as well as introducing an invented scenario wherein Wagner poses a direct threat to Russia domestically. This effort appears to be the next evolution of Prigozhin’s campaign against the Russian military establishment, and Patrushev could become Prigozhin’s next target after his concerted informational campaigns against the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff.[9]

Western news agencies confirmed on March 16 that Chinese companies have sold rifles, drone parts, and equipment that could be used for military purposes to unidentified Russian entities. Politico cited data provided by customs data aggregator ImportGenius showing that Chinese companies sent equipment including 1,000 assault rifles, 12 shipments of drone parts, and over 12 tons of body armor to unspecified Russian actors between June and December 2022. [10] CNN also reported on March 16 that Ukrainian forces shot down a retrofitted, weaponized commercial Mugin-5 drone produced by a Chinese commercial manufacturer.[11] *These sales appear small in scale, concern largely commercial equipment, and — in all but one confirmed case — do not include companies with ties to the Chinese government, according to Politico.*[12]

Such Chinese shipments are significant, however, because they could alleviate strain on the overextended Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and circumvent Western attempts to limit Russian access to microchips. ISW has not observed routine Russian small arms shortages, and Russia’s DIB appears capable of producing sufficient quantities of assault rifles. The import of domestically available equipment from China likely enables the Russian DIB to transfer resources — most critically the limited number of skilled Russian defense plant workers — from the production of such goods to the production of military equipment for which Russia has a dire need.[13] Meanwhile, the sale of even commercial drone parts to Russian entities could provide Russia’s DIB with access to valuable microchips vital to the production of sophisticated equipment, which Western sanctions have worked to prevent.[14]

Syrian President Bashar Assad used a staged interview with Russian outlet RIA Novosti to amplify notable Russian information operations. Assad told RIA on March 16 that Russian military bases in Syria should receive the “most advanced weapons” to effectively deter threats in response to a question about the deployment of hypersonic missiles.[15] This comment is explicitly in support of the deployment of Russian hypersonic weapons, likely of the Kinzhal variety, to Syria, which is part of a longstanding Russian information operation to strengthen Assad and increase pressure against Turkey as Ankara considers ratification of Finland and Sweden’s accession into NATO. [16] Assad also notably recognized the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as a part of Russia.[17]

Polish President Andrzej Duda stated on March 16 that Poland will give Ukraine four MiG-29 fighter jets. Polish news outlet Wydarzenia reported that Duda said that Poland will deliver the MiG-29s in the coming four to six weeks.[18] Polish news outlet Rzeczpospolita reported that Duda announced that Poland is servicing an unspecified number of additional MiG-29s for delivery to Ukraine.[19] The Ukrainian Air Force operates MiG-29s and would be able to use them in counteroffensive operations if Ukraine receives them with enough time in advance of its next counteroffensive.

Russia’s redeployment of elements of its “peacekeeping force” from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is eroding Russia’s influence with Armenia. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accused Azerbaijan of preparing to conduct a new large-scale attack and genocide against ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh at an unspecified future time on March 16.[20] Pashinyan stated that Armenia should appeal to the United Nations Security Council if the Russian Federation is unable to uphold the November 9, 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire that Moscow helped broker with Azerbaijan.[21] Pashinyan previously accused Russia’s “peacekeeping force” in Nagorno-Karabakh of “not fulfilling its obligation” under this ceasefire in December 2022 after Russian forces failed to secure passage on the only road through the Lachin Corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.[22] Russia’s “peacekeeping force” in Nagorno-Karabakh is very likely understrength. The Russian military redeployed elements of the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade — Russia’s only dedicated peacekeeping brigade — from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine in March 2022.[23] Ukraine’s General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces severely degraded the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade, killing about 800 and wounding about 400 soldiers of the brigade’s 1,800 soldiers that deployed to Ukraine as of June 2022.[24] Russia will likely lose military influence in other post-Soviet states since Moscow has redeployed elements of permanently stationed Russian forces from Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan, occupied Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Tajikistan to fight in Ukraine.[25]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long-term economic consequences, likely as part of the Kremlin’s effort to prepare Russians for a protracted war. Putin delivered a speech at the Congress of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs in Moscow on March 16 in which he claimed that the Russian economy has steadily grown in the past eight months following a roughly five percent contraction over the first months of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.[26] Putin attempted to portray Russia as not being isolated from the international economy by claiming that Russian trade with fast-growing markets has increased at double-digit rates.[27] Putin claimed that the domestic Russian economy will

experience sustainable long-term growth and forecasted that Russian industries will significantly grow as they fill niches previously held by Western firms that have left the country and stopped doing business with Russia.[28] Putin suggested that the entire Russian economy will expand in a manner similar to the Russian agricultural sector's growth following 2014 Western sanctions regimes associated with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.[29] Putin claimed that Russia's supposed economic resilience has disproven Western analysts who predicted empty store shelves and massive shortages of goods in Russia because of Western sanctions.[30]

Putin's portrayal of a healthy and resilient Russian economy is at odds with Russia's issues with sanctions-related supply chain bottlenecks, the Russian defense industrial base's (DIB) struggle to meet the Russian military's needs in Ukraine, and the Kremlin's substantial projected budget deficit problems.[31] Putin likely sought to reassure the Russian public as the Kremlin increasingly signals to Russians that the Kremlin intends to fight a protracted war in Ukraine and implicitly consign the Russian economy to an indefinite period of stringent Western sanctions.[32] The Kremlin also likely sought to reassure the Russian public that war-related production will not detrimentally impact the rest of the Russian economy as Russian officials continue efforts to gradually mobilize more of Russia's DIB.[33] The Kremlin will likely struggle to not contradict its different informational lines of effort as it attempts to reassure the Russian public about the Russian economy, set informational conditions for a protracted war, and mobilize a wider portion of Russia's DIB.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) appears to be trying to penetrate the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) in a way that is reminiscent of the KGB's involvement with the Soviet military and industrial base.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that he received a press question exposing a plot spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to undermine and "neutralize" the Wagner Group.
- Western news agencies confirmed that Chinese companies have sold military and dual-use equipment to unidentified Russian entities. These sales appear small in scale but could alleviate strain on Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and circumvent Western attempts to limit Russian access to microchips.
- Syrian President Bashar Assad used a staged interview with Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* to amplify notable Russian information operations.
- Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that Poland will give Ukraine four MiG-29 fighter jets.
- Russia's decision to redeploy elements of its "peacekeeping force" from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is eroding Russia's influence with Armenia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long term economic consequences, likely as part of the Kremlin's effort to prepare Russians for a protracted war.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line and in Western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized assaults in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces increased their naval presence in the Black Sea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 15, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, Zachary Coles, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The overall pace of Russian operations in Ukraine appears to have decreased compared to previous weeks. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavriisk Defense Forces, Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, stated on March 15 that Russian offensive actions have decreased significantly over the last week and noted that daily Russian ground attacks have decreased from 90 to 100 attacks per day to 20 to 29 per day.[1] Dmytrashkivskyi reported that Russian forces have somewhat lost offensive potential due to significant manpower and equipment losses.[2] Dmytrashkivskyi's statements are consistent with ISW's general observation regarding the pace of Russian operations along the entire frontline in Ukraine. The Russian offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast is likely nearing culmination, if it has not already culminated, although Russia has committed most elements of at least three divisions to the Svatove-Kremenna line.[3] Russian forces have made only minimal tactical gains along the entire Luhansk Oblast frontline over the last week, and Ukrainian forces have likely recently managed to conduct counterattacks and regain territory in Luhansk Oblast.[4] ISW has been unable to confirm the commitment of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division (1st Guards Tank Army, Western Military District) to the offensive in Luhansk Oblast since certain unspecified elements reportedly deployed to Luhansk Oblast in January—the only large formation assessed to be operational but not yet engaged.[5] It is unclear if the 2nd Motor Rifle Division has already deployed and has not been observed or if it is waiting to deploy to either Luhansk Oblast or other areas of the front. The commitment of two or three of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division's constituent regiments, however, is unlikely to significantly delay or reverse the culmination of the Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast, especially considering that at least five Russian regiments have definitely been fully committed in this area, likely along with several others, but Russian forces have still been unable to make substantial gains.[6]

The overall Wagner Group offensive on Bakhmut additionally appears to be nearing culmination. Ukrainian military sources have noted a markedly decreased number of attacks in and around Bakhmut, particularly over the last few days.[7] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has recently emphasized the toll that a reported lack of ammunition is having on Wagner's ability to pursue offensives on Bakhmut and stated on March 15 that due to ammunition shortages and heavy fighting, Wagner has had to expand its encirclement of Bakhmut.[8] Prigozhin notably claimed that Wagner captured Zalizianske, a tiny rural settlement 9km northwest

of Bakhmut on the east side of the E40 Bakhmut-Sloviansk highway, which indicates that Wagner forces are likely conducting opportunistic localized attacks on settlements further north of Bakhmut that are small and relatively easier to seize.[9] Recent Wagner gains north of Bakhmut suggest that manpower, artillery, and equipment losses in fights for Bakhmut will likely constrain Wagner's ability to complete a close encirclement of Bakhmut or gain substantial territory in battles for urban areas. The capture of Zalizianske and other similarly small towns north of Bakhmut and east of the E40 highway is extremely unlikely to enhance Wagner's ability to capture Bakhmut itself or make other operationally significant gains. It therefore is likely that Wagner's offensive on Bakhmut is increasingly nearing culmination. Russian forces would likely have to commit significant reserves to prevent this culmination. They may be able to do so, as ISW has observed elements of Russian airborne regiments in and around Bakhmut that do not seem to be heavily committed to the fighting at the moment. The Russians might also commit elements of other conventional units, including possibly the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division, or units drawn from elsewhere in the theater. But it seems that the Wagner offensive itself will not be sufficient to seize Bakhmut. Russian forces are not pursuing active or successful offensive operations elsewhere in theater, and as the pace of operations slows along critical sectors of the front, Ukrainian forces likely have an increased opportunity to regain the initiative.

International journalists reportedly obtained the Kremlin's long-term strategy document for destabilizing Moldova and reintegrating it back into the Russian sphere of influence by 2030.[10] The *Kyiv Independent*, *Yahoo News*, and several other international news partners released details of the Moldova report, reportedly originating from the same document as the leaked Belarus annexation strategy document.[11] Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean reportedly saw the document and stated that it is consistent with Moldova's assessments of Russia's ongoing campaign to undermine Moldovan sovereignty.[12] ISW is unable to confirm the existence or authenticity of this document, but the document's political lines of effort are consistent with recent Russian efforts to destabilize Moldova.[13]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin commented on the reports about the dismissal of the Russian Commander of the Airborne (VDV) Forces Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky (first reported on January 20) - likely revealing Teplinsky's affiliation with Wagner. Prigozhin stated on March 15 that Teplinsky is an honest and competent commander whom he had met before the war in passing and during "tragic" operations near Berestove, Donetsk Oblast. [14] Prigozhin stated that one of the possible reasons behind Teplinsky's dismissal was his refusal to lie about the situation on the frontlines. Prigozhin also claimed that Teplinsky expressed his "honest opinion," which had saved many paratroopers. Prigozhin stated that he hopes that commanders like Teplinsky and former theater commander in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovkin, would take senior positions in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Ukrainian intelligence previously linked Surovkin to Wagner, and Prigozhin's praise for Teplinsky is similar to the praise he offered Surovkin in October 2022.[15] ISW previously observed Wagner-affiliated milblogger claims about Teplinsky's dismissal on January 20 attributed to a reported disagreement with the Russian General Staff.[16] These claims emerged only nine days after Surovkin's dismissal from the position of theater commander and his new subordination under Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov on January 11.[17] Gerasimov may have removed Teplinsky as a result of his affiliation with Wagner, if the reports about his dismissal are true.

The Russian State Duma adopted the law on punishment for "discreditation" of all participants of the "special military operation" in Ukraine on March 14 to foster self-censorship within Russian society. Individuals found guilty of discrediting participants in combat operations will receive a fine of up to five million rubles (\$65,530), up to five years of correctional or forced labor, or up to seven years in prison.[18] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin responded to a journalist's question about the law on March 15 stating that while he initiated and supported this law, he expected that it would not protect Wagner commanders and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) from criticism.[19] Prigozhin noted that he is not worried about being accused of discrediting the Russian MoD because he "only speaks the truth" and has lawyers review all of his "carefully worded" social media posts. Prigozhin also implied that Russia cannot physically arrest 146 million Russians, further indicating that this law aims to encourage self-censorship among Russians and hinting that many Russians share his views critical of the MoD.

Continued Russian efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as existential to Russian domestic security by establishing additional air defense installations in areas that will never see hostilities is reportedly sparking internal backlash. Russian independent opposition outlet *The Insider* reported on March 14 that Russian forces are establishing additional S-400 air defense systems in residential areas and protected nature zones in Moscow, generating backlash for potentially endangering civilians and cutting down heavily forested areas for the installations.[20] *The Insider* reported that Kremlin-affiliated Telegram channels denied reports of the additional air defense installations.[21] The Bryansk Oblast Duma reported on March 9 that Russian State Duma Defense Committee Head Andrey Kartapolov proposed using public utilities payments to fund the installation of air defense systems to defend against "terrorist attacks." [22] The Bryansk Oblast Duma later removed this initiative from its website after the initiative garnered public attention on March 15 and blamed its publication on unspecified hackers.[23]

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his March 15 meeting with the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to continue to bolster his reputation as an involved and effective wartime leader.[24] Putin identified several lines of the war effort for the Prosecutor General's Office to regulate and improve upon, including timely payment and social support to Russian military personnel and their families, timely payment for defense industrial base (DIB) workers, proper usage of the DIB's allocated funds, law enforcement efforts in occupied Ukraine, and measures to support and protect orphaned children. Putin praised the Prosecutor General's Office for its ongoing efforts but emphasized throughout his speech that Russia needs more weapons and protection against external threats. Putin has attempted to reinvigorate his image as a wartime leader since late 2022 by framing himself as mobilizing the Russian DIB to a robust wartime footing.[25] He is also working to mobilize the DIB, but publicized meetings of this type are more likely staged for imagistic purposes than effective.

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Moscow, Russia on March 15. NOTE: A version of this text will also appear in The Critical Threat Project's (CTP) March 15 Iran Update.

Russian news outlet *RIA Novosti* claimed that Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said that topics for discussion included Syria-Russian relations, Syrian post-war reconstruction, and Syrian-Turkish relations.[26] According to the Kremlin readout of the meeting, Assad thanked Putin for the Russian military's "decisive contribution" in Syria.[27] Putin likely used the meeting to foster relationships with international partner states such as Syria and maintain Russia's stake in Levantine affairs. Assad regime officials used the meeting to discuss issues surrounding the attempted and struggling Ankara-Damascus rapprochement with their Russian counterparts. State-affiliated Syrian media refuted recent Turkish claims that ministerial-level Iran-Syria-Russia-Turkey quadrilateral rapprochement talks would occur in Moscow on March 15 and 16, as CTP previously reported.[28] The Assad regime's decision to discuss rapprochement issues with Russian officials after refusing to participate in the quadrilateral meetings may be part of a negotiating strategy intended to strengthen the Syrian position with intentional ambiguity.

Key Takeaways

- The overall pace of Russian operations in Ukraine appears to have decreased compared to previous weeks.

- The overall Wagner Group offensive on Bakhmut appears to be nearing culmination.
- International journalists reportedly obtained the Kremlin's long-term strategy document for destabilizing and reintegrating Moldova back into the Russian sphere of influence by 2030.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin commented on the reports about the dismissal of the Russian Commander of the Airborne Forces Mikhail Teplinsky - likely revealing Teplinsky's affiliation with Wagner.
- The Russian State Duma adopted the law on punishment for "discreditation" of all participants of the "special military operation" in Ukraine on March 14 to foster self-censorship in Russian society.
- Continued Russian efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as existential to Russian domestic security by establishing additional air defense installations in areas that will never see hostilities is reportedly sparking internal backlash.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin used his March 15 meeting with the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to continue to bolster his reputation as an involved and effective wartime leader.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Moscow, Russia on March 15.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks northwest of Svatove and conducted limited ground attacks on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut and conducted ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to conduct offensive actions across the Kakhovka Reservoir in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin reportedly tasked the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to recruit 400,000 contract servicemen starting on April 1.
- Ukrainian partisans killed a Russian collaborator in an IED attack in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 14, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 14, 5:45pm ET

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Prominent Russian milbloggers are reamplifying a longstanding Russian information operation that seeks to weaponize religion to discredit Ukraine. The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture issued a decision on March 9 stipulating that the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra Reserve will terminate its lease agreement with the Kremlin-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP), meaning that the UOC MP will need to vacate the premises of the lower Lavra by March 29. [1] The Ukrainian government did not renew the UOC MP's expired lease on the upper Lavra and allowed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to hold Christmas services at the Lavra on January 7, as ISW previously reported. [2] Two prominent milbloggers responded on March 14 to the latest decision requiring the UOC MP to vacate the lower Lavra by March 29 and exploited the story to accuse Kyiv of repressing freedom of religion within Ukraine. [3] Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin claimed with no evidence that Kyiv will likely stage a military takeover of the Lavra because Ukrainian authorities are bent on "bloodily pitting the Russians on both sides of an artificial border" against one another. [4] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander and former DNR Security Minister Alexander Khodakovsky accused Ukraine of causing a "church frenzy" to divide the UOC MP and OCU dioceses and encouraged Ukrainian authorities to see past Ukrainian and Russian distinctions and exercise "restraint and Christian patience." [5] Khodakovsky's comment is remarkable because it is Russia's rejection of the validity of seeing any distinctions between Russians and Ukrainians that was one of the justifications for the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine in the first place.

Both Girkin's and Khodakovsky's renewed exploitations of the Lavra issue are based on a misrepresentation of events and disingenuously seek to portray Kyiv as attacking religious liberty in Ukraine. The UOC MP is the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church's subordinate element in Ukraine and provided material support for Russia's illegal invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. [6] The UOC MP is not an independent religious organization but rather an extension of the Russian state and an instrument of Russian hybrid warfare. [7] By misrepresenting the Ukrainian government's decision to reduce the Kremlin-controlled UOC MP's influence in Ukraine, Russian milbloggers are amplifying a known information operation attempting to delegitimize the Ukrainian state and turn international public opinion against Ukraine.

Russian authorities continue measures to mobilize the struggling Russian defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war effort, including measures that will force the Kremlin to choose between having skilled workers in the DIB and skilled military personnel fighting in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed during a March 14 visit to an aviation production plant in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia, that the DIB suffers from a lack of adequately trained personnel and announced a series of reforms to attract more specialists to work at military production plants, including the reallocation of federal assets to housing and increasing pay. [8] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tactical Missile Corporation in Moscow Oblast and called on the plant to double production even after announcing that the plant had met the requirements of the state defense order. [9] Putin also announced that the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade has prepared a list of unspecified specialties to defer from military service, which may suggest that the Kremlin is prioritizing using skilled workers in the production of Russian weapons over having skilled soldiers fight in Russia's military. [10] Russian news outlets *Interfax* and *RBK*, the latter citing a Russian federal official, reported that the Russian Ministry of Finance is also considering issuing war bonds. [11] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed that Putin's March 3 presidential decree on government oversight of the DIB sets conditions for the Russian Ministry of Trade and Industry to bypass DIB managers at enterprises that fail to meet Russia's production standards. [12] The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service reported that Russian defense enterprises significantly decreased their hiring standards and now accept workers without experience and with histories of drug use, criminal records, and bankruptcy. [13] ISW has previously reported on Russia's struggle to rejuvenate its DIB amid labor shortages and Western sanctions and its ensuing lack of success in this endeavor. [14]

Two Russian Su-27 aircraft downed a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over the Black Sea in international airspace. US General James B. Hecker stated that two Russian aircraft hit the drone nearly causing both aircraft to crash and resulting in the loss of the drone.[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the drone crashed due to “sharp maneuvering.”[16] The incident will not cause an escalation to direct conflict between Russia and the US. Russian forces have used coercive signaling against US and allied flights and naval vessels for decades in multiple theaters without triggering conflict.[17] The US and Russian presidents retain full freedom to choose how to respond to such incidents, and there is nothing automatic about escalation in such situations. Given President Joe Biden’s repeated commitments to avoid committing US forces to direct conflict with Russia and the Kremlin’s clear and repeatedly demonstrated reluctance to get into a war with NATO, there is no reason for incidents such as these to cause dangerous escalations.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated on March 14 that Poland could supply MiG-29 multirole fighters to Ukraine within four-to-six weeks. Morawiecki stated that Poland is ready to

give Ukraine an unspecified proportion of its total fleet of 28 MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine as part of an international coalition. Slovak Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad previously signaled Slovakia’s support for providing Ukraine MiG-29 aircraft on March 9.[18] The Ukrainian Air Force operates MiG-29s and would be able to use them in counteroffensive operations if Ukraine receives them with enough time in advance of its next counteroffensive.

Key Takeaways

- Prominent Russian milbloggers are reamplifying a longstanding Russian information operation that seeks to weaponize religion to discredit Ukraine.
- Russian authorities continue measures to mobilize the struggling Russian defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war effort.
- Russian Su-27 jets forced down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over the Black Sea in international airspace.
- Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated on March 14 that Poland could supply MiG-29 multirole fighters to Ukraine within four-to-six weeks.
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continue building defenses along Russia’s border with Ukraine in order to pin Ukrainian troops to northern border areas.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces advanced within Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continue fortifying rear areas in Russian occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.
- United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak announced on March 14 that the Russian State Duma will consider a law simplifying the legal recognition of missing Russian soldiers as dead.
- Ukrainian partisans injured the Deputy Head of the Nova Kakhovka Occupation Military Administration in an improvised explosive device (IED) attack.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 13, 2023

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

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

March 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

A member of the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of pursuing political objectives in Russia that are endangering Wagner forces in Bakhmut. Russian political scientist Aleksey Mukhin—who contributes to the Valdai Discussion Club and Russian state media—commented on Prigozhin’s March 11 sarcastic announcement that he will be running in Ukrainian presidential election in 2024.[1] Mukhin stated on his Telegram channel that the Russian public began to interpret Prigozhin’s statement as an announcement that he will run for the Russian presidential elections, which are also scheduled for 2024. Mukhin rhetorically asked if Prigozhin notified Russian President Vladimir Putin about his “presidential ambitions.” Mukhin argued that Prigozhin’s presentation of himself as the “commander” of the Wagner private military company (PMC) “directly affects the planning and management of the assault squads’ combat operations.” Mukhin also sarcastically stated that Prigozhin is a “prospective politician” who searches for scapegoats to blame for Wagner’s high losses among personnel. Mukhin observed that everyone knows that the Russian government pays for Prigozhin’s forces and their ammunition and stated that Prigozhin’s failure to acknowledge the support from conventional Russian forces alienated him from other Russian battlefield commanders. Mukhin concluded that Prigozhin “has placed the Wagner fighters in danger of encirclement during the expected Ukrainian counterattack” as a result of his actions. Mukhin stated that Prigozhin now is demanding that Russian conventional forces “cover his flanks,” and that Russian forces may need to put aside their distaste for Prigozhin to prevent further Wagner losses in Bakhmut.

Mukhin’s attack on Prigozhin is in line with ISW’s March 12 assessment that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be deliberately expending Wagner forces in Bakhmut in part to derail Prigozhin’s political aspirations.[2] Mukhin’s accusations also support ISW’s assessment that the Kremlin and Russian MoD may be attempting to blame Prigozhin for the slowed pace of advance in Bakhmut and for high casualties among Wagner mercenaries. Mukhin’s statement showcases how the Kremlin may be perceiving Prigozhin’s controversial statements and his threat to Putin’s regime. ISW previously observed harsh criticism towards Prigozhin from milbloggers such as disgraced Russian officer Igor Girkin, but Mukhin’s statement is notable because of his existing affiliation with the Kremlin institution that is the Valdai Club.[3]

Prigozhin likely indirectly responded to Mukhin’s accusations on March 12 but has not scaled back his hostile rhetoric towards the Russian MoD. Prigozhin responded within an hour of Mukhin’s statement, stating that the situation in Bakhmut remains “really hard” and that his “550 attempts” to procure ammunition for

Wagner were ignored.[4] Prigozhin, however, emphasized that servicemen subordinated to the Russian MoD have been bringing 12 to 15 cars full of ammunition to Wagner in Bakhmut from Zaporizhia, Donetsk City, and Avdiivka frontlines. Prigozhin noted that “there is no conflict between Wagner PMC fighters and Russian MoD fighters,” and claimed that he is confident that Wagner will continue to receive such donations due to friendly relations with these units. Prigozhin doubled down on his statements on March 13 and reportedly met with an unnamed commander of an unspecified Russian brigade.[5] Prigozhin claimed that he had developed a relationship with unspecified conventional forces after they had suffered a year of “betrayal” and stated that these forces are not covering one of Wagner’s flanks—a statement that mimics Mukhin’s claim that Russian conventional forces are not interested in assisting Wagner.

A Wagner-affiliated milblogger also directly responded to Mukhin’s commentary stating that while Prigozhin was simply “trolling” about his presidential ambitions in Ukraine, he does not need to notify Putin of his political ambitions according to Russian law.[6] The milblogger further echoed Prigozhin’s claims that Wagner is on good terms with conventional forces, which further confirms that Prigozhin’s March 12 and March 13 statements were in response to Mukhin’s accusations.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to maintain Chechnya’s relevance in the Russian political and military sphere. Kadyrov met with Putin on March 13 to discuss Chechnya’s socioeconomic achievements and domestic developments in 2022.[7] Kadyrov also used the meeting to laud the success of Chechen fighters in Ukraine and emphasized that Chechen fighters are dutifully fulfilling Putin’s orders and “aim to act to the bitter end,” to which Putin responded by acknowledging the role of Chechen fighters and thanking Kadyrov.[8] Kadyrov appeared visibly nervous during the meeting, potentially indicating that he felt considerable pressure to present Chechnya, himself, and his troops to Putin in a positive and productive light.[9] Chechen troops are currently playing a very minimal role on the frontline in Ukraine and mainly appear to be conducting offensive operations near Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast, and are otherwise carrying out law enforcement tasks in rear areas of occupied Ukraine.[10] Kadyrov may therefore fear that he is losing favor with Putin because he has very little to show in terms of Chechen combat gains, and likely hoped to correct and bolster his reputation over the course of this meeting. Putin, in turn, likely hopes to pressure Kadyrov into increasing the role of Chechen fighters in combat operations due to continued losses to both the Wagner Group and conventional Russian forces in ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations. Iranian state media reported that Lukashenko met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber.[11] Raisi and Lukashenko signed eight cooperation agreements in the spheres of comprehensive cooperation, trade, transportation, agriculture, and culture and noted that Belarus and Iran tripled bilateral trade in 2022 compared to 2021.[12] Raisi notably stated that cooperation with Belarus could be a way for both nations to counter sanctions.[13] Lukashenko has frequently acted as a Kremlin vassal in recent trips to foreign countries, and his visit to Tehran is likely a component of the Kremlin’s wider effort to secure continued Iranian support in the face of international sanctions.[14] Iranian state media notably announced on March 11 that Iran has finalized a deal to buy Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia, indicating that military, political, and economic agreements between Tehran and Moscow are continuing to prove mutually beneficial for both parties.[15] The Kremlin will likely continue to leverage Lukashenko’s influence to deepen cooperation with Tehran.

Russian milbloggers continue to speculate about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine, suggesting increasing concern in the Russian information space about Ukrainian combat capabilities as Russian forces pin themselves on offensive operations in Bakhmut. The milbloggers largely agreed that Ukrainian forces would prioritize an offensive in the south against Berdyansk-Melitopol in Zaporizhia Oblast or Mariupol-Volnovakha in Donetsk Oblast, but some claimed that Ukrainian forces have enough combat power to conduct a second counteroffensive either in another area of southern Ukraine or along the Kupyansk-Svatove line in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.[16] A Wagner-affiliated milblogger agreed with ISW’s prior assessments on the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut, claiming that Ukrainian forces are grinding Russian forces’ best available infantry around Bakhmut to reduce Russian forces’ capability to stop any Ukrainian advances.[17] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces would be able to drive south and face minimal Russian resistance in southern Ukraine, unlike other areas of the front line. Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces would target southern Ukraine because a “destroyed Crimea” holds strategic importance while a “destroyed Donbas” does not.[18] Russian State Duma Deputy Dmitry Kuznetsov claimed that Ukrainian forces would target the Kerch Strait Bridge in Crimea in a months-long interdiction campaign like the Antonivskyi Bridge in Kherson Oblast and called on Russian forces to quickly develop anti-drone warfare to defend the critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) connecting Crimea to mainland Russia.[19]

A Russian State Duma bill aiming to raise the conscription age suggests that the Kremlin is not planning to conduct full mobilization in the future. The Russian State Duma received a bill for consideration on March 13 that would implement Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu’s proposal for raising the conscription age.[20] The bill would raise the maximum conscription age from 27 to 30 immediately while raising the minimum conscription age from 18 to 21 with a one-year annual increase between 2024 and 2026.[21] Shoigu proposed the conscription age increase at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) board meeting on December 21, 2022, and Russian officials have since offered oscillating statements on whether the increase would apply to upcoming conscription cycles in the spring and fall of 2023.[22] The bill’s immediate increase of the maximum age likely seeks to expand the conscription age range to fulfill some portion of the Russian military’s immediate manpower demands in Ukraine and then subsequently shrink the overall conscription demands on Russian society in the following years. The gradual increase of the minimum conscription age means that three year groups of potential Russian conscripts will essentially receive deferments of three, two, and one years each, while the current year groups eligible for conscription face continued attritional fighting in Ukraine. The Kremlin may be attempting to shield a new generation of Russians from the demographic and social impacts of attritional fighting in Ukraine by siloing these impacts among one generational group of Russians. The timeline given for the contraction of the conscription age range may also suggest that the Kremlin does not expect the war in Ukraine to last longer than the next three years. This proposed expansion of the conscription age range is another incremental force generation effort well below full mobilization and indicates that the Kremlin is still highly averse to the prospect of a full mobilization.

The Russian military is reportedly employing the newly created “assault detachments” in different manners across different tactical situations. A Ukrainian reserve officer who has previously reported on a captured Russian military manual on the new “assault detachment” reported on March 12 that Russian forces are using both formalized permanent assault (“storm”) units and ad hoc temporary assault detachments in Ukraine.[23] The Ukrainian officer reported that Russian forces have integrated permanent assault units into battalion, regiment, and brigade structures and that their size ranges from that of a company to that of a reinforced battalion.[24] Russian forces reportedly assemble temporary assault detachments within a regiment or battalion for specific operations and do not give these temporary detachments a number, name, defined structure, regular commander, or specific armaments.[25] Permanent Russian assault detachments reportedly have designated commanders and are most often comprised of one or two tanks, several armored personnel carriers, and 40 to 80 personnel.[26] Russian forces reportedly will form temporary assault detachments to respond to situations as they arise, and these formations apparently often retreat after initial losses and suffer from significant communication and coordination problems.[27] Russian forces reportedly designed permanent assault units to break through Ukrainian positions and may

have modeled them after the Wagner Group's small scale assault tactics in the Bakhmut area.[28] Russian forces have also reportedly used some of these permanent assault units for punitive reasons and forcibly staff them with problematic and disobedient soldiers to retaliate against them for bad behavior.[29]

The Russian military is likely attempting to concentrate combat ready forces and equipment in permanent formations trained to conduct small-scale assaults while distancing severely degraded formations from offensive operations of tactical importance. Russian forces are reportedly employing these assault formations to attack well-fortified Ukrainian positions and conduct urban warfare.[30] These non-doctrinal formations would likely struggle to conduct a mechanized advance across open country in Ukraine, and Russian forces are likely implementing them for conditions on the current frontlines and not for any wider operational goals.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk confirmed that Russia has illegally deported 2,161 Ukrainian orphans to Russia.[31] The Ukrainian government previously verified the illegal deportation of a total of 16,207 children to Russia, including those deported alongside their families, and estimated that the total number of children may be closer to 150,000.[32] ISW previously reported on a Russian documentary series following Ukrainian children after adoption into Russian families that claimed that Russian officials "evacuated" over 150,000 children to Russia from Donbas alone.[33] ISW continues to assess that the forcible deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is a violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and a potential constituent element of a wider ethnic cleansing campaign.[34]

Key Takeaways

- A member of the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of pursuing political objectives in Russia that are endangering Wagner forces in Bakhmut. This attack on Prigozhin is in line with ISW's March 12 assessment that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be deliberately expending Wagner forces in Bakhmut to derail Prigozhin's political aspirations.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to maintain Chechnya's relevance in the Russian political and military sphere.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations.
- Russian milbloggers continue to speculate about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine, suggesting increasing concern in the Russian information space about Ukrainian combat capabilities as Russian forces pin themselves on offensive operations in Bakhmut.
- A Russian State Duma bill aiming to raise the conscription age suggests that the Kremlin is not planning to conduct full mobilization in the future.
- The Russian military is reportedly employing the newly created "assault detachments" in different manners across different tactical situations.
- Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk confirmed that Russia has illegally deported 2,161 Ukrainian orphans to Russia.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks throughout the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line and made marginal gains northeast of Kupyansk and east of Siversk.
- Russian forces continued making advances in and around Bakhmut but have not succeeded in completing a turning movement, envelopment, or encirclement of the city as of March 13.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids against areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Subordination of mobilized Russian military personnel to Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR) formations is generating increasing discontent.
- Russian occupation officials continue to introduce new provisions to discourage and restrict the use of the Ukrainian language in educational facilities.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 12, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

March 12, 8 pm ET

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ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 12. This report establishes a comprehensive timeline of the rivalry between Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), which likely reached a boiling point over Bakhmut. The report also analyzes the Russian MoD's likely intent to expend Wagner forces in Bakhmut and explores Russian President Vladimir Putin's manipulation of this conflict to maintain the stability of his regime.

The conflict between the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin likely reached its climax against the backdrop of the Battle of Bakhmut. The Russian MoD – specifically Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff General Valery Gerasimov – is likely seizing the opportunity to deliberately expend both elite and convict Wagner forces in Bakhmut in an effort to weaken Prigozhin and derail his ambitions for greater influence in the Kremlin. The Russian MoD had been increasingly restricting Prigozhin's ability to recruit convicts and secure ammunition, forcing

Prigozhin to publicly recognize his dependency on the Russian MoD. Prigozhin, for example, publicly complained that he mailed a letter and tried to send his representative – likely to Shoigu and Gerasimov – with an urgent demand for ammunition, but that the representative was not allowed to present his complaints. [1] Prigozhin had been able to grow his forces by 40,000 convicts likely with the Kremlin's permission to recruit in prisons in 2022 but lost that permission and access to that manpower pool at the beginning of 2023. [2] Prigozhin has threatened to withdraw Wagner forces from Bakhmut and insinuated that the Russian MoD used Wagner to bear the brunt of the high-intensity attritional urban warfare to seize Bakhmut in order to conserve Russian conventional forces. [3] These threats and complaints indicate that Prigozhin is aware of the gravity of his conflict with the Russian MoD.

The Russian military leadership may be trying to expend Wagner forces – and Prigozhin's influence – in Bakhmut. Russian forces' rate of advance in Bakhmut slowed following the Ukrainian withdrawal from eastern Bakhmut around March 7. [4] ISW assessed on March 6 that Wagner had to commit its elite forces to maintain offensive momentum in Bakhmut but may be running out of these forces during direct assaults on eastern, southern, and northern parts of Bakhmut. [5] Geolocated footage published on February 18 showed 43 buses with Wagner mercenaries moving from Crimea via Melitopol possibly to reinforce positions in Bakhmut. [6] Prigozhin complained on March 5 and 6 that Wagner needed additional reinforcements, and Ukrainian military officials observed that Russian forces were suffering a seven-to-one casualty ratio compared to Ukrainian forces. [7]

Prigozhin likely anticipated that Ukrainian forces would entirely withdraw from Bakhmut out of fear of imminent encirclement and hoped that his commitment of Wagner's elite forces would be sufficient to generate that effect. Prigozhin even offered Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to allow Ukrainian forces to withdraw from Bakhmut in two days on March 3. [8] Limited information about the Prigozhin's pleas likely indicates that the Russian military command is intent on expending Wagner forces within the city. Spokesperson of the Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Serhiy Cherevaty also noted on March 11 that Ukrainian forces may be able to severely degrade Wagner and have already thinned out Wagner's second prisoner formation over the winter. [9] Ukrainian servicemen noted in a social media video from March 12 that they are holding positions in Bakhmut waiting for Russians to "shoot each other." [10] Russian military leadership may be allowing the Wagner Group to take high casualties in Bakhmut to simultaneously erode Prigozhin's leverage while capturing the city at the expense of Wagner troops.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 12:

- Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on March 12 that ISW's March 11 report about her comments acknowledging Kremlin infighting is false and an "informational attack." [50]
- Iranian State Media announced on March 11 that Iran has finalized a deal to buy Sukhoi-35 fighter jets from Russia. [55]
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line. [56]
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut but have not completed a turning movement, envelopment, or encirclement around the city. [57] Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters captured parts or all of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), although Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin stated that Wagner fighters do not control the settlement. [58]
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Avdiivka and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City. [59] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces entered Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims. [60]
- A Russian milblogger claimed on March 12 that there is a high desertion rate among SPETSNAZ forces. [61] The Russian milblogger claimed that no SPETSNAZ units are at their full complement and that some SPETSNAZ commanders have fled their units despite having received generous salaries for the past ten years. [62] ISW has no independent confirmation of these assertions. It appears unlikely that most commanders have fled these elite units.
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on March 12 that Russian military personnel from eastern regions of Russia die in Ukraine at per capita rates up to fortyfold of those of Russian personnel from Moscow City. [63] The UK MoD reported that Kazakh and Tartar minorities make up 75 percent of casualties among Russian military personnel from Astrakhan Oblast. [64]
- Deputy Ukrainian Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk stated on March 12 that Russian officials have illegally deported 2,161 Ukrainian orphans to Russia. [65] Vereshchuk also stated that the total number of children deported to Russia may be approximately 150,000. [66]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 11, 2023

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

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

March 11, 3:30pm ET

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Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances within Bakhmut on March 11. Ukrainian and Russian sources continue to report heavy fighting in the city, but Wagner Group fighters are likely becoming increasingly pinned in urban areas, such as the AZOM industrial complex, and are therefore finding it difficult to make significant advances.^[1] ISW will continue to monitor and report on the situation in Bakhmut as it unfolds.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova confirmed that there is infighting in the Kremlin inner circle, that the Kremlin has ceded centralized control over the Russian information space, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin apparently cannot readily fix it. Kremlin journalists, academics, and Novorossiya supporters held a forum on the “practical and technological aspects of information and cognitive warfare in modern realities” in Moscow on March 11.^[2] During a panel discussion Zakharova stated that the Kremlin cannot replicate the Stalinist approach of establishing a modern equivalent to the Soviet Information Bureau to centrally control Russia’s internal information space due to fighting among unspecified Kremlin “elites.”^[3]

Zakharova’s statement is noteworthy and supports several of ISW’s longstanding assessments about deteriorating Kremlin regime and information space control dynamics. The statement supports several assessments: that there is Kremlin infighting between key members of Putin’s inner circle; that Putin has largely ceded the Russian information space over time to a variety of quasi-independent actors; and that Putin is apparently unable to take decisive action to regain control over the Russian information space.^[4] It is unclear why Zakharova — a seasoned senior spokesperson — would have openly acknowledged these problems in a public setting. Zakharova may have directly discussed these problems for the first time to temper Russian nationalist milbloggers’ expectations regarding the current capabilities of the Kremlin to cohere around a unified narrative — or possibly even a unified policy.

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin said that he would transform the Wagner Group into a hardline ideological elite parallel military organization after the Battle of Bakhmut. Prigozhin stated on March 11 that the Wagner Group will start a new wave of recruitment after the envisioned capture of Bakhmut and reform itself into an army with an ideological component.^[5] The Wagner Group has recently been expanding recruitment centers throughout Russia, including centers and programs focused on recruiting youth.^[6] A Russian regional news source stated on March 11 that the Wagner Group has opened six recruitment centers in schools and youth sports clubs in Altai, Zabaykalsky, and Krasnoyarsk krais and Irkutsk Oblast.^[7] A Russian opposition news source reported on March 11 that the Ministry of Education in Apatity, Murmansk Oblast included Wagner personnel at a career guidance lesson to tell “heroic stories” and promote the Wagneryonok (“little Wagner”) youth group and summer camp in Crimea.^[8] The Wagner Group likely aims to recruit more impressionable recruits through these youth-focused campaigns and instill in them Prigozhin’s extremist ideological brand of Russian ultranationalism. Prigozhin may be attempting to restructure the Wagner Group into a hardline ideological elite parallel military organization to carve out a specialized role among Russian forces in Ukraine as its former role in solely securing tactical gains dissipates with the Wagner Group’s likely culmination around Bakhmut.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 10, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark

March 10, 5:15pm ET

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US intelligence warned that individuals with ties to Russian intelligence may be planning to attempt to instigate an insurrection in Moldova. CNN reported on March 10 that White House officials believe that Russian intelligence-linked individuals are planning to stage protests against the Moldovan government with the intent of fomenting a “manufactured insurrection” to install a pro-Russian administration in Moldova.^[1] CNN reported that the US believes Russia has been spreading disinformation about Moldova’s purported instability and supporting it with information operations emanating from Russian-occupied Transnistria.^[2] ISW has recently reported on several ongoing information operations in Transnistria premised on undermining the Moldovan government and sewing distrust of Ukraine and the West.^[3]

Russian forces continue to establish defensive lines in rear areas far from current frontlines and areas in Russia that will likely never see fighting. Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov claimed on March 9 that Russian authorities finished constructing the “zasechnaya line” of fortifications along Belgorod Oblast’s border with Ukraine.[4] Gladkov claimed that Russian forces should dedicate troops to defending this system of fortifications in case of an implausible Ukrainian attack on Belgorod Oblast. Russian forces would significantly misallocate forces that would be better suited supporting active offensive operations elsewhere in Ukraine by manning these fortifications. Gladkov also claimed that Russian officials spent 10 billion rubles (about \$132 million) constructing the defensive line, a likely waste of funds amid questions about Russia’s ability to fund its war effort in Ukraine.[5] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported on March 10 that Russian forces continued building fortifications along Kursk Oblast’s border with Ukraine, another area that will likely never see fighting.[6] Occupied Crimea head Sergey Aksyonov claimed on March 10 that Russian forces are constructing a defensive line in Crimea and implied that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the construction of the line. [7] These fortifications are far away from the current frontlines in southern Ukraine, and any Russian personnel and equipment deployed to these lines would similarly be better suited elsewhere in Ukraine. Russian officials in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts may be constructing defensive fortifications in support of information operations that aim to portray Ukraine as threatening Russian territory in order to frame the war in Ukraine as existential for Russia. Continued Russian fortifications in Crimea may suggest that Russian forces are unsure of their ability to hold occupied territories in southern Ukraine in the long term. ISW has not observed Russian forces deployed to any of these defensive lines at this time, and the fortifications are therefore currently inconsequential for Russian operations in Ukraine.

Russian Commissioner on Children’s Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, confirmed that the Russian government is using a variety of schemes to deport Ukrainian children to Russia in a comment that was apparently meant to disprove Western allegations of the illegality of these actions. In a Telegram post published on March 10, Lvova-Belova accused the West of artificially manufacturing fear regarding the deportation and forced adoption of Ukrainian children and claimed that children came to occupied areas of Ukraine and Russian territory “voluntarily” and can return to their families.[8] Lvova-Belova admitted that Russian authorities have taken children from Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Kharkiv oblasts to “sanatoriums” and health camps in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai for “rest” and protection from hostilities and claimed that 89 “children of Ukrainian citizens” will be reunited with their families from such programs in Crimea and Krasnodar Krai. [9] ISW has previously reported on such schemes to remove children from Ukraine under the guise of rest and relaxation programs and noted that several children in Krasnodar Krai and Crimea have been held for forced adoption into Russian families.[10] An independent investigation by Yale’s Humanitarian Research Lab found that of likely over 14,700 Ukrainian children deported to Russia, only 126 returned to Ukraine as of January 2023.[11] Lvova-Belova’s claim that a certain number of Ukrainian children are being returned to their families does not negate the reality that the vast majority of abducted children do not return to Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that the forced deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, as well as a component of a wider ethnic cleaning campaign.[12]

Key Takeaways

- US intelligence warned that individuals with ties to Russian intelligence may be planning to attempt to instigate an insurrection in Moldova.
- Russian forces continue to establish defensive lines in areas in rear areas far from current frontlines and areas in Russia that will likely never see fighting.
- Russian Commissioner on Children’s Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, confirmed that the Russian government is using a variety of schemes to deport Ukrainian children to Russia in a comment that was apparently meant to disprove Western allegations of the illegality of these actions.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian sources claimed that Wagner Group forces entered the built-up AZOM industrial complex, and frontal assaults on the complex will likely be costly for Wagner Group forces.
- Russian forces made gains in Bakhmut, are clearing eastern parts of the city, and have advanced to new positions in northwestern Bakhmut within 800 meters of the AZOM metal processing plant.
- Russian forces continue reconnaissance activity near islands in the Dnipro River delta.
- The Wagner Group continues to expand efforts to recruitment efforts in Russia.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to announce new infrastructure projects to increase connectivity between the Russian mainland and occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 9, 2023

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Russian forces conducted the largest missile strike across Ukraine of 2023 so far on March 9, but the attack likely only served Russian state propaganda objectives. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces targeted Ukrainian critical infrastructure with 84 different missiles including 28 Kh-101/Kh-555 and 20 Kalibr cruise missiles, six Kh-22 anti-ship missiles, six Kh-47 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, two Kh-31P supersonic anti-ship missiles, six Kh-59 guided missiles, and at least 13 S-300 air-defense missiles.^[1] Russian forces also attacked Ukraine with eight Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones, which Ukrainian officials noted likely sought to distract Ukrainian air defense systems before the missile strikes.^[2] Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down 34 of the 48 Kalibr and Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles and four Shahed-136 drones.^[3] Ukrainian officials also noted that all eight of the Kh-31P and Kh-59 missiles did not reach their intended targets. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that Ukrainian forces did not have the capacity to shoot down some of the Russian missiles—likely referring to Kinzhal and S-300 missiles.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces conducted “high precision long range air, sea, and land-based missile strikes” targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure, military-industrial complexes, and energy infrastructure supporting the Ukrainian military as retaliation for the alleged incursion into Bryansk Oblast on March 2.^[5]

Ukrainian officials, Russian milbloggers, and social media footage indicate that Russian forces overwhelmingly targeted energy infrastructure across Ukraine. The head of the Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrenergo, Volodymyr Kudrynskyi, stated that Russian missile strikes once again targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure, but yet again failed to achieve Russia’s ongoing goal of destroying Ukrainian power supplies.^[6] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated that Russian strikes hit eight energy sites resulting in power outages in some areas of the country.^[7] The Kyiv City Military Administration reported that preliminary data showed that Russian forces may have used Kinzhal missiles to strike unspecified infrastructure, while social media footage showed smoke rising from one of Kyiv’s thermo-electric power plants.^[8] Russian milbloggers amplified footage and reports of the aftermath of strikes on energy facilities in the cities of Kyiv, Dnipro, Vinnytsia, Odesa, Kirovohrad, and Kharkiv among others.^[9] ISW continues to assess that these missile strikes will not undermine Ukraine’s will or improve Russia’s positions on the frontlines.

The Kremlin likely deliberately launched missiles that Ukrainian air defenses cannot intercept to achieve results within the Russian information space despite the dwindling supplies of such missiles. Ihnat noted that Russia has up to 50 Kinzhal missiles and had used some missiles that it cannot replace. Russian President Vladimir Putin likely used these scarce missiles in fruitless attacks to appease the Russian pro-war and ultranationalist communities, which have overwhelmingly called on him to retaliate for the Bryansk Oblast incident on March 2.^[10] Russian milbloggers and propagandists have also criticized the Russian missile campaign for failing to make Ukraine “freeze” over the winter in late February and early March before the spring season.^[11] Putin likely attempted to offset these narratives with another missile attack similar to the ones that Russia conducted in the fall of 2022, using advanced missiles to guarantee some damage in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers did not overwhelmingly support today’s strikes, however, noting that the Kremlin needs to fundamentally change its targeting approach given that Ukraine has adapted to the established attack pattern against its energy infrastructure.^[12]

Russian forces likely advanced northwest of Bakhmut on March 9 amidst a likely increased tempo of Russian offensive operations in the area. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner Group fighters completely captured Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), and geolocated footage published on March 9 indicates that Wagner forces likely captured the settlement.^[13] The likely capture of Dubovo-Vasylivka corresponds with the potentially increased tempo of Russian offensive operations northwest of Bakhmut in recent days.^[14] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted at least 30 percent of their assaults in Ukraine northwest of Bakhmut on March 8.^[15] The Ukrainian General Staff has not reported Russian assaults near Khromove since March 1, and Ukrainian forces have reportedly reestablished river crossings in the area after Russian forces reportedly destroyed a bridge in the area on March 4.^[16] ISW has assessed that Ukrainian forces have likely pushed Russian forces back from Khromove since the Ukrainian General Staff’s reporting of the March 1 assaults, and the reported establishment of pontoon bridges suggests that Ukrainian forces are strengthening their positions around the critical ground lines of communications (GLOCs) near Khromove. Russian forces may be temporarily focusing their operational efforts northwest of Bakhmut to set conditions for future offensive operations aimed against these strengthened Ukrainian positions around Khromove or intended to bypass them in a larger envelopment.

The Wagner Group’s offensive operation in eastern Bakhmut appears to have entered a temporary tactical pause and it remains unclear if Wagner fighters will retain their operational preponderance in future Russian offensives in the city. There have been no reports of Wagner fighters conducting offensive operations from eastern Bakhmut into central parts of the city since Russian forces captured all of eastern Bakhmut located east of the Bakhmutka River on March 7.^[17] Wagner fighters have been conducting highly attritional frontal assaults on eastern Bakhmut for nine months and are likely not prepared to conduct a crossing of the Bakhmutka River to the Bakhmut city center at this time. The frontal offensive on eastern Bakhmut likely consumed a significant amount of Wagner personnel and

resources, although it is not yet evident whether this effort has caused Wagner's offensive within Bakhmut itself to culminate. Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated on March 9 that an increasing number of unspecified Russian airborne and mechanized reinforcements have recently arrived at Bakhmut.[18] The arrival of an increased number of conventional Russian forces to the area may suggest that Russian forces intend to offset the possible culmination of Wagner's offensive operations in Bakhmut with new conventional troops. Wagner Group fighters may also be conducting a temporary tactical pause to wait for these conventional Russian reinforcements and replenish themselves in preparation for costly operations within central Bakhmut.

Russian forces may be preparing to resume offensive operations around Vuhledar, although persistent personnel and ammunition issues will likely continue to constrain Russian forces from advancing. Social media footage published on March 8 reportedly shows personnel of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 58th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District appealing to the Russian military command for more artillery ammunition before they replace the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet near Vuhledar and conduct ground attacks in the area.[19] The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade bore a significant proportion of the catastrophic losses that Russian forces suffered in their culminated three-week February offensive to capture Vuhledar and has reportedly been reconstituted at least seven times since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[20] Russian forces may be rotating in the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade to replace a severely degraded formation in hopes of renewing offensives near Vuhledar, although this one-for-one replacement does not represent a Russian reinforcement of this effort. Personnel of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade detailed that they need to conserve their artillery ammunition as Russian forces send the majority of artillery shells to forces fighting around Bakhmut.[21] The 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade is unlikely to achieve tactical advances near Vuhledar that the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade, 40th Naval Infantry Brigade, and other Russian formations failed to make following months of preparation to start offensives in this direction. The likely degradation of other units in the area, significant equipment losses, and the reported continued artillery constraints will likely prevent Russian forces from securing significant tactical gains if they decide to resume offensives in the area.

Internal dynamics within the Russian military may be driving the potential resumption of costly offensives near Vuhledar that promise little operational benefit. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly ordered Eastern Military District (EMD) commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov to take Vuhledar at any cost to settle widespread criticism within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) about the lack of progress and significant losses in the Vuhledar area.[22] Shoigu recently visited Muradov in western Donetsk Oblast likely to assess the viability of the Vuhledar offensive as well as Muradov's continued role as EMD commander. [23] ISW previously assessed that Muradov would need new manpower and equipment reserves to follow through on Shoigu's reported instructions, and the one-for-one replacement of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade by the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade does not represent a notable fraction of the reinforcements likely required. [24] It is still not clear if Shoigu has decided to provide Muradov with the necessary resources to resume offensives, but Muradov may decide that he needs to resume offensive operations regardless to demonstrate his competence as EMD commander. ISW assesses that Russian forces would need to advance upwards of 24km from the current frontlines around Vuhledar for this offensive to support operations elsewhere in Donetsk Oblast, a rate of advance that Russian forces have not achieved since the first months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[25] The resumption of costly offensives around Vuhledar would be a misallocation of already degraded forces to an increasingly nonsensical operational effort, but Muradov's personal motivations may cause Russian forces in the area to resume these operations nonetheless.

Russian authorities are likely establishing volunteer-based military formations under Russian state-owned energy companies in order to distribute responsibility and accountability for managing units, alleviate burdens on the national budget and regional budgets, and draw on the financial resources of those entities. The BBC reported on March 9 that the Russian Tax Service entered the Zaporizhia-based Sudoplatov volunteer battalion into the register of Russian legal entities—making the battalion a state unitary enterprise.[26] The BBC added that the Russian Tax Service registered the battalion under the same address as state-owned enterprises Tavria-Energo and State Grain Operator.[27] The registration may be connected to the emerging Kremlin effort to establish a state-controlled armed formation analogous to the Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS) units under Gazprom subsidiary Gazprom Neft.[28] The creation of state-controlled military formations legally nested under energy companies could allow the Kremlin to reduce logistical burdens on the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and regional administrations, delegate clear responsibility for recruitment, recruit volunteers without committing additional federal funding, and provide a hedge against the limitations of the Wagner Group private military company (PMC). The decision to register the Sudoplatov battalion in proximity with Tavria-Energo, an organization that, unlike Gazprom, is not included in the US Treasury Department's sanctions lists, may provide additional financial incentives, as Tavria-Energo may aid the Sudoplatov battalion in circumventing financial hurdles that a Gazprom Neft-affiliated volunteer formation would face.[29]

The Transnistrian occupation government accused the Ukrainian government of plotting to kill Transnistria's president, likely as part of the ongoing Russian information operations to undermine Ukrainian credibility and destabilize Moldova. The Transnistrian occupation Ministry of Security Services accused six people, including Ukrainian nationals and Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) personnel, on March 9 of plotting to assassinate senior Transnistrian occupation officials and the occupation head Vadim Krasnoselsky.[30] The SBU stated that the Transnistrian authorities' accusation is a Kremlin information provocation.[31] ISW has previously reported on increasing Russian information efforts to destabilize Moldova and even draw Transnistria into the war.[32] The Kremlin also tried to undermine Ukraine's credibility through the recent claimed border incursions in Bryansk Oblast.[33]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted the largest missile strike across Ukraine of 2023 likely only to advance Russian state propaganda objectives.

- Russian forces likely advanced northwest of Bakhmut amid a likely increased tempo of Russian offensive operations in the area.
- The Wagner Group's offensive operation in eastern Bakhmut appears to have entered a temporary tactical pause and it remains unclear if Wagner fighters will retain their operational preponderance in future Russian offensives in the city.
- Russian forces may be preparing to resume offensive operations around Vuhledar, although persistent personnel and ammunition issues will likely continue to constrain Russian forces from advancing.
- Internal dynamics within the Russian military may be driving the potential resumption of costly offensives near Vuhledar that offer little prospect of operational benefit.
- Russian authorities are likely formalizing structures to create and coopt volunteer-based military formations under state-owned energy companies in order to distribute accountability, reduce burdens on the national budget, and avoid sanctions.
- The Transnistrian occupation government accused the Ukrainian government of involvement in a claimed terrorist plot, likely as part of the Russian information operations to undermine Ukrainian credibility and destabilize Moldova.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks throughout the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut but have not completed a turning movement or enveloped or encircled the city.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City and near Vuhledar.
- Russian strikes completely disconnected the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in Enerhodar, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, from all external power sources for 10 hours.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian occupation authorities are preparing for a spring 2023 mobilization wave in occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that may include male teenagers born in 2006.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities are continuing efforts to integrate occupied territories into the Russian political and bureaucratic systems.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 8, 2023

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Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

March 8, 7:45 pm ET

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Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on March 8 that Russian forces captured all of eastern Bakhmut, a claim consistent with available visual evidence.^[1] ISW assessed on March 7 that Ukrainian forces completed a controlled withdrawal from eastern Bakhmut across the Bakhmutka River.^[2] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces control between 45 to 52 percent of Bakhmut as of March 7.^[3] This figure is reasonable; ISW assesses that Russian forces now occupy at least 50 percent of Bakhmut as of March 8. Russian forces will likely intensify attacks in northwestern and southwestern Bakhmut (north from Opytne and south from Yahidne, respectively) to circumnavigate the Bakhmutka River.

Russian forces remain unlikely to rapidly exploit a breakthrough beyond Bakhmut if Russian forces capture the city. Prigozhin implied on March 8 that the Russian Ministry of Defense used the Wagner Group to bear the brunt of high-intensity attritional urban warfare in Bakhmut and may discard the Wagner Group after capturing Bakhmut so conventional Russian units can continue to attack.^[4] Prigozhin did not provide an assessment of the likelihood of success of future Russian offensive operations beyond Bakhmut. ISW has not observed any indicators that the Russian military has a well-equipped and prepared reserve force to advance beyond Bakhmut. Most observed Russian units in Donbas are already engaged in offensive operations, including Russian airborne (VDV) elements that joined the Russian offensive in Bakhmut in January 2023.^[5] ISW continues to assess that the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine will shortly culminate if Russian forces capture Bakhmut, as the Russian military does not have the combat power or reinforcements necessary to exploit a breakthrough near Bakhmut.^[6] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on March 8 that the Russian capture of Bakhmut would not "necessarily reflect any turning point of the war."^[7]

US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated on March 8 that Russian President Vladimir Putin likely recognizes the Russian military's current limited capability to sustain a short-term offensive and may pursue a protracted war.[8] Haines stated on March 8 that Putin is likely only temporarily focused on pursuing short-term military objectives in Ukraine and may believe that prolonging the war will increase the likelihood of achieving his strategic goals. ISW has previously assessed that Putin maintains maximalist war goals in Ukraine despite Russian forces' currently limited capabilities to achieve these goals.[9] Haines stated that Russia will increasingly struggle to maintain its current tempo of operations in Ukraine without conducting full mobilization and securing adequate ammunition to mitigate Russia's current shortage. Haines noted that Russian forces are suffering high losses to take Bakhmut, which Haines characterized as "not particularly strategic," supporting ISW's prior assessments that a Pyrrhic tactical victory in Bakhmut would not further Russia's operational or strategic battlefield aims.[10] ISW previously assessed on January 15 that the Kremlin was preparing for a strategically decisive effort in 2023 while simultaneously preparing for a protracted war.[11]

The Kremlin may be attempting to establish a new Russian government-controlled armed formation billed as a volunteer unit through the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom. A prominent Russian milblogger stated that Gazprom subsidiary Gazprom Neft is forming a volunteer formation analogous to Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS) units.[12] The milblogger originally claimed that Gazprom Neft is forming a private military company (PMC) and is actively deploying unspecified elements to occupied Donetsk Oblast before later issuing a correction that the Gazprom Neft formation is a volunteer unit, not a PMC. The milblogger claimed Gazprom Neft's recruitment campaign generated interest in Donetsk City given that the company is offering 400,000 rubles (approximately \$5,260) salary per month and additional compensation for performance bonuses.[13] The milblogger added that this offered salary is twice the amount offered by the Wagner Group, noting that a volunteer in the Gazprom Neft formation can—with bonuses—earn up to 600,000 rubles (about \$7,890) per month. Gazprom Neft may be attempting to compete with Wagner for recruits from Donetsk Oblast given that Wagner is also conducting its own recruitment campaign in the area.[14]

The Russian government previously authorized Gazprom Neft to create a private security organization (not a PMC) on February 6 to protect Russian energy infrastructure.[15] Ukrainian intelligence previously noted that the creation of the Gazprom Neft private security company aligns with an assessed Kremlin effort to sideline Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and mitigate the Kremlin's dependency on Wagner Group forces.[16] A Russian milblogger also rhetorically questioned when the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will become "jealous" of the new Gazprom Neft formations and cut off their access to ammunition—likely referencing the Russian MoD's conflict with Prigozhin.

A US official denied on March 8 that US intelligence assessed that a pro-Ukrainian group sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. US National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Andrienne Watson stated on March 8 that the NSC is unable to confirm the *New York Times* March 7 report that US officials reviewed unverified intelligence suggesting a pro-Ukrainian group conducted the attack.[17] Watson stated that the anonymous claims in the report did not come from downgraded intelligence shared by the US government and that sources were not authorized to speak on the US government's behalf.[18]

German and Polish officials announced that Germany and Poland will deliver 28 Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine in March 2023, which will bolster Ukraine's capabilities to conduct a counteroffensive amidst high Russian tank losses. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced on March 8 that Germany will deliver 18 Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine by the end of March, and Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczyk announced that Poland will deliver 10 more tanks by the end of the week.[19] These tanks, though below the quantities that the Ukrainian military needs, will augment Ukraine's capabilities to conduct counteroffensive operations, particularly due to the degraded state of Russian armored units. Dutch open-source group Oryx reported that it verified Russian losses of over 1,000 T-72 tank variants in Ukraine as of March 8.[20] Oryx verified 1,079 destroyed Russian tanks and 549 captured Russian tanks as of February 24, and estimated on February 9 that Russian forces had committed roughly 3,000 tanks to the war in Ukraine.[21]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on March 8 that Russian forces captured all of eastern Bakhmut, a claim consistent with available visual evidence
- Russian forces remain unlikely to exploit a breakthrough beyond Bakhmut if Russian forces capture the city.
- The Kremlin may be attempting to establish a new Russian government-controlled armed formation billed as a volunteer unit through the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom.
- A US official denied that US intelligence assessed that a pro-Ukrainian group sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022.
- German and Polish officials announced that Germany and Poland will deliver 28 Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine in March 2023, which will bolster Ukraine's capabilities to conduct a counteroffensive amidst high Russian tank losses.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on March 8 but have not succeeded in completing a turning movement around the city.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces landed on the Dnipro River Delta islands for the third consecutive day.

- The Kremlin is doubling down on reviving volunteer recruitment campaigns throughout Russia and occupied Ukraine.
- Russian hospitals are continuing to form new medical centers in Russia in an effort to maximize the capacity for overfilling hospitals in occupied territories to treat wounded Russian servicemen.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 7, 2023

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Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Mason Clark

March 7, 8:15 pm ET

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on March 7 that the hypothetical Russian capture of Bakhmut would provide Russian forces an “open road” to Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, and other critical settlements in Donetsk Oblast.^[1]

ISW continues to assess, however, that Russian forces lack the capability to exploit the tactical capture of Bakhmut to generate operational effects, and will likely rapidly culminate following the capture of Bakhmut. As ISW has previously assessed, Russian forces would have to choose between two diverging lines of advance after capturing Bakhmut. Russian forces could attempt to push west along the T0504 highway towards Kostiatynivka (about 20km from Bakhmut) or could push northwest along the E40 highway towards the Slovyansk-Kramatorsk area in northwestern Donetsk Oblast (about 40km northwest of Bakhmut).^[2] These two potential axes of advance are not mutually supporting, and degraded Russian forces would likely have to prioritize the pursuit of just one to have any chance of success - though Russian commanders have repeatedly stretched their forces too thin across multiple axes of advance throughout the invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian forces have also heavily fortified both of these routes, which are supplied by numerous ground lines of communication (GLOCs) running deep into the Ukrainian rear, and any Russian attempt to advance down these roads would likely be highly costly.^[3]

Russian forces additionally likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to advance beyond Bakhmut, and the tactical “assault detachments” used in assaults against Bakhmut are likely unable to conduct maneuver warfare. Recent Russian advances within urban areas of Bakhmut demonstrate that Russian forces can secure limited tactical gains with infantry-led frontal assaults.^[4] Russian forces likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to exploit the roads (which are likely highly fortified) west of Bakhmut. As ISW has recently reported, Russian forces are increasingly relying on “assault detachments,” a battalion-size element optimized for frontal assaults on fortified areas, rather than for maneuver warfare.^[5] These detachments are artillery-heavy, use simplified tactics, relegate tanks to a fire support role in rear areas, and would almost certainly struggle to effectively conduct operations beyond urban areas. A prominent Russian milblogger echoed this observation on March 7, noting that assault detachments are simply too small to “punch a wide and deep gap” in Ukrainian defensive formations and follow with tank and mechanized battalions, and called for the formation of “breakthrough brigades,” a change likely far beyond the current capabilities of Russian forces in the area.^[6] The continuing devolution of Russian force structure towards small assault detachments using simplified tactics, combined with mounting losses among the most effective Russian troops, will likely greatly limit the ability of Russian forces to properly exploit any paths of advance opened by the capture of Bakhmut. Russian forces remain unlikely to secure more than a tactical victory following 10 months of assaults.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric seeking to deter further Western military aid to Ukraine during a conference call on March 7.^[7] Shoigu reiterated senior Russian officials' tired claims that Western states aim to destroy Russia by providing arms to Ukraine and have begun an information war targeting Russia. Shoigu invoked the commonly referenced historical memory of World War II to justify the war in Ukraine, calling on Russians to prevent lessons learned from defeating Nazism "to be distorted and forgotten." Shoigu claimed that Russian forces killed over 11,000 Ukrainian military personnel in February 2023, which he claimed was a 40 percent increase from Ukrainian casualties in January. Shoigu's speech did not craft any new rhetorical arguments that could shape the Russian information space and garner more domestic support for the war effort, continuing to rely on standard tropes in the absence of any Russian successes.

Shoigu also outlined long-term and likely aspirational efforts to restore and expand the Russian officer corps.^[8] Shoigu stated that the Russian military is undergoing a phased increase and needs to recruit about 18,000 students and cadets for officer training. Shoigu noted that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) needs to increase staffing at Russian universities to provide adequate training for over 280 military specialties and claimed that Russians are increasingly interested in the engineering and flight specialties. Shoigu also stated that children of Russian military personnel and students at select schools will undergo selection for military specialties before taking the necessary exams. Shoigu also noted claimed ongoing efforts by Russian forces in Ukraine to refine training processes, increase the protection of military personnel, and increase the efficiency of military operations.

Russia exchanged 130 Ukrainian prisoners-of-war (POWs) for 90 Russian POWs on March 7. The Ukrainian State Border Service reported that of the 130 Ukrainian soldiers released, 87 fought in Mariupol, including 71 Azovstal defenders.^[9] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that 90 Russian soldiers returned to Russia, and a Russian milblogger posted footage claiming to show the released Russian soldiers receiving new boots and clothes in Belgorod Oblast.^[10]

Russian independent polling organization The Levada Center released poll results that 51 percent of Russians feel negatively toward Russians who left the country due to mobilization.^[11] Ten percent of Russians polled indicated that they have a positive or understanding attitude toward those that left. The Levada Center poll indicated that Russians over 55 years old and those living in rural areas and cities with fewer than 100,000 residents are most likely to have negative attitudes toward Russians who left due to mobilization. The Levada Center's polling data demonstrates that the Kremlin retains a strong hold over the domestic information space. The poll did not ask questions regarding attitudes to the war itself, indicating at minimum negative feelings towards those that escaped mobilization, if not overt support for the war.

The New York Times (NYT) reported on March 7 that low-confidence and unverified intelligence reviewed by US officials may suggest that a pro-Ukrainian group carried out an attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. US officials reported that they know very little about the "perpetrators or their affiliations," but that they may be "opponents" of Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[12] The NYT article emphasizes that US officials refused to disclose the nature of the intelligence and have not settled on an explanation of the Nord Stream attacks, and this leak remains low-confidence.

US Air Force General James B. Hecker, commander of US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa, and NATO Allied Air Command confirmed on March 6 that the US has provided Ukraine with Joint Direct Attack Munition Extended Range (JDAM-ER) kits.^[13] Hecker noted that the JDAM-ERs arrived in Ukraine three weeks ago and have a range of 72km.^[14] Russian milbloggers generally had a muted response to the announcement, with one Russian source voicing concern that JDAM-ERs will allow Ukrainian forces to launch strikes against Russian front and near rear positions without running the risk of entering Russian airspace.^[15] Another Russian milblogger remarked that Russian troops are responding to the use of JDAM-ERs with their own use of guided bombs to strike Ukrainian positions.^[16]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on March 7 that Russian forces will have an "open road" to capture key cities in Donbas. ISW continues to assess, however, that Russian forces lack the capability to exploit the tactical capture of Bakhmut to generate operational effects, and will likely rapidly culminate following the capture of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to advance beyond Bakhmut, and the tactical "assault detachments" used in assaults against Bakhmut are likely unable to conduct maneuver warfare.
- Russian forces have likely captured the eastern part of Bakhmut east of the Bakhmutka River following a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from eastern Bakhmut as of March 7.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric seeking to deter further Western military aid to Ukraine.
- Shoigu additionally outlined long-term and likely aspirational efforts to restore and expand the Russian officer corps.
- Russia exchanged 130 Ukrainian prisoners-of-war (POWs) for 90 Russian POWs on March 7.
- Russian independent polling organization The Levada Center released poll results that 51 percent of Russians feel negatively toward Russians who left the country due to mobilization, indicating at minimum negative feelings towards those that escaped mobilization, if not overt support for the war.

- *The New York Times (NYT)* stated on March 7 that low-confidence and unverified intelligence reviewed by US officials may suggest that a pro-Ukrainian group carried out an attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022, but made clear this is a very low confidence assessment.
- US Air Force General James Hecker confirmed on March 6 that the US has provided Ukraine with Joint Direct Attack Munition Extended Range (JDAM-ER) kits.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces attempt to conduct operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal authorities continue to place the onus of solving mobilization issues onto Russian regional authorities who then absolve themselves of ongoing Russian command issues.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to import employees from various Russian law enforcement agencies to staff vacancies in occupation administrations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 6, 2023

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

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

March 6, 10:45pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Ukrainian authorities indicated that Ukraine will continue to defend Bakhmut for now. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated at the end of the day on March 6 that he has ordered reinforcements to Bakhmut.^[1] This announcement follows Zelensky's March 6 meeting with Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi and Commander of Ukrainian Ground Forces Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi where both commanders recommended the continued defense of Bakhmut and asked Zelensky to strengthen Ukrainian forces in the area.^[2] Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak similarly stated on March 6 that the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut thus far has "achieved its goals" and been a "great strategic success."^[3] Statements made by Ukrainian officials regarding Bakhmut are likely meant in part to respond to the continued concern expressed by some Americans regarding the costs of Ukraine's continued defense of Bakhmut. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated on March 6 that he would not view a Ukrainian withdrawal from Bakhmut as a "significant strategic setback," possibly intimating that he favors such a withdrawal.^[4]

Bakhmut is not intrinsically significant operationally or strategically as ISW has previously observed. Taking Bakhmut is necessary but not sufficient for further Russian advances in Donetsk Oblast, and Russian forces have already taken such heavy losses fighting for the city that their attack will very likely culminate after they have secured it—if not before. The loss of Bakhmut is not, therefore, of major operational or strategic concern to Ukraine, as Secretary Austin and others have observed.

But Ukraine's fight for Bakhmut has become strategically significant because of the current composition of Russian forces arrayed in the area. Some Western reports have recently suggested that Ukraine is expending its own elite manpower and scarce equipment on mainly Wagner Group prison recruits who are mere cannon fodder, noting that such an exchange would be to Ukraine's disadvantage even at high ratios of Russian to Ukrainian losses. That observation is valid in general, although the pool of Russian convict recruits suitable for combat is not limitless and the permanent elimination of tens of thousands of them in Bakhmut means that they will not be available for more important fights.

Russian forces fighting in Bakhmut are now drawn from the elite elements of the Wagner Group and from Russian airborne units as well as from lower-quality troops. Ukrainian intelligence has supported ISW's assessment that Russian forces near Bakhmut have recently changed tactics and committed higher-quality special forces operators and elements of conventional forces to the fight.^[5] ISW has previously reported on the increasing presence of Russian Airborne (VDV) forces around Bakhmut since late December into early January, indicating that conventional Russian troops may be supporting or even supplanting Wagner's operations around Bakhmut.^[6] The Wagner Group is still likely using prisoners to support operations in Bakhmut, albeit to a much more limited extent than in previous months due to massive losses suffered by those recruits in attritional frontal assaults. But Wagner has now also committed its very best soldiers to the fight, and it is they who are being attrited along with the conscripts.

The Battle of Bakhmut may, in fact, severely degrade the Wagner Group's best forces, depriving Russia of some of its most effective and most difficult-to-replace shock troops. The Wagner attacks already culminated once, causing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to commit some of its elite airborne troops to the fight. It may well culminate again before taking the city, once more forcing the Russian military to choose between abandoning the effort or throwing more high-quality troops into the battle. The opportunity to damage the Wagner Group's elite elements, along with other elite units if they are committed, in a defensive urban warfare setting where the attrition gradient strongly favors Ukraine is an attractive one.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin apparently fears that his forces are being expended in exactly this way. Prigozhin made a number of statements on March 5 and 6 that suggest that he fears that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is fighting the Battle of Bakhmut to the last Wagner fighter and exposing his forces to destruction. Prigozhin claimed that he wrote a letter to the commander of Russian forces in Ukraine (presumably Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov) with an urgent appeal for the Russian command to allocate ammunition to Wagner but that his representative was denied access to Russian headquarters and could not deliver the appeal.^[7] Prigozhin later published a response to the Zelensky-Zaluzhnyi-Syrskyi meeting on March 6 and claimed that Ukraine has formed a number of offensive groups in Donetsk Oblast to "unblock" Wagner's blockade of Bakhmut and that he has been "raising the alarm" to call for ammunition and reinforcements for Wagner.^[8] Prigozhin claimed that if Wagner does not receive needed ammunition and reinforcements and the blockade of Bakhmut breaks, all is essentially lost and that he will stay with Wagner to the end.^[9] Prigozhin's plea to the Russian General Staff and suggestion that he will stay with Wagner until the bitter end suggests that he is working to position himself as the ultimate martyr for the ideological cause that Bakhmut has come to represent in the Russian milblogger information space. More importantly, it shows that he sees his elite forces to be in grave danger.

The severe degradation or destruction of the elite Wagner fighting force would have positive ramifications beyond the battlefield. Prigozhin has ostentatiously ramped up efforts to disseminate Wagner's militarism and ideology throughout Russia by advertising Wagner's role in Bakhmut. The Wagner Group has recently opened several recruitment centers at sports clubs throughout Russia, opened a youth branch, and is visiting schoolchildren to lecture them about Wagner's structure and show them unfiltered combat footage from Ukraine.^[10] Wagner's success in Bakhmut thus far has given Prigozhin a major advantage in the information space, bolstering his reputation and increasing his popularity in a way that will likely have long-term impacts in the Russian domestic sphere. Prigozhin is one of the most extreme of the Russian pro-war nationalists. He is one of the very few with a serious military force loyal to himself. He has even seemed at times a possible threat to Putin or a possible successor. Which may be why Putin is allowing the Russian MoD to hang him out to dry. Badly damaging Prigozhin's power and reputation within Russia would be an important accomplishment from the standpoint of the long-term prospects for restoring sanity in Russia. That is an aim in America's interests as well as in Ukraine's, and it raises the stakes in the Battle of Bakhmut beyond matters of terrain and battlespace geometry.

The Kremlin is returning to its previously unsuccessful volunteer recruitment and crypto-mobilization campaigns to avoid ordering another major involuntary reserve call-up. Russian Telegram channels began advertising for recruitment into existing volunteer battalions after ceasing such recruitment calls in September 2022 at the start of involuntary reserve mobilization.^[11] Some local Russian officials are also setting up mobile recruitment centers in order to advertise voluntary military contract service — a phenomenon that ISW observed during the previous volunteer recruitment campaign between late May 2022 and September 2022.^[12] Russian officials are even advertising contract service in unusual places: A Moscow-based psychiatrist is reportedly calling on suicidal men to enlist.^[13] Russian ultranationalist social media networks are also increasingly advertising recruitment for Wagner Group units across almost 30 Russian cities.^[14] Ukrainian officials observed instances of Russian occupation officials registering male teenagers born in 2006 from occupied Luhansk Oblast for military service.^[15] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that military recruitment centers in occupied Donetsk Oblast received instructions to clarify personal credentials of reserve officers under 65 years of age, and soldiers, sergeants, and warrant officers under the age of 50.^[16] Russian officials had extensively conducted similar crypto-mobilization in occupied Ukrainian territories throughout the war, especially over the summer.

Such voluntary recruitment drives may also indicate that the Kremlin is running out of combat-ready reserves to continue its offensive operations past the Battle of Bakhmut and its failed offensives around Vuhledar and in Luhansk Oblast. ISW assessed on February 26 that Russian President Vladimir Putin had turned to voluntary recruitment campaigns in late May 2022, when the Russian military began to run out of reserves as it was conducting a costly offensive on the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line — over a month before Russian attack culminated in Luhansk Oblast.^[17] Putin later abandoned his country-wide and summer-long volunteer recruitment campaign and ordered an involuntary reservist call-up in response to the sweeping Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022.^[18] The Kremlin may be repeating similar efforts in hopes that such irregular forces will be sufficient to retain Russian initiative on the frontline. Russian veterans and milbloggers, however, observed that Russia will not be able to achieve its objectives of reaching the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast without the large-scale mobilization of personnel, economy, and industry.^[19]

The return of the voluntary recruitment and crypto-mobilization campaigns likely indicates that the Kremlin will not launch another mobilization wave before the summer of 2023 at the earliest because the spring conscription cycle is due to begin on April 1. Western officials previously reported that Putin had been delaying announcing the second mobilization wave since January and was leaning towards conducting “silent mobilization” out of concern for the stability of his regime.[20] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely again advised Putin to launch another mobilization over the winter as an involuntary call-up at that time would be less likely to overwhelm already struggling Russian military recruitment centers between bi-annual conscription cycles. ISW had observed numerous indicators that Russia was preparing to execute the second mobilization wave since fall 2022, but Putin passed the mobilization window to avoid further antagonizing Russians who did not support previous involuntary call-ups.[21] The Russian MoD will likely be unable to embark on mobilization processes until after Russia completes its spring conscription cycle given that Russian military recruitment centers appear to have the administrative capacity to prepare and generate roughly 130,000 conscripts per bi-annual cycle.[22] That limitation appears to be relatively inflexible and likely explains why the 300,000 reservists called up in the fall seem to have been trained in batches rather than all at once. It likely also explains why Russian forces are using training areas in Belarus to reconstitute formations damaged in combat. Putin would likely need to delay the spring conscription cycle if he decided to announce mobilization now, likely for longer than the one-month delay in the autumn conscription cycle caused by his September 2022 reserve call-up.[23]

A reportedly captured Russian military manual suggests that Russian forces intend to use the newly created “assault detachment” elements in urban warfare. Ukrainian news outlet *Censor.NET* originally published the alleged manuals that detail the formation and use of the assault detachment on December 12. [24] ISW previously reported on the “assault detachment” on February 27 and assessed that this newly minted formation is likely an effort to compensate for current combat power limitations by breaking maneuver forces into smaller and more agile structures, thereby partially institutionalizing practices previously used to tactical effect by the Wagner Group in urban combat.[25] A Ukrainian reserve officer amplified documents in the manual on March 5 that recommend assault detachment tactics to be applied in an urban context.[26] The document recommends that Russian forces begin their assaults by targeting the defense’s frontline with tanks or explosives to make holes in fences and buildings to ensure safe passage of an assault company and suggests how to seize observation points, confuse the enemy, seize multi-story buildings, and take cover. The documents also makes suggestions for Russian forces operating in an assault platoon to break into small groups and clear multi-story and multi-entrance buildings. The Ukrainian reserve officer noted that while the Russian military attempts to create more flexible military formations, instructions are “blindly applied across the battlefield based on a few successful examples.”[27] ISW previously assessed that the documents indicate that the Russian military attempts to simplify combined arms warfare to compensate for the challenges posed by manpower and equipment losses and inexperienced and untrained mobilized personnel.[28] Assault detachments may suffer significant losses in urban warfare given the extensive use of untrained personnel and attritional tactics.

Russian forces utilized a new type of guided aerial bomb against Ukrainian targets amid continued precision missile shortages. Ukrainian news outlet *Defense Express* reported on March 4 that Russian forces used the UPAB-1500V guided aerial bomb against an unspecified target in Chernihiv Oblast within the past few weeks. *Defense Express* noted that Russian bomber aircraft can release the bombs up to 40km from the intended target and that the aircraft can maintain a low altitude of 14km, both of which would lessen the risk of Ukrainian air defenses taking out the Russian bombers.[29] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated that a Russian Su-34 may have been trying to launch a UPAB-1500V when Ukrainian forces shot the jet down.[30] Ignat stated on March 6 that Russian forces will undertake every possible measure to procure more weapons and warned not to underestimate Russia’s ability to procure artillery shells, drones, and missiles for use in Ukraine.[31]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 5, 2023

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

Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

March 5, 8:25pm ET

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ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 5. This report analyzes the ongoing Battle for Bakhmut and Russian prospects for further offensive efforts. Ukrainian forces may be conducting a limited fighting withdrawal in eastern Bakhmut and are continuing to inflict high casualties against the advancing mixed Russian forces. Russian milbloggers have also lowered their expectations of Russian forces’ ability to launch additional offensives, which would likely culminate whether or not Russian forces actually capture Bakhmut. If Russian forces manage to secure Bakhmut they could then attempt renewed pushes towards one or both of Kostyantynivka or Sloviansk but would struggle with endemic personnel and equipment constraints. The likely imminent culmination of the Russian offensive around Bakhmut before or after its fall, the already culminated Russian offensive around Vuhledar, and the stalling Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast are likely setting robust conditions for a future Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a limited tactical withdrawal in Bakhmut, although it is still too early to assess Ukrainian intentions concerning a complete withdrawal from the city. Ukrainian forces may be withdrawing from their positions on the eastern bank of the Bakhmutka River given recent geolocated footage of the destruction of the railway bridge over the river in northeastern Bakhmut on March 3.[1] Russian war correspondents and milbloggers claimed that Russian forces captured eastern, northern, and southern parts of Bakhmut on March 5 and claimed to be reporting from positions in eastern Bakhmut, but ISW cannot independently verify these claims at this time.[2] Geolocated footage showed that Wagner Group forces continued to make advances in northeastern Bakhmut and advanced near the Stupky railway station on March 5.[3] A Ukrainian serviceman told a Ukrainian outlet that Russian forces have yet to cross the Bakhmutka River into central Bakhmut as of March 4, and Russian milbloggers claimed that the Wagner Group pushed Ukrainian positions back to central Bakhmut.[4] It is unclear if Ukrainian forces are planning to hold positions on the western bank of the Bakhmutka River.

The Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut remains strategically sound as it continues to consume Russian manpower and equipment as long as Ukrainian forces do not suffer excessive casualties. Ukrainian forces are unlikely to withdraw from Bakhmut all at once and may pursue a gradual fighting withdrawal to exhaust Russian forces through continued urban warfare. Russian forces are unlikely to quickly secure significant territorial gains when conducting urban warfare, which usually favors the defender and can allow Ukrainian forces to inflict high casualties on advancing Russian units—even as Ukrainian forces are actively withdrawing. The Bakhmut city center is located on the western bank of the Bakhmutka River, and Russian forces will need to fight through the area if they are unable to advance directly north or south of Bakhmut to the west of the city center. Such urban conditions and river features may benefit Ukrainian forces if Ukrainian forces are able to hold the line from Khromove (a settlement on Bakhmut's northwestern outskirts) south to the T0504 Bakhmut-Kostyantynivka highway. Russian milbloggers noted that Ukrainian forces are retaining the ability to defend Khromove and are continuing to repel Russian attacks on Ivanivske and on the T0504 highway to the south.[5] The Ukrainian defense of positions near Khromove and on the T0504 could force Russian forces to fight through the urban terrain of central Bakhmut, which could impose significant delays and losses on Russian forces and accelerate the culmination of Russia's offensive. Urban warfare in Bakhmut may further degrade already exhausted Russian mixed forces in a fashion similar to that caused by Ukraine's fighting withdrawal from the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line, which effectively ended Russian offensive operations in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in the summer of 2022.

The Russian military's attritional campaign to capture Bakhmut has likely prompted Russian milbloggers to adopt more realistic expectations for further Russian operations in Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander and Russian milblogger Alexander Khodakovskiy questioned whether Russian forces are prepared for potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations after possibly "getting carried away by Bakhmut [and] Vuhledar" and suggested that Russian forces may have set conditions for Ukrainian counteroffensives by heavily expending combat power and resources on these operations.[6] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces would likely have to conduct a short operational pause following the potential capture of Bakhmut.[7] Another prominent Russian milblogger offered a more ambitious assessment that Russian forces would take Kostyantynivka by the end of spring 2023 and launch an offensive on the Sloviansk-Kramatorsk agglomeration between the summer and fall of 2023.[8] Even this relatively ambitious assessment contrasts with previous high expectations from Russian milbloggers, many of whom claimed that the entire Ukrainian frontline around Bakhmut would collapse and Ukrainian forces would fall back to Kramatorsk and Sloviansk following the Russian capture of the small settlement of Soledar northeast of Bakhmut on January 11.[9] Russian milbloggers similarly shifted to more conservative expectations focused on the immediate capture of specific settlements as the highly attritional campaign to capture Lysychansk and Severodonetsk in the summer of 2022 progressed and the overall offensive culminated.[10] Nine months of highly attritional, slow Russian advances in the Bakhmut area have likely heavily informed these increasingly realistic and constrained Russian milblogger assessments.

The Russian military will nevertheless likely fail to meet Russian milbloggers' expectations despite these more realistic assessments. The timeline offered by even the most ambitious assessment suggests that Russian campaigning to capture all of Donetsk Oblast would be a years-long effort. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin similarly assessed that it would take Russian forces up to two years to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders.[11] Russian forces currently do not have the manpower and equipment necessary to sustain offensive operations at scale for a renewed offensive toward Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, let alone for a years-long campaign to capture all of Donetsk Oblast. Meaningful Russian offensives around Vuhledar or elsewhere in western Donetsk Oblast are also highly doubtful. Russia will have to mobilize considerably more personnel and fundamentally transform its military industry to be able to support such operations. The Russian military's likely continued failure to achieve a decisive victory in Donetsk Oblast will likely draw increasing ire from Russia's ultranationalist pro-war community.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 5:

- The Ukrainian Air Force Command and Ukrainian news outlet *Defense Express* reported that Russian forces began using new UPAB-1500V aerial bombs against Ukrainian targets.[33]
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks northwest and south of Kreminna.[34]
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks near Avdiivka and on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.[35] A Russian source claimed that Russian forces advanced to Pervomaiske, 8km northwest of Donetsk City.[36]
- The Ukrainian General Staff continued to report that Russian forces are attempting to create conditions for the transition to an offensive in some areas of the Zaporizhia and Kherson directions.[37] ISW has not observed indicators that Russian forces are preparing to launch sustained offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast or any offensive activity in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Viktoriya Litvinova reported that Russia deported about 16,000 children of whom 307 were able to return to Ukraine.[38] The Ukrainian Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights Daria Herasimchuk reported that Russian officials use coercive tactics to separate Ukrainian children from their parents in order to deport them.[39]

- Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska reported that Ukrainian prosecutors are investigating 171 cases of sexual assault committed by Russian Forces against Ukrainian citizens.[40]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 4, 2023

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

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

March 4, 6:00 pm ET

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Russian forces appear to have secured a sufficient positional advantage to conduct a turning movement against certain parts of Bakhmut but have not yet forced Ukrainian forces to withdraw and will likely not be able to encircle the city soon. Russian forces made one limited confirmed advance near Bakhmut on March 4.[1] As ISW reported on March 3, Ukrainian forces are likely setting conditions for a controlled fighting withdrawal out of particularly difficult sectors of eastern Bakhmut, although it is not clear that Ukrainian commanders have decided to withdraw at this time.[2] Russian sources claim that Wagner Group elements have made gains in northeastern and eastern Bakhmut over the past few days, creating a tactically challenging turning movement in urban areas in northern Bakhmut. [3] Ukrainian officials have recently reiterated that Ukrainian forces still control the situation in Bakhmut but have noted that circumstances are increasingly complicated and that the Wagner Group has committed its most advanced and prepared elements to assault operations in the area.[4]

Russian advances in Bakhmut have been slow and gradual and do not suggest that Russian forces will be able to encircle Bakhmut soon, much less that they will be able to take the city by frontal assaults. The Russians have, rather, managed to push close enough to critical ground lines of communication from the northeast to threaten Ukrainian withdrawal routes in a classical envelopment maneuver. **The purpose of a turning movement is to force the enemy to abandon prepared defensive positions and is different from the aim of an encirclement, which is to trap and destroy enemy forces. The Russians may have intended to encircle Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut, but the Ukrainian command has signaled that it will likely withdraw rather than risk an encirclement.** ISW assesses that Ukrainian forces are far more likely to withdraw than to become encircled and that the Ukrainians might still be able to hold their positions in Bakhmut if they choose to try. Russian forces have been suffering high casualties in these advances, and Ukrainian commanders' assessments of the likelihood that they can force Russian attacks to culminate near or behind their current positions balanced against the risk of losing access to essential withdrawal routes will likely guide the Ukrainian decision to stay or pull back.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov in western Donetsk Oblast, likely to assess the extent of Russian losses around Vuhledar and the possibility of further offensives in this direction. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published a video on March 4 purporting to show Shoigu visiting Muradov in an unspecified area of western Donetsk Oblast and claimed that Muradov delivered a report on the current situation and actions of Russian forces in his area of responsibility.[5] Russian forces suffered catastrophic losses in a recent three-week offensive near Vuhledar, and severe personnel and equipment constraints are likely preventing Russian forces from making even marginal advances in this direction. [6] The Russian MoD may be considering whether transferring reserves of manpower and equipment to the Vuhledar area for renewed offensive operations is a worthwhile effort. The Russian MoD recently confirmed that Muradov is the EMD commander, and the substantial losses around Vuhledar have likely already caused Muradov significant reputational damage.[7] Shoigu may have therefore visited western Donetsk Oblast also to assess Muradov's continued suitability for the position of EMD commander. Shoigu's visit to Ukraine may suggest that the Russian MoD lacks confidence in Chief of the General Staff and theater commander of all Russian forces in Ukraine Army General Valery Gerasimov, who likely should have been the officer making this frontline visit or at least accompanying Shoigu.[8] Russia's military district commanders report to Gerasimov on operational matters, and Shoigu's publicized solo visit to western Donetsk appears to undermine Gerasimov.

The Chinese government is reportedly displeased with the Kremlin over the publicization of arms sales discussions. *The Economist* reported on March 2 that an unspecified European official claimed that the Chinese government wanted discussions of lethal aid to remain secret so that China could maintain its image as a neutral mediator.[9] CNBC News reported on March 3 that US officials have indicated that information regarding Chinese considerations to send Russia arms was an assessment "gleaned" from Russian officials.[10]

Russian State Duma Defense Committee Head Andrey Kartapalov stated that Russian companies should purchase their own air defense systems to defend against drones. A Russian state-owned news source reported that Kartapalov claimed on March 1 that Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) resources are focused on protecting critical state and military facilities. He argued that every "self-respecting corporation" should be able to purchase and install such systems for themselves. [11] This bizarre proposal would likely create further security issues for Russia, not resolve them, as the prospect of numerous companies fielding and presumably using their own air defense systems independent of the Russian military should alarm any sane Russian official. Kartapalov's statements are almost certainly an

extension of the domestic panic inflamed by reports of the March 2 incursion into Bryansk Oblast and accusations of recent Ukrainian drones in Russian airspace. Kartapalov may have additionally hoped to place the onus of defense on individual enterprises to frame Ukrainian activity as a direct threat to domestic Russian affairs.

The Wagner Group reportedly opened at least three new recruitment centers at Russian sports clubs between March 2 and 4, possibly to augment Wagner's recruitment base after losing access to prisoner recruits. The Wagner Group reportedly opened at least three new recruiting centers collocated with Russian sporting clubs since Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin officially announced that Wagner launched recruiting efforts through Russian sports club on March 2.[12] The new Wagner recruiting centers are reportedly based at the "Dynamo" sports facility in Samara, the "Antares" Sports Club in Rostov, and the Russian Boxing Federation building in Tyumen.[13] This effort may seek to offset decreases in Wagner recruitment after the Wagner Group reportedly lost access to recruiting prisoners in early 2023. Prigozhin insinuated on March 3 that Russian government officials barred the Wagner Group from recruiting prisoners—just as the Russian Ministry of Defense sabotaged Wagner Group forces' ammunition supplies.[14] Prigozhin announced on February 9 that Wagner had completely stopped recruiting prisoners but did not characterize it as the result of a Russian government ban at that time.[15] Russian media additionally reported that Wagner has opened a "Wagnernyok" youth club in St. Petersburg.[16]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces appear to have secured a sufficient positional advantage to conduct a turning action against certain parts of Bakhmut but have not yet forced Ukrainian forces to withdraw and will not likely be able to encircle the city soon.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Eastern Military District Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov in western Donetsk Oblast, likely to assess the extent of Russian losses around Vuhledar and the possibility of a further offensive in this direction.
- The Chinese government is reportedly angry with the Kremlin over the publicization of arms sales discussions.
- Russian State Duma Defense Committee Head Andrey Kartapalov encouraged Russian companies to purchase their own air defense systems to defend against drones.
- The Wagner Group reportedly opened at least three new recruitment centers at Russian sports clubs between March 2-4, possibly to augment Wagner's recruitment base after losing access to prisoner recruits.
- Russian forces conducted offensive actions along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued efforts to encircle Bakhmut and conduct ground attacks along the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Ukrainian sources continue to report that Russian forces are trying to set conditions for offensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues apparent efforts to increase Chechen influence within Russia through promoting Chechnya's Special Forces (SPETSNAZ) and youth policy efforts.
- Russian occupation administrations are strengthening law enforcement measures in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 3, 2023

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

Ukrainian forces appear to be setting conditions for a controlled fighting withdrawal from parts of Bakhmut. Russian forces have been fighting to take Bakhmut, a city with a pre-war population of roughly 70,000 people, since roughly May 2022 and have suffered devastating casualties in the process. Geolocated footage posted on March 3 confirms that Ukrainian troops have destroyed two critical bridges in the Bakhmut area—one across the Bakhmutivka River in northeastern Bakhmut and one along the Khromove-Bakhmut route just west of Bakhmut.[1] The preemptive destruction of bridges is likely an indicator that Ukrainian troops may seek to inhibit Russian movement in eastern Bakhmut and limit potential westward Russian egress routes out of Bakhmut. Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksandr Rodnyanskyi previously stated on February 28 that Ukrainian forces could choose to pull back from positions in Bakhmut as needed.[2] Rodnyanskyi also noted that Ukraine has fortified the area west of Bakhmut such that even if Ukrainian troops begin to withdraw, Russian forces would not necessarily be able to rapidly take the entire city.[3] If the Ukrainian military command deems it necessary to withdraw from Bakhmut it will likely conduct a limited and controlled withdrawal from particularly difficult sectors of eastern Bakhmut judging from Ukrainian statements and reported Ukrainian actions. ISW will continue to monitor the situation and offer updated assessments of the implications of possible Russian courses of action if and when Ukrainian forces begin to pull back.

Russian officials continued to release limited information about the March 2 incursion in Bryansk Oblast but failed to provide clarity about what actually transpired. Russian State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtein claimed on March 2 that a Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) vehicle ran over a mine while clearing the area near Sushany, Bryansk Oblast, and four personnel sustained minor injuries.[4] Russian authorities previously claimed that the perpetrators mined the area before leaving.[5] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) released edited footage of the purported aftermath on March 3 that shows two civilian cars with substantial damage from bullet holes and deceased drivers as well as man-portable military equipment and mines, all supposedly in the Bryansk Oblast border area.[6] The footage largely lacks any identifying features of the area that could verify the FSB's claims and has not been geolocated. The head of the Russian Volunteer Corps, which claimed responsibility for the incursion, claimed on March 3 that Ukrainian officials greenlit the incursion.[7] The Russian Investigative Committee did not corroborate the Volunteer Corps' claim, instead announcing that it has initiated an investigation into the actions of "Ukrainian saboteurs".[8] Russian officials and

milbloggers made additional claims accusing Western states of direct involvement in the incursion. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the perpetrators used NATO-provided weapons during the incursion and accused NATO states of being "accomplices" to the operation.^[9] State-run media outlet RT amplified a milblogger claim that the Russian Volunteer Corps has indirect affiliations with the UK via the Azov Regiment and accused the UK of involvement.^[10] ISW remains unable to confirm any of the Russian or Russian Volunteer Corps' claims about what actually occurred on the ground.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not address the reported situation in Bryansk Oblast in the readout of an emergency meeting with the Russian Security Council on March 3. Russian sources widely claimed that Putin held the meeting to discuss anti-terrorist security measures in response to the Bryansk incident, but the readout of the meeting instead recycled a number of tired Kremlin talking points and did not use this platform to introduce any new objectives or means for Russian military operations in Ukraine.^[11] Putin did use the speech to outline new, albeit limited, support measures for Russian soldiers serving in Ukraine and announced that all families of soldiers killed in Ukraine will receive the standard insurance coverage provided for by law, a one-time lump sum allowance of 7.4 million rubles (98,143 USD).^[12] Putin also called for "appropriate payments" for those wounded in Ukraine in the form of insurance payments and one-time injury payments.^[13] Putin continues to use public appearances to expand promises of social support for existing servicemembers, potentially to quell domestic discontent and incentivize those already fighting, but does so instead of articulating specific goals or outlining additional resources or measures to be taken for the future of the war.

Russian authorities continued efforts to portray Russia as the only safe operator of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), likely to constrain the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the ZNPP and compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the ZNPP. Advisor to the head of Russian nuclear energy operator Rosenergoatom, Renat Karchaa, claimed that Ukrainian personnel used a machine gun to fire at the Russian personnel during a rotation of IAEA personnel stationed at the ZNPP on March 2.^[14] Karchaa also claimed that the Russian security personnel tripped several mines while escorting the IAEA personnel. The IAEA has not corroborated Karchaa's claim, instead characterizing the March 2 personnel rotation as "successful" after previously delaying the rotation for over a month due to security concerns.^[15] IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi reported that the final remaining backup power line to the ZNPP was damaged for the third time in a week on March 1, which the IAEA contingent at the ZNPP characterized as "likely because of shelling on the other side of the Dnipro River."^[16] Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom reported on March 3 that Russian forces have established machine gun firing positions and erected sandbag fortifications at ZNPP facilities.^[17] ISW has extensively reported on Russian efforts to militarize the ZNPP, including 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.^[18]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces appear to be setting conditions for a controlled fighting withdrawal from parts of Bakhmut.
- Russian officials continued to release limited information about the March 2 incursion in Bryansk Oblast but failed to provide clarity about what actually transpired.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin did not address the reported situation in Bryansk Oblast in an emergency meeting with the Russian Security Council according to the meeting's readout.
- Russian authorities continued efforts to portray Russia as the only safe operator of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), likely to constrain the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the ZNPP and compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the ZNPP.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Donetsk Oblast front line as Ukrainian forces appeared to prepare for a controlled withdrawal from at least parts of Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to increase government oversight of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare occupied territories for the September 10 Russian regional elections.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 2, 2023

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

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

March 2, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin accused Ukraine of conducting a border incursion in Bryansk Oblast, Russia on March 2 — a claim that Ukrainian officials denied. Bryansk Oblast Governor Alexander Bogomaz claimed that "several dozen" Ukrainian saboteurs conducted an armed incursion into the villages of Lyubenchane and Sushany

on the international border.[1] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) doubled down on Bogomaz's accusation and claimed that the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) conducted an operation to "eliminate" Ukrainian saboteurs who reportedly killed one individual and took up to six individuals hostage.[2] Russian milbloggers and news aggregators offered differing information about the number of casualties and hostages, including claims that Ukrainian saboteurs fired on a school bus.[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin then responded unusually quickly to these claims, alleging that "neo-Nazis and their owners" carried out a "terrorist attack" against Bryansk Oblast.[4] Putin did not directly name Ukraine as the perpetrator of the attack in his televised statement, prompting Russian state media to later clarify that Putin meant "Ukrainian neo-Nazis." [5] Putin also claimed that Russia will "crush" neo-Nazis that have consistently aimed to deprive Russia of its history, killed the daughter of Russian nationalist ideolog Alexander Dugin, and "killed people in Donbas." [6]

Ukrainian officials denied the Kremlin's accusations of Ukraine's involvement in Bryansk Oblast and claimed that Russian officials might be facing problems with increasing partisan activity in Russia. Ukrainian Presidential Adviser Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Russian accusations are a deliberate "provocation" aimed at scaring the Russian people into believing that Russia needs to continue to fight in Ukraine.[7] Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Andriy Yusov stated that the incident in Bryansk Oblast is "part of transformative processes in Russia" and pointed to inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and socio-economic conflicts among Russian citizens in Russia.[8] Yusov also noted that the March 2 public statements of the Russian Volunteer Corps', which claimed responsibility for the incursion, further show that "Russia is beginning to wake up against Putin's bloody dictatorship." [9] Yusov likely referred to two videos uploaded by Russian Volunteer Corps fighters claiming that they crossed the international border into Bryansk Oblast to "liberate" fellow Russian citizens from Putin's dictatorship without harming Russian civilians.[10] The Russian Volunteer Corps claims to be an all-Russian, Ukraine-based armed formation operating under the Ukrainian Armed Forces; however, it is unclear if the group is affiliated with the Ukrainian military. The head of Dutch open-source investigative group Bellingcat's far-right monitoring project reported that the leader of the Russian Volunteer Corps, Denis Kapustin, is a notable far-right extremist figure.[11] Social media users geolocated one of the two videos showing two servicemen with the Russian Volunteer Corps flag to Sushany.[12] ISW cannot independently verify Russian, Ukrainian, or Russian Volunteer Corps' claims at this time, and the two videos each showing two men in uniform holding a flag remains the only concrete evidence available that anything happened.

The Bryansk incident generated speculation by Russian officials and ultranationalist groups about the Kremlin's response to the situation. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on questions regarding any change of the "special military operation" status to "war" because of the incident. [13] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin sarcastically observed that Russia had been allowing Ukraine to violate its "red lines" and used the opportunity to promote Wagner mercenaries.[14] Russian officials such as Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov along with milbloggers called on the Kremlin to expand security measures and conduct retaliatory operations.[15] Kadyrov, for example, called on the Kremlin to target civilians to punish the perpetrators of this incident - effectively calling for Russia to conduct war crimes. Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers and former proxy officials also called on the Kremlin to designate the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Russian Volunteer Corps, and Ukrainian armed organizations as terrorist organizations and compared the incident to the Beslan school siege in North Ossetia in 2004.[16] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the Russian Volunteer Corps was responsible for the murder of Daria Dugina and other terrorist activity in Russia.[17] Russian milbloggers also called on the Kremlin to use this incident to form a Supreme High Command to undertake all political, military, and economic decisions to ensure that Russia wins the war.[18] Other milbloggers also linked the incident to recent Putin statements that the FSB needs to strengthen border protection and advocated for more resources for border units.[19] Some milbloggers called on Russia to form assassination squads to kill Ukrainian officials and form exclusion zones at the border.[20] These responses indicate that the ultranationalist community is largely dissatisfied with numerous aspects of the Kremlin's inability to fully commit to its own false rhetoric that Russia is fighting an "existential war" in Ukraine. The Kremlin does not have the capacity to satisfy all of these ultranationalists' demands and may seize this opportunity to introduce additional security provisions in Russia that would benefit Putin without committing Russia to a higher risk or domestic unrest — such as declaring war.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated on March 2 that Germany is negotiating with allies about providing security guarantees to Ukraine but provided no further details on these proposed guarantees.[21] Scholz emphasized that the pact would only work if Ukraine prevailed in the war. Scholz mentioned the security guarantees while criticizing China for failing to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and calling on Chinese authorities to pressure Russia into withdrawing Russian forces from Ukraine. Scholz' statements are consistent with reports of a proposed Ukraine-NATO defense pact that would provide enough arms to Ukraine to force Russia to the negotiation table, but would not offer Article V protection or obligate NATO states to deploy forces to Ukraine. ISW has recently assessed that such an agreement appears to reflect a desire to pressure Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement on unfavorable terms, especially as Russian President Vladimir Putin is currently unlikely to compromise on his maximalist goals of demilitarization and de facto regime change in Ukraine.[22]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken briefly spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the G20 summit in New Delhi, India on March 2 about Russia's suspension of the New Strategic Offensive Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).[23] Blinken stated that he urged Lavrov to reverse Russia's February 28 suspension of Russian cooperation with New START, which imposes verifiable limits on the number of Russian and US intercontinental-range nuclear weapons. Blinken expressed US readiness to collaborate with Russia on strategic nuclear arms control regardless of the status of the war in Ukraine or the US-Russia relationship.[24] Blinken separately called on Russia to stop its war in Ukraine and come to the negotiating table and to release detained American Paul Whelan. [25] Russian officials are highly unlikely to pursue meaningful discussions to restore New START, however. **The Kremlin very probably is weaponizing fears of nuclear escalation and the suspension of New START in hopes of deterring Western support for Ukraine and slowing down pledged Western military aid transfers.** The Kremlin remains extremely unlikely to use nuclear weapons but routinely makes low-credibility threats of nuclear escalation in an effort to intimidate the West and appeal to its ultranationalist base, as ISW has previously reported.[26]

Russian authorities appear to be concerned over a growing loss of leverage in Serbia, which Russia has worked to integrate into the Russian sphere of influence for many years. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated on March 2 that reports of Serbian authorities secretly transferring multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) ammunition to Ukraine are a matter of "deepest concern."^[27] Russian state-affiliated news aggregator *Mash* claimed on February 27 that Serbian defense company Krusik supplied over 3,500 Grad MLRS rockets to Ukraine but claimed that it is not clear that Krusik knew that Ukraine was the final buyer of the rockets.^[28] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin responded to Serbian President Alexander Vucic's prior complaint that Wagner Group is recruiting in Serbia, claiming that no Serbian personnel have served in Wagner Group in 2023 and characterizing Vucic as having "thrown a tantrum in vain."^[29] Vucic's complaints about Wagner Group recruitment efforts in Serbia are one factor in Vucic's possible reconsideration of Serbia's close ties with Russia, as ISW has recently reported.^[30]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and several Russian milbloggers continue to debate the appropriateness of criticism of Russian war efforts as they react to a proposed amendment to Russia's Criminal Code which would increase punishments for "discrediting" the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin on March 1 defended his statements made earlier that day defending criticism of the war effort. Prigozhin claimed that Russians should have the right to criticize Russian commanders and strategists, including himself, but not to criticize or "discredit" ordinary soldiers.^[31] Russian milblogger Yuri Kotylenok defended restrictions on "discreditation attempts," arguing that criticism of Russian soldiers of all levels — from soldier to supreme commander — is like shooting them in the back. Kotylenok conceded that some criticism is necessary but said that it must be made carefully and in a limited way. Kotylenok added that Wagner Group representatives have earned the right to their "special opinion" due to their efficient fighting near Bakhmut.^[32] Former Russian officer (and avid critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin) Igor Girkin feigned repentance on March 2 and mockingly instructed his users "not" to make statements calling Russian leadership "illiterate, irresponsible mediocrities" and telling them to refer to major failures as victories, offering as an example the "alternative successes" in Vuhledar.^[33]

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin accused Ukraine of conducting a border incursion in Bryansk Oblast, Russia, on March 2 — a claim that Ukrainian officials denied.
- The alleged Bryansk incident generated speculations from Russian officials and ultranationalist groups about the Kremlin's response to the situation.
- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated on March 2 that Germany is negotiating with allies about providing security guarantees to Ukraine but provided no further details on these proposed guarantees.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken briefly spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the G20 summit in New Delhi, India on March 2 about Russia's suspension of the New Strategic Offensive Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The Kremlin very probably is weaponizing New START and fears of nuclear escalation in hopes of deterring Western support for Ukraine.
- Russian authorities appear to be concerned over a growing loss of leverage in Serbia, which Russia has worked to integrate into the Russian sphere of influence for many years.
- Russian ultranationalists continue to debate the appropriateness of criticism of Russian war efforts and to react to proposed increased punishments for "discrediting" the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and offensive operations around Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces appear to have temporarily scaled back efforts to encircle Bakhmut from the southwest as well as from the northeast and may instead be focusing on pressuring Ukrainian forces to withdraw from the city by concentrating on the northeastern offensive.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces downed two Ukrainian UAVs in Crimea.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Wagner Group has launched recruiting efforts through Russian sports clubs.
- Russian occupation officials denied reports of the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russian territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 1, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

March 1, 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

The Kremlin may leverage an amendment to Russia's Criminal Code increasing punishments for "discrediting" the war in Ukraine to promote further self-censorship among the critical ultranationalist community, prompting pushback from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and prominent milbloggers. Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin announced on March 1 that the Duma could ratify amendments to the Russian Criminal Code introducing harsher punishments for discrediting participants of the Russian "special military operation," including "volunteers," as soon as March 14.^[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) labels irregular armed formations fighting in Ukraine—specifically the Wagner Group—as volunteers. Volodin stated punishments would include a fine of up to five million rubles (about \$66,450), five years of correctional or forced labor, or a sentence of 15 years in prison.^[2] Russian President Vladimir

Putin previously stated on February 28 that Russia must "identify and stop illegal activities of those who are trying to weaken [Russian] society" and identify those who "use separatism, nationalism, neo-Nazism as a weapon."^[3] Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has long called on the Kremlin to punish anyone who spoke poorly of Wagner under the guise of ensuring that all participants of the war are protected under existing laws against discrediting the Russian Armed Forces. However, Prigozhin released a suggested adjustment to the amendments in response to Volodin's statement, arguing the amendment should not punish criticism of senior Russian MoD and Wagner Group commanders.^[4] Prigozhin argued constructive criticism "is necessary" to ensure Russian commanders use their powers "transparently and responsibly." Prigozhin may be concerned that the Kremlin could use the expanded amendment to crack down on or, at minimum, promote self-censorship practices among ultranationalist milblogger communities who regularly criticize senior Russian commanders, and likely seeks to balance his desired protection of the Wagner Group with retaining the freedom for himself and friendly milbloggers to criticize the Russian military.

ISW assessed on February 26 that Putin has allowed the ultranationalist community to expand its influence at the expense of the Russian MoD so the Kremlin can leverage the community's pre-established networks to recruit volunteers.^[5] The Kremlin likely seeks to mitigate further pushback from the pro-war ultranationalist community, which continues to look up to Putin as the facilitator of the war despite their criticisms of the conduct of the war. The State Duma will likely pass these amendments on March 14, given Volodin's announcement. The Kremlin could use these amendments to promote self-censorship among select milbloggers whose constituencies are no longer needed for its force generation or crowdfunding campaigns, or whose criticisms have exceeded the Kremlin's tolerance for open criticism. It is unclear to what extent such measures would scare Russian milbloggers into self-censorship, however. Former Russian officer (and avid critic of Putin) Igor Girkin mocked Volodin's announcement, stating that he will start apologizing for his previous critiques of Russia's military failures and sarcastically retracting his criticism.^[6] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, however, celebrated the amendments, noting that Putin is attempting to prevent divisions in society to improve the war effort.^[7]

A New York Times (NYT) investigation into catastrophic Russian losses during the recent Russian offensive near Vuhledar indicates that the Russian military remains unable to rapidly fix the endemic challenges posed by severe personnel and equipment losses. NYT reported on March 1 that Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continued to make serious mistakes and advance tank columns into Ukrainian ambushes in the recent three-week Russian offensive near Vuhledar, which Ukrainian sources characterized as the largest tank battle of the war to date.^[8] NYT reported that Russian forces lost at least 130 tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) during the three-week offensive, forcing them to resort in the last week to frontal infantry attacks.^[9] Ukrainian troops outlined their tactics to NYT, stating they lured Russian forces into kill zones before immobilizing Russian columns and channeling them into mine-laden road shoulders, before destroying them with artillery - including HIMARS, typically used against static, rear area targets.^[10] The Russian elements deployed to the Vuhledar area, primarily the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade, are mainly staffed with poorly trained mobilized personnel who suffered massive losses in this area in October 2022 and again in February 2023. ISW previously reported on Russian losses near Vuhledar and assessed that they are emblematic of the Russian military's inability to learn from its failures.^[11] The NYT investigation supports ISW's assessment that the continued recreation and reinforcement of Russian military failures will impede the Russian military's ability to conduct effective offensive operations.^[12]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a package of 16 documents on March 1 that may facilitate Russian sanctions evasion by channeling Chinese aid to Russia through Belarus. The documents include a strategy for joint Belarusian-Chinese industrial development, a document on Belarusian-Chinese scientific and technical cooperation for 2023-2024, and a memorandum of understanding on joint projects using Chinese government loans.^[13] Lukashenko stated that Belarus is interested in deepening cooperation with China on technological development, including the creation of joint ventures, the modernization of Belarusian enterprises with modern Chinese technologies, and trade in goods and services.^[14] Lukashenko stated that Belarusian manufacturers are interested in studying the "competencies and technologies of Chinese companies in the formation of a component base, the production of engines, transmissions, axles, other components, and assemblies."^[15] ISW previously assessed that China may clandestinely transfer military or dual-use equipment to Russia via Belarus.^[16]

Lukashenko likely additionally intends these agreements to support his longstanding effort to cultivate Chinese economic influence in Belarus to hedge against Russian integration pressure, although these measures will at most delay Russia's ongoing campaign to secure full economic control of Belarus. Several of the documents also concern Chinese-Belarusian trade and economic cooperation.^[17] Lukashenko previously expressed support to expand China's economic presence in Belarus in February 2021 when Lukashenko intensified his efforts to delay Russia's absorption of Belarus through the Union State.^[18]

Russian occupation authorities may be attempting to further constrain the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the plant. The IAEA announced on February 10 that it delayed a planned rotation of personnel to the IAEA mission at the ZNPP due to security concerns.^[19] IAEA General Director Rafael Grossi stated on February 20 that the situation remains unstable and on February 28 that 20 detonations occurred near the ZNPP, briefly disconnecting a backup powerline to the ZNPP and underscoring the ZNPP's "fragile external power situation."^[20] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on February 22 that the UN Department for Safety and Security indefinitely postponed the IAEA personnel rotation without proper cause, claiming that Russia is committed to ensuring the safe passage of IAEA personnel to the ZNPP.^[21] Zaporizhzhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed on March 1 that Western intelligence agencies disrupted the routine rotation of the IAEA mission in order to accuse Russia of creating obstacles for the IAEA.^[22] Russian and occupation officials have previously criticized the IAEA's presence at the ZNPP, such as Rogov accusing the IAEA in January of playing a political role at the ZNPP to support Ukraine.^[23] Russian and occupation authorities likely intend to use either the possibly trapped IAEA personnel or a reduced IAEA presence at the plant to coerce international recognition of Russian ownership over the plant. Russian and occupation authorities may also be attempting to deter a possible future Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine by escalating threats to the ZNPP.

Politico reported that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is seemingly reconsidering Serbia's close ties with Russia, spurred in part by ongoing Wagner Group recruitment and subversion efforts in Serbia and demonstrating the international economic and informational costs imposed on Putin by his invasion of Ukraine. *Politico* reported on March 1 that Vučić seeks to appeal to both Russia and western institutions by continuing Serbia's European Union membership bid while refusing to impose sanctions against Russia, but Vučić said that Serbia must make "difficult choices" soon.[24] Vučić condemned the Wagner Group and stated that Serbian authorities will arrest all Serbians who have fought for the Wagner Group in Ukraine. Vučić characterized attendees of a Wagner-backed protest in Belgrade as anti-Serbian and paid off by unspecified foreign actors. Vučić greenlit on February 17 a US-led plan to normalize relations with Kosovo, which Serbia does not officially recognize, and stated that Serbia will remain on the path to EU membership. *Politico* noted that polls in Serbia suggest that more Serbians support Russia than Western states, suggesting Vučić would struggle to completely divest from ties with Russia - which he likely does not intend to do. A Russian milblogger amplified the *Politico* article and criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin for turning Russia into a "pariah state" from which even "traditional fraternal states distance themselves." [25]

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin may leverage an amendment to Russia's Criminal Code increasing punishments for "discrediting" the war in Ukraine to promote further self-censorship measures among the critical ultranationalist community, prompting pushback from Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and prominent milbloggers.
- A *New York Times* (NYT) investigation into catastrophic Russian losses during the recent Russian offensive near Vuhledar indicates the Russian military remains unable to rapidly fix the endemic challenges posed by severe personnel and equipment losses.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a package of 16 documents that may facilitate Russian sanctions evasion by channeling Chinese aid to Russia through Belarus.
- US officials continue to report that Ukrainian forces are properly using Western-provided weapons in Ukraine.
- Russian and occupation authorities may be attempting to further limit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the plant.
- *Politico* reported that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is seemingly reconsidering Serbia's close ties to Russia during the war in Ukraine, spurred in part by ongoing Wagner Group recruitment and subversion efforts in Serbia.
- Russian forces are fortifying positions on the international border in Belgorod Oblast.
- Russian forces advanced within Bakhmut and continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continue defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to struggle with the administrative management of occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 28, 2023

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

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

February 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.

Russian authorities appear to be escalating their promotion of false flag information operations to distract from their lack of tangible battlefield gains and slow down the provision of Western tanks and other aid in advance of expected Ukrainian counter-offensives. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) accused the "US and its accomplices" on February 28 of planning to carry out a provocation in Ukraine using toxic chemicals.[1] The Russian MoD relatedly claimed on February 19 that Ukrainian officials are planning false-flag attacks at hazardous radiation facilities in Ukraine to accuse Russian forces of indiscriminately striking such sites.[2] The apparent uptick in fallacious biochemical and nuclear false flag warnings accompanies a concerted Russian false flag information operation accusing Ukraine of preparing for an invasion of Russian-occupied Transnistria, Moldova.[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin also notably re-introduced nuclear rhetoric into the Russian information space during his address to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 21 when he announced Russia's intent to suspend participation in START. [4] The recent resurgence of several standard Russian information operations in the form of false flag warnings and tired nuclear threats suggests that Russian officials are increasingly trying to mitigate the informational impacts of a continued lack of Russian battlefield successes as well as to slow down the provision of Western tanks and other equipment in advance of expected Ukrainian counter-offensives. ISW has previously reported on the correlation between Russian information operations and battlefield realities, particularly when Russian forces are failing to take significant ground in offensive operations in Ukraine.[5] The Russian MoD and top Russian officials will likely escalate their engagement with such information operations as the ongoing Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast nears culmination and the opportunities for Ukrainian counter-offensives grow.

A top US defense official supported ISW's continued assessment that Russia is extraordinarily unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl stated that the US does not assess that Russia will use nuclear weapons during a House Armed Service Committee hearing on American military support for Ukraine on February 28.[6] ISW has assessed that Russian invocations of nuclear threats and nuclear doctrine are part of an information operation meant to discourage Ukraine and the West but do not represent any material Russian intent to employ nuclear weapons.[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the Federal Security Service (FSB) board on February 28 and emphasized the role of the FSB in supporting the war in Ukraine in a law enforcement and counterterrorism capacity. Putin lauded the FSB for its direct participation in the war in "non-standard field tasks" such as protection of the Russian border and cracking down on terrorist activities, organized crime, corruption, and extremism.[8] Putin also emphasized that the FSB's primary purpose is to support the Russian Armed Forces and Rosgvardia in their efforts to accomplish the objectives of the "special military operation" and noted the FSB's role in preventing incursions of Ukrainian sabotage groups onto Russian territory.[9] Putin has frequently invoked mentions of domestic security, law enforcement, and counterterrorism efforts when speaking about the war in Ukraine in order to portray the war as a threat to Russian internal security and to bring the war closer to his domestic constituency as ISW has previously reported.[10] Putin's address to the FSB similarly aligns the FSB and its traditional domestic law enforcement and counterterrorism role with Russian military efforts in Ukraine in order to frame Russian victory in the war as necessary for Russia's domestic security.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to reintroduce a Russian information operation aimed at falsely portraying Russia as being open to negotiations while the collective West refuses to negotiate. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on February 28 that Russian officials are open to negotiations to end the war in Ukraine but that Ukraine and the West must recognize new "territorial realities" associated with Russia's illegal annexation of occupied territories in Ukraine. [11] Peskov added that Ukraine also needs to consider Russia's specific goals in the war in Ukraine to reach a negotiated settlement.[12] These goals include regime change of the Ukrainian government under the rubric of "denazification" and the elimination of Ukraine's ability to defend itself against future Russian attacks under the rubric of "demilitarization." [13] Peskov also stated that Russia made serious preparations for security talks before launching the invasion of Ukraine but accused the West of being unresponsive to such talks.[14] Russia's suggested pre-invasion security talks called for the West to acknowledge a list of "security guarantees" demanding a moratorium on NATO expansion, a ban on the deployment of Western strike weapons near Russia, and the de facto withdrawal of NATO forces to their 1997 posture.[15]

The Kremlin appears to be using Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko as a conduit to reengage with this information operation, likely in pursuit of negotiations on favorable terms to Russia and further delays in the West's provision of critical weapons systems to Ukraine. Lukashenko stated during his official trip to China that Russia is ready to take steps towards a peaceful settlement and that there is a unique opportunity to end the war in Ukraine before Russia puts its economy on a stronger war footing.[16] Lukashenko also blamed the West and the US for coercing Ukrainian officials into rejecting negotiations with Russia. [17] The Kremlin and Lukashenko are likely seizing on China's release of a 12-point peace plan to reintroduce an existing Russian information operation that the Kremlin used in December 2022. That information campaign centering on Russia's openness to negotiations aimed to prompt Western officials to offer preemptive concessions and coerce Ukraine to negotiate on Russian terms and likely contributed to the delay in the provision of Western tanks and other equipment essential for the continuation of Ukrainian mechanized counteroffensives.[18] The Kremlin may be reintroducing the negotiations information operation to reduce the effectiveness of future Ukrainian counteroffensives by delaying the provision of essential Western aid and to seek to gain concessions before potential further setbacks in Ukraine.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may facilitate sanctions evasion schemes between Russia and China during his official trip to Beijing, China from February 28 – March 2. Deutsche Welle reported that Lukashenko will sign a large package of agreements on developing joint projects, trade, economic, investment, humanitarian cooperation, and political cooperation with China during his three-day visit.[19] Lukashenko previously stated that the Belarusian defense industry can produce weapons since Belarus has access to microelectronics, optics, and other component imports from other states.[20] Ukrainian intelligence officials stated that Belarus supplied Russia with artillery ammunition from Belarusian warehouses to support operations in Ukraine.[21] US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns stated on February 25 that the CIA is confident that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia.[22] China may clandestinely transfer equipment to Russia via Belarus.

Key Takeaways

- Russian authorities appear to be escalating their promotion of false flag information operations in an effort to distract from their lack of tangible battlefield gains and slow down the provision of Western tanks and other aid in advance of expected Ukrainian counter-offensives.
- US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl stated that the US has no indication that Russian forces will use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the role of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in supporting the war in Ukraine during an address to the FSB board.
- The Kremlin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko are likely attempting to intensify efforts to falsely portray Russia as open to negotiations to end its war in Ukraine.
- Lukashenko may facilitate Sino-Russian sanctions evasion schemes during his official trip to Beijing, China from February 28 to March 2.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Svatove and Kreminna and likely made limited advances north of Kreminna.
- Russian forces made tactical gains in northern Bakhmut and continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Ukrainian officials continue to report potential Russian preparations for renewed offensive operations in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts, though ISW has not observed indicators that Russian forces plan to renew offensive operations in these directions.
- Armenian authorities detained a Russian citizen in Yerevan for an act of protest against the war in Ukraine committed in Moscow in July 2022.

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky enacted a Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council decision to sanction 109 Russian citizens involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 27, 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.

Russian officials are promoting an information operation that falsely frames Russia's war in Ukraine as existential to the continued existence of the Russian Federation. In an interview with TV channel Rossiya-1 on February 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that he does not know if "such an ethnic group as the Russian people can survive in the form in which it exists today" if the West succeeds in "destroying the Russian Federation and establishing control over its fragments."^[1] Putin accused the collective West of already having plans "set out on paper" for the destruction of the Russian Federation in its current form.^[2] Putin also remarked that Russia had to suspend its participation in the START treaty in order to ensure its strategic stability and security in the face of a concerted Western effort to use START to cripple Russia's strategic prospects.^[3]

Putin began to set conditions for the perpetuation of this information operation in his speech to the Federal Assembly on February 21, where he blamed the collective West for using the war in Ukraine to threaten the existence of the Russian Federation.^[4] Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev invoked similarly existential sentiments in an essay entitled "Points of No Return" published on February 27 in which he accused the West of fueling the current situation in Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union and concluded that "the calm power of our great country and the authority of its partners are the key to preserving the future of our entire world."^[5] Both Putin's and Medvedev's statements engage with an information operation that frames the war in Ukraine as existential to the continued survival of the post-Soviet Russian Federation, which is likely an attempt to present the war as having higher stakes for Russia and the West than it actually does. Putin likely hopes to set informational conditions to accuse Ukraine and the West of threatening the survival of the Russian Federation in response to Russian military failures and Western support for Ukrainian victories. No prominent Western official has called for the dissolution of the Russian Federation, and Western leaders have been very careful to articulate their aims as being to enable Ukraine to liberate all its territory at most. Putin's language is designed to fuel support for the war in Russia and stoke fears in the West of the instability that would follow the collapse of Russia to deter Western support to Ukraine and persuade the West to coerce Kyiv into accepting Russian demands.

Russian officials continue to engage in information operations in an attempt to discourage the Western provision of military aid to Ukraine. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated during a TV interview with Rossiya-1 on February 26 that the types of weapons that the West decides to provide to Ukraine will determine how far Russian troops will need to "push the threat away" from Russian borders.^[6] Putin made a similar statement in his February 21 address to the Federal Assembly.^[7] These statements are likely meant to discourage the West from providing long-range systems to Ukraine by suggesting that the provision of such systems will protract the war by "forcing" Russia to take more Ukrainian territory to be "safe." ISW has previously reported on concerted Russian information operations to discourage Western military aid to Ukraine.^[8]

Ukrainian military officials continue to respond to Western concerns about Ukrainian capabilities to liberate Ukrainian people and land and suggest that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a spring counteroffensive in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian Deputy Head of the Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadim Skibitskyi stated on February 26 that Ukrainian forces will be ready for a counteroffensive in spring 2023 and that one Ukrainian strategic goal is to split the Russian frontline between Crimea and mainland Russia. Skibitskyi noted that the supply of Western military aid is one decisive factor in determining the timing of a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Western officials and news outlets have recently expressed a degree of doubt about Ukrainian forces' ability to conduct a counteroffensive and the West's ability to provide long-term military aid to Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.^[9] ISW's prior assessments of Russian military capabilities along the Zaporizhia Oblast front line suggest that there are opportunities for Ukraine to conduct a counter-offensive in that strategically vital region.^[10]

A reportedly captured Russian military manual suggests that Russian forces are implementing new assault tactics to compensate for current combat power limitations in response to continued offensive failures. A Ukrainian reserve officer posted a picture on February 26 reportedly of a captured Russian manual that details the tactics of a newly minted "assault detachment," which is a battalion-sized element that has been optimized for frontal assaults on fortified areas.^[11] The assault detachment formation reportedly fields six T-72 main battle tanks, 12 infantry fighting vehicles, and a collection of man-portable thermobaric rocket launchers, anti-tank guided missile systems, towed artillery, and self-propelled mortars.^[12] The assault detachment appears to be comprised of three assault

companies and a tank section.[13] Each assault company has a command element, two assault "platoons" (at far below normal platoon strength), a UAV team, an armored fighting vehicle (AFV) group, a fire support platoon and an artillery support platoon, a reserve section, and a medevac section. Each company fields one tank and four BMP/BMD-2 infantry fighting vehicles, with anti-tank launchers, heavy machine guns, and mortars. The Ukrainian reserve officer remarked that assault "platoons" of 12 to 15 people, divided into tactical groups of three people, are the formation's primary maneuver elements.[14] The assault detachment reportedly conducts assaults within less than a minute of the time when artillery fire begins on open fortified positions, with the platoon commander controlling mortar fire.

The manual suggests that Russian forces are trying to adapt maneuver forces into smaller and more agile military formations than were employed earlier in the war. The Ukrainian reserve officer noted that this new tactical formation suggests that Russian forces have replaced the defunct battalion tactical group (BTG) with these smaller and more agile maneuver formations. The manual suggests that Russian forces are using T-72 tanks for direct fire support from the rear rather than as integral parts of a combined arms team. The increased reliance on dismounted infantry and the relegation of tanks to fire support from the rear indicates that Russian military leadership is prioritizing protecting main battle tanks over protecting infantry, which is reflective of recent reports of massive equipment losses that Russian armor units sustained over the first year of the war.[15] The manual indicates that the Russian military is resorting to employing a form of simplified combined arms warfare that has likely been pared down to compensate for the overall degradation of Russian manpower and equipment capacity and which is easier for inexperienced and untrained mobilized personnel slotted into such detachments to employ.

The tactics of the assault detachment additionally suggest that the Russian military may be attempting to institutionalize practices used to marginal tactical effect by the Wagner Group in Bakhmut. The Ukrainian reserve officer suggested that this new formation is likely partially influenced by Wagner Group operations around Bakhmut.[16] ISW has previously reported on the fact that Wagner has largely relied on squad-sized frontal assaults, which have decreased the reliance on massed fires as Russian artillery and equipment stocks have dwindled.[17] The Wagner Group's highly attritional offensive on Bakhmut has failed to gain operationally significant ground, so the institutionalization of elements of Wagner's tactics will likely further normalize attritional frontal assaults. Such tactics are likely to waste Russian combat power and not effectively counter conventional Ukrainian battalions and brigades. Assault detachments may be able to make tactical gains at cost due to their simplicity but will likely culminate rapidly due to their small size and attritional tactics. Russian forces are unlikely to make operationally significant breakthroughs rapidly with this formation.

US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns stated on February 25 that the CIA is confident that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia but has not made a final decision.[18] In an interview with CBS News, Burns stated that the CIA has not seen evidence of Chinese shipments of lethal equipment to Russia. Burns also stated that the US government chose to make the CIA's assessment public in order to deter China from sending lethal weapons to Russia.

Key Takeaways

- Russian officials are promoting an information operation that falsely frames Russia's war in Ukraine as existential to the continued existence of the Russian Federation.
- Russian officials continue to conduct information operations in an attempt to discourage the Western provision of military aid to Ukraine.
- Ukrainian military officials continue to respond to Western concerns over Ukrainian capabilities and suggest that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a spring counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.
- A reportedly captured Russian military manual suggests that Russian forces are implementing new assault tactics to compensate for the current limitations on combat capability in light of continued offensive failures.
- The manual suggests that Russian forces are trying to adopt smaller and more agile combined arms formations than were employed earlier in the war.
- The tactics of the assault detachment additionally suggest that the Russian military may be attempting to institutionalize tactics used to marginal tactical effect by the Wagner Group in Bakhmut.
- US Central Intelligence Director William Burns stated on February 25 that the CIA is confident that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia but has not made a final decision or provided lethal aid to Russia.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces have been concentrating and escalating operations along the Luhansk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line, and Russian sources widely claimed that Wagner Group forces made territorial gains north of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to focus on establishing defensive fortifications in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and Crimea.
- Russian forces are continuing to expend their already limited stocks of precision munitions.
- Russian officials announced that all social support measures will enter into force in occupied territories on March 1.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, February 26. This report focuses on Russian President Vladimir Putin's attempt to avoid ordering involuntary mobilization by launching a series of irregular volunteer force generation campaigns since late May 2022 and the consequences of that attempt. Putin sought to satisfy the requirement for replacements following Russian defeats around Kyiv by conducting a voluntary recruitment campaign building on the existing campaigns already being conducted by quasi-official ultranationalist groups such as the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) or the Wagner Group. Putin unsuccessfully attempted to establish new all-volunteer formations over the summer that competed with other existing quasi-official formations. Putin eventually abandoned his volunteer recruitment campaign after Ukrainian forces liberated much of Kharkiv Oblast between September 6 and September 11, ordering partial reserve mobilization on September 21.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on February 26:

- Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated that Ukrainian forces will be ready for a counteroffensive this upcoming spring and that one of Ukraine's strategic goals will be to drive a wedge into the Russian front in southern Ukraine between Crimea and the Russian mainland.[43]
- Russian President Vladimir Putin falsely stated that the West is trying to break up the Russian Federation and suggested that Western security assistance to Ukraine makes the West a participant in the war.[44] Putin leaned on a longstanding rhetorical line of effort for raising domestic support for the war by falsely claiming that the West is threatening the survival of the Russian people as a unified ethnic group.[45]
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that the types of systems that the West provides to Ukraine will determine how far Russian forces need to push threats away from Russia's borders, likely in support of an ongoing Russian information operation aimed at discouraging the Western provision of specific systems to Ukraine.[46]
- US Central Intelligence Director William Burns stated on February 25 that the CIA is confident that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia but has not made a final decision.[47]
- Russian forces continued to conduct unsuccessful operations northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.[48]
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, and a prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made further advances north of the city.[49]
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City and in western Donetsk Oblast.[50]
- Representative of the Ukrainian Tavriisk operational direction Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi reported that Russian forces are accumulating a large amount of Russian personnel and equipment near Vasylivka and Hulyaipole in Zaporizhia Oblast.[51]
- Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are continuing to construct defensive fortifications in Crimea.[52] Humenyuk also reported that Russian forces conducted failed attempts to mine islands in the Dnipro River delta and are mining the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.[53]
- A Ukrainian military officer reported that Russian forces are replacing Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) with a new unit called the "Assault Unit" or "Assault Detachment" due to failures with their current assault tactics.[54] The Ukrainian military officer stated that Russian forces are transitioning from larger structures to smaller, more agile assault units that rely heavily on artillery support that are customizable to specific mission requirements.[55]
- Russian military personnel from the 1439th Regiment from Irkutsk Oblast released a video complaining about being subordinated under DNR commanders in Ukraine, further indicating that the Russian Ministry of Defense may be continuing to integrate DNR formations into the Russian Armed Forces through the subordination of mobilized personnel to these formations.[56]
- Independent Russian outlet Dozhd reported that it identified communication between the Russian Ministry of Education and regional guardianship authorities revealing that Russian officials forcibly deported 400 Ukrainian children to Russian territory in August 2022.[57] Dozhd reported that 36

children had been placed into foster care by mid-January 2023 and that boarding schools received instructions not to place the children with families with Russian citizenship.[58] Dozhd also stated that Russian officials are subjecting the children to Russian patriotic-military education programs.[59]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 25, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 25, 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.

UK, French, and German officials are reportedly preparing a NATO-Ukraine pact that falls far short of the protections Ukraine would receive from NATO membership and appears to reflect a desire to press Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement on unfavorable terms.[1] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the exact provisions of the pact are undecided, but the officials indicated that the pact will provide advanced military equipment, arms, and ammunition to Ukraine, but not Article V protection or a commitment to station NATO forces in Ukraine—falling short of Ukraine's aspirations for full NATO membership. The officials stated that the pact aims to provision Ukraine so that Ukrainian forces can conduct a counteroffensive that brings Russia to the negotiating table and deter any future Russian aggression. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that these officials expressed reservations about the West's ability to sustain a prolonged war effort, the high casualty count that Ukraine would sustain in such a prolonged war, and Ukrainian forces' ability to completely recapture long-occupied territories like Crimea, however. The *Wall Street Journal* contrasted these officials' private reservations with US President Joe Biden's public statements of support—which did not mention peace negotiations—and with Central and Eastern European leaders' concerns that premature peace negotiations would encourage further Russian aggression. Russian President Vladimir Putin has given no indication that he is willing to compromise on his stated maximalist goals, which include Ukraine's "neutrality" and demilitarization—as well as de facto regime change in Kyiv, as ISW has consistently reported.[2]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko plans to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, possibly to assist Russia and China in sanctions evasion amidst reports that China is seriously considering sending Russia lethal aid. Lukashenko announced plans to visit China from February 28 to March 2 and to meet with Xi Jinping likely to sign agreements on trade, investment, large-scale joint projects, and other matters.[3] Lukashenko also plans to meet with top Chinese officials and the heads of Chinese corporations.[4] Lukashenko's announcement of his planned visit coincides with reporting from CNN and *The Washington Post* that senior US officials assess that China is seriously considering selling combat drones, personal weapons, and 122mm and 152mm artillery shells to Russia.[5] Russian and Chinese officials have also reportedly developed plans for the shipment of drones to Russia under falsified shipping documents to avoid international sanctions measures.[6] China may seek to use agreements with Belarus to obfuscate violations of sanctions.

US President Joe Biden rejected China's 12-point peace plan as Russian sources continue to capitalize on the announcement of the plan to vilify the West and Ukraine. Biden stated that the Chinese peace plan is only beneficial for Russia and that it would make no sense for China to participate in negotiations on the war in Ukraine.[7] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin argued that China's peace plan is a fundamentally different approach to the war in Ukraine from the West's as the West demands the fulfillment of preconditions while exacerbating the conflict through supporting Ukraine.[8] Pushilin nevertheless also rejected the Chinese plan because it would prevent Russia from achieving its maximalist goals in Ukraine.[9] Russian officials and propagandists continue to assert that Western aid that helps Ukraine resist Russia's illegal invasion protracts the war and to ignore the role that Russia's determined pursuit of its maximalist aims plays in prolonging the conflict.

Lukashenko breathed new life into the Kremlin's Transnistria information operation by falsely claiming that opening a Transnistrian front would be in the West's interests.[10] Lukashenko claimed that Ukraine would suffer high casualties if it opened a second front to the war, but that the West aims to defeat both Russia and Russian-occupied Transnistria and bring Moldova closer to the West. Lukashenko's statements support the Kremlin's broader information operation that paints Russia as being at war with the West rather than with Ukraine. Lukashenko embroidered on the Russian government's statements warning of a supposed Ukrainian provocation along the Ukraine-Transnistria border by adding the unfounded assertion that the West desires a conflict in Moldova. The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute has previously assessed that the Kremlin likely conducted a false flag operation against the Transnistrian occupation Ministry of Defense (MoD) in April 2022 in order to blame Ukraine for the attacks and draw Transnistria into the war, a goal that the Kremlin has so far failed to accomplish.[11]

Russian authorities detained more than 50 people at anti-war demonstrations in 14 Russian cities on February 24. Independent Russian outlet OVD-Info reported that police detained at least 54 people for anti-war demonstrations at which they picketed, laid flowers, and wrote messages in the snow.[12] The arrests suggest that the protests were far more limited in scale than they had been earlier in the war, since Russian authorities detained 1,800 people on the first day of the war and almost 5,000 on March 6, 2022.[13] Russian milblogger Anatoly Nesmyan claimed that Russian authorities only arrested 18 people at an anti-war demonstration on February 25 in St. Petersburg compared to 500 on February 25, 2022.[14] The protests are noteworthy for having occurred at all rather than because of their size given the intense pressure the Kremlin has put on all public opposition to the war, including the criminalization of criticism of the war's conduct, of military officials, and of the Kremlin itself.[15]

Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters criticized Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu over his son-in-law Alexei Stolyarov's alleged Instagram "likes" of anti-war posts. Independent Russian-language opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported that Stolyarov denied liking posts by anti-war journalist Yuri Dud and claimed that screenshots circulating social media were photoshopped.[16] Prigozhin added to the criticism of Stolyarov saying "bring [Stolyarov] to me. I will train him for six weeks" and claiming that he could help Stolyarov improve by sending him into combat.[17] A pro-Wagner milblogger called for Shoigu's removal over his association with his son-in-law.[18]

Key Takeaways

- UK, French, and German officials are reportedly preparing a NATO-Ukraine pact that falls far short of the protections Ukraine would receive from NATO membership and appears to reflect a desire to press Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement on unfavorable terms.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko plans to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, possibly to assist Russia and China in sanctions evasion amidst reports that China is seriously considering sending Russia lethal aid.
- US President Joe Biden rejected China's 12-point peace plan as Russian sources continue to capitalize on the announcement of the plan to vilify the West and Ukraine.
- Lukashenko breathed new life into the Kremlin's Transnistria information operation by falsely claiming that opening a Transnistrian front would be in the West's interests.
- Russian authorities detained more than 50 people at anti-war demonstrations in 14 Russian cities on February 24.
- Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters criticized Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu over his son-in-law Alexei Stolyarov's alleged Instagram "likes" of anti-war posts.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces continue to struggle to conduct effective combat operations on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line.
- Russian forces are continuing to suffer significant losses on the battlefield prompting some milbloggers to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for failing to recognize the scale of the casualties.
- Russian authorities are exploiting Ukrainian children from Mariupol as propaganda to falsely portray Russia as the savior of occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 24, 2023

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

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

February 24, 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.

The Kremlin did not comment on the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely because Russia has failed to achieve any of its stated objectives and has not made significant territorial gains since July 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his administration made no statements relating to the anniversary even though Putin has made numerous public appearances over the past three days.[1] Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev made inflammatory claims that Russia will win the war and reiterated that it is vital for Russia to achieve its goals to "push back the borders that threaten [Russia] as far as possible, even if they are the borders of Poland."^[2] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin has been using Medvedev to sustain information campaigns targeting Western military support for Ukraine and to deflect attention from Russia's military failures.^[3] Medvedev's statements highlight the fact that the Kremlin is continuing to pursue its unrealistic maximalist goals even though it has no meaningful successes to offer the Russian people after a year of costly war in Ukraine.

Select Russian milbloggers commented on the Kremlin's silence on the first anniversary of the war. Russian former officer and an avid Kremlin critic Igor Girkin criticized Medvedev's statements as delusional and lamented the fact that no one remembers the severe losses Russian airborne troops suffered during the fight for Hostomel Airfield near Kyiv on February 24, 2022.^[4] Girkin claimed that he had long been forecasting that Russia had embarked upon a protracted and exhausting war. He noted that it is very difficult to defeat a state that receives external support using Russia's unmotivated forces, absent civil society, and strong brainwashing.^[5] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger attempted to downplay Russia's military failures expressing thanks that the war revealed shortcomings but distress at the high price paid in Russian blood.^[6] The milblogger also amplified the Kremlin's false narrative that the war was necessary to stop supposed Ukrainian "aggression" in Donbas. The milblogger's statements closely mirror comments made by unnamed Kremlin-affiliated officials to *Financial Times* who noted that Putin will try to frame Russia's catastrophic military failures as a necessary learning experience that Russia will use to prepare for future supposed NATO aggression against Russia that Putin purportedly fears.^[7]

A Russian source capitalized on China's release of a 12-point peace plan to inaccurately portray China as supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a document on February 24 titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" that called for Ukraine and Russia to respect each other's sovereignty, cease hostilities, resume peace talks, reduce strategic risks, and cease unilateral sanctions.^[8] Advisor to the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head Rodion Miroshnik falsely asserted that China's peace plan insinuated that Ukraine and the West are the aggressors, supporting Russia's framing of the war.^[9] China's release of the vague peace plan is likely in support of an ongoing effort balance between supporting Russia and retaining access to European markets by portraying China as a disinterested third-party mediator. The Chinese peace plan is unlikely to be a serious blueprint for a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine.^[10]

US intelligence reportedly assesses that China is seriously considering sending weapons to Russia amidst continued pressure from Western sanctions regimes on Russia's defense industrial base (DIB). CNN reported on February 24 that sources familiar with the intelligence stated that Chinese officials have not made a final decision on the provision of lethal aid but are discussing the price and scope of the supply of attack drones and ammunition with Russian officials.^[11] Senior US officials reportedly assess that recent intelligence suggests that China is leaning toward providing the equipment to Russia, although based on a bilateral arms sales agreement and not as security assistance.^[12] German outlet *Der Spiegel* reported on February 23 that Russian officials are engaged in negotiations with Chinese drone manufacturer Xi'an Bingo Intelligent Aviation Technology for the mass production and delivery of 100 ZT-180 drones to Russian forces by April.^[13] *Der Spiegel* reported that the ZT-180 drone can carry a 35-50kg warhead, suggesting that these drones may be a dual-use technology that Russian forces are seeking to acquire for reconnaissance purposes and not just as loitering munitions or high-precision weapons systems.^[14] Russian and Chinese officials have reportedly developed plans for the shipment of the drones to Russia under falsified shipping documents labeling the equipment as replacement parts for civil aviation.^[15]

Russian officials are likely seeking support from Chinese defense manufacturers due to restrictions that international sanctions regimes have placed on Russia's defense industry. The United Kingdom (UK) government and the US Department of Treasury both announced new sanctions and export ban measures on February 24 specifically targeting industries, entities, and individuals supporting Russian military capabilities.^[16] The UK government stated that its new package of export bans aims to block the export of every item that Russia uses on the battlefield in Ukraine and that its new sanctions package would target senior executives of Russian state-owned nuclear power company Rosatom, executives of Russian defense firms, six entities involved in the repair of Russian military equipment, four Russian banks, and Russian elite figures.^[17] The US Department of Treasury stated that Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on 22 individuals and 83 entities, 30 of which are reportedly third-country entities and individuals that help Russia evade existing sanctions measures.^[18] Intensified Western sanctions regimes will likely continue to constrain Russia's ability to acquire the technology and materiel to maintain a defense industrial base necessary for supporting its war effort in Ukraine.

Western governments made a variety of statements on the provision of military aid to Ukraine on February 24. Polish President Andzej Duda reported that Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki delivered the first batch of Leopards to Ukraine as part of the international "tank coalition."^[19] Conversely, US Army Minister Christine Wormuth stated that it could take the United States more than a year to deliver M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine due to the production and modernization timeline associated with such tank variants.^[20] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated on February 24 that Russia has already lost its war in Ukraine, but that the provision of F-16 fighter jets, which the Ukrainian government has consistently asked the West for, "are not the key capability" that Ukraine currently needs.^[21] Sullivan remarked that the provision of F-16s is not a question of the short-term and instead a question of long-term defensive capabilities.^[22] As ISW has previously assessed, the West's material support for Ukraine, particularly the provision of main battle tanks and other critical systems, is essential to enable Ukraine to conduct successful mechanized counteroffensives to liberate Ukrainian people and territory. Continued Western support for Ukraine is crucial to enabling Ukraine to regain the initiative and reengage in successive counteroffensive operations in the near future.

The Kremlin escalated its information conditions-setting for a possible false-flag operation in Russian-occupied Transnistria, Moldova. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) made a second claim on February 23 that Ukrainian forces are intensifying preparations to invade Transnistria following its first such claim earlier in the day.^[23] The MoD emphasized that the claimed Ukrainian plan poses a significant threat to the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Transnistria. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed on February 24 that Russia will consider any action that threatens Transnistrian security as an attack against Russia.^[24] The Kremlin may instead aim to destabilize Moldova, however. Some Russian milbloggers amplified the Kremlin's rhetoric by claiming that the situation along the Ukrainian-Transnistrian border is becoming increasingly tense.^[25] Moldovan officials continued to deny Russian claims on February 24, characterizing the claims as "aggressive disinformation" or "a psychological operation."^[26]

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin did not comment on the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely because Russia has failed to achieve any of its stated objectives and has not made significant territorial gains since July 2022.
- A Russian source capitalized on China's release of a 12-point peace plan to inaccurately portray China as supporting Russia's war in Ukraine.
- US intelligence reportedly continues to assess that China is seriously considering sending lethal aid to Russia amid continued pressure from Western sanctions regimes on Russia's defense industrial base.
- Western governments made a variety of statements on the provision of military aid to Ukraine on February 24.
- The Kremlin escalated its information condition-setting for a possible false-flag operation in occupied Transnistria, Moldova.

- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian sources confirmed that Russian forces have split certain Airborne (VDV) force formations across at least two axes of advance.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Ukrainian officials suggested that Russian forces may feel insecure in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue measures to expand the capacity of Russian peacekeepers.
- Russian sources likely attempted to shift the blame for scandals associated with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commanders to the conventional Russian military.
- Ukrainian partisans likely blew up a railway segment near Poshtove, Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 23, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 23, 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.

The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions for false flag operations on the Chernihiv Oblast international border and in Moldova ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian Northern Operational Command reported on February 23 that Russian forces are preparing possible false flag operations in the international border areas of Chernihiv Oblast.^[1] The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian intelligence has already observed Russian convoys with unmarked military equipment and personnel dressed in uniforms resembling those worn by the Ukrainian military move to areas near the Chernihiv Oblast border. The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command stated that the purpose of these false flag operations would be to accuse Ukrainian forces of violating the territorial integrity of an unspecified country, very likely referring to Belarus. The Kremlin may be preparing false flag attacks to coerce Belarus into the war following Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's February 16 statement that Belarus would only enter the war if attacked by Ukraine.^[2] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense also notably claimed on February 21 that Belarusian forces observed a buildup of Ukrainian forces at its borders.^[3] ISW continues to assess that Belarusian or Russian attack on northern Ukrainian regions is highly unlikely, but Russia seeks to force Lukashenko's hand or blame Ukraine for expanding the war to undermine support for Kyiv. Such a false flag operation could also aim to fix Ukrainian forces at the northern border in an effort to weaken Ukrainian defenses in eastern Ukraine and preparations for counter-offensive operations.

The Kremlin also appears to be setting information conditions to stage a false flag operation in occupied Transnistria, Moldova. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on February 23 that Ukrainian forces are planning to conduct an armed provocation against Transnistria in the near future.^[4] The MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces would dress as Russian military personnel and stage an alleged Russian offensive from positions in Transnistria.^[5] The Moldovan government denied the Russian MoD's allegations.^[6] The MoD likely sought to foster this false narrative to twist Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's warning to Moldovan President Maia Sandu that the Kremlin was preparing provocations in Moldova and his offer to help Moldova if Russian forces in Transnistria threaten the territorial integrity of Ukraine.^[7] The MoD's dissemination of this false narrative does not indicate that Putin intends to attack Moldova—an undertaking for which he lacks military capability—although it points toward an escalation in his ongoing efforts to undermine the Moldovan state.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to deliver boilerplate rhetoric in public addresses that offered him opportunities he did not take to shape the Russian information space ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Putin marked Defenders of the Fatherland Day on February 23 with a video address in which he reiterated tired Kremlin talking points arguing that the Russian military is fighting neo-Nazism in Ukraine and protecting "our people in our historical lands."^[8] Putin delivered vague remarks that the Russian military is improving the training of its units and continuing to supply advanced equipment to its forces.^[9] Putin also asserted that Russian industry is quickly increasing the production of a broad range of conventional weapons and preparing for the mass production of advanced models of military equipment, although ISW assesses that Russia continues to gradually prepare its defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war instead of engaging in wider rapid economic mobilization.^[10] Putin's speech did not offer specific goals or objectives for the war on Ukraine but instead continued generic rhetorical lines of effort aiming to prepare the Russian public for a protracted war in Ukraine. Putin's refusal to use the public address to issue specific goals or policies ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine suggests that Putin remains uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space through a dramatic speech that represents a significant inflection in his rhetoric.^[11]

Putin likely attempted to downplay recent surges of criticism regarding the integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR/LNR) into the Russian Armed Forces. Putin attended a wreath-laying ceremony to mark Defenders of the Fatherland Day, during which a Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Lieutenant Colonel Roman Cheremukhin asked him questions concerning the status of DNR and LNR militias and their inability to access state benefits for combat veterans.^[12] Putin responded that the Russian government will include DNR and LNR militia personnel who served from 2014 onward to the list of those eligible for combat veteran benefits, in what was likely an orchestrated performance similar to past exchanges between Putin and servicemembers.^[13] Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Andrey Turchak's announcement that DNR and LNR personnel who fought in Ukraine since 2014 would receive the status of combat participant further suggests that the incident was staged.^[14] The Kremlin is likely attempting to gain favor with the newly-integrated DNR and LNR militias – who have expressed concern over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) imposing military command changes within their units – by offering them the prospect of having state benefits.

Putin seems more concerned with appealing to ultranationalist pro-war ideologues and tired rhetorical gestures than with presenting any new approach to achieving the Kremlin's objectives in Ukraine. Putin's only specific remark in his public address concerned the operation of the Borei-A nuclear-powered submarine and how it would allow the Russian Navy's strategic nuclear forces to operate at 100 percent capacity.[15] Putin's remarks concerning the Russian Navy's strategic nuclear forces were likely meant to support ongoing Russian information operations aimed at discouraging Western support to Ukraine by fueling hyperbolic concerns about nuclear escalation, as well as to display Russian military might to a domestic audience by highlighting capabilities that are not involved with Russian military failures in Ukraine.[16] Putin also engaged in a likely staged interaction with a representative from the Russian Orthodox Church in which he stated that he would do everything to address the concerns of the Orthodox clergy serving with Russian forces in Ukraine.[17] Putin's appeals to nuclear armaments, DNR and LNR proxy forces, and Orthodoxy indicate that he is continuing to rely on rhetoric that he knows appeals to the Russian ultranationalist pro-war community.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely continues to suffer from confirmation bias in his belief that Russia's will to fight will outlast the West's will to support Ukraine. The *Financial Times* (*FT*) cited unnamed officials close to the Kremlin stating that Putin assesses that "Russia is more committed to the war than the West is to Ukraine and [is] resilient enough to see out the economic pain." [18] Unnamed Kremlin sources also told *FT* that Putin's demands for loyalty over competence among elites is forcing them to refrain from being honest with him about the progress of the war, and noted that Putin gets information of "poor" quality as a result. Sources also revealed that most of Putin's presidential administration and economic cabinet expressed that they do not support this war but use lies as a survival tactic, with only a small number of officials resigning since the start of the invasion. One longtime insider also observed that Putin is of "sound mind" and is "reasonable," which supports ISW's February 5 assessment that he is a highly calculated actor who places considerable emphasis on eliminating risks.[19] Insiders also revealed that Putin also withheld his plans to launch a full-scale invasion in February 2022 and his plans to occupy Crimea in 2014 from his closest advisors, with his circle of advisors recently tightening even more. The insider information indicates that Putin is prepared for Russia to suffer through a costly and exhausting protracted war under the conviction that the war will tire out Western support. Putin is also likely misinformed about the effectiveness of the Western equipment on the frontlines and its ability to impede his plans for a protracted war of attrition. **The combination of Putin's beliefs about Russian staying power and expectations of the collapse of Western will with the shrinking circle of advisors and the apparent unwillingness of insiders to contradict him likely create a strong confirmation bias in Putin's observations of Western statements and outreach.** Putin is likely to prioritize any indications of waning Western support or hesitancy over statements or indications of Western toughness or determination if this hypothesis is correct. Western leaders would do well to consider the likelihood that confirmation bias of this sort is shaping Putin's perceptions in their own public and private statements and actions.

A Russian source attempted to preempt Western discussions about releasing classified information regarding China's considerations to provide lethal aid to Russia. A prominent Russian milblogger responded to Chinese Foreign Minister Yi Wang's denial that China intends to supply weapons to Russia and stated that China provides Russia the opportunity to purchase various types of ammunition, industrial drones, field medicine, and protective gear on a commercial basis.[20] The Russian milblogger claimed that Chinese-made equipment is abundantly available in Russia and is present throughout the front in Ukraine.[21] The milblogger is likely referring to commercially available dual-use technology from China, which ISW has observed various Russian volunteer groups purchase and send to the Russian military as part of crowdfunding efforts. ISW has not observed any evidence of Russian forces using lethal aid from China in Ukraine. US officials are reportedly considering releasing intelligence that they believe shows that China is weighing whether to supply weapons to support Russia's war in Ukraine.[22] NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg stated on February 23 that NATO has seen signs that Chinese officials may be planning to send lethal aid to Russia.[23]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) fulfilled Wagner Group's complete artillery ammunition request on February 23 following immense support for Prigozhin in the Russian information space.[24] Prigozhin thanked many unspecified figures for helping to solve Wagner's ammunition shortage problems, including unspecified individuals in positions of power who "exerted pressure and made decisions" in favor of Wagner, and claimed these individuals helped save hundreds of Wagner personnel from dying in combat operations. Prigozhin likely aimed to further undermine the Russian MoD by thanking individuals rather than the MoD itself for providing Wagner with all its requested ammunition. Prigozhin's February 23 resolution did not generate significant discussion within the information space, unlike Prigozhin's escalation on February 22.[25] Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov stated on February 23 that the Russian military command is trying to oust Prigozhin from the information space after his continuous resistance to subordinate to the Russian MoD.[26] Prigozhin's claims about Wagner receiving ammunition, if true, may suggest that the Kremlin fears Prigozhin's influence over the information space and might have attempted to appease him before he exposed more inner workings of the Kremlin and the Russian MoD. The provision of ammunition to Wagner would also indicate that the Russian MoD continues to suffer significant resistance when attempting to subordinate and integrate irregular forces into its structure despite their reliance on the Russian MoD. It is also possible, however, that Prigozhin was pressured by the Kremlin or the MoD to make this statement defusing the informational crisis he had created.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions for false flag operations in Chernihiv Oblast and Moldova ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to deliver boilerplate rhetoric in public events that present him opportunities to shape the Russian information space ahead of the year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Putin likely attempted to downplay recent surges of criticism regarding the integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR/LNR) into the Russian Armed Forces.

- Putin seems more concerned with appealing to ultranationalist pro-war ideologues with meaningless gestures than with presenting any new approach to achieving the Kremlin's objectives in Ukraine.
- Putin likely continues to suffer from confirmation bias in his belief that Russia's will to fight will outlast the West's will to support Ukraine.
- A Russian source attempted to preempt Western discussions of releasing classified information regarding China's considerations to provide lethal aid to Russia.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) fulfilled Wagner Group's complete artillery ammunition request on February 23 following immense support for Prigozhin in the Russian information space.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian authorities announced that they completed the repair of the Kerch Strait Bridge road spans ahead of schedule.
- Russian officials continue to offer incremental and insufficient benefits to support Russian military personnel and defense manufacturers.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to militarize Ukrainian children through the installation of military-patriotic educational programs in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 22, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 22, 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 President Vladimir Putin revived his imperialistic narrative that Russia is fighting for Russia's "historic frontiers" on February 22, a narrative that he had similarly voiced in his speech before the re-invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Putin gave a four-minute speech at the rally for the Defenders of the Fatherland Day in Moscow, stating that there is currently "a battle going on for [Russia's] historical frontiers, for [Russian] people."^[1] Putin had similarly called territories adjacent to Russia "[Russian] historical land" when announcing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.^[2] Putin did not offer other notable remarks on the progress of the war or discuss concrete frontline objectives. The concept of Russia's "historical frontiers" could be used to justify aggression against almost any of Russia's neighbors, as well as Moldova and the Central Asian states that do not share a border with Russia, since all of them contain territory that belonged at one point to either the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire or both.

Putin's speech also followed his February 21 decree revoking his May 2012 edict on Russia's position on Moldovan territorial integrity.^[3] Putin revoked his 2012 orders to the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) to firmly uphold the principles of the United Nations Charter—which require the development of friendly relations between states on the basis of equality, respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity—and Russia's commitment to actively seek ways to resolve the Transnistria issue on the basis of respect for Moldovan territorial integrity. The revocation of the 2012 decree does not indicate that Putin intends to attack Moldova—an undertaking for which he lacks the military capability—although it does point toward an escalation in his ongoing efforts to undermine the Moldovan state.

The new decree also canceled the provision of "consistent implementation" of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (START) with the United States. Putin stated that he signed the decree "in order to ensure the national interest of the Russian Federation in connection with the profound changes taking place in international relations."

Ukrainian intelligence officials continue to assess that Russia lacks the combat power and resources needed to sustain its new offensive operations in Ukraine. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky told the AP that Russian forces intensified their offensive operations in at least four or five directions in Luhansk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts at the beginning of February but have yet to achieve any significant successes despite continuing to exhaust their personnel and resources.^[4] Skibitsky added that Russian forces are concentrating their efforts on capturing Kupyansk, Lyman, Bakhmut, Marinka, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.

GUR Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview with *Forbes* that the Russian offensive is so ineffective as to be almost unnoticeable and noted that Russian forces have been rationing shells and ammunition to sustain assaults on the Bakhmut, Lyman, and Vuhledar directions while conserving shells in other areas.^[5] Budanov's statement coincides with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are prioritizing the Bakhmut and Lyman directions and have yet to launch a significant push to advance in areas west of Donetsk City.^[6] Budanov added that Russian artillery stocks decreased to 30 percent of the total number of shells. He claimed that Russia has imported a test batch of artillery shells from Iran and is currently attempting to procure another batch of 20,000 shells. Budanov previously estimated that Russian

forces fired about 20,000 shells per day in late December 2022, down from 60,000 shells per day during the early stages of the war.[7] Budanov also observed that Russian tactics around Bakhmut and Vuhledar have largely shifted from artillery and mechanized attacks to infantry assaults due to the lack of shells and armored vehicles. Budanov noted that Russia had committed more than 90 percent of its 316,000 mobilized personnel to the frontlines, which further confirms Western and ISW's assessments that Russian forces do not have significant untapped combat-ready reserves.[8] Budanov noted that the Kremlin's stated objective of producing 800 tanks per year is unrealistic and stated that Russia can only produce 40 cruise missiles per month, which they use up in a single round of missile strikes. Russia has already lost at least 1,500 tanks and possibly as many as 2,000, as ISW has previously reported.[9]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of mistreating Wagner forces, igniting intense backlash in the information space and supporting ISW's prior assessments of a growing Wagner-MoD fissure.[10] Prigozhin accused the MoD of lying about supplying all unconventional units with requested artillery ammunition, claiming instead that Wagner forces receive only 20 percent of the artillery ammunition promised to them. [11] Prigozhin claimed that the MoD's statement is "spitting at the Wagner private military company (PMC)" and an attempt to hide the MoD's "crimes against fighters" who achieve battlefield successes near Bakhmut.[12] Prigozhin published a dossier contrasting Wagner forces' artillery ammunition usage with what the MoD distributes to Wagner forces, an image showing Wagner fighters dead supposedly from the lack of artillery support during assaults, and an interview response claiming that the support of certain regional heads, including Crimean Occupation Governor Sergey Aksyonov, has helped raise awareness of Wagner forces' ammunition shortages.[13] Prigozhin called on the MoD to fulfill its promises rather than "deceiving" the Russian public.[14] Many prominent Russian milbloggers jumped to defend Prigozhin, spreading Prigozhin's claims and accusing the MoD of failing to support the supposedly most effective Russian forces in Ukraine.[15] One milblogger noted that the Russian MoD is now treating Wagner forces in the same way that the MoD treats its conventional forces in Ukraine, a clear step down from Prigozhin's prior posturing as the true victor near Bakhmut.[16] Prigozhin's complaints also confirm that his earlier boasts of Wagner's independence from the Russian MoD were lies. [17] Another Kremlin-affiliated milblogger criticized the rivalry between the Wagner Group and the MoD as counterproductive.[18]

US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that the US government is concerned about the potential strengthening of Russia-China relations. [19] Price stated that the United States is concerned because "these two countries share a vision... in which big countries could bully small countries [and] borders could be redrawn by force."[20] Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Director Wang Yi in Moscow on February 22.[21] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Yi said "no matter how the international situation changes, China remains committed to... maintaining positive trends in the development of its relations with Russia."[22]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin revived his imperialistic narrative that Russia is fighting for Russia's "historic frontiers" on February 22, a narrative that he had similarly voiced in his speech before the re-invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.
- Putin's speech also followed his February 21 decree revoking his May 2012 edict on Russia's position toward Moldovan territorial integrity.
- Ukrainian intelligence officials continue to assess that Russia lacks the combat power and resources necessary to sustain its new offensive operations in Ukraine.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of mistreating Wagner forces, igniting intense backlash in the information space and supporting ISW's prior assessments of a growing Wagner-MoD fissure.
- US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that the US government is concerned about the potential strengthening of Russia-China relations.
- Russian forces are likely attempting to increase the tempo of their offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Lyman line.
- Some Russian sources refuted other Russian claims about the intensification of offensive operations in western Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks throughout the Donetsk Oblast front line and secured marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut.
- Russian and occupation authorities continue to publicly indicate that Russian forces are focusing on defensive operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and Crimea.
- US intelligence officials stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin may mobilize significantly more Russian personnel.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 21, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 21, 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 21 address to the Russian Federal Assembly did not articulate specific goals or intentions for the war in Ukraine, instead reinforcing several long-standing rhetorical lines in an effort to buy Putin more space and time for a protracted war. Putin claimed that Russia began the "special military operation" in Ukraine a year ago in order to protect people in Russia's "historical lands," ensure Russian domestic security, remedy

the threat posed by the Ukrainian “neo-Nazi” regime that he claims has been in place since 2014, and protect the people of Donbas.[1] Putin virulently accused the collective West of arming Ukraine and deploying bases and biolabs close to Russian borders, thereby unleashing the war on Russia.[2] Putin falsely analogized the Ukrainian Armed Forces with various Nazi divisions and thanked the Russian Armed Forces for their efforts in fighting the Nazi threat.[3] The emphasis of a significant portion of the speech was on the supposed resilience of the Russian economic, social, and cultural spheres, and Putin made several recommendations for the development of occupied territories of Ukraine.[4] Putin’s speech notably re-engaged with several long-standing Russian information operations regarding the justifications of the war and did not present an inflection in Russia’s rhetorical positioning on the war. Putin could have used this event to articulate new objectives and means for achieving them, such as announcing another formal wave of partial mobilization, redefining the “special military operation” as an official war, or taking additional steps to mobilize the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) in a more concrete way. Instead, Putin said very little of actual substance, likely in order to set continued information conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine by not articulating specific temporal goals and framing the war as existential to the Russian domestic population.

Putin announcement of Russia’s suspension of participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) captured more attention than the relatively boilerplate content of the rest of the speech. Towards the end of his speech, Putin claimed that the collective West has used START to try to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia and that Russia is therefore suspending its participation in START, although Putin did emphasize that suspension is not a full withdrawal.[5] Putin called on the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Russian nuclear energy agency Rosatom to ensure readiness for testing nuclear weapons.[6] Putin may have made this announcement in order to re-introduce nuclear rhetoric into the information space, thereby distracting from the overall lack of substance in the rest of his speech. ISW has previously reported on the Russian use of nuclear rhetoric as an information operation to discourage Ukraine and the West and compensate for Russian battlefield failures.[7] ISW continues to assess that Russia will not employ a nuclear weapon in Ukraine or against NATO, however.

US President Joe Biden gave a speech in Warsaw, Poland on February 21 to reaffirm US and NATO support for Ukraine after his trip to Kyiv. Biden emphasized the unity among NATO countries and stated “our support for Ukraine will not waver, NATO will not be divided, and we will not tire.”[8] Biden also directly addressed Putin’s February 21 speech stating, “the West was not plotting to attack Russia” and “[Putin] could end this war with a word.”[9]

Many Russian milbloggers condemned Putin’s failure to use his speech to forward new war aims, outline new measures to support the war, or hold Russian authorities accountable for their many military failures. Some milbloggers with prior Kremlin affiliation as well as occupation officials attended the speech in person and expressed positive or neutral support for Putin’s framing of the war as a conflict against the West, suspension of Russia’s participation in START, and support of the Donbas separatist republics.[10] Other milbloggers criticized Putin’s address as boilerplate and without meaningful action. Russian milblogger Igor Girkin notably claimed that Putin did not say anything meaningful for 40 minutes; omitted Russia’s military defeats, military failures, and economic downturn; and failed to hold Russian officials accountable.[11] Girkin also expressed frustration at Putin’s failure to use the address to formally recognize the war, announce next objectives, or counter Western sanctions. Another milblogger claimed that the suspension of Russia’s participation in START is politically symbolic but complained that the suspension will not improve Russia’s situation on the battlefield, instead calling on Russia to hinder Western military aid deliveries to Ukraine.[12] A third milblogger compared Putin to a corpse and echoed many of Girkin’s complaints about accountability and action.[13] Other milbloggers similarly noted the need for decisive action and called for Russia to foster the growth of and promote military leaders with a demonstrated history of taking decisive action on the battlefield.[14] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that he did not watch Putin’s speech live because he was too busy working to supply Wagner forces with ammunition necessary to continue effective combat operations in Ukraine.[15]

International journalists reportedly obtained the Kremlin’s classified 2021 strategy document on restoring Russian suzerainty over Belarus through the Union State by 2030. The *Kyiv Independent*, *Yahoo News*, and several of their international media partners published an investigative report on February 20 about a classified 17-page Russian strategy document on how the Kremlin seeks to absorb the Belarusian state using the Kremlin-dominated Union State structure by 2030. [16] The journalists did not publish the strategy document to avoid compromising sources they said. While ISW is unable to confirm the existence or contents of this document, the reporters’ findings about the strategy document and its various lines of effort for Belarus’ phased military, political, economic, and cultural integration with Russia through the Union State are consistent with ISW’s long-term research and assessments about the Kremlin’s campaigns and strategic objective to subsume Belarus via the Union State.[17]

NATO must seriously plan for the likely future reality of a Russian-controlled Belarus. As ISW previously assessed, Putin will very likely secure significant gains in restoring Russian suzerainty over Belarus regardless of the outcome of his invasion of Ukraine.[18] Russia’s likely permanent gains in Belarus present the West with a decision about how to deal with the potential future security landscape on NATO’s eastern flank. If the West allows Putin to maintain his current gains in Ukraine—particularly Crimea and eastern Kherson Oblast—then the Kremlin will be able to use both occupied Belarusian and Ukrainian territory to further threaten Ukraine and NATO’s eastern flank. The West could alternatively set conditions for a future in which a territorially-whole Ukraine becomes a robust military partner in defending NATO’s eastern flank against Russia and Russian-occupied Belarus. This preferable long-term future is predicated on immediate and sustained decisive Western action to empower Ukraine to expel Russian forces from its territory. It is extraordinal unlikely that the West will be able to defeat or respond effectively to the Russian campaign to absorb Belarus without first defeating the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Director Wang Yi met in Moscow on February 21 to discuss deepening Sino-Russian cooperation.^[19] Patrushev stated that developing a strategic partnership with China is an unconditional foreign policy priority for Russia.^[20] Patrushev claimed that Western states are acting against both China and Russia and claimed that both states stand for a fair world order. Wang stated that Sino-Russian relations remain strong and can "will withstand the test of the changing international situation."^[21] Wang will meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on February 22.^[22] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on February 18 that China is strongly considering providing lethal support to Russia.^[23]

The *Financial Times* (FT) reported that international companies belonging to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's continue to garner hundreds of millions of dollars in profits despite long-standing Western sanctions.^[24] FT reported that the Prigozhin-controlled company Evro Polis, which received energy concessions from Syria in exchange for recapturing ISIS-controlled oilfields, had net profits of \$90 million in 2020 despite US sanctions on the company in 2018, providing a 180 percent return on investment for shareholders that was repatriated to Russia. FT reported that smaller Prigozhin-controlled companies like M Invest, which runs gold mines in Sudan, and Mercury LLC, a Syrian oil company that likely transferred operations to a new business name to evade sanctions, continue to rake in millions in profit. FT's report further demonstrates the extent to which Western sanctions have failed to stop Russian or Russian-backed actors that help Russia fight against Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 21 address to the Russian Federal Assembly did not articulate specific goals or intentions for the war in Ukraine, instead reinforcing several long-standing rhetorical lines in an effort to buy Putin more space and time for a protracted war.
- Putin announcement of Russia's suspension of participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) captured more attention than the relatively boilerplate content of the rest of the speech.
- US President Joe Biden gave a speech in Warsaw, Poland on February 21 to reaffirm US and NATO support for Ukraine after his trip to Kyiv.
- Many Russian milbloggers condemned Putin's failure to use his speech to forward new war aims, outline new measures to support the war, or hold Russian authorities accountable for their many military failures.
- International journalists reportedly obtained the Kremlin's classified 2021 strategy document on restoring Russian suzerainty over Belarus through the Union State by 2030.
- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Director Wang Yi met in Moscow on February 21 on deepening Sino-Russian cooperation.
- The *Financial Times* (FT) reported that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's international companies continue to garner hundreds of millions of dollars in profits despite long-standing Western sanctions.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kremenna. Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a limited counterattack near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued making incremental tactical gains in and around Bakhmut, and continued ground attacks near Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to reinforce and build fortifications in rear areas in southern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin may be directing patronage programs between Russian regions and occupied Ukrainian territory to promote socio-economic recovery and infrastructure development.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin further expanded unrealistic promises of benefits for Russian soldiers in his address to the Russian Federal Assembly.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 20, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 20, 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.

US President Joe Biden visited Kyiv on February 20 ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Biden met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and announced that the US will provide an additional \$500 million in military assistance to Ukraine, including howitzer shells, anti-tank missiles, air surveillance radars, and other aid.^[1] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that the Biden administration notified Moscow of Biden's visit shortly before his departure for Ukraine for "deconfliction purposes."^[2] Biden's visit and the timing of his trip to Europe clearly signal continued Western support for Ukraine following concerted Russian efforts to deter Western military aid and political support.

Ukrainian officials continue to respond to statements made by unspecified US defense officials on the pace and prospects of the war as it approaches the one-year mark. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 20 that Ukraine will continue to defend Bakhmut but "not at any cost."^[3] Zelensky and Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov also emphasized that Ukrainian troops are continuing to prepare for counteroffensives in the near term.^[4] Zelensky and Reznikov's statements are likely direct responses to unspecified US defense officials, who reportedly told the *Washington Post* on February 14 that the United States is concerned about Ukraine's ability to defend Bakhmut while also pursuing counteroffensive operations.^[5] ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's decision to defend Bakhmut is a strategically sound effort to pin Russian forces in a discrete area of the front and attrit them, Zelensky likely tempered his administration's stance on Bakhmut to make a limited rhetorical concession to US officials.^[6] It has long been clear that Ukraine would not continue to defend Bakhmut at the risk of seeing large numbers of Ukrainian troops encircled in the city, so Zelensky's comment is not likely a real change in Kyiv's strategy.

Verkhovna Rada Committee on National Security, Defense, and Intelligence member Fedir Venislavskyi notably stated on February 19 that Russia has "all combat-ready units on the line of contact in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, and partly in Zaporizhia Oblast," reaffirming the assessment that Russia does not have a large uncommitted combat ready reserves that can be deployed and change the course of operations.^[7] These Ukrainian statements are consistent with ISW's assessment that Ukraine has the capacity to regain the initiative in 2023 with sufficient and timely Western backing.^[8]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the formal integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR/LNR) militias into the Russian Armed Forces on February 19 in response to growing criticism about reported command changes within the proxy units. The Russian MoD denied reports about the alleged dismissal of officers of the integrated DNR and LNR's 1st and 2nd Army Corps, likely in response to widespread milblogger and proxy criticisms about the reported dismissal of DNR Militia Spokesman Eduard Basurin on February 17.^[9] Basurin discussed his dismissal in a publicized meeting with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on February 19 in which he stated that such command changes will "harm" proxy commanders and servicemen.^[10] Basurin noted that servicemen in occupied Donetsk Oblast trust their commanders and would be demoralized if those commanders were replaced by people they did not know. Basurin stated that it is important to warn about ongoing command changes and questioned who would be defending Russia if the newly integrated proxy units refuse to fight as a result of the Russian professionalization effort.

The decision to reorganize the DNR and LNR militias amid an ongoing offensive likely indicates that the Russian MoD does not fully grasp the scale of the underlying challenges of integrating irregular forces into the professional military, especially during a period of intense combat operations. The DNR and LNR forces are currently fighting in Donbas in support of Russia's goal to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and such untimely restructuring of the command structure may reduce cohesion within the proxy units and between them and Russian forces. Russian forces have suffered from their own shortcomings in unit cohesion and will likely face greater tensions with the proxy militias that were not trained to professional standards. Proxy elements have also repeatedly complained about receiving unequal treatment from the Kremlin, and Russian mobilized servicemen have recently accused the DNR and LNR formations of abuse and discrimination in turn.^[11] This reorganization may upset and demoralize proxy elements that have enjoyed a great deal of independence as irregular militants for nine years and may risk alienating them amidst the offensive for Donbas. Russia needs DNR and LNR units—which have not been historically effective forces—to maintain positions in western Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as conventional Russian troops pursue an offensive on select frontlines in eastern Ukraine.

The restructuring of proxy militias also suggests that the Russian military command is trying to achieve all desired reforms while the Russian MoD has the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian military command may recognize that Russia does not have the combat capability to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the short term and is likely trying to rush through some planned reforms before Putin again becomes disillusioned with the Russian MoD's inability to secure meaningful advances. The Russian military command may alternatively be deluded about its ability to rapidly and seamlessly complete professionalization objectives to aid the ongoing offensive and may not perceive the problems inherent in conducting a significant military reform while pursuing difficult offensive operations. The Russian MoD has been trying to simultaneously professionalize different aspects of Russian forces by targeting Wagner's influence, integrating mobilized servicemen into proxy and conventional formations, and introducing personal grooming standards and operational security procedures.^[12] These efforts would be logical if Russia had initiated them during peacetime but are a bureaucratic burden that will likely generate further discontent toward the already heavily scrutinized Russian MoD. The Russian military command is embarking on too many drastic changes that will either require time or will cause significant tensions that will hinder their full execution even as it orders its forces to conduct extremely challenging military operations that are likely beyond their capabilities in any event.

The Russian military command has likely cut off Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's independent access to artillery shells and heavy weaponry as part of the effort to professionalize Russian conventional forces. Prigozhin stated on February 20 that the Russian military command had stopped providing artillery shells to Wagner as a result of his "complicated relationships" with unspecified but likely Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials.^[13] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner has "complete shell hunger" as a result of Russian military officials ignoring his demands and introducing new limitations and restrictions on his ammunition procurement. Prigozhin claimed that Wagner servicemen are experiencing twice the number of casualties (without specifying the comparison) because they are unable to suppress Ukrainian artillery fire and noted that Wagner had sufficient ammunition during the tenure of former Commander of the Russian Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin. Prigozhin denied rumors of having a personal relationship with Surovikin, but noted that he used to meet up with and call Surovikin when he visited the frontlines. Prigozhin also noted that Wagner had been receiving some weapons from unnamed generals and officers who had violated the military code to help him. The Russian MoD has also reportedly cut off Prigozhin's ability to recruit prisoners and train at select training grounds belonging to the Russian Armed Forces.^[14] A milblogger observed that Prigozhin was repeating the experience of former Russian officer Igor Girkin, who led proxy units in Donbas in 2014, claiming that the Russian MoD had also cut off Girkin's access to reinforcements and supplies while blaming him for losing ground in Slovyansk.^[15]

Prigozhin's appeal may have misrepresented the devastating impact of the lack of artillery ammunition on Wagner to mask his true frustrations with Wagner's inability to have and operate its own artillery systems independent of conventional Russian units. Prigozhin demanded that the Russian military leadership set aside its principles and save Wagner servicemen by providing shells. It is unlikely that Wagner is operating in the Bakhmut direction completely without artillery support, however. Wagner is likely receiving artillery support from the conventional Russian forces that have been supporting Wagner operations in the area since the Wagner offensive culminated.[16] The Russian military command may have stripped Wagner's privileges to independently use its own artillery systems, which Prigozhin sought to portray as disregard for Wagner servicemen's lives. Prigozhin's rhetoric was partially successful as some prominent milbloggers expressed solidarity with Wagner—even stating that those who boycott Prigozhin are boycotting Russian President Vladimir Putin.[17] Others complained that paramilitaries should not be allowed to replace conventional forces.[18] Prigozhin's appeal further indicates that Wagner is dependent on the provision of heavy weapons and ammunition by the Russian MoD, and further confirms that Wagner is not the sole force operating around Bakhmut given the ongoing artillery fire in the area.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov likely publicized a meeting he had with Prigozhin on an unspecified date in order to assuage Prigozhin's possible anger at Kadyrov's likely refusal to join Prigozhin's informational campaign against the Russian MoD. Kadyrov posted a picture on February 19 showing him meeting with Prigozhin on an unspecified date and applauded the Wagner Group for its success and work in Ukraine.[19] Kadyrov's endorsement of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group followed Kadyrov's equally effusive endorsement of the Russian MoD on February 18, suggesting that Kadyrov is likely trying to maintain his relationships with the MoD and the Kremlin without incurring Prigozhin's criticism. [20] Kadyrov did not state that he intends to form a paramilitary company in an unspecified timeframe, as some Western reporting of his comments suggested. Kadyrov rhetorically commented that he might compete with Prigozhin's Wagner Group one day following the completion of his work in the civil service as Chechen Republic head.[21] Kadyrov has governed the Chechen Republic as its dictator since 2007 and is unlikely to leave his position there any time soon unless he improbably receives a promotion of some sort—certainly not by choice. His observation about "competing" with Wagner was thus likely meant as a compliment to Prigozhin rather than a statement of Kadyrov's own intentions. Kadyrov already effectively has his own paramilitary structure in the form of the Chechen combat units that he raises and over which he appears to retain some command and control.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the US government is concerned that China is considering providing lethal aid to Russia. Blinken stated in an interview with CBS News on February 19 that he told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference that Chinese lethal support to Russia would have "serious consequences" for US-Chinese relations.[22] The US Treasury and State Department have sanctioned Chinese Changsha Tianyi Space Science and Technology Research Institute Company (Spacety China) for providing satellite imagery of Ukraine to Wagner.[23]

The Russian MoD likely responded to a call for the Russian military to systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) by setting possible informational conditions for strikes aimed at forcing emergency shutdowns at these NPPs. The Russian MoD falsely claimed on February 19th that Ukrainian officials are planning false-flag attacks at hazardous radiation facilities in Ukraine to accuse Russian forces of conducting indiscriminate strikes on these facilities in violation of the Convention on Nuclear Safety ahead of the 11th emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly on February 22.[24] A prominent Russian news aggregator recently called on the Russian military to systematically target electrical substations external to Ukrainian NPPs in order to force Ukrainian officials to conduct emergency shutdowns at the plants.[25] The Russian MoD may be starting an information operation aimed at setting informational conditions for conducting such strikes and the potential radiological incidents that could result from systematically depriving the facilities of energy. The attacks advocated by the Russian news aggregator would not likely generate radiological incidents, but attacking anywhere near nuclear power plants always carries some risk of such incidents. Previous Russian strikes against critical infrastructure facilities in Ukraine do not suggest that Russian forces are systematically targeting electrical infrastructure specifically associated with NPPs at this time, however. The Russian MoD's statement may also be attempting to set informational conditions for a potential radiological incident at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in light of reports that Russia's draining of the Kakhovka Reservoir may be putting the ZNPP's cooling system in peril.[26]

Key Takeaways

- US President Joe Biden visited Kyiv on February 20 ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine signaling continued US commitment to supporting Ukraine in its efforts to liberate its territory.
- Ukrainian officials continue to respond to statements made by unspecified US defense officials on the pace and prospects of the war as it approaches the one-year mark.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the formal integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR/LNR) militias into the Russian Armed Forces on February 19 in response to growing criticism about reported command changes within the proxy units.
- The decision to reorganize the DNR and LNR militias amidst an ongoing offensive likely indicates that the Russian MoD does not understand the scale of the challenges of integrating irregular forces into a professional military during intensive combat operations.
- The restructuring of proxy militias suggests that the Russian military command is trying to achieve all its desired reforms while the Russian MoD has the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- The Russian military command has likely cut off Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's independent access to artillery shells and heavy weaponry as part of the effort to professionalize the Russian conventional forces.
- Prigozhin may have misrepresented the devastating impact of the lack of artillery ammunition on Wagner to mask his true frustrations with Wagner's inability to have and operate its own artillery systems.

- Chechen Republic head Kadyrov likely attempted to assuage Prigozhin's possible anger at Kadyrov's likely refusal to join Prigozhin's informational campaign against the Russian MoD.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the US government is concerned about China's possible consideration of sending lethal aid to Russia.
- The Russian MoD likely responded to a call for the Russian military to systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) by setting possible informational conditions for strikes aimed at forcing emergency shutdowns at these NPPs.
- Russian forces continued ground assaults along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut as well as in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to militarize the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces may be struggling to repair air defense systems deployed in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities are using an "anti-terrorist" commission to justify seizing and nationalizing assets in occupied Crimea for economic and military benefit.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 19, 2023

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

Karolina Hird and Frederick W. Kagan

February 19, 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, February 19. This report forecasts the unlikelihood of significantly increased Russian offensive operations this winter based on an assessment of Russian forces already committed to active operations compared with Russia's overall ground forces order of battle.

The major phase of Russian offensive operations in Luhansk Oblast is underway, and Russia likely lacks sufficient uncommitted reserves to dramatically increase the scale or intensity of the offensive this winter. Russian conventional ground forces are generally deploying and fighting in normal doctrinal formations and units rather than in battalion tactical groups or other ad hoc structures. The observed absence of several critical tank units suggests that the Russian military continues to struggle to replace equipment, especially tanks, lost during previous failed offensive operations. Russian forces almost certainly still have some reconstituted mechanized units in reserve, but the commitment of these limited reserves to the Luhansk Oblast frontline is unlikely to change the course of the ongoing offensive dramatically. The Russian offensive will very likely continue for some time and may temporarily gain momentum as the final reserves are committed—if they are—but will very likely culminate well short of its objectives and likely short of achieving operationally significant gains.

The current pattern of commitment in Luhansk Oblast indicates that Russian forces in this area are deploying in doctrinal units and formations from the military-district level down to the brigade/regiment level at least, and likely down to the battalion level as well. Russian forces operating in and near the Luhansk Oblast frontline are drawn almost entirely from the Western Military District (WMD) with a few reinforcements from other force groupings. This disposition suggests that the Russian military command has returned to the traditional military district command-and-control structure wherein all units in a discrete geographical area fall under the area of responsibility of a single military district. Two full WMD divisions (the 144th Motorized Rifle Division and the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division) have each deployed their maneuver regiments in line allowing the division commanders to operate as divisions are designed to do. These regiments have been reconstituted with mobilized personnel, indicating that the Russian command is using mobilized soldiers as replacements in doctrinal structures instead of creating ad hoc formations.^[1]

Russian forces have deployed throughout this war in various non-standard and non-doctrinal structures, starting with the battalion tactical group but encompassing also volunteer regiments, BARS (National Combat Reserve) units, and militia units belonging to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR respectively), to say nothing of the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) formations of convicts. The return to doctrinal structures represents an inflection in Russian force structure and campaign design. As ISW has previously assessed, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is currently engaging in a number of reforms meant to formalize and professionalize the Russian Armed Forces and prepare to fight a protracted war in Ukraine as a conventional army.^[2] The current array of forces along the Luhansk Oblast frontline likely reflects the ongoing shift in Russian military procedure towards the Russian MoD establishment.

The Russians are receiving less benefit from this return to normal in military operations than they might have hoped because of the badly degraded condition of their forces. They did not leave enough time to train their mobilized reservists to standards sufficient to support large-scale offensive mechanized maneuver warfare, as ISW has repeatedly observed; and they clearly lack the equipment necessary to kit out their reconstituted units. The coherent 3rd and 144th Motorized Rifle Divisions attacking on the Luhansk Oblast axis have thus made relatively few gains since the offensive began.

The Russian military has committed a large majority of the conventional elements belonging to the Western Military District (WMD) to its decisive offensive effort in Luhansk Oblast, leaving relatively few elements either in reserve or unobserved. ISW has observed elements of Russia's WMD, along with some supplemental Central Military District (CMD), Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR) and airborne (VDV) elements, arrayed along the Luhansk Oblast frontline, with a specific concentration of units along the Svatove-Kremenna line. The WMD has fully committed both rifle divisions of the 20th Combined Arms Army (CAA)—the 144th Motor Rifle Division (144th MRD) and 3rd Motor Rifle Division (3rd MRD)—to the Svatove-Kremenna line in Luhansk Oblast.^[3] ISW has observed both of the 144th MRD's rifle regiments (the 254th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment and the 488th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment) and its tank regiment (the 59th Guards Tank Regiment) committed along the Svatove-Kremenna line but has only observed the 752nd and 252nd Motorized Rifle Regiments of the 3rd MRD by name.^[4] ISW has also observed reports that elements of the 4th Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army, of the 26th Tank Regiment of the 47th Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army, and of the 27th Separate Tank Brigade of 1st Guards Tank Army are deployed along the line from Svatove north toward Kupyansk.^[5] The CMD has additionally committed elements of the 6th Tank Regiment of the 90th Tank Division to the Svatove area, and unspecified elements in the Lyman direction west of Kremenna.^[6] DNR units and ad hoc formations are apparently supporting WMD operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line in limited numbers, and LNR units (particularly the 4th Motorized Rifle Regiment) are engaged in the Bilohorivka area south of Kremenna.^[7] Limited VDV elements, particularly of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division and of the 98th Airborne Division, appear to be supporting WMD operations in the Kremenna area as well.^[8]

ISW has not observed the commitment of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division (2nd MRD) of the 1st Guards Tank Army to combat even though the unit was reported to have deployed to Luhansk Oblast. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) noted on January 25 that the 2nd MRD partially redeployed to Luhansk Oblast from training areas in Belarus.^[9] ISW has not yet observed indications that the 2nd MRD or its constituent elements—the 15th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment, 1st Tank Regiment, or 1st Guards Motor Rifle Regiment—appear near the frontline. 2nd MRD elements are therefore likely being held in reserve in the rear of Luhansk Oblast and likely could deploy to the frontline in the future. It is possible that elements of the 2nd MRD have already been committed to the line in some capacity, but that ISW has simply not observed evidence of their commitment. That scenario is unlikely because of the fanfare this unit generally receives when it operates and because of the detail with which Russian and Ukrainian sources have been reporting on the Russian units fighting in Luhansk Oblast. The absence of the 2nd MRD from active engagement suggests that Russian forces are holding most of a division in reserve. With two motorized rifle divisions already likely fully committed along with other reinforcements, however, the addition of the two or possibly three regiments of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division to the fight is unlikely to generate a nonlinear change in Russian offensive capacity.

The absence of several elite and prominent WMD elements from the Luhansk Oblast line and elsewhere in theater suggests that the Russian military continues to face challenges in reconstituting combat units and specifically tank units. The WMD commands three army-level maneuver formations—the 6th and 20th Combined Arms Armies (CAA) and the 1st Guards Tank Army (GTA). The 20th CAA is heavily committed along the Svatove-Kremenna line, as noted above. ISW has only observed limited mentions of the 6th CAA and partial mentions of 1st GTA formations in Luhansk Oblast, however, and has not observed these elements anywhere else in theater, suggesting that some of these units and formations have likely not been reconstituted yet.^[10] A delay in the reconstitution of tank units in particular could result from the fact that several critical (and previously elite) Russian tank units and mechanized formations have suffered devastating defeats over the course of the first year of the war. The 1st GTA, for example, suffered massive losses during its assault in Chernihiv Oblast early in the war and then once again in autumn of 2022 during Ukraine's counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast.^[11] The 1st GTA's 4th Tank Division, specifically its 12th and 13th Guards Tank Regiments, famously lost nearly 100 tanks (a full regiment's worth) in a few days in September of 2022.^[12]

Russian tank losses have been enormous in this war, amounting to the equivalent of around 16 tank regiments worth, which is likely hindering Russia's ability to reconstitute its tank units rapidly. Recent intelligence estimates presented by Dutch open-source investigative organization Oryx and the British research institute International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) depict these losses clearly. Oryx verified over 1,000 distinct Russian tank losses and 500 captured tanks on February 9, which likely means that Russia has lost half of its pre-war tank fleet in the first year of the war.^[13] IISS similarly noted on February 15 that Russia has lost about 50 percent of its pre-war number of T-72B and T-72B3M main battle tanks.^[14] A single tank regiment requires just short of 100 tanks, so rebuilding two tank regiments from scratch (as the 12th and 13th Tank Regiments likely required) would demand 200 tanks, which the Russian armed forces do not appear to have in usable stocks and do not appear able to produce quickly.^[15] Widespread tank losses also impact the capacities of motorized rifle formations to function effectively, but motorized rifle units require fewer tanks in each and can make better use of the large amount of relatively untrained manpower the rushed Russian reserve mobilization has generated. The absence of reconstituted tank regiments and brigades, however, deprives the Russian ground forces of the kind of punch required to make and exploit operationally significant breakthroughs—which may explain why the WMD has so far failed to make any.

The pattern of Russian deployments in other parts of the theater strongly suggests that most of the available maneuver elements of the other military districts and the Airborne Forces are already committed and thus do not constitute a large reserve that Moscow could suddenly hurl into the fray in Luhansk Oblast or elsewhere. ISW has previously assessed that various elements of the Southern Military District (SMD) are currently engaging in unsuccessful offensive efforts throughout Donetsk Oblast and holding defensive positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.^[16] Elements of the Eastern Military District (EMD) and the 40th and 155th Naval Infantry Brigades have been predominantly fighting near Vuhledar in western Donetsk Oblast and have suffered catastrophic losses over the past weeks.^[17] DNR troops are heavily committed along the outskirts of Donetsk City and elsewhere throughout Donetsk Oblast.^[18] The Central Military District (CMD), which suffered devastating losses during Ukrainian counteroffensive operations near Lyman in fall 2022, appears to mainly be reinforcing WMD elements in the Kremenna area.^[19] VDV elements are scattered throughout the theater, gradually supplementing and increasingly supplanting the Wagner Group in its assaults around Bakhmut and maintaining a presence in southern Ukraine as well as a limited presence in Luhansk Oblast.^[20] The commitment of Russian forces throughout Ukraine suggests that the 2nd MRD is the only obvious candidate for a theater reserve unless the missing tank regiments/brigades begin to appear. The

United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) has previously confirmed this assessment with the suggestion that an absolute majority of the Russian military is already committed in Ukraine.[21]

There may well be more Russian elements online in Luhansk Oblast than ISW has observed at this time. Other research organizations have suggested that additional units of the 6th CAA are operating along the Luhansk Oblast line.[22] ISW cannot verify the sources of these other assessments but has no reason to question them. If elements of the 6th CAA or other formations have indeed been committed, then Russian theater reserves available for commitment to subsequent offensive or defensive operations are even smaller. The offensive will likely continue and may briefly increase in intensity if reserve elements such as the 2nd MRD are committed, but these increases in intensity will likely be brief and unable to make operationally significant gains.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 18, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Angela Howard, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick Kagan

February 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.

Russian forces conducted another missile strike attack targeting Ukrainian infrastructure throughout the country. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 18 that Russian forces launched 16 missiles targeting civilian infrastructure in Khmelnytskyi City and Ukrainsk in Donetsk Oblast (about 30km west of Donetsk City).[1] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian air defense systems shot down two Kalibr missiles of four launched earlier in the day but did not release the total number of intercepted missiles towards the end of the day.[2] Ukrainian officials also did not release information about the type of missiles Russian forces used during this attack as of the time of this publication. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck critical infrastructure facilities in Khmelnytskyi City and oblast and Kryvyi Rih.[3] Ukrainian nuclear enterprise Energoatom reported that two Russian missiles flew dangerously close to the South Ukraine Nuclear Power Plant (NPP).[4]

Russian news aggregators are advocating for Russia to carry out “retaliatory strikes” that would systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) to force Ukraine to conduct emergency shutdowns of its NPPs. Prominent Russian news aggregator Readovka told its audience of almost 1.7 million subscribers that Russian forces need to prioritize the “decommissioning” of the NPPs’ external electrical infrastructure in hopes that doing so would lead to the emergency shutdown of NPPs in Ukraine.[5] Readovka did not advocate for Russian forces to directly strike nuclear power plants or attempt to cause radiological events, but rather to target separate substations that would cut off electrical supply essential to the safe operation of the plants thereby forcing Ukrainian officials to shut the plants down in ways that would make it very difficult to restart them. Readovka stated that the destruction of such targets for the three Ukrainian NPPs outside of Russian-occupied areas “will cause damage many times greater than the last few massive missile strikes.”[6] Readovka claimed with low confidence that the February 18 missile strike on Khmelnytskyi City may have targeted one such substation that supports the Khmelnytskyi NPP, though Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces hit a military facility and civilian infrastructure.[7] Readovka had previously advocated for such strikes noting that Russia’s massive missile strikes have not generated the desired effect of prompting the Ukrainian government’s capitulation.[8] ISW has no other evidence that Russia is pursuing or considering such a course of action but observes that the Russian militarization of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the use of Zaporizhzhia NPP grounds to fire at Ukrainian positions, and the reported Russian strikes on Zaporizhzhia NPP transmission lines all suggest that it is not beyond the realm of the conceivable that the Kremlin might pursue actions with the intent of forcing the emergency shutdowns of Ukrainian nuclear reactors.

The Russian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) reported dismissal of Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) military spokesman Eduard Basurin as part of the formal reorganization of the DNR militia under the Russian MoD triggered another wave of Russian milblogger criticisms against the Russian defense establishment. A prominent Russian milblogger broke the news to his over one million subscribers that Russian military officials fired Press Secretary of the DNR’s Military Command Eduard Basurin on February 17.[9] This milblogger reported that the Russian defense establishment seeks to replace all commanders of the DNR and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) militias with professional Russian officers as part of the formal reorganization of the DNR and LNR militias under the Russian MoD. Many Russian milbloggers met the news with discontent, disappointment, and outrage, stating that the DNR and LNR commanders have practical experience fighting Ukraine and are better than the “real” Russian commanders even if DNR and LNR commanders do not have formal military education, know the military’s peacetime functions, have the right bureaucratic experiences, or meet the Russian military’s physical fitness requirements.[10] Some milbloggers stated that a purge of the DNR and LNR officers would degrade Russian fighters’ morale and undercut support for the Russian military establishment.[11] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin stated that he will meet with DNR commanders in the near future to discuss Basurin’s alleged dismissal and stated that the news must be some kind of fake propaganda because firing DNR and LNR commanders would be unacceptable.[12] Prigozhin will likely exploit this episode in his ongoing informational counteroffensive against the Russian MoD if Basurin’s dismissal is confirmed.[13]

The DNR and LNR’s 1st and 2nd army corps are not and never have been a professional military or even an effective fighting force. These Russian proxies were ineffective at capturing and holding ground during the initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and required reinforcements from the conventional Russian military to capture

Debaltseve in 2015.[14] DNR and LNR unit effectiveness has not improved since 2014, and the proxy forces have continued to be ineffective in the renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian milblogger community's reaction to the professionalization of the DNR and LNR forces indicates that the ultranationalist community values ideological commitment to the DNR's and LNR's brand of Russian nationalism over military professionalism, competence, and fighting effectiveness.

The Kremlin continues to fail to deliver on previous financial promises to volunteer forces, a failure that will likely have detrimental ramifications on Russia's ability to generate volunteer forces in the long-term as it seeks to professionalize and expand the army. Prominent Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian military is not delivering promised financial compensation to Russian combatants across many units and noted that the problem is particularly affecting elements of the Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS).[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) sought to establish BARS as an active reserve by recruiting volunteer reservists for three-year contract service starting in fall 2021 and offered minor financial compensation of 4,000 to 9,000 rubles (about \$54 to \$122) per month with other benefits, but this initiative failed almost immediately.[16] Milbloggers also noted that the Russian bureaucracy is making it impossible for volunteers who had joined the Russian war effort in spring–summer 2022 to obtain documents proving that they participated in combat — documents necessary to collect their promised payments. One milblogger noted that Russian officials must resolve these concerns soon or there will be "an explosion" of discontent.[17] Another milblogger noted that the Russian General Staff should be punished for the mistreatment of BARS personnel since the active reserve was the Russian General Staff's initiative.[18] The milbloggers also noted that Russian mobilized servicemen who had fought on the Svatov-Kremenna line in late September 2022 are not receiving compensation for their injuries and added that officials in military recruitment centers are understaffed and incapable addressing these issues.[19]

The Kremlin's uninterest in paying volunteer formations may kill any incentive among Russians to sign contracts with the Russian MoD during or after the war because of growing mistrust that promised financial incentives will materialize. ISW previously reported that the Russian MoD likely did not reach its recruiting targets for volunteers over summer 2022 due to pervasive underlying distrust of the Russian military to honor its promises against the backdrop of a bloody war, and that the Russian military will likely further undermine its reputation by failing to pay and recognize volunteers.[20] The widespread distrust of the Russian MoD may increasingly erode Russians' willingness to enter contract service and increase the Russian military's dependence on forced mobilization and recruitment practices. Integration of select irregular forces such as the Donetsk or Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR) may further alienate irregular volunteer formations, and ISW had been observing ongoing conflicts between irregular formations due to the Russian military command's unequal treatment.[21] ISW had also previously assessed that the Kremlin would deplete Russian state budgets at the federal and subfederal level if it delivers the promised payments and long-term benefit commitments. [22] The Kremlin's failure to create and properly support BARS formations also indicates that the Kremlin will be unlikely to establish effective volunteer reserves — during wartime or peacetime.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) promoted the Western and Eastern Military District (WMD/EMD) commanders after confirming their appointments as district commanders. Russian President Vladimir Putin promoted WMD Commander Yevgeny Nikiforov and EMD Commander Rustam Muradov to Colonel General after the Russian MoD formally named the two as military district commanders.[23] Nikiforov and Muradov have likely held these positions for at least several months without the rank of Colonel-General that is typical for military district commanders.[24] The Kremlin likely ordered the Russian MoD to formally confirm Russia's four military district commanders in part to present the Russian military as an organized institution with a clear chain of command following months of confusion about what commanders were in charge of the war in Ukraine.

Chechen Republic leader Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have rejected overtures from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to join a renewed informational campaign against the Russian MoD, suggesting that this campaign may fail to restore Prigozhin's waning influence. Kadyrov likely responded to the Russian MoD's confirmation of the four military district commanders on February 17, stating that Chechen formations will follow the orders of any commander appointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and that Chechen combat officers have an excellent well-coordinated relationship with the MoD.[25] Kadyrov's endorsement of the Russian MoD follows Prigozhin's attempt to court Kadyrov's support through a publicized visit to a wounded Akhmat Special Forces commander on February 16.[26] Prigozhin appears to be intensifying his informational campaign against the MoD, stating on February 18 that the Wagner Group is not subordinate to the MoD and "has nothing to do with the Russian Army."[27] Prigozhin's and Kadyrov's divergent attitudes towards the MoD are notable as Prigozhin used Kadyrov's criticism of Russian military officials in October 2022 to undermine the MoD and establish the Wagner Group as Russia's elite force in Ukraine.[28] Kadyrov likely refused to join Prigozhin's renewed informational attack against the MoD because his formal ties to the Kremlin and position in the Russian government are more beneficial than any political relationship with Prigozhin could be. Prigozhin is likely trying to enlist ultranationalist figures within the Kremlin and select Russian milbloggers to support his quest for authority in Russia but will likely find that those with ties to the Kremlin may turn away from him to retain their patronage.[29]

Ukrainian officials continue to question the Russian military's ability to conduct a large-scale offensive throughout Donetsk Oblast. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Defense Forces in the Tavriisk operational direction Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated on February 18 that Russian forces likely do not have the potential to conduct large-scale assaults throughout Donetsk Oblast and are beginning to lose momentum along this sector of the front.[30] Dmytrashkivskyi also stated that Russian forces are committing motorized rifle detachments to offensive operations throughout Donetsk Oblast with insufficient equipment and without armored vehicle support.[31] ISW has previously assessed that the Russian military's costly campaign in Ukraine has likely significantly depleted the necessary Russian equipment and manpower reserves for large-scale offensives in Ukraine.[32] The Russian military's likely degraded ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare tactics may be denying the Russian military any tactical advances throughout Ukraine outside of marginal gains in the Bakhmut area.[33] ISW has observed that there are likely some Russian conventional units uncommitted in the current fighting that may constitute a reserve to support the ongoing offensive, although likely not on a large scale or in a way that would likely generate significant Russian momentum. ISW will explore this topic in more detail in its special edition on February 19.

United States Vice President Kamala Harris announced on February 18 that the US had determined that Russia had committed crimes against humanity in Ukraine.[34] Harris stated during the Munich Security Conference that Russian forces "have pursued a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population" by committing murder, torture, rape, and deportation. Harris noted that Russian forces forcibly deported hundreds of thousands of people from Ukraine to Russia, including children. Harris noted that after the review of evidence there is "no doubt" that Russia committed crimes against humanity. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken added that the US reserves the determination of crimes against humanity for the "most egregious crimes." [35]

Key Takeaways

- United States Vice President Kamala Harris announced on February 18 that the US had determined that Russia had committed crimes against humanity in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted another missile strike attack targeting Ukrainian infrastructure.
- Russian news aggregators are advocating for Russia to carry out "retaliatory strikes" that would systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) to force Ukraine to conduct emergency shutdowns of its NPPs.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) reported dismissal of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) military spokesman Eduard Basurin as part of the formal reorganization of the DNR militia under the Russian MoD triggered another wave of Russian milblogger criticisms against the Russian defense establishment.
- The Kremlin continues to fail to honor its commitments to financially incentivized volunteer forces, which will likely have detrimental ramifications on Russia's ability to generate volunteer forces in the long-term.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) promoted the Western and Eastern Military District (WMD/EMD) commanders after confirming their appointments to the roles as part of an ongoing effort to present the Russian military as a well-organized fighting force.
- Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have rebuffed overtures from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to join a renewed informational campaign against the Russian MoD.
- Ukrainian officials continue to question the Russian military's ability to conduct a large-scale offensive throughout Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and in the Kremenna area.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces are continuing to reinforce defensive positions in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue to exaggerate the extent of a Ukrainian threat to Russia's border regions, attempting to convince the public of the "existential necessity" of the war in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 17, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 17, 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.

The Kremlin will likely subsume elements of Belarus' defense industrial base (DIB) as part of Moscow's larger effort to reequip the Russian military to support a protracted war against Ukraine. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on February 17 that Belarus' aerospace industry is ready to produce Su-25 ground attack aircraft for the Russian military with the support of Russian technology transfers. [1] Lukashenko also stated that the Belarusian state-run Minsk Automobile Plant began producing components to support Russian KAMAZ (a Russian heavy-duty truck producer) products and expressed willingness to help Russia produce electronic components to substitute for lost Western imports. [2] Lukashenko additionally stated that Belarus is implementing 100 percent of unspecified defense and security cooperation agreements that Belarus and Russia agreed to "three months ago." [3]

Additional Su-25s and truck parts are likely not critical material for the success of Russia's long-term war effort. The Kremlin may commandeer Belarusian factories and retool them to produce critical materiel that the Russian military needs, Lukashenko's statements notwithstanding. The Russians might also seek to repurpose Russian factories currently involved in or tooled for the production of Su-25s and trucks to produce more urgently needed materiel. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces began using Belarusian training grounds and trainers to train mobilized Russians to compensate for Russia's degraded training capacity. [4] The Kremlin appears to be similarly incorporating elements of Belarus' DIB to augment Russian defense output as Putin seeks to reinvigorate Russia's DIB to support a protracted war with Ukraine. [5]

Lukashenko confirmed that Belarus has implemented more Union State integration programs - marking progress in the Kremlin's steady pressure campaign to formalize the Russian-Belarusian Union State across decades. Lukashenko stated on February 17 that Russia and Belarus implemented 80 percent of the 28 Union State programs including programs on customs and tax – a significant achievement in the Kremlin's campaign to formalize the Union State. [6] Lukashenko has historically resisted implementing the Union State integration programs by stalling specifically on complex customs and tax harmonization issues since at least 2019.[7] Lukashenko's statement that Belarus has finally ratified Union State programs on customs and tax issues therefore marks a significant Russian gain. Lukashenko stated that the remaining unimplemented Union State programs concern humanitarian issues.[8]

Lukashenko is likely paying for his rejection of Putin's larger demand for Belarusian forces to join the invasion against Ukraine by making smaller concessions that he has stonewalled for years, as ISW assessed.[9] Lukashenko's belated concessions and continued refusal to commit Belarusian forces to the Russian invasion indicate Lukashenko's determination to keep Belarusian forces from directly participating in the Russian war.

The Kremlin's gains in Belarus underscore that Putin's imperialistic ambitions transcend Ukraine and that containing the Russian threat requires the West's sustained attention. Putin will very likely make significant gains in restoring Russian suzerainty over Belarus regardless of the outcome of his invasion of Ukraine. ISW has long assessed that the West sometimes ignores Putin's activities that appear trivial, but that seemingly trivial activities that fly under the radar are essential to Putin's strategic gains in the long run.[10] Putin's gains in Belarus indicate that he is reaping the benefits of such long-term campaigns. Russia and Belarus formed the Union State structure in 1999. The Kremlin significantly intensified its political and economic pressure campaigns to integrate Belarus through the Union State structure no later than 2019.[11] Putin and Lukashenko initially ratified the package of 28 Union State integration programs - which are now mostly implemented - in November 2021.[12] Western shortsightedness about the Kremlin's slower-developing, long-term efforts helps enable Putin's strategic advances.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the names of the commanders of Russia's four military districts, finalizing a complete turnover of the Russian military's initial command since the start of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian MoD confirmed on February 17 that it appointed Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev as Central Military District (CMD) commander and that it had previously appointed Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev as Southern Military District (SMD) commander, Lieutenant General Yevgeny Nikiforov as Western Military District (WMD) commander, and Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.[13] The Russian MoD confirmed ISW's previous reporting that Muradov, Nikiforov, and Kuzovlev were the commanders of their respective military districts.[14] Mordvichev reportedly replaced Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin as CMD commander when the Russian military appointed Lapin the Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces on January 10.[15] Lapin appears to be the only previous Russian military commander in Ukraine who retains a significant position at the MoD, as General Alexander Dvornikov, who was previously in charge of Russian forces in Ukraine, Colonel General Aleksandr Chaiko, the former Eastern Military District commander who oversaw the Russian military's failed offensive to capture Kyiv, and initial WMD commander Colonel General Aleksandr Zhuravlev appear to hold no significant positions.

The formalization of military district commanders is likely part of an effort to distance the Russian military from past failures and to prepare the Russian military for a renewed large-scale offensive in Ukraine. The formalization of military district commanders also accompanies the MoD's likely attempt to delineate clearer areas of responsibility for each military district in Ukraine. The appointment of these commanders does not represent the restoration of the pre-war MoD leadership bloc or an expansion of the ultranationalist *siloviki* faction's power, despite reported connections that Nikiforov has to Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and tenuous connections that Mordvichev may have with Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov.[16] The Kremlin likely appointed figures relatively neutral in the struggle between Wagner PMC financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin and the MoD to these positions to appease both parties while also likely setting up potential scapegoats for any future failures in Ukraine to protect recently appointed theater commander and Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, from potential criticism.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to be mounting an informational counteroffensive against the conventional Russian military establishment. Following a video posted on February 16 of Wagner Group troops stating that they have been cut off from artillery supplies Wagner fighters released another video on February 17 showing a room full of bodies of deceased Wagner fighters.[17] The fighter in the video claims that Wagner is losing hundreds of personnel a day because the Russian MoD is not providing them with the weapons, ammunition, and other supplies that they need.[18] Several Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels also amplified a #GiveShellsToWagner post that explicitly tags the Russian MoD and claims (falsely) that Wagner is the only formation currently advancing in Ukraine and that Wagner elements, therefore, need immediate support.[19] The escalation of Wagner's direct accusations against the Russian MoD represents a new informational counteroffensive by Prigozhin that seeks to continue to undermine the Russian MoD and obscure Wagner's attrition-based operational model by blaming the Russian MoD for its failures.

Prigozhin has likely launched an intensified informational campaign against the Russian MoD in response to the MoD's likely role in barring the Wagner Group from continuing its prison recruitment campaign and Prigozhin's overall declining influence.[20] Prigozhin's declining prominence and the end of the Wagner Group's prison recruitment campaign are likely constraining the Wagner Group's operational capabilities in Ukraine, and it appears that the MOD continues to sideline Wagner Group forces from decisive efforts.[21] Prigozhin appears to be courting ultranationalist figures, fellow siloviki such as Chechen Head Ramzan Kadyrov, and select Russian milbloggers to aid him in his effort to regain prominence but will likely find these figures' support to be unreliable.[22] Prigozhin became such an influential figure in the pro-war ultranationalist community by directing veiled and outright criticism at the conventional Russian establishment and by promoting the Wagner Group as an elite

force that could secure tactical gains that the regular Russian military could not.[23] Prigozhin will likely try to emulate this path to renewed prominence, but it is unclear if he will be able to do so.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin will likely subsume elements of Belarus' defense industrial base (DIB) as part of Moscow's larger effort to reequip the Russian military to support a protracted war against Ukraine.
- Lukashenko confirmed that Belarus has implemented more Union State integration programs - marking progress in the Kremlin's decades-long pressure campaign to formalize the Russian-Belarusian Union State.
- The Kremlin's gains in Belarus underscore that Putin's imperialistic ambitions transcend Ukraine and that containing the Russian threat requires the West's sustained attention.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the names of the four military district commanders, finalizing a complete turnover of the Russian military's initial command since the start of the invasion of Ukraine.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to be mounting an informational counteroffensive against the conventional Russian military establishment.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, in the Donetsk City-Avdiivka area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian military activity near Nova Kakhovka, Kherson Oblast indicates that Russian forces are likely deployed to positions close bank of the Dnipro River.
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that Russian forces have likely suffered up to 200,000 casualties since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a variety of laws on February 17 to integrate occupied territories into Russian legal, economic, and administrative structures.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 16, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick Kagan

February 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 forces conducted another missile strike on infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces fired 32 air- and sea-launched missiles at Ukraine, including 12 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from Tu-95MS aircraft over the Caspian Sea, 8 Kalibr cruise missiles from a Black Sea frigate, 12 Kh-22 cruise missiles from Tu-22M3 long-range bombers over Kursk Oblast, and 2 Kh-59 cruise missiles from Su-35 aircraft over Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] Ukrainian air defense reportedly shot down 14 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles and 2 Kh-59 cruise missiles, 6 over Mykolaiv Oblast, 2 over Kherson Oblast, and the remainder over western regions of Ukraine.[2] Russian missiles struck infrastructure targets in Lviv, Poltava, Kirovohrad, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.[3] Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces have changed their tactics and are launching cruise missiles at night, instead of in the middle of day, in order to take Ukrainian air defense forces by surprise.[4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on February 16, confirming that the Kremlin is directly involved in facilitating the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families. During an in-person working meeting with Lvova-Belova, Putin stated that the number of applications submitted by Russian citizens for the adoption of children from Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts is growing significantly.[5] Lvova-Belova noted that she herself adopted a child from Mariupol and stated that she has particularly been working with Russian families to facilitate the placement of Ukrainian children into Russian homes, highlighting the story of one Moscow Oblast family who took custody of nine children.[6] Lvova-Belova confirmed that Russian regional governors are facilitating adoption efforts and emphasized the role of Chechen Head Ramzan Kadyrov's efforts to work with her on programs for "difficult teenagers." [7] Lvova-Belova's and Putin's meeting is likely a result of Putin's January 3 list of instructions to Lvova-Belova and the occupation heads of occupied oblasts directing them to take a number of measures ostensibly to support children in occupied areas of Ukraine.[8] This meeting is additionally noteworthy because it suggests that Putin himself is overseeing and directing efforts to facilitate deportation and adoption programs, which ISW continues to assess may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[9]

Putin also ostensibly made a limited concession to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin during his meeting with Lvova-Belova. Lvova-Belova noted that some servicemembers are fighting for Russia in private military companies (PMCs) but that their families aren't receiving the same social support as families of other servicemembers.[10] Putin responded that volunteers, contract servicemen, and everyone in the Russian Armed Forces are equal and that Russian officials are

working on providing social benefits to all families, including those of PMC fighters. While Putin did not mention the Wagner Group explicitly, the allusion to PMCs suggests that Putin to some degree sees such irregular military formations as equal to conventional Russian forces. The provision of social guarantees to families of PMCs, especially Wagner, would mark an inflection from Putin's recent attempts to disenfranchise Wagner and move closer to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment, on which ISW has previously reported.[11]

Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces aim to capture Bakhmut by the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, which would require a significantly higher rate of Russian advance than anything seen for many months. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated on February 16 that Russian forces intend to capture Bakhmut by February 24 to mark the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine and plan to conduct a massive series of missile strikes to mark the date.[12] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin recently stated that he expects Wagner Group fighters to encircle Bakhmut by March or April, and Prigozhin's pragmatic assessments of Russian advances in the Bakhmut area have generally been closer to tactical realities than assessments forecasting rapid Russian advances.[13] Russian forces do not appear to be quickening their rate of advance around Bakhmut and are unlikely to meet this reported February 24 goal. Ukrainian forces could always decide that the costs associated with holding Bakhmut are too high and voluntarily withdraw from the city, although Ukrainian forces and leaders continue to indicate that they intend to hold the city. ISW previously assessed that the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut would likely prevent Putin from claiming that Russian forces secured the city on the anniversary of the invasion in an attempt to renew hope in a Russian victory in Ukraine. [14] The Kremlin may launch another series of missile strikes on civilian targets throughout Ukraine to mark the symbolic anniversary as actual military success continues to evade the Russian military.

Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of airpower in Ukraine but are unlikely to dedicate significant amounts of airpower to combat operations over Ukrainian-controlled territory. The *Financial Times* (FT), citing shared NATO-member intelligence, reported on February 14 that Russia is massing fixed-wing and rotary aircraft near the Russo-Ukrainian border and suggested that Russian fighter jets may support an offensive on the ground.[15] Russian opposition outlet *Important Stories*, citing an internal Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) source, reported on February 16 that the Russian military is changing tactics and has committed to using large amounts of airpower in Ukraine.[16] A senior NATO official reported that 80 percent of Russia's airpower remains intact and that Russian forces have been attempting to disable Ukrainian air defenses in preparation for a large strike campaign.[17] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on February 16 that Russian sortie rates have increased over the past week to levels last seen in summer 2022 but noted that Russian forces have not increased their air presence in Ukraine and assessed that Russian forces are not likely preparing for an extended air campaign.[18] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that current Ukrainian air defense capabilities are not sufficient to combat a renewed wave of air attacks but stated that there are no imminent signs of a massive Russian aerial attack.[19] *Important Stories* noted that Russian forces have not likely adequately trained enough personnel to fully crew their aircraft. [20] Russian forces would likely suffer unsustainable aircraft losses if they committed aircraft to extended combat operations like a strategic bombing campaign or close air support, especially if Western states provide Ukraine with adequate air defense capabilities.

Russia and Ukraine exchanged 202 prisoners-of-war (POWs) in a one-for-one exchange on February 16.[21] Head of the Ukrainian Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak, stated that of the 101 personnel Ukraine received, 94 were taken prisoner in Mariupol and that 63 of them were defenders of the Azovstal plant.[22] A Russian source expressed frustration that the Russian Ministry of Defense casually released Azovstal POWs while Russian authorities imposed a harsh sentence against Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko for claiming that Russian forces destroyed the Mariupol Drama Theater.[23] A court in Barnaul, Siberia sentenced Ponomarenko on February 15 under the law against the dissemination of fake information about the Russian military to six years in a strict regime penal colony.[24]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to subtly attack the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) credibility. Wagner Group artillerymen posted a video on social media on February 16 in which they claimed that Wagner Group artillery elements lack artillery ammunition and are "cut off" from ammunition supplies — implying that the Russian MoD is sabotaging Wagner Group's ammunition supply despite Prigozhin's claims that the Wagner Group is the main combat-ready force on the frontlines.[25] Prigozhin amplified this narrative when Russian media asked for his comment about the video, stating that these artillerymen are effective fighters simply asking for necessary supplies for success on the battlefield.[26] Prigozhin stated that he personally has had to appeal to "offices in Moscow" to secure resources before and that the fact that he has had to ask for ammunition does not undermine the Russian military's credibility.[27] Prigozhin's statement nonetheless promotes the larger narrative that the Russian MoD's incompetence is hamstringing Wagner Group's frontline forces and supports his larger effort to portray the Russian MoD as ineffective and corrupt.[28]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes on infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on February 16.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on February 16, confirming that the Kremlin is directly involved in facilitating the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.
- Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces aim to capture Bakhmut by the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, which would require a significantly higher rate of Russian advance than has been recently observed.
- Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of airpower in Ukraine but are unlikely to attempt dramatically increased air operations over Ukrainian-controlled territory.
- Russia and Ukraine exchanged 202 prisoners-of-war (POWs) in a one-for-one exchange.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to subtly attack the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) credibility.

- Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued reconnaissance activities along the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly continuing its prison recruitment efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continued efforts to integrate occupied areas into the Russian legal system.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated his longstanding boilerplate rhetoric that Belarusian forces will attack Ukraine if Ukraine or the West attacks Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 15, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, Layne Philipson, Kita Fitzpatrick, and Frederick Kagan

February 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's costly military campaign in Ukraine has likely significantly depleted Russian equipment and manpower reserves necessary to sustain a successful large-scale offensive in eastern Ukraine. UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told the BBC that the UK had not seen the Russian "massing of a single force to punch through in a big offensive" and noted that Russians are now trying to advance in Donbas at a "huge cost."^[1] Wallace estimated that Russia could have committed up to 97 percent of its army to the fight in Ukraine and that its combat effectiveness has decreased by 40 percent due to an "almost First World War level of attrition" that measures Russian advances in meters in human wave attacks. ISW cannot independently confirm Wallace's estimates, but his observation that Russia lacks sufficient mechanized combat power for a breakthrough aligns with previous ISW assessments that the conventional Russian military must undergo significant reconstitution before regaining the ability to conduct effective maneuver warfare.^[2] Wallace's observations also suggest that Russia does not have untapped combat-ready reserves capable of executing a large-scale offensive, which is also ISW's assessment.

Russia's inability to regenerate expended mechanized vehicles in the short term further restricts Russian maneuver warfare capabilities. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) reported that Russia lost about 50 percent of its T-72B and T-72B3M tanks and many T-80 tanks, forcing Russian forces to rely on older equipment.^[3] Wallace noted that two-thirds of Russia's tanks are destroyed or unusable. The UK Ministry of Defense assessed that the Kremlin likely recognizes that Russia's low industrial output is a "critical weakness," and that Russian production is not meeting the Kremlin's long-term requirements.^[4] Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, for example, called for increased production of weapons and modern tanks on February 9.^[5] The Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) noted that Russia is still capable of producing large quantities of small arms, missiles, and tanks but that its defense industry base (DIB) will continue to struggle to offset the effects of Western sanctions.^[6] The NIS added that Russia will also need to undergo an extensive effort to set up new production lines and will need time to recruit and train workers. Some Russian defense firms continue to complain that they do not have sufficient personnel to support the intensified industrial effort, while Russian pro-war milblogger noted that Russia needs to immediately embark on modernization and personnel recruitment efforts to solve issues with tank production.^[7] Such measures are unlikely to increase the Russian defense industry's capacity to produce tanks rapidly and at scale, and would certainly not do so in time to affect the outcome of the current Russian offensive or of a Ukrainian counter-offensive launched in the coming months. **The timely Western provisions of tanks and armored vehicles to Ukraine would further offset Russia's ability to conduct mechanized warfare as Russia struggles to restart its defense production in the immediate term.** Ukraine likely continues to have a window of opportunity to initiate large-scale counteroffensives over the next few months, but its ability to do so likely rests heavily on the speed and scale at which the West provides it the necessary materiel, particularly tanks and armored vehicles.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to announce measures for further escalation of the war in Ukraine, major new Russian mobilization initiatives, or any other significant policy in his planned address to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 21. 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 that is roughly equivalent to the US President's annual State of the Union Address. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on February 15 that Russian federal television channels will set aside an hour to broadcast Putin's address to the Federal Assembly on February 21.^[8] Putin postponed his annual address to the Federal Assembly several times in 2022 likely in hopes of eventually using this speech to celebrate sweeping Russian victories in Ukraine but was unable to do so due to the lack of such victories and amidst heightened criticism of the Kremlin's management of the war.^[9] Putin has delivered unimpressive addresses in recent months to mark symbolic anniversaries and dates and likely scheduled his postponed address to coincide with the first anniversary of Russia's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR/LNR).^[10] Putin will likely repackage Russian measures to integrate occupied territories into the Russian Federation as a novel achievement.

Russian military failures in Ukraine continue to deny Putin the ability to present military success to the Russian public. The Russian military has not achieved significant operational success in Ukraine since the capture of Severodonetsk in July 2022. Ukrainian forces have liberated almost 18,000 square kilometers of territory since then. Putin may have scheduled the address to the federal assembly in the expectation that Russian forces would secure at least a tactical success in the

Bakhmut area, although Russian forces have only gained about 500 square kilometers in the Bakhmut area in intensive campaigning since July 4, 2022, while suffering extravagant casualties. Putin could announce the start of a subsequent mobilization wave, although most indicators and assessments suggest that he will not do so at this time.[11] ISW, along with UK Defense Minister Ben Wallace, assesses that the Russian military has already committed a significant number of its available formations to intensified offensive operations in Ukraine and that the lack of large uncommitted reserves will likely prevent Putin from announcing the start of an entirely new large-scale offensive effort.[12] Putin will likely continue to deliver insignificant public addresses as the absence of Russian military success in Ukraine deprives him of the opportunity to claim or convincingly promise a victory of any significance. The stubborn Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut itself, despite the cost in Ukrainian lives and materiel, would prevent Putin from even claiming that Russia has secured that city on the war's anniversary, a claim that could give Putin, the Russian military, and the Russian public renewed hope of winning and possibly increase the Kremlin's willingness to demand more of its people to press on.

The Kremlin continues to pursue efforts to censor dissent through societal intimidation tactics. Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko proposed on February 15 that federal communication supervisor Roskomnadzor publish a list of Telegram channels that are hostile to Russia and label such channels with icons indicating this status.[13] The Kremlin is unable to force Telegram to introduce these icons and is seemingly unwilling to block Telegram, which pro-Russian milbloggers use heavily to speak to the Russian people. The list is likely meant instead to intimidate the Russian public into refraining from engaging with content that the Kremlin deems to be dangerous to Russian security. The Kremlin is likely to include independent media, Western sources, and opposition outlets on the list. The Kremlin is highly unlikely to use the measure to target milbloggers, even those critical of the Russian military or the Kremlin itself, as they continue to appeal to the ultra-nationalist pro-war community that is their audience.

A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on February 15 that Iran and Russia were creating and sharing technology on high-precision bombs, missiles for UAVs, and attack aircraft. The milblogger alleged that Russia has agreed to purchase over 100,000 Iranian artillery and mortar rounds and especially 152mm rounds. Rybar stated that Iran possesses large stocks of 122mm shells for D-30 howitzers and BM-21 Grad Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS). The milblogger suggested that Russia could employ Iranian proxies and partners in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and other unnamed countries to fight in Ukraine.[14]

Key Takeaways

- Russia's costly military campaign in Ukraine has likely significantly depleted Russian equipment and manpower reserves necessary to sustain a successful large-scale offensive in eastern Ukraine.
- Russia's inability to reconstruct spent mechanized material in the short term further restricts the Russian military's mechanized maneuver warfare capabilities.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to announce measures for further escalation of the war in Ukraine, major new Russian mobilization initiatives, or any other significant policy in his planned address to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 21.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources implied that Ukrainian forces may hold positions on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast, although ISW has not observed any confirmation of the claim.
- The Kremlin continues to fund its war efforts in Ukraine from regional budgets.
- The Russian government continues to further integrate occupied territories into Russian governance structures.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 13, 2023

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

George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick Kagan

February 14, 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.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin signaled on February 14 that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group's 54 member states will continue to support Ukraine in the long run. Austin stated that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (a coalition of 54 states supporting Ukraine's defense) will "support Ukraine's fight for freedom over the long haul" and will support Ukraine during a spring counteroffensive.[1] The *Washington Post* reported on February 13 that the Biden administration will announce a new aid package for Ukraine "in the next week." [2]

The Washington Post reported that US officials have privately signaled to Ukraine that Western security aid to Ukraine is finite, however. The *Washington Post* reported on February 13 that an anonymous US government official stated that US government officials are trying to "impress upon [Ukrainian officials] that [the US Government] can't do anything and everything forever." [3] The *Washington Post* also reported that US officials stated that recent Western aid packages for Ukraine "represent Kyiv's best chance to decisively change the course of the war." [4]

Western reporting indicates that there continue to be Western concerns about Ukraine's determination to hold Bakhmut. The *Washington Post* also reported that US defense planners assess that Ukrainian forces are unable to simultaneously defend Bakhmut and launch a spring counteroffensive and have urged Ukraine to prioritize the spring counteroffensive over defending Bakhmut.^[5] ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's decision to defend Bakhmut is likely a strategically sound effort despite its costs for Ukraine.^[6] Ukraine's defense of Bakhmut has forced the Kremlin to expend much of the Wagner Group as a force and commit high-value Russian airborne forces to sustain attritional advances.^[7] Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut has degraded significant Russian forces and will likely set favorable conditions for a future Ukrainian counteroffensive. Had Russian troops taken Bakhmut without significant Ukrainian resistance they could have hoped to expand operations in ways that could have forced Ukraine to construct hasty defensive positions in less favorable terrain. Therefore, Ukraine's defense of Bakhmut and undertaking an effort to set conditions for a counteroffensive are likely complementary, not mutually exclusive, activities considering that Russian forces would have continued their offensive beyond Bakhmut had Ukraine yielded the city earlier.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly recruiting convicts and mimicking the Wagner Group's treatment of convicts as cannon fodder. CNN reported that the Russian MoD had been directly recruiting prisoners who deployed to Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, into formations of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 2nd Army Corps in October 2022.^[8] Convicts complained to CNN about gruesome abuses and noted that they suffered heavy casualties after they were ordered to storm Ukrainian defensive positions. CNN also obtained a recording from a deceased convict who feared that the Russian MoD would execute him after he survived an assault on Soledar, though this soldier was killed in action days later anyway. These convicts specified that the Russian MoD recruited them after Wagner Group initially overlooked them, and even accused Russian forces of conducting deliberate friendly fire against the convicts.

The Russian MoD's decision to recruit prisoners is an indicator that the Kremlin seeks to exploit convicts for future human wave attacks in a similar fashion as the Wagner Group despite convicts' limited combat effectiveness. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate Andriy Usov stated that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov are creating a convict cannon fodder reserve that they could directly control through the MoD's own private military companies.^[9] Russian MoD's integration of these convict forces into the LNR formations also may suggest that Russian military commanders are attempting to avoid the restructuring of some of their conventional units to fit underprepared convicts. ISW had previously observed instances of Russian proxy armed formations receiving poor treatment from Russian conventional forces, and the Russian command may have sought to not further disturb unit morale by integrating convicts.^[10]

The Russian MoD's recruitment of prisoners in fall 2022 may also coincide with the intensifying criticism from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin began to publicly attack Russian military commanders in early October, and the Russian MoD's intervention in his recruitment scheme may have ignited some of these grievances with the conventional Russian military and MoD bureaucracy.^[11] A representative for the Russian prisoner group *Gulagu.net* also noted that many in Moscow began to fear Prigozhin and his unpredictable and ever-growing large "organized criminal group of mercenaries and killers."^[12] The Kremlin has since been distancing itself from Wagner—both rhetorically and by likely depriving Prigozhin of the ability to recruit and train convicts. The Ukrainian General Staff, for example, reported that Russian MoD began to use the Kadomovsky Training Ground in Rostov Oblast to train mobilized and volunteer personnel for a few weeks, while Wagner had not been able to train at the training ground since the beginning of 2023.^[13]

Key Takeaways

- US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin signaled on February 14 that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group's 54 member states will continue to support Ukraine in the long run. The *Washington Post* reported that US officials have privately signaled to Ukraine that Western security aid to Ukraine is finite, however.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly recruiting convicts and mimicking the Wagner Group's treatment of convicts as cannon fodder.
- Russian forces continued offensive actions in the Kupyansk direction and along the Svatove-Kremenna line on February 14.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast or in Kherson, Mykolaiv, or western Zaporizhia oblasts on February 14.
- Russian ground forces on the Kola Peninsula in northwestern Russia have been reduced to one-fifth of their initial strength numbers before the invasion of Ukraine, supporting ISW's longtime assessment that the Kremlin is not concerned about a NATO conventional military threat against Russia.
- A Ukrainian and Tatar partisan group reportedly conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a car carrying two Russian military personnel and two Russian special service representatives in Nova Kakhovka on February 10.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may meet on February 17.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 13, 2023

[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.

Moscow continues to leverage its relationship with Iran to provide military support for the war in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) intercepted audio on February 10 reportedly of two Shahed drone operators coordinating targets in what the GUR claimed was a "Kurdish dialect interspersed with Farsi words."^[1] ISW cannot identify the dialect in the audio intercept with high confidence, but the fact that the individuals in the audio clip are Shahed operators indicates that they may be operators from Iranian Kurdistan who are likely affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It is far less likely that Russia has been able to identify or import individual Kurdish militants with experience operating drones to conduct Shahed strikes on Ukraine. ISW has previously reported that IRGC-affiliated elements are likely supporting Russia's use of Shahed drones by acting as operators and trainers, and the operators in the GUR intercept are likely part of the same line of effort.^[2] UK outlet *The Guardian* relatedly reported on February 13 that Iran has smuggled at least 18 long-range drones to Russia using boats and Iranian state-owned aircraft.^[3] *The Guardian* found that these shipments include six Mohajer-6 drones and 12 Shahed-121 and 129 drones, which have air-to-ground strike capabilities and are designed to deliver a payload to the target and return to base, unlike the Shahed-131 and 136 loitering munition-type drones that Russian forces have widely used in Ukraine thus far.^[4] Russian milbloggers noted on February 13 that IRGC-affiliated Il-76 cargo aircraft routinely fly to Russia, suggesting that Tehran consistently provides Moscow with a variety of material using IRGC-affiliated planes.^[5] These data points, taken in tandem, suggest that Russia continues to rely on Iran for military and technological support in Ukraine and that some Iranian personnel are likely in Ukraine directly supporting Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, as ISW has previously reported.^[6]

The Wagner Group's continued dissemination of deliberately brutal extrajudicial execution videos and generally graphic content is normalizing an increasing level of brutality and thuggishness within the domestic Russian information space. A Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channel posted a video on February 12 showing the brutal execution of former Wagner fighter Dmitry Yakushchenko with a sledgehammer.^[7] Yakushchenko reportedly was convicted of robbery and murder in Crimea and was serving a 19-year sentence when he joined Wagner.^[8] The Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel accused Yakushchenko of defecting to Ukraine and posted a video reportedly of Yakushchenko expressing pro-Ukrainian sentiments while in Ukrainian captivity.^[9] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin later posted a video that appears to be of Yakushchenko alive and uninjured and thanking Wagner for forgiveness.^[10] Whether the videos of Yakushchenko's execution or alleged proof-of-life are real—or in what sequence they might have been recorded—are less important than the wider issue highlighted by the creation and dissemination of such videos. Several prominent milbloggers responded positively to the execution video, claiming that such vicious and inhumane killing is an appropriate way for Wagner to deal with betrayal in its ranks.^[11] The Wagner-affiliated channel that originally circulated the video claimed that being accused of brutality during a war is like getting fined for speeding during a car race, which is the same remark made by the channel following the summary execution of ex-Wagner fighter Yevgeny Nuzhin in November 2022.^[12] The continued justification and glorification of such brutal tactics is symptomatic of the wider pathology that Wagner has come to represent—one where excessive and performative violence is taken as a necessary tactic of military practice. Many military justice systems, including America's, include death penalties for various crimes, particularly in combat. Militaries fighting for healthy societies that are themselves professional and well-disciplined do not, however, conduct executions with sledgehammers nor do they glory in the vicious brutality of the capital punishments they execute. The Kremlin will likely need to balance its continued desire to use Wagner as a stop-gap measure in pursuing operations in Ukraine with the damage that the increasingly evident chaotic brutality that Wagner has come to institutionalize is inflicting on Russian society.

Russian authorities are increasingly undertaking measures to promote self-censorship in Russia under the guise of countering increased information threats resulting from the invasion of Ukraine. A representative of Russia's Main Radio Frequency Center (GRChTs), a subsidiary of Russian state media censor Roskomnazor, announced the launch of the "Okulus" automatic search system that automates scanning text, images, and video footage to detect state-censored content, extremist themes, calls for mass illegal activity, suicide, and pro-drug and pro-LGBTQ content (which Moscow apparently views as posing a national security threat). The GRChTs will reportedly fully develop Okulus by 2025.^[13] The Russian Okulus has no connection to any technology offerings of Western companies that have similar names. The GRChTs claimed that an unprecedented amount of fake information disseminated at high speed has flooded the Russian information space following the start of the invasion of Ukraine and that Okulus can analyze 200,000 images per day (an increase from the manual processing of 106 images and 101 videos per day) to address this increase in information.^[14] A Belarusian hacker group that supposedly hacked into Okulus claimed that GRChTs programmed Okulus to find personal insults directed at Russian President Vladimir Putin, including comparisons to unflattering figures.^[15] Okulus, alongside other recent Kremlin efforts to digitize Russian society while simultaneously expanding control of digital Russia, are likely efforts to scare Russians into further self-censorship. It is also unclear to what extent the Kremlin will shield critical milbloggers from such systems.

Independent Russian language opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that Roskomnazor may soon ban YouTube and that Russian state-affiliated social media outlet VK is expanding its social media monopoly to recruit famous Russian-language content creators on YouTube to its video service. VK is also attempting to expand its music streaming service, likely in an effort to eliminate Russians' interactions with unwanted content.^[16] Russian authorities also seek to expand the scope of rhetoric eligible for censorship. A United Russia State Duma Deputy announced on February 12 that he is planning to propose legislation to introduce criminal liability for insulting Russian military figures with the titles "Hero of Russia" and "Hero of the USSR."^[17] The Kremlin's collective skin appears to be thinning as the war protracts at a rate that can be measured by the number of phrases and words Russians are forbidden to say.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to publicly stand by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as Russian forces continue to suffer catastrophic casualties around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast. Putin commented on a Russian state TV show recorded on February 9 and broadcast on February 12 that Russian

"naval infantry is working as it should right now" and that the Pacific and Northern fleets are "heroically fighting."^[18] Putin likely deliberately praised his Pacific and Northern fleets against the backdrop of highly published and substantial losses to mechanized elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet in their assault on Vuhledar.^[19] The Russian MoD had been silent regarding Russian losses in Vuhledar, and Putin's comment follows Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's statement on February 7 that Russian forces are successfully developing an offensive in Vuhledar.^[20] Putin is likely deliberately doubling down on the Russian MoD's extremely overly optimistic description of the Vuhledar frontline to sustain the narrative of an imminent and sweeping major Russian offensive in Donetsk Oblast. Putin is also likely refraining from siding with critical milbloggers who had been increasingly accusing the Russian MoD and military command of failing to learn from their previous mistakes when conducting mechanized drives.^[21]

Putin's comment, however, may also signal an intent to reinforce the assault on Vuhledar with more mobilized forces or by recommitting remaining Northern Fleet elements to the area.^[22] ISW recently observed Ukrainian forces destroying Russian surface-to-air missile systems—reportedly belonging to the 80th Separate Arctic Motorized Rifle Brigade of the Northern Fleet—in occupied Kherson Oblast.^[23] Ukrainian officials have also previously reported that the Russian military had been accumulating some forces in Mariupol, just 75km southeast of Vuhledar.^[24] These indicators suggest that Russian forces, including elements of the Northern Fleet, may be preparing for commitment to Vuhledar. Putin may have been signaling his continued support for Russian forces there to offset news of significant defeats to conventional Russian units on critical sectors of the front.

The Russian military's use of mobilized personnel as replacements in battle-damaged units is unlikely to generate sufficient offensive capabilities for a large-scale and rapid mechanized advance. Representative of the Ukrainian Tavriisk operational direction, Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, stated that the Russian military will need to restaff the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade for the third time due to its losses in Vuhledar and previous military failures around Kyiv Oblast and Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast.^[25] Dmytrashkivskyi noted that the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade had 5,000 servicemen prior to its defeat in Vuhledar. A Russian serviceman from the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade who participated in an assault on Vuhledar told a Russian opposition outlet that the brigade was 80% to 90% staffed with mobilized men because the Russian military command consistently reinforces Russian units with mobilized servicemen.^[26] Russia's continued reliance on mobilized men who were unable to perform military tasks such as identifying and detecting minefields or knowing what to do having blundered into them during the assault indicates that these mobilized elements do not have the necessary combat experience necessary to stage a successful mechanized offensive. These mobilized men have likely received limited individual training and lack the unit cohesion and professional training or experience necessary for large-scale mechanized offensives. Russia may deploy additional mobilized elements that may be able to conduct sound defensive operations or attrition-based offensive operations to the Vuhledar frontline, but these mobilized soldiers are unlikely to become effective mechanized elements capable of mounting successful offensive operations in any short period of months.

Key Takeaways

- Moscow continues to leverage its relationship with Iran to provide military support for the war in Ukraine.
- The Wagner Group's continued dissemination of deliberately brutal extrajudicial execution videos and generally graphic content is normalizing an increasing level of brutality and thuggishness within the domestic Russian information space.
- Russian military command is facing challenges integrating irregular armed formations with conventional forces.
- Russian authorities are increasingly undertaking measures to promote self-censorship in Russia under the guise of countering increased information threats resulting from the invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to publicly stand by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as his naval infantry continues to suffer catastrophic casualties around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains near Bakhmut and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked Ukrainian positions in western Zaporizhia Oblast while continuing to fortify their positions in the region.
- Russian officials and regime-linked actors continue to exploit assets from captured Ukrainian cities for economic and military benefit.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 12, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

February 12, 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, February 12. This report focuses on the impact of Russian information operations on delaying and deterring Western transfers of high-end weapons systems and other military aid to Ukraine. Russia has partially reconstituted its ability to conduct

information operations as part of its hybrid warfare campaigns in support of military operations. These information operations will continue to emerge as Russia attempts to set conditions for upcoming operations and mitigate setbacks, and the West must critically evaluate the context of Russian information operations and avoid simply interacting with them on their own terms.

Russia has partially regained the ability to conduct successful information campaigns in support of strategic objectives and even discrete operational aims. Russian hybrid warfare theory has long called for the integration of information campaigns and military operations, with information operations sometimes taking precedence over kinetic activity.^[1] Russia skillfully conducted multiple information campaigns over the two decades preceding the re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most notably those that supported the Minsk II Accords in which Germany and France accepted Russia as a mediator rather than a belligerent in Ukraine.^[2] The Biden Administration conducted a remarkable and successful counter-information campaign in the months leading up to the February 2022 full-scale invasion, however, disrupting multiple Russian information campaigns intended to induce Ukrainian surrender, separate Ukraine from the West, and create favorable conditions for the re-invasion.^[3] The Biden Administration and the West have also cut off and derailed Kremlin-controlled media operations in the United States and Europe since the start of the re-invasion, causing the Kremlin to struggle to conduct successful information operations.^[4] Moscow, as a result, has been unable to achieve the objectives that its pre-re-invasion campaigns had been pursuing. **Russia has, however, reconstituted the ability to conduct discrete information campaigns in support of specific strategic objectives and to tailor those campaigns to mitigate battlefield setbacks and to set conditions for future planned operations.**

Russian information campaigns have supported a continuous strategic objective of deterring or slowing the West's provision of material support to Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin likely bought into his own pre-invasion narrative that the West would not support Ukraine but would instead seek to maintain good relations with Russia, fueling his hopes for a speedy victory in Ukraine.^[5] Putin soon realized that the war would protract due to his military's inability to achieve decisive victories and Ukraine's surprising (to him) determination to resist, and because of the West's surprising (to him) willingness to support Ukraine's resistance.^[6] Putin thereupon began to focus on feeding the arguments Western leaders were making to themselves about the dangers of providing Ukraine with too much materiel or certain kinds of materiel.^[7] These Russian information campaigns have been continuous in their pursuit of the common aim of inhibiting Western support for Ukraine regardless of battlefield conditions. The operational-level information campaigns discussed below nest into this strategic purpose, suitably adjusted for the specific battlefield circumstances of the moment.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 11, 2023

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

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

February 11, 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 military officials and Russian pro-war nationalist voices are downplaying Russia's ability to launch a sweeping large-scale offensive in Donetsk Oblast in the current circumstances of the Russian Armed Forces. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR), Andriy Chernyak, stated that Russia does not have the resources necessary to launch a large-scale offensive operation on February 24 to coincide with the anniversary of Russia's 2022 invasion.^[1] Chernyak noted that Russians are preparing to intensify their attacks in eastern Ukraine in the next few weeks and are currently searching for weak spots in Ukrainian defenses. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have regained the initiative on the Svatove-Kremenna line but that the offensive has not yet reached its full tempo.^[2] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson, Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty, also noted that the Russian leadership had ordered the capture of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts' administrative borders and said that the grinding Russian operations in Bakhmut are a "symbol" of Russia's inability to conduct rapid and powerful offensive operations."^[3]

Russian milbloggers continue to appear demoralized at the Kremlin's prospects for executing a major offensive. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander Alexander Khodakovsky questioned why Russian forces are wasting their limited resources on small-scale grinding advances rather than accumulating combat force to launch larger-scale offensives.^[4] Another milblogger amplified Khodakovsky's concern, accusing Russian presidential administration officials of creating unattainable expectations for Russian offensives.^[5]

Russian forces' reported culmination and tactical failures around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, have likely further weakened the Russian ultranationalist community's belief that Russian forces are able to launch a decisive offensive operation. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces failed to quickly advance in the first days of their offensive to capture Vuhledar and that Russian forces had lost the initiative by the end of January due to Ukrainian forces' rapid transfer of reserves to the area.^[6] The milblogger made his assessment that the Russian offensive to capture Vuhledar has likely culminated in response to viral footage showing Ukrainian forces destroying a disorderly column of Russian mechanized forces in the Vuhledar area.^[7] Russian milbloggers seized on the footage to criticize the Russian military command for repeating the same failures that have plagued the Russian military throughout the war in Ukraine, with one prominent milblogger arguing that such incidents illustrate that the Russian army is unable to conduct an offensive along the entire Donetsk front.^[8]

The disparity between the limited but significant Russian advances in the Bakhmut area and the lack of meaningful advances elsewhere in Ukraine may support milblogger and Ukrainian observations that Russian forces are unable to secure rapid advances through traditional mechanized maneuver warfare. The Russian military command is deploying its most elite units to the Bakhmut area in smaller formations using urban infiltration tactics, according to the limited footage of Russian tactics in the area that ISW has observed.[9] These tactics seem to be resulting in significant tactical Russian advances in the Bakhmut area that could lead to operational gains if Ukrainian forces choose to withdraw from Bakhmut. Russian offensive operations elsewhere in Donetsk Oblast and along the Svatove-Kremenna line have resulted in marginal advances without operational significance thus far. ISW has observed limited footage of Russian tactics in areas separate from the Bakhmut effort that suggests that Russian forces are engaging in more traditional mechanized maneuver warfare tactics with regular, not elite, motorized rifle, naval infantry, and tank elements.[10] All the formations so far observed were rendered combat-ineffective in earlier phases of the war and have very likely been reconstituted with mobilized personnel. The Russian military appears to have been unable to prepare its mobilized personnel to conduct effective mechanized offensive operations in the short period of time since their call-ups, as ISW forecasted.[11] The lack of adequate vehicles, ammunition, and other materiel is likely contributing to the ineffectiveness of Russian mechanized maneuver tactics thus far. The Russian military is unlikely to be able to scale its approach from the Bakhmut area to the wider theater because the tactics it is using in Bakhmut are more suited to dense urban environments and because Russian forces lack the number of elite formations needed to conduct a larger offensive in eastern Ukraine in the same fashion. ISW's assessment regarding the prospects for future Russian mechanized offensive operations is offered with low confidence due to the limited available footage depicting Russian military tactics across the entire front line.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is trying to salvage his declining influence in Russia as the Kremlin continues to sideline him and his mercenaries. Prigozhin attempted to improve the declining reputation of his Wagner mercenaries in an interview with a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger Semyon Pegov (known under the alias Wargonzo) on February 10. Prigozhin responded to a series of questions about Wagner controversies such as high casualties and ineffectiveness of recruited convicts, execution of deserters, treatment of recruited forces as cannon fodder, Prigozhin's harsh criticism of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and his supposed political aspirations, and Wagner mercenaries bearing "symbols of the Third Reich" despite fighting to "denazify" Ukraine. [12] Prigozhin notably confirmed that Wagner has stopped recruitment in prisons because of the expiration of an agreement permitting such recruitment with an unspecified agency – likely the Russian MoD. Prigozhin falsely denied ever criticizing the Russian conventional military and inaccurately presented his critiques as similar to the commonly expressed frustrations among Russian milbloggers regarding poor communications between the Russian military command and Russian units, as well as professionalization efforts that have been widely criticized. Prigozhin also denied having political aspirations and attacked his long-standing enemy St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov.

The Kremlin is continuing to dim Prigozhin's star by depriving him of the right to recruit in prisons and by targeting his influence in the information space. In addition to the Wargonzo interview, a Wagner-affiliated milblogger obtained a document that outlines rules for covering the war in Ukraine with explicit requirements to refrain from mentioning Wagner and Prigozhin in the media.[13] The document also calls on media officials and milbloggers to refrain from praising Deputy Commander of the Russian Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergei Surovikin, who is reportedly affiliated with Wagner.[14] The milblogger noted that he is not sure about the authenticity of the document, but the Russian MoD and the Kremlin had already been deliberately avoiding mentioning Wagner and Prigozhin as ISW has previously observed.[15]

Prigozhin likely attempted to deflect attention from his controversies by undercutting the Kremlin's unrealistic goals for the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin forecasted that it would take Russian forces up to two years to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders and three years to advance to the Dnipro River from the east. Prigozhin added that Russian society would need to be drastically militarized for the Kremlin to reach the English Channel, likely either hyperbolizing Russia's aims of destroying NATO or referring to the Cold War-era Soviet war plans aimed at conducting a rapid blitzkrieg to the Channel coast. Prigozhin likely sought to contribute to the current concern within the Russian information space about the Russian military command's ability to sustain a major offensive in Donetsk Oblast to reestablish his reputation relative to that of the Russian MoD. The Wargonzo interview itself was likely a Kremlin ambush of Prigozhin aimed at calling public attention to Wagner controversies. Prigozhin likely saw this interview as an opportunity to elevate his name but instead found himself on the defensive throughout.

Prigozhin's criticism of the Kremlin's military campaign resembles the rhetorical approach of the former Russian militant Igor Girkin. Girkin had previously assisted the Kremlin by leading proxy armed formations in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 until the Kremlin deprived him of any influence following his surrender of Slovyansk in July 2014. Girkin became an embittered critic of the Kremlin and the Russian military command while seeking to rehabilitate his reputation in extremist Russian nationalist circles. Prigozhin's uncharacteristically nihilistic forecast about Russian offensive prospects closely mirrors Girkin's forecasts, and it is possible that Prigozhin is also turning into a bitter zealot who is losing his ability to leverage his parallel military to obtain political influence.[16] If the current Russian offensive stalls rapidly, on the other hand, the star of the conventional Russian military may once again wane, possibly re-opening a path for Prigozhin to regain significance and opportunities.

Russian forces targeted southern Ukraine with air, missile, and aerial and maritime drone strikes overnight on February 10-11. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted 20 of 24 Russian UAVs and one Kh-101 missile overnight.[17] Russian forces chiefly targeted energy infrastructure in Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Dnipro, Kryryi Rih, and Khmelnytskyi cities.[18] Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces used a naval drone to strike the Zatoka road and rail bridge in Odesa Oblast (28km south of Odesa City on the Black Sea coast), the first observed instance of Russian forces operating unmanned naval drones.[19] The footage suggests that the bridge may have sustained severe damage, but the true degree of damage is currently unknown. Russian forces also conducted airstrikes against

Snake Island, and Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk suggested that Russian forces conducted these strikes to demonstrate that Russian forces have not forgotten about offensive actions in southern Ukraine.[20] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces currently lack the ability to threaten southern Ukraine with a full-scale offensive. The Ukrainian Operational Command South stated that Russian forces are trying to incite panic in the areas bordering Moldova.[21]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian military officials and Russian pro-war nationalist voices are downplaying Russia's ability to launch a sweeping large-scale offensive in Donetsk Oblast in the current circumstances of the Russian Armed Forces.
- Russian forces' reported culmination and tactical failures around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, have likely further weakened the Russian ultranationalist community's belief that Russian forces are able to launch a decisive military effort.
- The disparity between the limited but significant Russian advances in the Bakhmut area and the lack of meaningful advances elsewhere in Ukraine may support milblogger and Ukrainian observations that Russian forces are unable to secure rapid advances through traditional mechanized maneuver warfare.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is trying to salvage his declining influence in Russia as the Kremlin continues to sideline him and his mercenaries.
- Russian forces targeted southern Ukraine with air, missile, and aerial and maritime drone strikes overnight on February 10-11.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continue to prioritize offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely draining the Kakhovka Reservoir north of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed that the Wagner Group stopped recruiting inside Russian prisons due to the expiration of an agreement between the Wagner Group and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 10, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Wolkov, and Mason Clark

February 10, 5pm 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 launched another massive series of missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on February 10. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched over 100 missiles against critical and civil infrastructure throughout Ukraine including S-300 surface-to-air missiles in ground attack mode and air and sea-based Kh-101/Kh-55 and Kalibr-28 cruise missiles.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces also launched seven Shahed-type drones and that Ukrainian air defense intercepted 61 of the cruise missiles.[2] Ukrainian Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces struck Kharkiv Oblast with S-300 missiles from the direction of Belgorod Oblast and Tokmak, Zaporizhia Oblast.[3] Russian milbloggers widely lauded the wave of strikes and claimed they hit energy infrastructure in Kyiv, Khmelnytskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, Pavlohrad, Vinnytsia, Zaporizhia, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Poltava, Zhytomyr, Kirovohrad, and Kharkiv oblasts. [4] Russian claims of the scale and effectiveness of the strikes are overblown in comparison to official Ukrainian statements, and Russian forces continue to expend already limited stocks of precision munitions on such strikes.

Russian missile overflights of NATO territory are highly unlikely to prompt an escalation, and ISW continues to assess with high confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin is unwilling to risk a direct conflict with NATO. Russian forces fired two cruise missiles from the Black Sea that reportedly crossed Romanian and Moldovan airspace before entering Ukrainian airspace.[5] Russia's ongoing campaign of missile strikes in support of its illegal invasion of Ukraine will continue to generate peripheral risks outside of Ukraine, such as these overflights or the risk of air defense incidents (as in Poland on November 15, 2022). However, ISW assesses that NATO (and individual member states) are in full control over its responses and the degree to which it chooses to escalate in response to accidental or intentional Russian overflights or other provocations. ISW also continues to assess with high confidence that Putin does not seek a war with NATO and is unlikely to directly risk an escalation.

Recent footage of a failed Russian assault near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast has become the latest point of neuralgia in the Russian information space. Milbloggers latched onto the footage to launch several critiques of Russian military leadership.[6] Russian milbloggers claimed that the same Russian commanders who oversaw highly attritional assaults by the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade on Pavlivka (near Vuhledar) in November 2022 are responsible for the effort to capture Vuhledar, and argued that the video illustrates that these commanders continue to make the same costly mistakes.[7] One Russian milblogger specifically stated that Eastern Grouping of Forces commander Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov is responsible for Russian tactical failures around Vuhledar.[8] Another Russian milblogger called for public trials to punish high-ranking officers who repeatedly fail on the battlefield and argued that Russian forces will continue to repeat the

same mistakes if these commanders remain in their positions.[9] Footage shows these Russian forces engaging in highly dysfunctional tactics that are far more indicative of the fact that the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade is likely comprised of poorly trained mobilized personnel than of poor command.[10] Russian milbloggers likely blamed Russian commanders to downplay the fact that the systemic poor training of Russian mobilized personnel will likely continue to result in similar tactical failures throughout Ukraine. Russian milbloggers have routinely accused Russian commanders of being responsible for tactical failures throughout the war, likely to shift the overall Russian military failure in Ukraine from the Russian military as an institution onto individuals.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched another massive series of missile and drone strikes across Ukraine.
- Russian missile overflights of NATO territory are highly unlikely to prompt an escalation, and ISW continues to assess with high confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin is unwilling to risk a direct conflict with NATO.
- Recent footage of a failed Russian assault near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast has become the next point of neuralgia in the Russian information space and demonstrated the systemic poor training of Russian mobilized personnel.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and around Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas as well as in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces reportedly conducted a limited ground attack in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian authorities are likely placing restrictions on movement in and out of Russia to support crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities are intensifying measures to integrate children in occupied territories using government-funded civic organizations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 9, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 9, 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.](#)

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on February 9 that the Wagner Group has entirely stopped recruiting prisoners. In a response to a press comment, Prigozhin claimed that Wagner's recruitment of prisoners has "completely stopped" and that "all obligations are being fulfilled" for those currently under Wagner's employ.[1] Prigozhin also absurdly claimed that over 10 million Americans have applied to join Wagner.[2] The Wagner Group will likely continue to recruit from prisons, albeit in a much more limited capacity. As ISW has previously noted, Wagner's recruitment of prisoners has slowed over the last few months, an assessment confirmed by statistics by the Federal Penitentiary Service that show that decreases in the Russian prison population stabilized between November 2022 and January 2023.[3] This phenomenon is consistent with the overall trend of conventional Russian troops slowly replacing the Wagner Group around Bakhmut, indicating that Russian military command may be shifting away from its reliance on Wagner and therefore on using prisoners as cannon fodder.

The Kremlin continues to pursue measures to gradually prepare Russia's defense-industrial base for a protracted war in Ukraine while avoiding wider economic mobilization. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with the Supervisory Board of the Agency for Strategic Initiatives on February 9 and instructed the agency to support federal subjects in developing the production of unmanned aircraft systems.[4] Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev previously stated that Russian military manufacturers intend to expand the supply of reconnaissance and attack drones to support operations in Ukraine, and Russian and Iranian officials are reportedly planning to build a factory in Russia to manufacture 6,000 drones "in the coming years."<[5]

Medvedev visited a tank manufacturing plant in Omsk Oblast on February 9 and stated that Russia needs to increase the production of various armaments, including modern tanks, in response to Western military assistance to Ukraine.[6] Dutch open-source group Oryx reported that Russian forces have lost 1,012 destroyed tanks in Ukraine with an additional 546 tanks captured by Ukrainian forces.[7] Oryx reported that these combined losses represent roughly half the tanks that Russian forces committed to Ukraine at the start of the invasion.[8] Fifteen hundred tanks are enough to equip more than 15 tank regiments or brigades or about 150 battalion tactical groups.[9] The Russian military needs to quickly replenish these tank losses to maintain the ability to conduct large-scale mechanized maneuver warfare ahead of a likely increased pace of offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. Medvedev likely framed his calls for increased production as a response to Western military assistance to obscure the fact that substantial military equipment losses are driving the need for increased production. The Kremlin's efforts to gradually prepare Russia's defense industrial base for a protracted war while avoiding a wider mobilization of the Russian economy continue to be incompatible with the scale of the war that the Russian military is fighting in Ukraine and the scale of Russian military equipment losses.

A prominent Wagner-linked Russian milblogger called for the dismissal of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu over a Russian military uniform procurement scandal. Many prominent Russian military bloggers harshly criticized Shoigu and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) over news that the 22-year-old son of the Russian Deputy Head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management won a contract to supply the Russian military with new uniforms.[10] The milbloggers argued that the new uniforms are of inferior quality and overpriced (costing about 130,000-210,000 rubles or \$1,780 - \$2,875 per uniform) and are part of a petty corruption scheme to enrich the families of Russian defense officials. The Grey Zone Telegram channel—a prominent Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger – wrote an explicative-laden rant to its 426,000 subscribers that Shoigu has lost credibility in front of the Russian nation and that Russian President Vladimir Putin can amend the situation by firing Shoigu, Shoigu's "entourage" in the Russian General Staff and banning Shoigu and his associates from all Russian military affairs.[11] This is the

latest episode in a string of events that has prompted Russian military blogger communities to attack the Russian MoD and senior Kremlin officials for petty corruption and ineptitude resulting in battlefield failures and worse quality of life for average Russian soldiers.[12]

The Kremlin continues to show that it is unwilling to curb divisive rhetoric from ultranationalist pro-war figures. Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov publicly sparred with Duma Deputy General Viktor Sobolev following Sobolev's criticism of Kadyrov's statements on grooming standards in the Russian military being discriminatory against Muslims and calls for the Russian military to fight satanism in Poland.[13] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on February 9 that the Kremlin is "not participating in this controversy and would not like to give any assessments" about it.[14] The Kremlin will continue to tolerate divisive rhetoric from ultranationalist figures as it seeks to appeal to the wider pro-war community.

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Wagner Group has entirely stopped recruiting prisoners.
- The Kremlin continues to pursue measures to gradually prepare Russia's defense industrial base for a protracted war in Ukraine.
- A prominent Wagner-linked Russian milblogger called for the dismissal of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu over a Russian military uniform procurement scandal.
- The Kremlin continues to illustrate that it is unwilling to curb divisive rhetoric from ultranationalist pro-war figures.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast and the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and continued offensive operations around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that the Russian military integrated a Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) volunteer formation into the Russian Armed Forces.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian authorities detained a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempting to assassinate Russian occupation officials.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 8, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Wolkov, and Mason Clark

February 8, 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 have regained the initiative in Ukraine and have begun their next major offensive in Luhansk Oblast. The pace of Russian operations along the Svatove-Kremminna line in western Luhansk Oblast has increased markedly over the past week, and Russian sources are widely reporting that conventional Russian troops are attacking Ukrainian defensive lines and making marginal advances along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border, particularly northwest of Svatove near Kupyansk and west of Kremminna.[1] Geolocated combat footage has confirmed Russian gains in the Dvorichne area northwest of Svatove.[2] Russian military command additionally appears to have fully committed elements of several conventional divisions to decisive offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremminna line, as ISW previously reported.[3] Elements of several regiments of the 144th and 3rd Motor Rifle Division (20th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) and a regiment of the 90th Tank Division (Central Military District), supported by elements of the 76th Airborne Division and unspecified Southern Military District elements, are conducting offensive operations along the entire Svatove-Kremminna line and are reportedly advancing against Ukrainian defenses.[4]

The commitment of significant elements of at least three major Russian divisions to offensive operations in this sector indicates the Russian offensive has begun, even if Ukrainian forces are so far preventing Russian forces from securing significant gains. The Russian offensive likely has not yet reached its full tempo; Russian command has not yet committed elements of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division (1st Guards Tank Army, Western Military District), which deployed to Luhansk Oblast in January after deploying to Belarus.[5] Russian forces are gradually beginning an offensive, but its success is not inherent or predetermined. While Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast now have the initiative (in that Russian forces are setting the terms of battle, ending the period of Ukrainian initiative from August 2022), the full commitment of these forces could lead to their eventual culmination along the Svatove-Kremminna line without achieving their objectives of capturing all of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. That culmination would likely provide a window of opportunity for Ukrainian forces to exploit with their own counteroffensive.[6]

Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia command reportedly assumed control over a Russian artillery battalion, likely in support of an effort to strengthen degraded DNR forces ahead of an imminent Russian offensive. A Russian source published a video appeal from mobilized personnel of the 640th howitzer battalion from Saratov Oblast on February 8 in which they stated that Russian military officials sent them to join DNR units and that DNR commanders are now trying to transfer them to infantry assault units.[7] ISW has not previously observed Russian personnel subordinated to a DNR formation and this claim, if true, would suggest that Russian forces may be reinforcing degraded DNR formations with mobilized personnel from Russia itself because DNR formations are unable to

replenish losses themselves. The reported subordination of Russian military personnel to DNR formations may portend a Russian effort to prepare DNR formations for an expanded role in their zone of responsibility along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and the transfer of remaining conventional Russian forces from this area to the Bakhmut area and Luhansk Oblast, where Russian forces are conducting an increased pace of offensive operations.

The reported subordination of Russian mobilized personnel to DNR formations could also suggest that Russian military command may be continuing efforts to integrate ad hoc DNR and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) formations into the Russian Armed Forces, but will likely face significant difficulties. The Russian Southern Military District formally controls the armed forces of the DNR and LNR through the 1st and 2nd Army Corps, respectively. However, many DNR and LNR formations remain ad hoc units and are not fully integrated into Russian MoD structures. ISW previously assessed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to be rushing to integrate irregular conventional forces into a more traditional structure and may be creating new formations from DNR/LNR units in support of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's proposals to create new maneuver divisions.[8] Russian forces would likely need to temporarily remove these irregular forces from frontline positions to integrate them into new Russian formations, a prospect that would not be operationally sound ahead of increased Russian offensive operations in Ukraine. Russian officials therefore may be attempting to gradually integrate these irregular formations through subordinating mobilized personnel under them without disrupting the command structures and existing personnel operating at front line positions. The mobilized personnel of the 640th howitzer battalion claimed that DNR command is retraining assault units for artillery purposes yet still committing their artillery battalion to infantry roles, indicating a breakdown in command and the proper utilization of personnel among DNR formations.[9] The Russian MoD will likely struggle to correct the poor effectiveness of DNR/LNR forces through the rapid integration of Russian personnel.

Russian officials continue to propose measures to prepare Russia's military industry for a protracted war in Ukraine while also likely setting further conditions for sanctions evasion. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin stated on February 8 that the Russian government will subsidize investment projects for the modernization of enterprises operating in the interests of the Russian military and will allocate significant funds for manufacturing new military equipment. [10] Mishustin also stated that the Russian government would extend benefits to Russian entrepreneurs who support the Russian military, including extended payment periods on rented federal property.[11] The Kremlin likely intends these measures to augment its overarching effort to gradually prepare Russia's military industry for a protracted war in Ukraine while avoiding a wider economic mobilization that would create further domestic economic disruptions and corresponding discontent.[12]

Russian officials also likely proposed these measures in coordination with a recent decree excluding Russian officials from requirements to list income declarations and proposals to repeal federal procurement procedures. The Kremlin may be creating a system of subsidies and benefits designed to have little oversight or accounting. This lack of oversight and accounting would likely allow Russian firms to better evade international sanctions regimes targeting Russia's military industry.[13] The United Kingdom announced a new list of sanctioned entities on February 8 focused on Russia's military industry.[14] ISW previously reported that 82% of Iranian-made drones downed in Ukraine had chips, semiconductors, and other components from the United States, suggesting that Russia and Iran are likely exploiting loopholes to transfer Western-produced arms components to Russia via proxy actors.[15] The Kremlin's effort to prepare the Russian military industry for a protracted war in Ukraine in part relies on the ability of Russian military industry to have consistent access to multiple secure supply chains of key foreign components that it otherwise cannot produce.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have regained the initiative in Ukraine and have begun their next major offensive in Luhansk Oblast.
- The commitment of significant elements of at least three major Russian divisions to offensive operations in this sector indicates the Russian offensive has begun, even if Ukrainian forces are so far preventing Russian forces from securing significant gains.
- Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia command reportedly assumed control over a Russian artillery battalion, likely in support of an effort to strengthen degraded DNR forces ahead of an imminent Russian offensive.
- The reported subordination of Russian mobilized personnel to DNR formations could also suggest that Russian military command may be continuing efforts to integrate ad hoc DNR and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) formations into the Russian Armed Forces, but will likely face significant difficulties.
- Russian officials continue to propose measures to prepare Russia's military industry for a protracted war in Ukraine while also likely setting further conditions for sanctions evasion.
- Russian forces continued offensive actions northwest of Svatove and intensified offensive operations near Kreminna.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continue small-scale skirmishes and reconnaissance activity in the Dnipro River delta and on the Kinburn Spit.
- The Wagner Group is reportedly resorting to more coercive tactics in its prison recruitment campaign, possibly in response to the campaign's declining effectiveness.

February 7, 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 Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a press conference on the status of the war on February 7, likely in an attempt to posture the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as an effective and involved leadership apparatus as the Russian military prepares for a renewed major offensive in Ukraine. Shoigu claimed that Russian forces are successfully developing operations near Bakhmut and Vuhledar and claimed that Russian troops have recently taken control of Soledar, Klishchiivka, Pidhorodne, Krasnopolivka, Blahodatne, and Mykolaivka in the Bakhmut area and Lopkove in Zaporizhia Oblast.^[1] Shoigu likely held this press conference in order to create the guise of formality and legitimacy for the Russian MoD as it continues efforts to reform the Russian military, prepare for a renewed offensive, and set conditions for prolonged operations in Ukraine. ISW has previously noted that Russian officials are preparing for an imminent Russian offensive in Ukraine in the coming months, and that these preparations are also happening on the strategic level with Russian command structures.^[2]

Russian military command may be rushing to launch a large-scale offensive operation to conquer Donetsk Oblast in an unrealistic timeframe and likely without sufficient combat power. The UK MoD assessed on February 7 that Russia has highly likely been attempting to launch a major offensive operation to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders since early January 2023 but had only been able to gain several hundred meters of territory per week.^[3] The UK MoD attributed such a slow pace to Russian munitions shortages and a lack of maneuver units that are necessary for a successful and rapid offensive. The UK MoD noted that Russia is unlikely to build up the combat power necessary to substantially affect the outcome of the war while Russian military command continues to demand for unrealistic and sweeping advances. ISW similarly assessed on January 28 that Russian leadership may be once again planning a decisive offensive based on erroneous assumptions about Russian military capabilities and likely lacks the combat power necessary to sustain more than one major offensive operation.^[4] ISW also observed the Kremlin signaling preparations for an early 2023 offensive in December but assessed that the time and space relationship may hinder Russian rapid and large-scale advance aspirations as Ukraine heads into a muddy spring season unsuitable for maneuver warfare.^[5]

The Russian nationalist information space is continuing to express worry over Russia's inability to sustain a rapid and multi-pronged decisive offensive operation on a deadline. One prominent milblogger warned that Russian forces should not fall into the trap of attempting to start numerous offensive operations like they did in spring 2022 but instead focus on gradual advances that would generate high casualties among Ukrainian forces. The milblogger added that Russian military command should prioritize tiring Ukrainian forces and disrupting their logistics rather than conducting a frontal assault. Another milblogger stated that Russia still needs to create a breakthrough force and reject its current tactic of launching small, localized offensives that waste Russian combat on "capturing fields."^[6] ISW previously assessed that Russian efforts to conduct spoiling attacks and to fix Ukrainian forces further undermine the sustainability of a major offensive.

Russian state energy company Gazprom may be creating its own private security force, likely in an effort to normalize state-affiliated paramilitary groups and undermine private military companies (PMCs). The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on February 7 that Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin privately authorized Gazprom subsidiary Gazprom Nafta to establish a 70 percent stake in its own private security company under a law on the safety of fuel and energy complex assets.^[7] While it is not inherently unusual for state and private energy companies to establish private security forces to protect their assets, the GUR noted that the creation of this PMC aligns with ongoing tensions between the Kremlin and Wagner Group PMC financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Russia may use these Gazprom security forces for purposes other than protecting Russian energy assets.

The Kremlin may be considering implementing some demands previously voiced by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to build rapport with other nationalist figures who advocated for similar policies. Head of the Russian State Duma Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Vasily Piskarev is reportedly preparing amendments to the Russian Criminal Code to include provisions against discreditation of individuals who participated in combat operations and volunteer detachments that assist the Russian Armed Forces during the war in Ukraine.^[8] Russian state media credited Prigozhin as the initiator of the amendment, and the provision will likely include Wagner mercenaries whom the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) repeatedly labeled as "volunteers."^[9] The largest Russia media holding company, Gazprom Media, is reportedly planning to ban its media outlets (which include Russian federal TV channels) from publishing content on YouTube.^[10] Russian outlets also speculated that Gazprom Media's bans may be connected to efforts to block YouTube in Russia — another initiative that Prigozhin advocated for since late 2022.^[11] Both provisions, if authorized, do not legalize Wagner or elevate Prigozhin's coveted political authority in Russia. However, those provisions appeal to the broader nationalist and milblogger communities who had been calling for stricter limitations on Western media in Russia and for the Kremlin's recognition of volunteers — which include proxy armed formations, volunteer battalions, and the Russian Combat Reserve (BARS).

The Russian State Duma further formalized the institution of social benefit schemes in occupied territories of Ukraine in order to further consolidate administrative control of occupied areas. State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin stated on February 7 that the Duma adopted the first reading of four bills on the legislative integration of social rights of the residents of occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.^[12] The bills define the minimum level of

income, pension payments, sick leave, pregnancy and childcare benefits, and social support for veterans and the disabled and notably allows residents to submit documents to apply for social benefits in Ukrainian without a notarized translation into Russia.[13] The Duma bills represent the highest level of legislative integration of social benefit schemes thus far, having previously been defined and advertised in local forms by individual occupation officials. ISW continues to assess that such social benefit measures are a method of consolidating administrative control of occupied areas, as residents of occupied areas are forced to interact with Russian-controlled administrative organs to receive necessary payments.[14] The Duma bills codify and formalize these practices are part of the Russian legislative code.

Key Takeaways

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu is likely attempting to posture the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as an effective and involved leadership apparatus as the Russian military prepares for a renewed major offensive in Ukraine.
- Russian military command may be rushing to launch a large-scale offensive operation to conquer Donetsk Oblast in an unrealistic timeframe and likely without sufficient combat power.
- The Russian nationalist information space is continuing to express worry over Russia's inability to sustain a rapid and multi-pronged decisive offensive operation on a deadline.
- Russian state energy company Gazprom may be creating its own private security force, likely in an effort to normalize state-affiliated paramilitary groups and undermine non-state private military companies (PMCs).
- The Kremlin may be implementing some demands previously voiced by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to build rapport with other nationalist figures who advocated for similar policies.
- The Russian State Duma further formalized the institution of social benefit schemes in occupied territories of Ukraine in order to further consolidate administrative control of occupied areas.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces did not make confirmed territorial gains on the southern axis.
- Russian officials appear to be investing in railway infrastructure to increase the efficiency of military logistics.
- The Russian MoD is reportedly proposing a bill to allow all military personnel, including conscripts, to voluntarily participate in Russian peacekeeping missions.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 6, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 6, 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.

Ukrainian officials assess that Russian forces are preparing to launch a large-scale decisive offensive in eastern Ukraine in mid-to-late February. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov stated on February 5 that the Ukrainian military is expecting Russia to start its decisive offensive around February 24 to symbolically tie the attack to the first anniversary of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[1] Reznikov also clarified that the Ukrainian military has not observed the formation of Russian offensive groups in the Kharkiv and Chernihiv directions or Belarus; Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Nataliya Humenyuk noted that Russian forces are likely concentrating on launching offensive operations in the east rather than in southern Ukraine.[2] An unnamed advisor to the Ukrainian military told *Financial Times* that Russia intends to launch an offensive in the next 10 days (by February 15), a timeline that would allow Russian forces to strike Ukrainian positions before the arrival of Western tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.[3] Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are continuing to deploy reserves to Luhansk Oblast to strike after February 15.[4]

Select Russian nationalist voices continued to express skepticism towards Russia's ability to launch a successful offensive past late February. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger noted that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov (who currently commands Russian forces in Ukraine) has a limited time window to launch a large-scale offensive operation in Ukraine before it is entirely impossible to execute.[5] Another ultra-nationalist voice, former Russian officer Igor Girkin, forecasted that the Russian decisive offensive will not be successful until Russia mobilizes more manpower, industry, and economy.[6] Girkin claimed that an attack without such mobilization would shortly culminate. Both observations highlight that the Russian military command appears to be in a rush to launch the decisive offensive, likely ahead of the arrival of Western military aid and the muddy spring season in Ukraine around April that hindered Russian mechanized maneuvers in spring 2022.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz undermined Russian President Vladimir Putin's false narrative that the provision of German tanks to Ukraine threatens Russian security. Putin stated on February 2 that German tanks are again threatening Russia, drawing a false parallel with World War II.[7] Scholz stated that Putin's

remarks are "a part of a series of abstruse historical comparisons that he uses to justify his attack on Ukraine."^[8] Scholz added that the West and Ukraine have a "consensus" that Ukrainian forces will only use Western-provided weapons to liberate its territories from Russian occupation. Germany's provision of Leopard tanks does not differ from Western military provisions of Soviet tanks and kit to Ukraine throughout the war, and Putin's February 2 reaction is likely a continuation of Russian information operation to discourage Western military aid to Ukraine ahead of Russia's decisive offensive. Kremlin information agents are amplifying similar rhetoric that Ukrainian forces will use Ground Launched Small Diameter Bombs (GLSDM) - which increase the range of HIMARS to 151km from roughly 80km – to target Russian territory alongside occupied Ukrainian territories.^[9] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov confirmed on February 5 that Ukraine agreed to not use Western long-range weapons to strike Russian territories, however.^[10]

Kremlin-appointed Russian and occupation officials continue to implement social benefit schemes that target children and teenagers in occupied areas of Ukraine to consolidate social control and integration of these territories into Russia. Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova (appointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin) met with a slate of Russian occupation officials on February 6 to discuss various issues relating to children and youth in occupied regions of Ukraine. In a meeting with occupation head of Crimea Sergey Aksyonov, Lvova-Belova noted that the Crimean occupation government has been instrumental in "accepting" children from Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.^[11] Lvova-Belova also reported that the "Day After Tomorrow" organization will begin conducting "rehabilitation" tours in Crimea to work with children who need special psychological assistance.^[12] ISW has previously reported on numerous instances of Russian occupation officials using the guise of psychiatric and medical rehabilitation to remove Ukrainian children further into Russian-controlled territory within Ukraine or deport them to Russia.^[13] Sevastopol occupation head Mikhail Razvozhaev similarly announced that he met with Lvova Belova on February 6 to discuss "new formats of social work" on behalf of Putin and remarked that most of the children who require social support are not orphans.^[14] Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik stated that Lvova-Belova proposed that children whose personal data is in the regional data bank will be "able to find a family in other regions of the Russian Federation."^[15] Pasechnik also reported that LNR authorities are working with Novosibirsk Oblast and Khanty-Mansi Okrug to secure "methodological assistance" in resolving issues regarding children in occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[16] Lvova-Belova additionally met with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin to develop programs "for the socialization of adolescents" and with Zaporizhia occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky to discuss social institutions for children in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.^[17]

Lvova-Belova is likely working directly on Putin's orders to institute several social institutions and programs in occupied areas of Ukraine to collect personal data on children, carry out various social programming functions aimed at integrating occupied areas using pseudo-humanitarian organizations, and set conditions to legitimize and institutionalize the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families. Putin signed a list of instructions on January 3 that directed Lvova-Belova and directed the occupation heads of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts to "take additional measures to identify minors...left without parental care" in occupied areas to provide them with "state social assistance" and "social support."^[18] Lvova-Belova's February 6 meetings with occupation heads are likely the manifestation of Putin's list of instructions and represent an escalation in efforts by Kremlin-appointed officials to consolidate social integration of occupied territories by targeting children.^[19] The implementation of "rehabilitation centers" and the tabulation of children's personal data through these social programs will likely enable Russian occupation officials to facilitate the forced deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children to Russian families. Occupation officials continue to execute social control measures in occupied areas according to directives provided by Putin's list of instructions. ISW continues to observe that efforts to deport and forcibly adopt Ukrainian children may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.^[20]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to open the door for further institutionalized corruption in Russia through legislative manipulations. Putin signed a decree on February 6 allowing Russian deputies and senators to not publish their incomes in the public domain.^[21] The law will allow deputies and senators to publish their incomes in an anonymized form that does not contain their personal data. The law will also apply to regional and municipal deputies.^[22] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the new law will not affect anti-corruption measures and stated that "the conditions of the [special military operation] bring their own specifics."^[23] Putin previously approved a decree on December 29, 2022, that exempted all Russian officials, including members of the military and law enforcement, from making public income declarations.^[24] These two decrees are likely efforts by the Kremlin to appease the political actors who comprise Putin's domestic support base and will likely continue to contribute to the institutionalization of corruption in Russia.

The Kremlin continues to deny Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin legitimacy and authority in Russia. A Moscow court refused to recognize Prigozhin as the owner and founder of Wagner private military company (PMC) after revisiting Prigozhin's lawsuit against Russian journalist Alexei Venediktov on February 6.^[25] Prigozhin sued Venediktov in June 2021 for accusing him of being the "owner of Wagner," and the Moscow court concluded that information about Prigozhin's ownership of Wagner was "unreliable."^[26] Prigozhin attempted to reverse the court's decision on January 19, claiming that Venediktov did not lie about Prigozhin's ownership of Wagner—likely in an ongoing effort to overcompensate for his declining influence following the replacement of war-torn Wagner forces around Bakhmut with Russian conventional units.^[27] ISW previously assessed that the Russian military's decreasing reliance on Wagner forces around Bakhmut is likely reducing Prigozhin's influence within the Kremlin inner circle.^[28]

Prigozhin's appeal in the Russian nationalist information space may also be declining as he continues to overcompensate for the culmination of Wagner's attack around Bakhmut. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger commented on a video showing Prigozhin piloting an Su-24M bomber aircraft supposedly over Bakhmut on February 6.^[29] The milblogger stated that Prigozhin became the main player in Russian information space rather than the traditional Russian military command which "lacked creativity."^[30] Prigozhin also "declared" the US, UK, and Canadian governments to be illegitimate states that sponsor terrorism according to the "Wagner Charter."^[31] The milblogger stated that Prigozhin's manipulation of the information space - specifically his skill in trolling - had allowed him to gain more

political influence than a Russian Defense Minister.[32] ISW assessed on October 25 that Prigozhin weaponized the Russian information space and Russian President Vladimir Putin's reliance on his forces to gain political leverage in Russia.[33] The milblogger's acknowledgment of Prigozhin's flashy tactics may indicate that the non-Wagner-affiliated nationalist information space may be awakening to Prigozhin's efforts to use the war in Ukraine for personal benefit. Wagner-affiliated milbloggers, in turn, continued to celebrate Prigozhin and previous theater commander Army General Sergey Surovikin as the only two leaders who have "confirmed their high qualifications and enjoy the trust of the political leadership of the country and the people."[34]

Failures of Western sanctions efforts against the provision of arms components to Iran have likely contributed to Russia's ability to bypass Western sanctions to acquire components for combat drones through military cooperation with Iran. US officials stated on February 5 that Russia and Iran are moving ahead with plans to build an Iranian drone factory on Russian soil, the second such international Iranian drone factory.[35] Iran opened a drone production factory in Tajikistan - a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member state and Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) candidate - in May 2022.[36] Russia may leverage its significant economic ties to Tajikistan through the CSTO and EEAU to launder drone components or procure manufactured drones for use in Ukraine to bypass international sanctions.[37]

UK investigative group Conflict Armament Research (CAR) reported in November 2022 that 82% of Iranian Shahed-131, Shahed 136, and Mohajer-6 drones downed in Ukraine had chips, semiconductors, and other components that came from the US despite high import and export control restrictions on such components to Iran. [38] CAR also noted that the downed drones contained higher-end technological capabilities and have a "significant jump in capabilities" compared to other systems previously observed in the Middle East.[39] Most Western-manufactured components in the downed Iranian drones were produced between 2020 and 2021, following the expiration of United Nations Security Council heavy arms sanctions against Iran in 2020.[40] Most Western companies whose components were found in downed Iranian drones in Ukraine denied directly selling components to Russia, Iran, or Belarus since the start of the war.[41] However, the representative of a Swiss manufacturing company noted that it is impossible to be completely sure that distributors of arms components do not sell components to sanctioned entities, implying that Russia, Iran, or other sanctioned states can exploit loopholes allowing them to acquire Western-produced arms components via proxy actors.[42]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials assess that Russian forces are preparing to launch a large-scale decisive offensive in eastern Ukraine in mid to late February.
Ukrainian officials assess that Russian forces are preparing to launch a large-scale decisive offensive in eastern Ukraine in mid-to-late February.
- Select Russian nationalist voices continued to express skepticism toward Russia's ability to launch a successful offensive past late February.
- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz undermined Russian President Vladimir Putin's false narrative that the provision of German tanks to Ukraine threatens Russian security.
- Kremlin-appointed Russian and occupation officials continue to implement social benefit schemes that target children and teenagers in occupied areas of Ukraine to consolidate social control and integration of these territories into Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to open the door for further institutionalized corruption in Russia through legislative manipulations.
- The Kremlin continues to deny Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin legitimacy and authority in Russia.
- Prigozhin's appeal in the Russian nationalist information space may also be declining as he continues to overcompensate for the culmination of Wagner's attack around Bakhmut.
- Failures of Western sanctions efforts against the provision of arms components to Iran have likely contributed to Russia's ability to bypass Western sanctions to acquire combat drones through military cooperation with Iran.
- Russian forces likely made tactical gains northeast of Kupyansk between February 4 and February 6, and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced west of previous positions on the Svatove-Kremenna line on February 5 and February 6.
- Ukrainian forces maintain positions in Bilohorivka in Luhansk Oblast as of February 6 despite Russian claims that Russian forces captured Bilohorivka on February 3.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut but still have not encircled the settlement as of February 6.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Ukrainian forces continued limited attempts to cross the Dnipro River.
- Russian conventional and irregular forces may be increasingly struggling to recruit from Russian penal colonies due to high casualties among prior penal colony recruits.
- Russian forces continue to struggle with ethnic tensions and tensions between irregular forces.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities may be intensifying operational security to conceal new Russian force deployments in Donbas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 5, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko and Mason Clark

February 5, 9pm 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, February 5. This report focuses on Russian President Vladimir Putin's cautious approach to risk-taking after having thrown the dice on launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, an act he likely did not see as a risk. Putin's hesitant wartime decision making demonstrates his desire to avoid risky decisions that could threaten his rule or international escalation—despite the fact his maximalist and unrealistic objective, the full conquest of Ukraine, likely requires the assumption of further risk to have any hope of success.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decisions regarding Ukraine since his initial flawed invasion on February 24, 2022, indicate a likely disconnect between his maximalist objectives and his willingness to take the likely high-risk decisions necessary to achieve them. Putin likely operated under the flawed assumption that Russian forces could force Kyiv to capitulate without any significant military sacrifices and saw Russia's invasion as a limited and acceptable risk. Captured Russian military plans, for example, revealed that the Kremlin expected Russian forces to capture Kyiv in days, Russian intelligence services reportedly expected the Ukrainian military to collapse, and Kremlin propagandists preemptively published a prewritten article extolling Russia's "victory" on February 26, 2022. [1] Reports that Putin dismissed the Russian Central Bank's prescient warnings in February 2022 of the effect of a war in Ukraine on the future of the Russian economy under harsh Western sanctions likely suggest Putin wrongfully assumed the West would not impose major costs on his invasion.[2] The failure of Russian forces in the Battle of Kyiv—and with it the Kremlin's war plan—forced Putin to face complex decisions as the Kremlin fought an increasingly costly and protracted conventional war. Putin, however, has remained reluctant to order the difficult changes to the Russian military and society that are likely necessary to salvage his war.

Putin has consistently ignored, delayed, or only partially implemented several likely necessary pragmatic decisions concerning his invasion. Putin was reluctant to order full mobilization following the costly capture of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in June-July 2022 and several unsuccessful offensives that depleted much of his conventional military. Putin ignored repeated calls from the Russian nationalist community in May 2022 to mobilize reservists, declare war on Ukraine, implement martial law in Russia, and modernize the military call-up system.[3] Putin likely feared antagonizing Russian society and instead prioritized recruiting and committing relatively ineffective irregular armed formations over the summer.[4] Putin also attempted to maintain the façade of a limited war to shield much of Russian society from the scale and cost of the Russian war in Ukraine.[5] Putin also did not make many public appearances relating to the war effort from the start of the war until mid-December.[6] Putin additionally did not attempt to silence the large group of Russian pro-war and ultra-nationalist milblogger and public figures who supported Putin's war aims but began to criticize what they perceived as a half-hearted Russian war effort.[7]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 4, 2023

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

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

February 4, 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 decisive offensive operations are unlikely to target Zaporizhia City from the western Donetsk-Zaporizhia frontline as the Russian military continues to prepare for an offensive in western Luhansk Oblast. Advisor to the exiled Ukrainian mayor of Mariupol, Petro Andryushenko, stated that Russian soldiers in Mariupol are telling residents that the Russian military ordered offensive operations against Vuhledar, areas southwest of Bakhmut, Zaporizhia City and Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] Andryushenko added that Russia is also building up forces at barracks and settlements on roads leading to frontline positions, and that Russia had brought an extra 10,000–15,000 troops to Mariupol and its outskirts.[2] Andryushenko noted the Russian forces reportedly have 30,000 troops in the greater Mariupol area. ISW continues to assess that Russia is concentrating troops and military equipment to stage a decisive offensive on the western Luhansk Oblast and Bakhmut areas.

Western and Ukrainian military officials have repeatedly noted that Russian forces are likely setting conditions to reach the Luhansk and Donetsk oblast borders — an objective that Russian Chief of General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov had also outlined on December 22.[3] ISW continues to observe Russian transfers of military equipment and elite units and the preparations of logistics in occupied Luhansk Oblast that support Western, Ukrainian, and Russian forecasts for the western Luhansk Oblast–Bakhmut offensive.[4] Russian forces are also intensifying attacks on Bakhmut while neglecting frontlines around Donetsk City.[5] The Ukrainian military has reported that Russian forces have not massed a powerful enough strike group to conduct an offensive in the Zaporizhia direction.[6]

Russian sources have been claiming Russian forces have been making territorial gains in Zaporizhia Oblast in late January, claims that ISW assesses were likely an information operation aimed at dispersing Ukrainian forces ahead of the decisive offensive in the east.^[7] Andryushenko had previously stated that Russian officials were restricting Mariupol residents from accessing non-Russian information and were misrepresenting the situation on the frontlines, so Russian forces spreading rumors about an attack on Zaporizhia City may be a continuation of such information operations.^[8] Andryushenko has also consistently reported increases of Russian forces in Mariupol throughout different stages of the war and noted that Russian forces are using the city as a military base due to its proximity to Russia.^[9]

Russia has not shown the capacity to sustain the multiple major offensive operations that would be necessary to simultaneously reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders and take Zaporizhia City. Andryushenko's reported Russian troop concentration of 30,000 servicemen in the Mariupol area is not sufficient to attack Zaporizhia, a city of roughly three-quarters of a million people, while continuing offensive operations to encircle Bakhmut and launching a new major attack in Luhansk Oblast. Russian conventional forces, reserves, and Wagner forces have committed tens of thousands of troops to the effort to seize Bakhmut already, reportedly suffering many thousands of casualties in that effort.^[10] Bakhmut had a pre-war population of slightly over 70,000.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has launched a series of efforts to restructure and consolidate the mismatched blend of irregular forces supporting Russia's war in Ukraine into Russia's conventional military forces. A Russian MoD map published on February 3 included occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts in the Southern Military District's (SMD) area of responsibility.^[11] The SMD press service also announced that the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Militias are integrating into the Russian Armed Forces.^[12] The UK MoD assessed on February 4 that integration of occupied Ukrainian territories into the SMD zone likely follows Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's January 17 reform announcement about the formation of "self-sufficient force groupings" in Ukraine.^[13] The UK MoD further assessed that these integration efforts aim to integrate occupied territories into Russia's long-term strategic posture but are unlikely to generate an impact on combat operations in the near term. ISW has also previously assessed that the Kremlin's effort to reconstitute the Russian Armed Forces is a long-term commitment in its preparations both for a protracted war and to rebuild Russia's conventional military might generally.^[14]

The Russian MoD might be taking some steps to integrate volunteer battalions into its framework. A prominent Russian milblogger stated on February 4 that the Union of Volunteers of Donbas military units elected to create a single Russian Armed Forces Volunteer Corps from Russian Armed Forces volunteer units.^[15] A DNR Telegram channel claimed on February 2 that Russian officials coerced mobilized miners into taking military oaths to Russia despite months of prior service.^[16] Russian media outlet TASS also reported on February 4 that the Russian government expanded military medical commissions' mandate to provide care for volunteer formations as well.^[17]

The Russian MoD may be rushing to integrate and professionalize irregular forces into its conventional structure while Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov has the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[18] Russian irregular forces in Ukraine include contract soldiers, mobilized soldiers, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR and LNR) forces, volunteer battalions, Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS) forces, Cossack and Chechen units, and Wagner Group mercenaries. These formations have different objectives, limitations, pre-requisites, hierarchies, and legal statuses. The Russian MoD has initiated several professionalization efforts since Gerasimov's appointment as the Commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine on January 11, and it is logical that the Russian MoD would seek to cohere the current odd mix of forces into a more traditional structure.^[19] These integration efforts coincide with the launching of decisive offensive operations, however, and will likely generate short-term disruptions and pushback among units needed for those operations. Undertaking complex structural and administrative changes while launching major offensive operations is an unusual step, however appropriate the changes. Gerasimov likely feels that he has a limited window to make changes to Russian forces before the impossibility of achieving the grandiose objectives he has apparently been set causes him to lose Putin's favor once again.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely overcompensating for his declining influence by continuing to frame himself as the sole victor in the Bakhmut area and attempting to leverage his remaining influence online. Prigozhin responded to a question on February 4 about rumors of a new Russian offensive by comparing Wagner Group forces' battle strategy to a chess game in which players must "hit [their opponents'] head with a chessboard."^[20] Prigozhin also called for Russian authorities to investigate US-based Russian-language international media outlet RTVI for disseminating "slanderous information," one of many recent calls for Russian officials to take action based on his demands alone.^[21] Select Russian milbloggers no longer flock to Prigozhin's defense, however. One Russian milblogger, for example, characterized Prigozhin as a "brilliant troll" and claimed that DNR and LNR mobilized forces suffer significant casualties on the entire Donbas frontline without sufficient support while Wagner Group forces concentrated their efforts around Bakhmut.^[22]

Russia and Ukraine conducted a prisoner of war (POW) exchange on February 4, exchanging 63 Russian POWs for 116 Ukrainian POWs.^[23] The Russian MoD claimed that the Russian POWs included personnel of an unspecified "sensitive category," and the MoD credited the United Arab Emirates leadership for mediating the exchange. A Russian milblogger expressed continued frustration at uneven Russo-Ukrainian POW exchanges.^[24]

Key Takeaways

- A Russian decisive offensive operation is unlikely to target Zaporizhia City from the western Donetsk–Zaporizhia frontline.
- Russian forces have not shown the capacity to sustain the multiple simultaneous large-scale offensive operations that would be necessary to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast and seize Zaporizhia City.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has launched a series of efforts to restructure and consolidate the mismatched blend of irregular forces supporting Russia's war in Ukraine into Russia's conventional military forces.
- The Russian MoD's decision to undertake significant structural reform while preparing for a major offensive in eastern Ukraine likely represents an effort by Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov to complete reforms while he has Russian President Vladimir Putin's often fleeting favor.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is overcompensating for his declining influence by continuing to frame himself as the sole victor in the Bakhmut area.
- Russian and Ukrainian officials exchanged 63 Russian POWs for 116 Ukrainian POWs.
- Russian forces conducted limited offensive operations northwest of Svatove and continued offensive operations around Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and Vuhledar but have slowed the pace of their offensives along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian military assets in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian authorities are attempting to reinvigorate force generation efforts by drawing from broader pools of manpower.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 3, 2023

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

The Biden administration announced a new \$2.2 billion military aid package to Ukraine on February 3, including precision long-range missiles for HIMARS. [1] The package includes Ground Launched Small Diameter Bombs (GLSDM) that will increase the range of HIMARS to 151km from roughly 80km.[2] The package also includes Javelin anti-armor systems, two HAWK air defense firing units, regular HIMARS ammunition, and 120mm mortar and 155mm artillery rounds.[3]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his campaign against certain opposition voices in the domestic information space while continuing to platform critical nationalist milbloggers. Moscow authorities announced the arrest of Alexander Gusov, the alleged administrator of the *Novyi Vek* and *VChK-OGPU* Telegram channels, on charges of extortion on February 3.[4] Independent Russian outlet *OVD Info* claimed that Russian authorities also arrested Oleg Seliverov for charges relating to terrorism after Moscow authorities recently investigated Seliverov for ties to the *Nexita Live* opposition outlet.[5] Seliverov is an anti-war activist, and *VChK-OGPU* characterizes itself as exposing the "secrets of officials, oligarchs, gangsters, security officials."<[6] Gusov denied his affiliations with *Novyi Vek* and *VChK-OGPU* on January 26, and Seliverov denied associations with *Nexita Live* on January 28.[7] *VChK-OGPU* condemned the arrests and claimed that Rostec CEO Sergey Chemezov and Chemezov's associates influenced the crackdowns.[8] Putin censored several large opposition outlets in late January 2023, as ISW has previously reported.[9] Putin likely aims to crack down against opposition outlets that directly oppose Putin's regime or goals, including anti-war voices, while upholding voices such as nationalist milbloggers who support Putin's regime and war even as the milbloggers criticize the regime for its poor execution of war aims they regard as insufficient.

Russian officials continue to perpetuate the information operation that the war in Ukraine is a direct threat to Russian security through legislative manipulations. Bryansk and Kursk oblasts announced on February 3 that they are extending the "yellow" level of terrorist threat indefinitely due to a need for enhanced measures to protect and defend Russian territory.[10] Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on January 31 that simplifies the process of implementing terror threat alerts in Russia and allows Russian regions classed as "yellow level" of terrorist threat per Putin's October 19 martial law decree to indefinitely introduce an elevated "terrorist level."<[11] Bryansk and Kursk oblast officials will likely use this new "terror level" regime to escalate law enforcement measures in order to crack down on domestic dissent, partially to present the war in Ukraine as directly threatening Russian domestic security in order to generate continued support for Russian operations.

Key Takeaways

- The Biden administration announced a new \$2.2 billion military aid package to Ukraine on February 3, including precision long-range missiles for HIMARS.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his campaign against certain opposition voices in the domestic information space while continuing to platform critical nationalist milbloggers.
- Russian officials continue to perpetuate the information operation that the war in Ukraine is a direct threat to Russian security through legislative manipulations.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line with an intensified pace of operations near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces did not make any confirmed territorial gains in southern Ukraine.
- Western officials reportedly estimate that Russian forces have sustained almost 200,000 casualties in the war in Ukraine.

- Russian officials continue to rely on government-organized non-governmental organizations operating in occupied territories to create the veneer of grass roots support for Russian occupation.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 2, 2023

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

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 2, 2023

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 2, 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.

A Ukrainian intelligence official stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian military to capture Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by March 2023, supporting ISW's most likely course of action assessment (MLCOA) for a Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Chernyak told the *Kyiv Post* on February 1 that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian military to capture all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by March 2023.^[1] Chernyak also stated that Russian forces are redeploying additional unspecified assault groups, units, weapons, and military equipment to unspecified areas of eastern Ukraine, likely in the Luhansk Oblast area.

Russian authorities blocked internet cell service in occupied Luhansk Oblast likely as part of an effort to intensify operational security to conceal new Russian force deployments in Luhansk Oblast. The only mobile cell service provider in Russian-occupied Luhansk Oblast reported on February 2 that it would suspend mobile internet coverage in Luhansk Oblast starting on February 11 on orders from the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media.^[2] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian officials already disabled mobile internet in occupied Luhansk Oblast as of February 2.^[3] Ukrainian citizens have used cell phones to collect information about Russian forces in occupied Ukraine and send targeting information to the Ukrainian military.^[4] Russian forces may be learning from their previous operational security failures and adapting to protect Russian force concentrations in Luhansk Oblast ahead of the major offensive about which Ukrainian officials are increasingly warning.^[5]

Putin may have overestimated the Russian military's own capabilities again, as ISW previously assessed.^[6] ISW has not observed any evidence that Russian forces have restored sufficient combat power to defeat Ukraine's forces in eastern Ukraine and capture over 11,300 square kilometers of unoccupied Donetsk Oblast (over 42 percent of Donetsk Oblast's total area) before March as Putin reportedly ordered. ISW previously assessed that a major Russian offensive before April 2023 would likely prematurely culminate during the April spring rain season (if not before) before achieving operationally significant effects.^[7] Russian forces' culmination could then generate favorable conditions for Ukrainian forces to exploit in their own late spring or summer 2023 counteroffensive after incorporating Western tank deliveries.^[8]

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov supported ISW's MLCOA assessment and possibly suggested that Russian forces have mobilized substantially more personnel for an imminent offensive. Reznikov stated on February 2 that Russian forces are preparing to launch an offensive, likely in eastern or southern Ukraine.^[9] Reznikov stated that Ukrainian officials estimate that the number of mobilized Russian personnel is higher than the Kremlin's official 300,000 figure.^[10] Reznikov stated that the Kremlin mobilized 500,000 Russian soldiers, although it is unclear whether this figure refers to Russian force generation efforts following the start of partial mobilization in September of 2022 or the total number of forces that Russia has committed to the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated on January 31 that there are currently 326,000 Russian forces fighting in Ukraine, excluding the 150,000 mobilized personnel still at training grounds.^[11] The total 476,000 personnel could be representative of Reznikov's figure, or the 500,000 figure could reflect an assessment that ongoing Russian crypto-mobilization efforts since the end of the first mobilization wave have generated a substantial number of additional forces. ISW has not observed indicators that crypto-mobilization efforts in past months have produced as many as 200,000 additional mobilized personnel, however, although it is possible. The mobilization of 300,000 Russian citizens generated far-reaching domestic social ramifications and provisioning challenges, and the further covert mobilization of another 200,000 personnel would likely produce similarly noticeable problems.

Russian officials are continuing efforts to frame the war in Ukraine as an existential threat to Russian audiences in order to set information conditions for a protracted war and maintain domestic support for continued military operations. In a February 2 speech at a concert dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi troops by the Red Army in the Battle of Stalingrad, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia is once again facing a modern manifestation of Nazism that is directly threatening Russian security.^[12] Putin falsely accused the collective West of forcing Russia to repel its aggression and remarked that Russia is "once against being threatened with German Leopard tanks" that are "going to fight with Russia on the soil of Ukraine with the hands of Hitler's

descendants.” [13] Putin has previously similarly weaponized erroneous historical parallels to analogize the “special military operation” in Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War, partially in an effort to set long-term information conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.[14] German tanks, and Ukraine and the West more generally, are nowhere near attacking Russian borders. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov similarly perpetuated the information operation that the war in Ukraine poses a tangible domestic threat to Russia on February 2 and claimed that Western-supplied long-range weapons necessitate efforts to drive Ukrainian artillery far enough away from Russian territory that Ukraine will no longer be able to strike these areas.[15] Lavrov is advancing an ongoing information operation that seeks to highlight the fictional threat of Ukrainian ground attacks on Russian territory to make the consequences of the war seem more salient to a domestic audience.

These efforts on the part of Russian officials are not succeeding in generating the likely desired effect of motivating Russians to want to participate in the war, however. Russian State Services announced that as of February 2, the acceptance of applications for new passports has been suspended.[16] Russian research and design joint-stock company Goznak (responsible for manufacturing security products such as banknotes and identity cards) responded with a statement that it has received an inundation of applications for the personalization of foreign passports, which require special embedded microchips.[17] The shortage of microchips for passports and subsequent suspension of passport applications are in part consequences of the mass application for foreign passports in 2022, partially due to the exodus caused by partial mobilization.[18] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that it issued over 5.4 million passports in 2022, 40% more than in the previous year.[19] The increase in passport applications indicates that social conditioning efforts to bring the “special military operation” home to Russia and reinvigorate patriotic fervor are not having the desired effect. The Kremlin need not look further than passport statistics to poll domestic attitudes on the Russian population’s desire to fight Putin’s war.[20]

Key Takeaways

- A Ukrainian intelligence official stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian military to capture Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by March 2023, supporting ISW’s most likely course of action assessment (MLCOA) for a Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian authorities blocked internet cell service in occupied Luhansk Oblast likely as part of an effort to intensify operational security to conceal new Russian force deployments in Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov supported ISW’s MLCOA assessment and possibly suggested that Russian forces have mobilized substantially more personnel for an imminent offensive.
- Russian officials are continuing efforts to frame the war in Ukraine as an existential threat to Russian audiences in order to set information conditions for protracted war and maintain domestic support for continued military operations. These efforts on the part of Russian officials are not succeeding in generating the likely desired effect of motivating Russians to want to participate in the war, however.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources suggested that Russian forces may be preparing offensive actions in the Svatove area.
- Russian forces intensified ground attacks in the Kremenna area on February 2.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and southwest of Bakhmut.
- Russian officials are likely trying to prepare the Russian military’s disciplinary apparatus for an influx of mobilized personnel.
- Russian forces and occupation authorities continue efforts to identify and arrest Crimean Tatars on allegations that they associate with extremist movements banned in Russia.
- Russian federal subjects and occupation authorities continued announcing patronage programs to support infrastructure projects in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 1, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 1, 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 are continuing to warn about Russia’s intention of conducting a decisive offensive operation in Donbas in February and/or March, supporting ISW’s most likely course of action assessment (MLCOA). Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov stated on February 1 that Ukraine is on the eve of an active phase of combat that will take place over the next two months.[1] Yusov noted that the poor state of Russian military equipment will force the Russian military command to mass forces to outnumber Ukrainian defenders in order to make gains. Ukrainian Colonel Serhiy Hrabskyi stated that Russia does not have sufficient forces to conduct an attack along the entire 1,500km frontline in Ukraine and will concentrate its efforts on seizing Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.[2] A prominent Russian milblogger observed that the prospect of a Russian offensive operation does not appear to be triggering panic among Ukrainian forces, who are continuing to build out their counteroffensive plans.[3] ISW reported on January 31 that Ukrainian military officials reiterated their intent to launch major counteroffensive operations by the summer of 2023.[4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin may be setting conditions for further Russian cross-border raids into northeastern areas of Ukraine, likely in an effort to further domestic information operations and pin Ukrainian forces against northern border areas. Putin held a meeting on February 1 to discuss the restoration of residential infrastructure in Crimea, Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts following “shelling by Neo-Nazi formations.”^[5] Putin noted that his administration is prioritizing the ending of Ukrainian shelling of border regions, but that this task is “the business of the military department.”^[6] Putin’s focus on the supposed danger of Ukrainian shelling of border regions likely serves a two-fold purpose. It furthers an information operation intended to frame the war in Ukraine as an existential threat to Russian citizens in order to generate domestic support for a protracted war. ISW has reported on previous methods by which Russian authorities have engaged in this information operation.^[7] Putin may also be setting conditions for escalated cross-border raids in order to distract and disperse Ukrainian forces from critical axes of advance by pinning them to northeastern border areas. ISW continues to assess that a Russian invasion from Belarus is exceedingly unlikely, and the ongoing information operation to pin Ukrainian troops against the northern Ukraine-Belarus border seems to be faltering as Ukrainian officials increasingly assess that this contingency is improbable.^[8] The threat of cross-border raids from Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts into northern and northeastern Ukraine is likely an attempt to force Ukraine to deploy limited elements to these areas to protect against such attacks, thus dispersing Ukrainian troops to an extent in advance of a likely Russian offensive operation in the coming months. ISW has previously reported similar Russian distraction and dispersion operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.^[9]

The Kremlin is likely seizing an opportunity to discredit Igor Girkin, a prominent critical voice within the Russian nationalist space and former Russian officer, following his altercation with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov accused Girkin of cowardice following his decision to retreat from Slovyansk, Donetsk Oblast, in July 2014.^[10] This is a common criticism Girkin’s enemies direct at him. Solovyov’s remarks echo Prigozhin’s ongoing efforts to attack Girkin across the Russian information space, which ISW assessed was an attempt to undermine Girkin’s patronage networks and influence among Russian ultranationalists.^[11] Wagner-affiliated milbloggers also portray Girkin as a coward through shared interviews with individuals claiming to be Girkin’s acquaintances.^[12] ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin’s criticism of Girkin will likely benefit the Kremlin, who will seize this opportunity to discredit an avid critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin.^[13]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials are continuing to warn about Russia’s intention of conducting a decisive offensive operation in Donbas in February and/or March, supporting ISW’s most likely course of action assessment (MLCOA).
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may be setting conditions for further Russian cross-border raids into northeastern areas of Ukraine, likely in an effort to further domestic information operations and pin Ukrainian forces against northern border areas.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and southwest of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks to regain lost positions on the Svatove-Kremenna line on February 1.
- Russian forces are continuing to carry out unsuccessful disruption missions on islands in the Dnipro River delta in Kherson Oblast in an effort to prevent Ukrainian forces from gaining ground on the islands.
- Russian officials plan to propose a moratorium on the public procurement law to simplify spending procedures amid an increasingly costly war effort.
- The Wagner Group’s prison recruitment efforts may have slowed in previous months.
- Crimean partisans may have conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack in occupied Crimea on January 30.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 31, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Angela Howard, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 31, 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 introduction of Russian conventional forces to the Bakhmut frontline has offset the culmination of the Wagner Group’s offensive and retained the initiative for Russian operations around the city. The ISW December 27 forecast that the Russian offensive against Bakhmut was culminating was inaccurate. [1] The Wagner Group offensive culminated, as ISW assessed on January 28, but the Russian command has committed sufficient conventional Russian forces to the effort to reinvigorate it, thus forestalling the overall culmination of the offensive on Bakhmut, which continues.^[2] The commander of a Ukrainian unit operating in Bakhmut, Denys Yarolavskyi, confirmed that “super qualified” Russian conventional military troops are now reinforcing Wagner Group private military company (PMC) assault units in an ongoing effort to encircle Bakhmut.^[3] Another Ukrainian Bakhmut frontline commander, Volodymyr Nazarenko, also confirmed ISW’s observations that the Russian military command committed Russian airborne troops to the Bakhmut offensive.^[4] Russian forces are continuing to conduct offensive operations northeast and southwest of Bakhmut and have secured limited territorial gains since capturing Soledar on January 12.^[5]

ISW does not forecast the imminent fall of Bakhmut to Russian forces, although the Ukrainian command may choose to withdraw rather than risk unacceptable losses. It is extraordinarily unlikely that Russian forces will be able to conduct a surprise encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut. Yaroslavskyi noted that the Ukrainian military command would conduct a controlled withdrawal of forces from Bakhmut to save Ukrainian soldiers’ lives, likely if the Ukrainian command assesses that the risk of an encirclement of the city is imminent.^[6] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated on January 31 that Ukrainian forces are still able to effectively supply units in Bakhmut and noted that the Ukrainian military command has developed several contingency

plans to respond to Russian operations around Bakhmut.[7] Cherevaty added that Russian forces are continuing to suffer heavy casualties and noted that Ukraine's previous defense and subsequent withdrawal from Severodonetsk and Lysychansk over the summer of 2022 exhausted Russian forces and disrupted their plans for an immediate attack on Bakhmut.

Russian officials are again overestimating Russian military capabilities to advance in Donetsk Oblast and in the theater in a short period of time. Head of the Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin stated on January 31 that the Russian capture of Bakhmut will allow Russia to advance to Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, both approximately 40km northwest of Bakhmut.[8] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin previously claimed that the average pace of Russian advance around Bakhmut was about 100 meters per day, and it took Russian forces eight months to advance from occupied Popasna in Luhansk Oblast and Svitlodarsk to their current positions in the vicinity of Bakhmut (distances of 25km and 22km respectively).[9] Pushilin also claimed that the hypothetical Russian capture of Vuhledar would allow Russian forces to launch offensive operations on Kurakhove, Marinka, and Pokrovsk—despite the inability of Russian forces to capture Marinka since March 17, 2022, when the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) falsely claimed to have seized the settlement.[10] Pushilin had also claimed that Russian forces will seize Avdiivka, but has not provided any explanation of how Russian forces will break through almost nine years' worth of Ukrainian fortifications around the settlement.[11] Pushilin's expectations for Russia's hypothetical seizure of Bakhmut further demonstrate that Russians are continuing to face challenges in accurately assessing the time and space relationship with the account for Russian military capabilities.

Russian conventional forces may be replacing expended Wagner PMC forces by relocating them from Bakhmut to the frontlines in southern Ukraine. [12] The Head of the Ukrainian Press Center of the Defense Forces of the Tavriks Direction, Colonel Yevhen Yerin, stated that Russian forces are conducting unspecified force rotations out of Kherson Oblast and that Ukrainian authorities are clarifying reports about Wagner Group forces arriving in the Zaporizhia operational direction.[13] Ukrainian officials first reported on Wagner forces arriving in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on January 15, coinciding with the culmination of the Wagner offensive in Donbas with the capture of Soledar on January 12.[14] Russian forces may be rotating out the culminated and battle-weary Wagner forces in favor of Russian conventional units that have likely been resting and refitting since the Russian withdrawal to the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast in November.[15]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be attempting to fully supplant Wagner forces near Bakhmut and frame the traditional Russian military command structure as the sole victor around Bakhmut, assuming Russian forces eventually take the city. The Russian MoD and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin have made competing claims over recent Russian gains around Soledar and Bakhmut following the capture of Soledar.[16] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces captured Blahodatne just west of Soledar on January 31 after Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces seized the settlement on January 28. [17] Prigozhin is likely overcompensating for Wagner forces' reduced combat capabilities and reliance on conventional forces by claiming territorial gains before the MoD can feasibly claim them for Russian conventional forces.[18] The Russian MoD likely aims to undermine the Wagner Group's influence in Ukraine despite the MoD's reliance on Wagner forces to sustain the Russian effort around Bakhmut since July and to take horrendous losses for minimal territorial gains.[19]

Ukrainian officials continue to support ISW's assessment that an imminent Russian offensive in the coming months is the most likely course of action (MLCOA) and further suggested that Ukrainian forces plan to launch a larger counteroffensive. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated in a January 31 interview with Sky News that Russian forces are preparing for a "maximum escalation" in Ukraine within the next two to three months and may do so as soon as the next two to three weeks to coincide with the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[20] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated in a January 31 interview with the *Washington Post* that Russian forces will focus on occupying a larger area of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces appear to be preparing for an imminent offensive in eastern Ukraine, particularly in Luhansk Oblast.[21] Budanov stated that there are currently 326,000 Russian forces fighting in Ukraine, excluding the roughly 150,000 mobilized personnel still in training grounds that Russian forces have reportedly not yet committed to hostilities.[22] The Russian military will likely continue to accumulate conventional forces in Luhansk Oblast and increase the deployment of remaining mobilized personnel to eastern Ukraine in support of an imminent decisive strategic effort in western Luhansk Oblast.[23] Danilov suggested that Ukrainian forces have their own plans for operations in the coming months, and Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces must return Crimea to Ukrainian control by the summer of 2023.[24] Budanov has recently stated that Ukrainian forces intend to launch a major counteroffensive throughout Ukraine in the spring of 2023 "from Crimea to Donbas."[25]

Prominent Russian milbloggers continue to expose Russian military failures in Ukraine through increasingly public and elevated platforms. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on live Russian state TV that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) lost 40-50% of their personnel between the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and September of 2022, although ISW cannot independently confirm the accuracy of the milblogger's assessment.[26] The public reporting of this significant figure, regardless of its accuracy, notably undermines efforts from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to minimize Russian causalities reported in the Russian information space. The Kremlin has recently attempted to integrate some select milbloggers, including this one, into its narrative control by offering them platforms on Russian state broadcasters while also attempting to resurrect censorship efforts targeting the wider community of milbloggers that are critical of the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[27] The Kremlin's effort to coopt a select group of milbloggers by giving them more public and elevated platforms may backfire as milbloggers may seize the opportunity to appeal to the Russian ultranationalist community that has been increasingly critical of the Kremlin's conduct of the war.[28]

Russia continues to weaponize counterterrorism laws to justify domestic repressions. Russian sources reported on January 31 that the Central Military District Court found Vladislav Borisenko guilty of a terrorist act and sentenced him to 12 years in prison for his role in a May 2022 Molotov cocktail attack on the Nizhnevartovsk military registration office in Khanty-Mansi Okrug.[29] This is notably the first instance of the perpetrator of an attack on a military registration office being officially charged with committing a terrorist act.[30] The apparent elevation of charges for such incidents from destruction of property and hooliganism indicate that the Russian judicial system is increasingly seeking to impose harsher punishments on acts of domestic dissent as the war in Ukraine continues, as ISW has previously assessed.[31] Russian President Vladimir Putin additionally signed a decree on January 31 that simplifies the process of implementing terror threat alerts in Russia.[32] The decree allows Russian regions to introduce an elevated "terrorist level" for an indefinite period, thus negating the previous 15-day limit.[33] The January 31 decree is an expansion of Putin's October 19 martial law decree, which introduced varying levels of "martial law readiness" in occupied regions of Ukraine and Russian border regions.[34] The new decree will allow Russian regions operating on a "yellow level" of terrorist threat (as in Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk Oblasts) to stop and search vehicles on administrative borders to weapons and explosives, activities that were previously allowed only in "red level" regions.[35] The continued legislative manipulations of terrorism as a legal concept are allowing Russian authorities greater scope to crack down on domestic dissent and on any activities that are deemed contrary to Russian interests.

Key Takeaways

- The introduction of Russian conventional forces to the Bakhmut frontline has offset the culmination of the Wagner Group's offensive and retained the initiative for Russian operations around the city. ISW's December 27 forecast that the Russian offensive against Bakhmut was culminating was inaccurate.
- ISW does not forecast the imminent fall of Bakhmut, and it is extraordinarily unlikely that Russian forces will be able to conduct a surprise encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut.
- Russian military command is overestimating Russian military capabilities to advance rapidly in Donetsk Oblast and in the theater.
- Russian conventional forces may be replacing expended Wagner PMC forces by relocating them from Bakhmut to the Zaporizhia Oblast front line.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be attempting to fully supplant Wagner forces near Bakhmut to frame the traditional Russian military command structure as the sole victor around Bakhmut, assuming Russian forces take the city.
- Ukrainian officials continue to support ISW's assessment that an imminent Russian offensive in the coming months is the most likely course of action (MLCOA) and further suggested that Ukrainian forces plan to launch a larger counteroffensive.
- Prominent Russian milbloggers continue to expose Russian military failures in Ukraine through increasingly public and elevated platforms.
- Russia continues to weaponize counterterrorism laws to justify domestic repressions.
- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line on January 31.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces are unlikely to benefit significantly elsewhere in eastern Ukraine from their localized offensive around Vuhledar.
- Russian forces are likely prioritizing sabotage and reconnaissance activities over territorial gains in southern Ukraine.
- Russian Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov acknowledged Russian mobilization failures in an attempt to frame implementation failures and policy violations as resolved.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to use youth engagement and education programs to consolidate social control of occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 30, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 30, 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.

Western, Ukrainian, and Russian sources continue to indicate that Russia is preparing for an imminent offensive, supporting ISW's assessment that an offensive in the coming months is the most likely course of action (MLCOA).^[1] NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg stated on January 30 that there are no indications that Russia is preparing to negotiate for peace and that all indicators point to the opposite.^[2] Stoltenberg noted that Russia may mobilize upwards of 200,000 personnel and is continuing to acquire weapons and ammunition through increased domestic production and partnerships with authoritarian states such as Iran and North Korea.^[3] Stoltenberg emphasized that Russian President Vladimir Putin retains his maximalist goals in Ukraine.^[4] Head of the Council of Reservists of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, Ivan Tymochko, relatedly stated that Russian forces are strengthening their grouping in Donbas as part of an anticipated offensive and noted that Russian forces will need to launch an offensive due to increasing domestic pressure for victory.^[5] Stoltenberg's and Tymochko's statements support ISW's previous forecast that Russian forces are setting conditions to launch an offensive effort, likely in Luhansk Oblast, in the coming months.^[6] Russian milbloggers additionally continued to indicate that the Russian information space is setting conditions for and anticipating a Russian offensive. Milbloggers amplified a statement made by a Russian Telegram channel that the current pace and nature of Russian operations indicate that the main forces of the anticipated offensive and promised breakthrough have not yet "entered the battle."^[7] This statement suggests that Russian milbloggers believe that Russian forces have not yet activated the elements required for a decisive offensive effort.^[8]

Russia and Iran continued efforts to deepen economic ties. NOTE: This item appeared in the Critical Threats Project (CTP)'s January 30 Iran Crisis Update. Iranian state media reported that Iran and Russia established direct financial communication channels between Iranian banks and more than 800 Russian banks on January 29.^[9] Iranian Central Bank Deputy Governor Mohsen Karami announced that Iranian and Russian banks have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on financial messaging, effective immediately. Karami added that Iranian banks abroad were also included in the MoU and would be able to exchange standard banking messages with Russian banks.^[10] Iranian officials and state-affiliated media outlets framed the MoU as a means to circumvent Western sanctions on Iran and Russia and compared the messaging system to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), which serves as the world's largest financial messaging system.^[11] ISW has previously reported on the deepening of economic and military ties between Tehran and Moscow.^[12]

Key Takeaways

- Western, Ukrainian, and Russian sources continue to indicate that Russia is preparing for an imminent offensive, supporting ISW's assessment that an offensive in the coming months is the most likely course of action (MLCOA).
- Iranian state media reported that Iran and Russia established direct financial communication channels between Iranian banks and more than 800 Russian banks on January 29.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks to regain lost positions west of Kremenna as Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations northwest of Svatove.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian force concentrations in rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces continued to make marginal territorial gains near Bakhmut.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continued measures to professionalize the Russian military as it faces continued backlash against these measures.

- Russian forces and occupation authorities continue to target Crimean Tatars in an effort to associate anti-Russia sentiment with extremist or terrorist activity.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 29, 2023

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

Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, Mason Clark, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

January 29, 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, January 29. This report focuses on the impact of delays in sending high-end weapons systems to Ukraine on Ukraine's ability to take advantage of windows of opportunity throughout this war.

Delays in the provision to Ukraine of Western long-range fires systems, advanced air defense systems, and tanks have limited Ukraine's ability to take advantage of opportunities for larger counter-offensive operations presented by flaws and failures in Russian military operations. Western discussions of supposed "stalemate" conditions and the difficulty or impossibility of Ukraine regaining significant portions of the territory Russia seized in 2022 insufficiently account for how Western delays in providing necessary military equipment have exacerbated those problems. Slow authorization and arrival of aid have not been the only factors limiting Ukraine's ability to launch continued large-scale counter-offensive operations. Factors endogenous to the Ukrainian military and Ukrainian political decision-making have also contributed to delaying counteroffensives. ISW is not prepared to assess that all Ukrainian military decisions have been optimal. (ISW does not, in fact, assess Ukrainian military decision-making in these updates at all. Yet, as historians, we have not observed flawless military decision-making in any war.) But Ukraine does not have a significant domestic military industry to turn to in the absence of Western support. Western hesitancy to supply weapons during wartime took insufficient account of the predictable requirement to shift Ukraine from Soviet to Western systems as soon as the West committed to helping Ukraine fight off Russia's 2022 invasion.

The military aid provided by the US-led Western coalition has been essential to Ukraine's survival, and this report's critiques illustrate the importance of that aid as well as its limitations. Western military advising before the February 24 invasion helped the Ukrainian military resist the initial Russian invasion. Western weapons systems such as the Javelin anti-tank missile helped Ukraine defeat that onslaught and throw the Russian drive on Kyiv back to its starting points. The provision of essential Soviet-era weapons systems and munitions by members of the Western coalition has kept the Ukrainian military operating throughout the war. The delivery of more advanced Western systems such as the US-produced 155mm artillery (in April) and then HIMARS (in June) facilitated the Ukrainian counter-offensives that liberated most of Kharkiv Oblast and then western Kherson Oblast.^[1] The arrival of Western NASAMS air-defense systems in November helped blunt the Russian drone and missile campaign attacking Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.^[2]

The war has unfolded so far in three major periods. The Russians had the initiative and were on the offensive from February 24 through July 3, 2022, whereupon their attacks culminated. The Ukrainians seized the initiative and began large-scale counteroffensives in August, continuing through the liberation of western Kherson Oblast on November 11. Ukraine has been unable to initiate a new major counter-offensive since then, allowing the conflict to settle into positional warfare and allowing the Russians the opportunity to regain the initiative if they choose and to raise the bar for future Ukrainian counteroffensives even if they do not. The pattern of delivery of Western aid has powerfully shaped the pattern of this conflict.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 28, 2023

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

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

January 28, 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.

Conventional Russian forces are likely replacing exhausted Wagner Group forces to maintain the offensive in Bakhmut after the Wagner Group's offensive in Bakhmut culminated with the capture of Soledar around January 12. The Wagner Group's assault on Bakhmut has likely culminated with its surge on Soledar. Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut have not made significant gains since capturing Soledar around January 12. Conventional Russian units are now participating in fighting in Bakhmut to reinvigorate the Russian offensive there. Combat footage posted on January 20 indicates Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) are operating around Bakhmut as the footage shows a Russian BMD-4M – niche mechanized equipment exclusively used by the VDV.^[1] A Russian source reported that Wagner and VDV elements conducted joint operations in Bakhmut on December 27.^[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense has been increasingly reporting that Russian VDV are operating in the Bakhmut area since early January 2023, indicating conventional Russian forces are augmenting if not replacing likely culminated Wagner forces in the area. [3] Wagner Group forces - particularly convicts - have taken heavy causalities in Bakhmut since the fall of 2022. One anonymous US official reportedly stated on

January 5 that the Wagner Group's forces have sustained more than 4,100 deaths and 10,000 wounded, including over 1,000 killed between late November and early December near Bakhmut.[4]

Ukrainian officials have maintained that the Russian offensive on Bakhmut has not culminated.[5] ISW has previously assessed that the Russian offensive on Bakhmut was culminating.[6] We continue to assess that the Wagner offensive has culminated, but now assess that the Russians are committing conventional units to continue the fight. The larger Russian effort against Bakhmut has likely thus not culminated.

Russian forces are attempting to prevent Ukraine from regaining the initiative possibly ahead of a planned decisive Russian offensive in Donbas. Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov stated on December 22 that Russian forces are focusing most of their efforts on seizing Donetsk Oblast, which likely entails Russian forces capturing key positions in western Luhansk Oblast and northeastern Donetsk Oblast to reach the oblasts' administrative borders.[7] Russian forces have resumed ground attacks in the Vuhledar area (which they unsuccessfully attempted to reach in late October 2022) and are conducting small-scale assaults in Zaporizhia Oblast and around Donetsk City. Russian forces are conducting a large-scale offensive operation on the Bakhmut frontline as their current main effort and a defensive operation, for now, on the Svatove-Kremenna line.[8]

The localized attacks on Vuhledar and settlements in Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts are likely intended to disperse Ukrainian troops and set conditions for a decisive Russian offensive in western Luhansk Oblast, as ISW had previously assessed.[9] Russian forces may be attempting to disperse the Ukrainian grouping of forces on the Svatove-Kremenna line to enable a Russian recapture of Lyman, Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces could seek to use Lyman as a launching point for a decisive offensive to secure Donbas by conducting an offensive from Lyman in tandem with a drive on Bakhmut or from Bakhmut toward Sloviansk if the Russians succeed in capturing Bakhmut. The Russians may imagine that they can drive from their current positions directly to the Donetsk Oblast border along several independent lines of advance, although it is unlikely that they would not recognize the extreme improbability of success in such an attempt. The Russians more likely intend to pursue several phases of offensive operations culminating with securing the borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. These phases would likely require anywhere from six to 12 months of Russian campaigning, if they are possible at all, extrapolating from past Russian operational patterns and assuming higher levels of Russian combat power and capability than ISW has observed since the start of the war.

Russian forces likely lack the combat power necessary to sustain more than one major offensive operation while fixing Ukrainian forces in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts. There is no open-source evidence to suggest that Russian forces have regenerated sufficient combat power from their losses in the early phases of the war to enable Russian forces to conduct simultaneous large-scale mechanized offensives in the next several months. The Russian military has not demonstrated the capability to conduct simultaneous combined arms offensive operations since early 2022. Russia's most recent gains around Bakhmut relied on months of human wave attacks to secure territorial gains around Bakhmut by brute force at tremendous human costs. Russia's earlier capture of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in summer 2022 also did not utilize combined arms but instead relied on large-scale rolling artillery barrages to methodically destroy Ukrainian positions. Russian forces are experiencing growing artillery ammunition shortages that would prevent them from repeating these tactics.[10] It is unlikely, moreover, that the conventional Russian military will be willing to take the kinds of horrific losses the human wave tactic has inflicted on Wagner's convicts. The Russians' ability to execute large-scale rapid offensives on multiple axes this winter and spring is thus very questionable.

The conventional Russian military still must undergo significant reconstitution before regaining the ability to conduct effective maneuver warfare. The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) plans to significantly increase the size of Russia's military with 12 new maneuver divisions will take at least until 2026, if this effort succeeds at all. [11] Western intelligence and defense officials have not issued any indications that Russia's effective mechanized warfare combat power has recently increased, and ISW has not observed any indicators along those lines.

The Russian military leadership may once again be planning an offensive operation based on erroneous assumptions about the Russian military's capabilities, however. Russia's military failures in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson oblasts have demonstrated time and again that Russian military leadership overestimates the Russian military's own capabilities. The degraded Eastern Military District naval infantry elements that are currently attacking Vuhledar will likely culminate even if they succeed in capturing the settlement.[12] The Ukrainian loss of Vuhledar, if it occurs, would not likely portend an immediate Russian breakthrough on multiple lines of advance in Donetsk or in the theater in general, therefore. Ukraine's spring rain season (which normally occurs around April) will degrade the terrain's suitability for maneuver warfare. If Russian forces attempt simultaneous mechanized offensives in the next two months they would likely disrupt Ukrainian efforts to conduct a counteroffensive in the short term, but such a Russian offensive would likely prematurely culminate during the spring rain season (if not before) before achieving operationally significant effects. Russian forces' culmination would then generate favorable conditions for Ukrainian forces to exploit in their own late spring or summer 2023 counteroffensive. Ukraine would additionally be seeing growing benefits from the incorporation of Western tank deliveries that have only just been pledged.

The Russians are thus very unlikely to achieve operationally decisive successes in their current and likely upcoming offensive operations, although they are likely to make tactically and possibly even operationally significant gains. Ukraine will very likely find itself in a good position from which to conduct successful counteroffensive operations following the culmination of Russian offensives before or during the spring rainy season—always assuming that the Ukrainians do not preempt or disrupt the Russian offensives with a counter-offensive of their own.

The Russian military's decreasing reliance on Wagner forces around Bakhmut is likely reducing Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's influence. ISW assessed on January 22 that the Kremlin likely turned to Prigozhin's irregular forces to get through a rough period following the culmination of Russian conventional forces' offensive in Luhansk Oblast over the summer of 2022, which misled Prigozhin into overestimating his importance in the Russian military and political spheres.[13] The Kremlin, however, will not need to appease Prigozhin if Russian conventional forces continue to take responsibility for the Bakhmut frontline. ISW has reported that the Kremlin likely has already been slowly terminating his privileges.[14] Gerasimov and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) have also embarked upon new efforts to professionalize the army, an effort that, if successful, would marginalize parallel military formations such as the Wagner Group.

Prigozhin is likely sensing and is overcompensating for his declining influence and has therefore begun to attack the nationalist veteran faction. The veteran faction has been demanding that the Russian military command fix flaws within its conventional campaign instead of focusing on ineffective and unconventional solutions since at least May 2022.[15] Prigozhin continued on January 28 to berate Igor Girkin – a prominent Russian nationalist voice and a former Russian officer who has connections with the Russian veteran community – with vulgar insults and accusations that he is responsible for Russian forces' loss of

Sloviansk in 2014.[16] Prigozhin accused Girkin, Russian State Duma Parliamentarian and Committee on Defense member Lieutenant General (Ret.) Viktor Sobolev, and Leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party Leonid Slutsky of living in a past in which Russia relied on conventional forces.[17] Sobolev previously supported the Russian MoD effort to professionalize the military by enforcing grooming standards, and Slutsky avidly advocated for the Kremlin to declare mobilization to rectify the dire situation on the frontlines in early fall 2022.[18] Prigozhin went after these three individuals likely in an effort to undermine their credibility and advocacy for reforms and improvements within the military that further marginalize his undisciplined and brutal parallel military forces.

Prigozhin is also facing bribery accusations, which may further diminish his reputation regardless of their validity. Prigozhin responded to a media inquiry on January 27 regarding speculations that he receives bribes from convicts who do not then serve on the front lines but still receive a pardon for their "service."^[19] The allegations claimed that Prigozhin had recruited and soon released convicted Lipetsk Oblast Parliamentarian Andrey Yaitskiy (who some commentators speculated was physically unfit for military service), which granted him a pardon in exchange for a bribe.^[20] Prigozhin attempted to deflect the accusations by claiming that Wagner discharged Yaitskiy with honors following his heavy injuries sustained on the frontlines and included purported testimony from Yaitskiy's alleged commanders who portrayed him as a hero.^[21] ISW cannot independently verify these bribery accusations against Prigozhin, however, their emergence is notable given that corruption and bribery is endemic in Russia and a hated cultural vice among Russians.

Key Takeaways

- Conventional Russian forces are likely replacing exhausted Wagner Group forces to maintain the offensive in Bakhmut after the Wagner Group's offensive in Bakhmut culminated with the capture of Soledar around January 12.
- Russian forces are attempting to prevent Ukraine from regaining the initiative possibly ahead of a planned decisive Russian offensive in Donbas.
- Russian forces likely lack the combat power necessary to sustain more than one major offensive operation while fixing Ukrainian forces in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.
- The Russian military leadership may once again be planning an offensive operation based on erroneous assumptions about the Russian military's capabilities
- The Russian military's decreasing reliance on Wagner forces around Bakhmut is likely reducing Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's influence.
- Russian forces reportedly continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City areas. Russian forces continued a localized offensive near Vuhledar in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian sources did not report any Russian ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast for the second consecutive day on January 28.
- Some Russian citizens continue limited efforts to sabotage Russian force generation efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continue to set conditions for the long-term forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 27, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 27, 7:40 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 insiders reportedly told *Bloomberg* that Russian President Vladimir Putin is preparing a new offensive to regain the initiative that may begin as early as February or March 2023. Russian officials, Kremlin advisors, and other unspecified knowledgeable figures who spoke on condition of anonymity reportedly told *Bloomberg* that Putin seeks to conduct a new major offensive and that he believes that Russia's tolerance to accept causalities will allow Russia to win the war in the long run despite Russian failures so far.^[1] This report is consistent with ISW's current assessment and forecast that the Kremlin is likely preparing to conduct a decisive strategic action—most likely in Luhansk Oblast—in the next six months intended to regain the initiative and end Ukraine's current string of operational successes.^[2] ISW previously assessed that the decisive strategic action in Luhansk Oblast could be either a major offensive or a Russian defensive operation to defeat and exploit a Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[3]

Recent limited Russian ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast may be intended to disperse Ukrainian forces and set conditions for an offensive in Luhansk.^[4] Russia is redeploying elements of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division from Belarus to Luhansk Oblast.^[5] This recent development suggests that the planned Russian offensive referenced in the *Bloomberg* report is most likely aimed at Luhansk Oblast though it could also occur in the Vuhledar area in western Donetsk. This new offensive is extremely unlikely to target northern Ukraine from Belarus. There continues to be no indication that Russian forces are forming strike groups in Belarus; Russian elements in Belarus are largely using Belarusian infrastructure and training capacity for training rotations.^[6] Russian milbloggers are also increasingly writing off the notion of a second attack against Kyiv as an information operation and are suggesting that the most likely target for a Russian offensive would be in eastern Ukraine or neighboring Kharkiv Oblast.^[7]

The Kremlin confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is issuing preemptive pardons for convicts who serve in Russian operations in Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on January 27 that he cannot provide additional information about presidential decrees on pardons because they are protected by "various classifications of secrecy."^[8] Peskov's statement confirms that Putin has been issuing preemptive presidential pardons to convicts, the majority of whom are likely recruited into the ranks of the Wagner Group. Russian Human Rights Council member Eva Merkacheva stated in early January that convicts recruited by Wagner are pardoned before their release from penal colonies.^[9] ISW previously assessed that these preemptive presidential pardons may be driving further recruitment within penal colonies and likely empower Wagner to operate with greater impunity in the theater.^[10]

A visual investigation by a Russian opposition outlet confirmed that Russian authorities are deporting children from occupied Kherson Oblast to occupied Crimea. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* examined photos posted to an "Adoption in Moscow Oblast" website that showed 14 children aged two to five from Kherson Oblast at the Yolochka orphanage in Simferopol, occupied Crimea.[11] *Verstka* noted that the Yolochka orphanage is subordinate to the Crimean Ministry of Health and specializes in the care of children with nervous system issues, mental and behavioral disorders, hearing and vision problems, and HIV.[12] The Yolochka orphanage's official work mandate provides for the education of its children with "patriotism and citizenship" on the grounds that "Crimea is located in the south of Russia" and the generation of "awareness of oneself as a citizen of multinational Russia."[13] Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* reported on Yolochka in 2020 and stated that children under Yolochka's care were severely malnourished and neglected by orphanage leadership, prompting the intervention of the former Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Anna Kuznetsova (the predecessor of current Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova).[14] *Verstka*'s investigation confirms that elements of the Russian occupation infrastructure in occupied areas of Ukraine are actively involved in the deportation and handling of Ukrainian children, as ISW has previously assessed.[15] Head of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi reiterated on January 27 that Russia is consistently in violation of "the fundamental principles of child protection" by putting Ukrainian children up for adoption.[16]

Russian officials denied the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) report of explosions at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on January 26, without accusing Ukrainian forces of being responsible for these explosions. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi reported on January 26 that IAEA observers at the ZNPP informed him about explosions and detonations near the facility that indicated nearby military activity.[17] The reference to military activity is notable as the IAEA routinely fails to comment on the Russian military's activities on and near the ZNPP. Russian officials claimed that no explosions occurred near the plant and that the IAEA observers likely heard sounds of an artillery duel a considerable distance from the ZNPP.[18] Zaporizhzhia Oblast Occupation Deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed that the IAEA was playing a political role to support Ukraine and amplified Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Head Sergey Naryshkin's claim that Ukrainian forces are using nuclear power plants throughout Ukraine to store military equipment.[19] The fact that Russian officials did not frame the event as a Ukrainian provocative shelling of the plant diverges from the routine Russian response to reports of explosions near the ZNPP. Russian officials will likely continue to use interactions with the IAEA to push for it to recognize its ownership of the ZNPP, and *de facto* recognize its illegal annexation of Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

The Russian military command is likely attempting to restrict milbloggers' frontline coverage to regain control over the Russian information space ahead of a possible new offensive. Alexander Kots—a member of the Russian Human Rights Commission under Russian President Vladimir Putin and a prominent milblogger—stated that there are rumors that Russian authorities will require war correspondents to wear bright blue press vests to identify themselves as journalists in the combat zone.[20] Kots and other milbloggers criticized the rumored decision, claiming that high-visibility vests will only help Ukrainian forces deliberately target war correspondents embedded in Russian units.[21] Some milbloggers even admitted that they have been hiding their "PRESS" labels for years and noted that this allowed hundreds of war correspondents to independently work on the frontlines without anyone's formal orders.[22] The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) First Deputy Information Minister Daniil Bezsonov also argued that generals who are introducing these regulations should be responsible for each war correspondent's death after making them an easily visible target on the ground.[23] One milblogger accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of deliberately introducing new bureaucratic requirements that will limit the milbloggers' ability to operate on the frontlines.[24]

These plans for restrictions—if they exist—are likely a part of the Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov's efforts to professionalize the Russian Armed Forces. ISW previously reported that Russian milbloggers and nationalist figures had criticized the regulations introduced by the Russian military command requiring servicemen of Russian conventional forces to shave and banning them from using personal vehicles and cell phones on the frontlines.[25] Gerasimov and the Russian MoD are likely attempting to formalize guidance for embedded reporters in Russian units, which is a standard practice in professional militaries aimed at maintaining operational security on the frontlines. The Russian milbloggers' reaction is likely rooted in their fear that these press vests are little more than a Russian MoD ruse to strip the milbloggers of their independence from Russian government oversight given that they will likely need to undergo complex bureaucratic procedures to receive the Russian MoD's permission to operate on the front lines to acquire the vests.

The Russian military command may also be attempting to resurrect its previously unsuccessful censorship efforts targeting the critical milblogger community. ISW previously reported that the Russian MoD conducted several unsuccessful attempts to promote self-censorship among milbloggers from different nationalist factions—including Wagner-affiliated milbloggers—in summer and fall 2022.[26] Russian military command also previously attempted to promote self-censorship among milbloggers by pushing the narrative that Russian milbloggers have been violating Russian operational security by uploading combat footage or revealing Russian positions online.[27] It is unclear if Russian President Vladimir Putin is supporting these restrictions given that he had been appeasing pro-war milbloggers by meeting with them, allowing them to autonomously operate on the frontlines, and tolerating their criticisms.[28] The Kremlin is also continuing to integrate some select milbloggers by offering to let them host TV shows on Russian state broadcasters.[29] The Russian MoD may be conducting its own line of effort to silence the milbloggers independent of Putin. ISW will continue to monitor to see if Putin overrules the Russian MoD's efforts to silence milbloggers.

The Russian MoD's effort to restrict embedded milbloggers in conventional units will not silence all milblogger criticism online, however. A Russian milblogger observed that restrictive measures such as government-distributed press vests will further solidify Wagner Group as the dominant source of independent frontline information since Wagner will not abide by such restrictions. The Russian MoD's tactic to suppress information from the frontlines would create a vacuum in the information space for Wagner-affiliated milbloggers, who have a significantly stronger distaste for the Russian MoD, to fill. Russia's use of unconventional military formations will also undermine the effectiveness of such regulations.

Key Takeaways

- Kremlin insiders reportedly told *Bloomberg* that Russian President Vladimir Putin is preparing a new offensive to regain the initiative that may begin as early as February or March 2023.
- The Kremlin confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is issuing preemptive pardons for convicts who serve in Russian operations in Ukraine.
- A visual investigation by a Russian opposition outlet confirmed that Russian authorities are deporting children from occupied Kherson Oblast to occupied Crimea.
- Russian officials denied reported explosions near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on January 26.
- The Russian military command is likely attempting to restrict milbloggers' frontline coverage to regain control over the Russian information space ahead of the new offensive. These restrictions—if planned—are likely a part of the Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery

- Gerasimov's efforts to professionalize the Russian Armed Forces.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kremenna on January 26 and January 27.
 - Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, on the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
 - Russian sources did not report that Russian forces continued localized offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast on January 27.
 - Russian officials claimed that the conscription age will not change in the upcoming 2023 spring conscription cycle.
 - Russian occupation authorities are continuing to intensify efforts to integrate occupied territories into the Russian legal and administrative structures.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 26, 2023

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

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

January 26, 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 forces launched another massive series of missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on January 26. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valery Zaluzhnyi stated that Russian forces launched 55 air- and sea-based missiles, including Kh-101, Kh-555, Kh-47, and Kh-95 Kalibr and Kinzhal missiles at Ukraine from Tu-95, Su-35, and MiG-31K aircraft from the waters of the Black Sea.[1] Ukrainian air defense shot down 47 of the 55 missiles and all 24 Shahed 136 and 131 drones.[2] Several missiles struck critical infrastructure in Vinnytsia and Odesa oblasts.[3] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov notably reported that Russian forces had 90 Iranian-made drones remaining as of January 7.[4] Russian forces have enough drones for only a few more large-scale strikes unless they have received or will soon receive a new shipment of drones from Iran. Russian Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on January 23 to expand bilateral cooperation efforts, conversations that may have included discussions on the provision of Iranian-made weapons systems to Russia.[5]

A recent altercation between Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and former Russian officer Igor Girkin is exposing a new domain for competition among Russian nationalist groups for political influence in Russia. Girkin accused Prigozhin on January 25 of deliberately misconstruing his criticism of Prigozhin's political aspirations and exploitation of the information space as an attack on Wagner forces fighting in Ukraine.[6] Girkin claimed that Wagner-affiliated outlet *RiaFan*'s interview with an unnamed Wagner commander who blamed Girkin for abandoning positions in Donbas in 2014 was an effort to anonymously discredit him.[7] Girkin also accused Prigozhin of continuing to commit Wagner forces to support operations in Syria and African countries instead of deploying his mercenaries to win the war in Ukraine.

Prigozhin replied that he does not have political ambitions and stated that his team attempted to bribe Girkin in an effort to silence his criticism of Wagner forces which could have led to the imprisonment of his fighters for illegal mercenary activity.[8] Prigozhin also made a point of exaggerating his authority by claiming that he cannot withdraw Wagner from Africa because he "made a promise to several presidents" that he will "defend them," claimed that Wagner "de-facto" won the Syrian war, and noted that Wagner was kicked out of Donbas in 2015.[9] Prigozhin reiterated that he founded, controls, and sponsors Wagner and sarcastically invited Girkin to join one of Wagner's assault units in occupied Luhansk Oblast, which Girkin stated he would do if Prigozhin sent him a serious invitation.[10] Prigozhin further demeaned Girkin by stating that Wagner does not send out invitations and stated that Girkin would not be effective on the frontlines because he is only interested in promoting himself for financial benefit.[11]

Prigozhin and Girkin – both critics of Russian President Vladimir Putin's conduct of the war – are likely competing for influence and patronage among pro-war politicians disillusioned with the progress of the war. ISW assessed on October 4 that the Russian nationalists are split among three distinct groups that pursue different objectives while unilaterally criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD): Russian or proxy veterans, nationalists with their own private forces, and Russian milbloggers and war correspondents.[12] Girkin represents the veteran faction due to his connections with veteran organizations such as the All-Russian Officers Assembly, while Prigozhin is a self-proclaimed nationalist with access to a parallel military structure.[13] While both have avidly denied their political aspirations in Russia, they have continued to criticize the Russian MoD and the Kremlin in an effort to boost their prominence in Russian society against the backdrop of Russian military failures.[14] Prigozhin and Girkin are likely competing for favor with the same pro-war nationalist patronage networks within the Kremlin that are represented by outspoken nationalist politicians. Prigozhin, for example, is engaging members of the A Just Russia – For Truth Party and nationalist-leaning Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin to legalize Wagner mercenaries in Russia.[15] Girkin had broken with many officials with strong nationalist rhetoric like Volodin, however, and may be frustrated that he is unable to attain the same political power that he exerted in 2014 during the occupation of Crimea, and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.[16]

Prigozhin's attack on Girkin may benefit Putin, however. Prigozhin is very prominent in the Russian information space, and many milbloggers accused Girkin of lacking combat experience and cowardice in response to this exchange.[17] Prigozhin may have attempted to undermine Girkin to gain influence in the nationalist space while simultaneously but not necessarily intentionally discrediting one of the most prominent Putin critics.

Prigozhin is likely attempting to maximize his influence to avoid Girkin's fate. The Kremlin had seemingly rid itself of Girkin after his militants retreated from Sloviansk and following his involvement in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014.[18] Girkin was removed from the position of Minister of Defense of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) in August 2014 and has not resurrected his influence within the Kremlin since then. Prigozhin, however, is trying to build a support base within the Kremlin and in Russian society to solidify his presence in Russian domestic affairs even as Wagner struggles on the battlefield.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his campaign against critical and opposition voices by cracking down on several major opposition media outlets while continuing to platform highly critical Russian milbloggers. Putin signed a law on January 25 designating several major Russian language media and investigative outlets, including *Meduza*, *Important Stories*, *Bellingcat*, *The Bell*, and *The Insider* as undesirable organizations within Russia, outlawing the publication, distribution, or financial support of the organizations and their publications.[19] The Russian Prosecutor General's Office claimed that the activities

of *Meduza* and other outlets threaten the “foundations of the constitutional order and security” of Russia.[20] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin had notably called for the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office to censor *Meduza* in July 2022, claiming that the outlet deliberately spread false information to split Russian society. [21] Putin has failed, however, to rein in highly critical Russian nationalist milbloggers who have long criticized and undermined the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Kremlin, and even Putin himself, as ISW has previously reported.[22] Putin likely hopes to cultivate a group of loyal milbloggers to undermine other rising opponents, such as Prigozhin and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov.[23]

The United States Treasury Department announced new sanctions targeting the Wagner Group’s global support network, likely in response to the Wagner Group’s renewed efforts to support its operations outside of Ukraine. The US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 16 entities that support the Wagner Group’s military operations as sanctioned entities including a Russian-based technology firm, a Chinese-based satellite imagery company, a Central African Republic security company controlled by the Wagner Group, a United Arab Emirates-based aviation firm, and several Russian nationals. [24] OFAC redesignated the Wagner Group as a significant transnational criminal organization and cited its role in Russian operations in Ukraine and its involvement in serious criminal activity in the Central African Republic and Mali.[25] The announcement of secondary sanctions on specified entities outside of Russia and the focus on the Wagner Group’s activities in the Sahel suggests that the US Treasury Department is in part trying to constrain the Wagner Group’s likely renewed focus on conducting operations outside of Ukraine. The Wagner Group has likely renewed efforts to increase security capacity building and counterterrorism roles in African countries, roles that the Wagner Group had focused heavily on before committing serious resources to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[26]

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched another massive series of missile and drone strikes across Ukraine on January 26.
- A recent altercation between Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and former Russian officer Igor Girkin is exposing a new domain for competition among Russian nationalist groups for political influence in Russia against the backdrop of Russian military failures in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued his campaign against critical and opposition voices by cracking down on several major opposition media outlets.
- The United States Treasury Department announced new sanctions targeting the Wagner Group’s global support network, likely in response to the Wagner Group’s renewed efforts to reinvigorate its operations outside of Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces relaunched counteroffensive operations near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, on the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in the Vuhledar area.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are not conducting offensive operations at the size or scale necessary for a full-scale offensive.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continued to conduct limited and localized ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Wagner Group likely experienced significant losses in attritional offensive operations in eastern Ukraine over the past few months.
- Russian occupation officials are reportedly continuing to “nationalize” property and close places of worship belonging to the Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Christian communities in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast in an effort to establish the Kremlin-affiliated Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Church as the dominant faith in the region.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 25, 2023

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

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

January 25, 9:45pm 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 may be engaging in limited spoiling attacks across most of the frontline in Ukraine in order to disperse and distract Ukrainian forces and set conditions to launch a decisive offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast. Russian forces have re-initiated offensive operations, namely limited ground attacks, on two main sectors of the front in the past few days—in central Zaporizhia Oblast along Kamianske-Mali Shcherbak-Mala Tokmachka line and in the Vuhledar area of western Donetsk Oblast.[1] Ukrainian officials have noted that these attacks are conducted by small squad-sized assault groups of 10 to 15 people and are aimed at dispersing Ukrainian defensive lines.[2] The size and nature of these attacks suggest that they are more likely spoiling attacks that seek to distract and pin Ukrainian forces against discrete areas of the front than a concerted effort to relaunch offensive operations to gain ground in the central Zaporizhia and western Donetsk directions.

These limited attacks are notably ongoing as the pace of Russian operations around Bakhmut, led by the Wagner Group, seems to be decreasing. Following the Russian capture of Soledar in mid-January, the attacks on Bakhmut and surrounding settlements have apparently dropped off, suggesting that the Russian offensive operation to take Bakhmut may be culminating. The Wagner Group has failed to deliver on its promise of securing Bakhmut and has been unable to progress beyond minor tactical gains in Soledar and other surrounding small settlements. Russian military leadership may have, therefore, decided to de-prioritize operations around Bakhmut after recognizing the low likelihood that Wagner will actually be able to take the settlement. As ISW has previously suggested, Russian sources may be pushing the narratives of claimed Russian offensive operations in central Zaporizhia and western Donetsk Oblast in order to inflate the Russian information space with positive narratives that compensate for abject failures around Bakhmut.[3] Both the information space effects and the attacks themselves may be intended to distract focus from the lack of gains in Bakhmut and draw Ukrainian forces to the areas in question.

The Russian military appears to be shifting its focus towards conventional forces and away from the non-traditional force structure of the Wagner Group, potentially in preparation for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast. On the strategic level, certain changes to Russian command reflect a gradual transition away from reliance on unconventional force groupings such as Wagner and towards supporting and empowering conventional Russian elements. The recent appointment of Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov to overall theater command of Russian forces in Ukraine (and subsequent demotion of Wagner Group

favorite Army General Sergey Surovikin) suggests that Russian military leadership is increasingly looking to the traditional and conventional military establishment that Gerasimov represents and leads. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has similarly engaged in efforts to reform and standardize the conventional military in line with Gerasimov's appointment.^[4] Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be empowering Gerasimov to take steps that undermine Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and the unconventional force structure he represents.^[5] The shift toward conventional forces is also increasingly apparent on the operational and tactical levels. Various conventional elements (namely from the 3rd Motor Rifle Division and Airborne Forces) have been arrayed across the Svatove-Kremminna line in Luhansk Oblast and are notably not supporting Wagner Group operations around Bakhmut, indicating that Russian military leadership may be allocating conventional forces to what they regard as a more promising axis of advance.^[6] Ukrainian intelligence reportedly noted that elements of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army of the Western Military District have withdrawn from Belarus and partially deployed to Luhansk Oblast.^[7]

The array of conventional forces across the Luhansk Oblast frontline suggests that Russian forces may be preparing for a decisive effort in this sector, supported by limited spoiling attacks elsewhere on the frontline to distract and disperse Ukrainian forces. ISW has previously discussed indicators of a potential decisive Russian effort in Luhansk Oblast.^[8] Taken in tandem with a variety of intelligence statements that Russia is preparing for an imminent offensive operation in the coming months, it is likely that a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast would be an offensive one.^[9] The most probable course of a Russian offensive action in Luhansk Oblast would be premised on launching an attack along the Svatove-Kremminna line, supported by critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that run into major logistics hubs in Luhansk City and Starobilsk, in order to reach the Luhansk Oblast administrative border and complete the capture of the remaining part of Luhansk Oblast that is still Ukrainian-controlled. Russian forces may hope to recapture critical ground in northern Donetsk Oblast around Lyman and use the Svatove-Kremminna line to launch further attacks into western Kharkiv and/or northern Donetsk Oblasts. Russian forces are exceedingly unlikely to be able to gain substantial ground on this axis even if they do launch a successful offensive operation on this sector, however.

The Kremlin and Russian milbloggers attempted to play down the Western provision of tanks to Ukraine, indicating that they likely find these systems threatening to Russian prospects. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on January 25 that the Western provision of Abrams and Leopard tanks to Ukraine is "quite a failure ... in terms of technological aspects" and that there is a "clear overestimation of the potential that [these tanks] will add" to Ukrainian forces.^[10] Some Russian milbloggers likely sought to reassure their domestic audiences by claiming that these systems do not pose a significant threat and that previous Western systems like HIMARS are a far more serious threat.^[11] The Kremlin and Russian milbloggers previously framed the Western provision of purely defensive Patriot missile systems as a serious escalation between Russia and the West.^[12] The fact that the Kremlin and Russian milbloggers did not frame the provision of armored vehicles that could actually aid future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations as escalatory suggests that the Kremlin and the Russian information space continue to selectively choose which systems to frame as an escalation. The Kremlin and Russian milbloggers seem more concerned in this case with calming potential fears of the impact of Western commitments to supply Ukraine with tanks than with feeding the escalation narrative in the West. The Kremlin and its allies are right to be concerned about these new Western commitments, which allow Ukrainian commanders to plan against replacements for tank losses they could expect in counter-offensive operations that might be launched even before the Western tanks begin to arrive.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces may be engaging in limited spoiling attacks across most of the frontline in Ukraine in order to disperse and distract Ukrainian fronts and launch a decisive offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast.
- The Russian military appears to be shifting its focus toward conventional forces deployed to Luhansk Oblast and away from the non-traditional force structure of the Wagner Group and its focus on Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin and Russian milbloggers attempted to downplay the Western provision of tanks to Ukraine, indicating that they likely find these systems threatening to Russian prospects.
- Russian forces claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations near Svatove as Russian forces continued limited ground attacks near Kremminna.
- Ukrainian forces have likely made advances around Kremminna.
- Ukrainian officials acknowledged that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Soledar.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City area. Russian forces reportedly continued localized offensive operations near Vuhledar.
- Russian forces continued to conduct small-scale ground attacks across the Zaporizhia Oblast front line, likely to attempt to fix Ukrainian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers are divided over the veracity of Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov's ongoing, overblown information operation.
- The Kremlin is attempting to downplay new restrictions on crossing the Russian border, likely in an effort to contain panic within Russian society about a likely second mobilization wave.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may be attempting to conduct another wave of mobilization discreetly out of concern for undermining his support among Russians.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 24, 2023

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

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

January 24, 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.

A coalition of NATO member states reportedly will send Ukraine modern main battle tanks. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on January 24 that US President Joe Biden is preparing to send "a significant number" of Abrams M1 tanks to Ukraine and that the White House may announce the delivery as soon as January 25.

[1] German newspaper *Der Spiegel* reported on January 24 that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz decided to deliver at least one tank company (14 tanks) of Leopard 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine in an unspecified time frame.[2] Poland likely will send Ukraine Leopard 2 tanks following Germany's decision. Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczał stated on January 24 that Poland formally requested Germany grant permission to transfer Poland's Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stated that Berlin would not interfere if Poland wanted to send its Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine.[3] British officials confirmed on January 16 that the United Kingdom would send Ukraine 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine.[4] French President Emmanuel Macron stated he would not rule out the possibility of France sending Ukraine Leclerc tanks on January 22.[5]

Western states' provision of main battle tanks to Ukraine will help enable Ukraine to conduct mechanized warfare to defeat the Russian military and liberate Ukrainian territory. ISW previously assessed that the West has contributed to Ukraine's inability to take advantage of having pinned Russian forces in Bakhmut by slow-rolling or withholding weapons systems and supplies essential for large-scale counteroffensive operations.[6] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhny previously emphasized in December 2022 that Ukraine needs 300 main battle tanks (among other weapon systems) to enable Ukrainian counteroffensives.[7]

Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov continued efforts to portray himself and the traditional Russian military command structure as the true defenders of Russia. Gerasimov reiterated on January 23 that Russian President Vladimir Putin approved Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's plan to develop Russian forces' ability to respond to "new threats to the military security" of Russia, and Gerasimov accused Ukraine and NATO states of aiming to threaten Russia.[8] Gerasimov invoked the Russian General Staff's historical role in guiding and protecting Russia through several military crises, including the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Gerasimov claimed that "modern Russia has never known such a level and intensity of hostilities" and heavily implied that the current war in Ukraine presents the greatest threat to Russia since the Great Patriotic War, therefore necessitating the leadership and protection of the Russian General Staff under Gerasimov's leadership. Gerasimov's framing of the war and the General Staff's ongoing revitalization efforts within the historical context of the Great Patriotic War is part of the continued campaign to counter the growing power and influence of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov, and their respective paramilitary structures, all of which threaten Gerasimov and the Russian General Staff as ISW has previously reported.[9] It also continues Putin's efforts to reframe the current struggle as an effort like the Great Patriotic War to justify protracted demands for sacrifice and mobilization by the Russian people.[10]

Russian outlet RBK claimed on January 23 that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu appointed Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev as the Southern Military District (SMD) commander and Lieutenant General Yevgeny Nikiforov as the Western Military District (WMD) commander.[11] RBK claimed that Nikiforov replaced Kuzovlev as WMD commander after Kuzovlev held the position from December 13, 2022, to January 23, 2023.[12] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appointed Kuzovlev WMD Commander in late October of 2022.[13] RBK claimed that the Russian MoD had appointed Lieutenant General Roman Berdnikov as WMD commander in October of 2022, however.[14] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 26, 2022, that Nikiforov left his position as Chief of Staff of the Eastern Military District (EMD) to replace Kuzovlev as a part of the internal power struggles between Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Shoigu, and Gerasimov.[15] Nikiforov previously commanded Wagner Group fighters in Ukraine as commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army in 2014 and may have connections to Prigozhin.[16] The conflicting reporting on the WMD and SMD command suggests that military district command dynamics remain opaque, indicating that the Russian military is struggling to institute sound command structures and maintain traditional command

Key Takeaways

- A coalition of NATO member states reportedly will send Ukraine modern main battle tanks.
- Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov continued efforts to portray himself and the traditional Russian military command structure as the true defenders of Russia.
- Russian outlet RBK claimed on January 23 that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu appointed Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev as the Southern Military District (SMD) commander and Lieutenant General Yevgeny Nikiforov as the Western Military District (WMD) commander.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counteroffensive operations near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City area. Russian forces made marginal territorial gains near Bakhmut.
- Russian sources claimed, likely to distract from the lack of progress in Bakhmut, that Russian forces launched an offensive around Vuhledar.
- Russian forces likely continued to conduct limited and localized ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast but likely did not make territorial gains, further undermining Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov's prior territorial claims.
- Ukrainian special forces conducted a raid across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast on January 23-24.
- Russian authorities are likely continuing efforts to mobilize ethnic minorities to fight in Ukraine.
- Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) is reportedly increasing the production of drones and loitering munitions.
- Ukrainian partisans targeted a member of the Zaporizhia occupation administration.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 23, 2023

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

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

January 23, 9:45pm 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.

Ukrainian intelligence assessed that Russian forces are preparing for an offensive effort in the spring or early summer of 2023, partially confirming ISW's standing assessment that Russian troops may undertake a decisive action in the coming months. Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky stated on January 20 that the spring and early summer of 2023 will be decisive in the war and confirmed that the GUR has observed indicators that Russian troops are regrouping in preparation for a "big offensive" in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.^[1] Skibitsky also reiterated that Russian forces are unlikely to launch an attack from Belarus or in southern Ukraine.^[2] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may be preparing for a decisive effort (of either offensive or defensive nature) in Luhansk Oblast and observed a redeployment of conventional forces such as Airborne (VDV) elements to the Svatove-Kremminna axis after the Russian withdrawal from Kherson Oblast.^[3] ISW also maintains that it is highly unlikely that Russian forces are planning to relaunch a new offensive on northern Ukraine from the direction of Belarus.^[4] Skibitsky's assessments largely support ISW's running forecasts of Russian intentions in the first half of 2023 and underscore the continued need for Western partner support to ensure that Ukraine does not lose the initiative to a renewed Russian offensive operation.

The Wagner Group's outsized reliance on recruitment from penal colonies appears to be having increasing ramifications on Wagner's combat capability. Head of the independent Russian human rights organization "Rus Sidyashchaya" (Russia Behind Bars) Olga Romanova claimed on January 23 that out of the assessed 50,000 prisoners that Wagner has recruited, only 10,000 are fighting on frontlines in Ukraine due to high casualty, surrender, and desertion rates.^[5] ISW cannot independently confirm these figures, but they are very plausible considering Wagner's model of using convicts as cannon fodder in highly attritional offensive operations.^[6] The model Wagner has reportedly been using of retaining its highly trained long-serving mercenaries as leadership and Special Forces-type elements on top of a mass of untrained convicts also lends itself to high combat losses, surrenders, and desertions. The Wagner Group aim of reducing casualties among its non-convict mercenaries likely undermines its ability to retain and use effectively its large mass of convicts at scale and over time. ISW has previously reported on instances of relatives of Wagner group fighters receiving empty coffins after being told their loved ones died in Ukraine, suggesting that Wagner lacks the basic administrative and bureaucratic infrastructure to track and present its own losses, adding further credibility to the "Rus Sidyashchaya" estimate.^[7]

Russia continues to deepen military and economic relations with Iran in an effort to engage in mutually beneficial sanctions evasion. *NOTE: A version of this item appeared in the Critical Threats Project (CTP)'s Iran Crisis Update.*^[8] Russian Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin met with Iranian Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on January 23 to expand bilateral cooperation efforts.^[9] Ghalibaf noted that Moscow and Tehran should strive to strengthen ties in the banking, energy, and commodity-trading sectors in the face of American sanctions, which Volodin credited for bringing the two countries closer together.^[10] Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) sources additionally speculated on further military cooperation efforts between Tehran and Moscow. IRGC-affiliated outlet *Tasnim News* published an editorial arguing that a Russo-Iranian joint production deal could allow Iran to receive Russian Mi-28 and Ka-52 attack helicopters.^[11] Both Tehran and Moscow are likely looking to these agreements to mitigate the pressure of sanctions levied against them by the US.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian intelligence assessed that Russian forces are preparing for an offensive effort in the spring or early summer of 2023, partially confirming ISW's standing assessment that Russian troops may undertake a decisive action in the coming months.
- The Wagner Group's outsized reliance on recruitment from penal colonies appears to be having increasing ramifications on Wagner's combat capability.
- Russia continues to deepen military and economic relations with Iran in an effort to engage in mutually beneficial sanctions evasion.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremminna line.
- Ukrainian forces struck Russian concentration areas in occupied Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces likely conducted a failed offensive operation in Zaporizhia Oblast in the last 72 hours.
- Russian forces have not made any confirmed territorial gains in Zaporizhia Oblast despite one Russian occupation official's continued claims. The occupation official may be pushing a narrative of Russian tactical successes in Zaporizhia Oblast to generate positive narratives to distract Russians from the lack of promised progress in Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin's efforts to professionalize the Russian Armed Forces are continuing to generate criticism among supporters of new Russian parallel military structures.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue efforts to integrate occupied territories into Russian social, administrative, and political systems and crack down on partisan dissent in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 22, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

January 22, 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, January 22. This report focuses on the Kremlin's recent marginalization of the Wagner Group following the culmination of the drive on Bakhmut and it's the Kremlin's return to reliance on conventional forces on the frontlines and the regular Ministry of Defense (MoD) and General Staff apparatus. The report also analyzes the changing relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and its implications.

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's star has begun to set after months of apparent rise following his failure to make good on promises of capturing Bakhmut with his own forces. Russian President Vladimir Putin had likely turned to Prigozhin and Prigozhin's reported ally, Army General Sergey Surovikin, to continue efforts to gain ground and break the will of Ukraine and its Western backers to continue the war after the conventional Russian military had culminated and,

indeed, suffered disastrous setbacks.[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and General Staff, headed by Sergey Shoigu and Army General Valeriy Gerasimov respectively, had turned their attention to mobilizing Russian reservists and conscripts and setting conditions for improved performance by the conventional Russian military, but they had little hope of achieving anything decisive in the Fall and early Winter of 2022. Putin apparently decided to give Prigozhin and Surovikin a chance to show what they could do with mobilized prisoners, on the one hand, and a brutal air campaign targeting Ukrainian civilian infrastructure on the other. Both efforts failed, as Prigozhin's attempts to seize Bakhmut culminated and Surovikin's air campaign accomplished little more than inflicting suffering on Ukrainian civilians while expending most of Russia's remaining stocks of precision missiles. Prigozhin seems to have decided in this period that his star really was on the ascendant and that he could challenge Gerasimov and even Shoigu for preeminence in Russian military affairs. Those hopes now seem to have been delusional.

Putin appears to have decided to turn away from relying on Prigozhin and his irregular forces and to put his trust instead in Gerasimov, Shoigu, and the conventional Russian military once more. Putin began to re-centralize control of the war effort under the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) in early December. [2] He gave Gerasimov overall command of the Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine on January 11, subordinating Surovikin to Gerasimov along with two other deputies.[3] The Russian MoD announced large-scale reforms to expand and reconstitute the Russian Armed Forces on January 17.[4] Ukrainian intelligence and select Kremlin officials have also reported that Putin is preparing to launch a second wave of reserve mobilization to expand the Russian Armed Forces, and the Russian MoD has been attempting to improve the professionalism of its conventional forces and to test the effectiveness of its chains of command.[5] Such reforms and appointments mark a significant inflection in the Kremlin's efforts to reconstitute its conventional military and a deemphasis of short-term mitigation efforts such as the use of irregular formations on the frontlines.

Putin's decision to focus and rely on conventional Russian forces is marginalizing the Wagner Group and the *siloviki* faction that nevertheless continues to contribute to Russian war efforts in Ukraine. The *siloviki* faction is a small group of Russian businessmen and leaders with meaningful power bases and parallel military companies and includes individuals such as Prigozhin. Putin's resubordinating to Gerasimov the Commander of the Aerospace Forces, Surovikin, whose October 8 appointment received widespread support from the *siloviki* faction, reversed a months-long trend of Putin's efforts to placate the *siloviki*.[6] Ukrainian intelligence had previously reported that Prigozhin formed an alliance with Surovikin that enabled Wagner Group to receive heavy weapons from the Russian Armed Forces and that the two together rivaled Shoigu.[7] Surovikin's demotion has likely disrupted Prigozhin's ability to exploit his connections within the Russian military command to the benefit of himself and Wagner.

Putin is also attempting to rebuild the Russian MoD's authority and reputation, both of which had been badly damaged by failures in 2022 and heavily attacked by the *siloviki* faction for many months. Putin's turnaround became most evident when he pointedly did not credit Prigozhin or his Wagner forces for the capture of Soledar during a federal TV interview on January 15.[8] The Russian MoD also originally did not recognize Wagner as a participant in the Battle for Soledar, only to vaguely acknowledge Wagner assault units in a follow-up announcement on January 13.[9] Prigozhin and his allies had been fighting to claim credit for gains around Bakhmut and the capture of Soledar for some time, making Putin's decision to walk back Russian MoD's acknowledgment of Wagner a major defeat for Prigozhin.[10]

Putin may have felt threatened by Prigozhin's rise and tactless self-assertion. Putin began to reintroduce himself as an involved wartime leader in December, ostentatiously meeting with his commanders and appearing with troops.[11] Prigozhin did not take the hint, if hint it was, but instead redoubled his efforts to assert himself by advertising the superiority and successes of his own troops.[12] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov may have indirectly accused Prigozhin of deliberately fueling the conflict between the Russian MoD and Wagner in public on January 16, another shot across Prigozhin's bow.[13] Putin had also been increasingly integrating State Duma officials whom Prigozhin had been heavily courting, such as Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Andrey Turchak, by appointing them to working groups aimed at addressing issues with mobilization among other things.[14]

Putin likely turned to Prigozhin's irregular forces to get through the period following the Russian conventional military's culmination after the reckless and costly push to seize Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Wagner forces have fought in Putin's invasion of Ukraine since the first days of the war and played important roles in offensive operations such as that to seize Popasna, Luhansk Oblast (40km east of Bakhmut) in April-May 2022.[15] Wagner forces assisted other Russian troops in the Battle of Severodonetsk, serving as the main assault forces alongside Rosgvardia elements in late June 2022.[16] Wagner forces shifted their focus to Bakhmut in early July 2022 while simultaneously reinforcing their units with recruited prisoners.[17] Wagner had begun to make some advances in the vicinity of Bakhmut and took the lead for this axis in August 2022, likely relying on arriving convicts.[18] Prigozhin later began the ostentatious construction of a set of fortifications called the Wagner Line throughout Luhansk, Donetsk, and Belgorod oblasts in October 2022 and began training Belgorod and Kursk people's militias.[19]

Russia's pushes on Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, which followed the unsuccessful Russian drive on Kyiv and the bloody Battle for Mariupol, had consumed much of its offensive combat power in Donbas and southern Ukraine.[20] Russian forces paid dearly to seize the two remaining large cities in Luhansk Oblast and faced a significant troop shortage that prompted Putin to launch volunteer recruitment campaigns throughout the country.[21] Putin had likely allowed Prigozhin to expand his forces with prisoner recruits in an effort to mitigate these personnel shortages and maintain momentum on some select frontlines by unconventional means. Prigozhin may have won Putin over to his idea of recruiting prisoners into Wagner—something the conventional Russian military likely could not have undertaken at that time—due to Wagner's contributions in seizing Popasna and Severodonetsk.

Prigozhin likely imagined that his efforts in Ukraine would continue to lend him military and political power in Russia. Prigozhin's command over the Bakhmut direction and proximity to Putin likely gave him a false sense that he could use the victory in Bakhmut against the backdrop of Russian MoD's military failures as a bargaining tool for his own commercial objectives such as the legalization of Wagner mercenary activity in Russia, expanding his political power within the Kremlin, or even displacing the authority of Shoigu. Western officials revealed in October that Prigozhin had harshly criticized the Russian MoD in a private conversation with Putin, claiming that Russian conventional forces were entirely reliant on Wagner forces.[22] Prigozhin had criticized former Commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, who was also responsible for the "central" group of forces in Ukraine, and Putin eventually dismissed Lapin.[23] Prigozhin had likely expected that further criticism of the Russian MoD and even Putin's presidential administration would earn him a position near Putin.[24] The intensification of the Battle for Bakhmut in December and its subsequent culmination may also indicate that Prigozhin tried and failed to outshine the Russian MoD before the start of 2023.[25]

Prigozhin's recent apparent fall from grace and influence likely reflects the real limitations on his actual power. US and UK intelligence estimated that Prigozhin has approximately 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, of whom 40,000 are convicts and 10,000 contractors.[26] Prigozhin has been relentlessly throwing his fighters into bloody assault operations around Bakhmut at a high cost, while Putin has been conserving and training at least a portion of the men he mobilized into conventional

Russian Army units.[27] Wagner Group is also likely relying on the Russian MoD's logistical support and maintenance functions for its aviation and heavy military equipment.[28] Wagner's forces are suffering from a lack of basic administrative organs and structures that are preventing Wagner from becoming an effective parallel military structure.[29] Prigozhin had likely believed in his own exaggerated view of the quality and importance of his largely convict force and his ability to outperform Russia's conventional military, as well as his prospects of securing a spot in power nearer Putin. Certainly, his rhetoric and self-presentation had become overbearing and ostentatiously swaggering until things began to go south for him.

Putin had never fully given in to Prigozhin's recommendations or demands throughout this transitional period and had likely always planned to put Prigozhin back into his place once the Russian conventional military improved enough to bear the burden of continuing the war. Putin had removed Lapin and appointed Surovkin—possibly on the advice of Prigozhin and his allies—but he did not grant most of Prigozhin's desires. Prigozhin is still demanding that the Kremlin officially recognize the Wagner Group in Russia, even though Russian criminal law prohibits the operation of parallel military and mercenary formations. [30] Putin could have responded to numerous of Prigozhin's requests and demands over many months and legalized Wagner's operations in Russia, but he likely did not deem it necessary to weaken the Russian MoD and empower Prigozhin further to sustain a temporary force generation effort. Prigozhin had also called on the Russian State Duma and Prosecutor General's office to fire and imprison St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for treason, claiming that Beglov had hindered Russia's war efforts.[31] Prigozhin's efforts along these lines went nowhere. Putin, on the other hand, met with Beglov in St. Petersburg on January 18 making clear that Beglov had won this round.[32] Prigozhin has also run into several bureaucratic obstacles when opening his Wagner Center in St. Petersburg and constructing the Wagner Line in Belgorod Oblast, obstacles that Putin could likely have demolished had he so desired.[33]

Putin's turn on Prigozhin has positive and negative implications for Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. Putin is now marginalizing and distancing himself from a hard-to-control mercenary group composed predominantly of ill-disciplined convicts commanded in the most brutal manner. Prigozhin will likely continue to criticize the Russian MoD and the Kremlin and may even seek to turn the pro-war nationalist faction against Putin. But Prigozhin was already fueling the most extreme pro-war faction that had already been attacking the Russian MoD hammer and tongs and had even begun to come after Putin himself.[34] Prigozhin's voice will likely carry less weight if Putin continues his marginalization, especially if Putin can convince the pro-war faction that he remains committed to his original notion of victory and intends to pursue it by more conventional means.

The marginalization of people like Prigozhin, who has had men executed with sledgehammers and hands out Wagner sledgehammers as gifts, is a good thing.[35] The return to prominence and influence of more professional military officers such as Gerasimov likely suggests a reduced likelihood that Putin will give in to the crazier demands of the far-right pro-war faction, possibly in turn further reducing the already-low likelihood of irrational Russian escalations. It can never be good to have people like Prigozhin near the center of power, so any indication that he is receding from power is positive. Prigozhin is not yet gone and will not likely leave Putin's circle permanently. And he could rise again if Gerasimov and his cronies fail Putin once more. But Prigozhin is, for now, apparently an increasingly spent force in the Kremlin's inner circles, and that is good.

But the re-emergence of the professional Russian military is also concerning. Prigozhin could never have established a formidable and sustainable national military apparatus. As long as Putin favored Prigozhin's and others' irregular approaches to continuing the war Putin postponed the day that Russia could re-establish a powerful conventional military. His re-embrace of Gerasimov and regular order has likely put Russia back on course toward rebuilding its military. NATO would do well to take note of this development as a matter of its own future security, beyond anything it might portend for Ukraine.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on January 22:

- Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin made incredible threats of nuclear escalation as part of an ongoing information operation aimed at deterring the Western provision of further military aid to Ukraine.[36] ISW continues to assess that Russia is very unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and extraordinarily unlikely to use them against the West.
- Russian milbloggers on January 22 continued to discuss the potential of a pending major Russian or Ukrainian offensive and speculated as to which areas present the highest priority targets.[37]
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line on January 22.[38] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck an industrial facility in Kadiivka, Luhansk Oblast with HIMARS rockets.[39]
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and the Donetsk City-Avdiivka areas.[40]
- Russian sources claimed on January 22 that Russian forces continued offensive operations in two directions in Zaporizhia Oblast, with their main efforts focusing on Hulyapole and Orikhiv.[41] Head of the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavrisk Direction Defense Forces Yevhen Yerin stated on January 22 that Russian forces are not conducting large-scale operations in the Zaporizhia direction.[42]
- Russian occupation authorities continued commandeering civilian infrastructure in occupied territories at the expense of civilian health and safety on January 22.[43]

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus.

ISW's most dangerous course of action warning forecast about a potential major Russian offensive against northern Ukraine from Belarus appears increasingly unlikely. ISW currently assesses the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as very low. ISW will continue reporting observed indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, which we expect to update regularly.

Observed significant military activities in Belarus in the past 24 hours that indicates an attack from Belarus is more likely:

- Nothing significant to report.

Observed significant military activity in Belarus in the past 24 hours that is ambiguous:

- Nothing significant to report.

Observed significant military activity in Belarus in the past 24 hours that indicates that an attack from Belarus remains unlikely:

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov stated that there is currently no threat of a Russian offensive operation from Belarus, and that the GUR has not observed a grouping and readiness of Russian forces in Belarus that would allow for such an operation.[44]
- The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that it has not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group as of January 22.[45]

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.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 21, 2023

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

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

January 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 Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut is likely a strategically sound effort despite its costs for Ukraine. While the costs associated with Ukraine's continued defense of Bakhmut are significant and likely include opportunity costs related to potential Ukrainian counter-offensive operations elsewhere, Ukraine would also have paid a significant price for allowing Russian troops to take Bakhmut easily. Bakhmut itself is not operationally or strategically significant but had Russian troops taken it relatively rapidly and cheaply they could have hoped to expand operations in ways that could have forced Ukraine to construct hasty defensive positions in less favorable terrain. One must also not dismiss the seemingly "political" calculus of committing to the defense of Bakhmut lightly—Russian forces occupy more than 100,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory including multiple Ukrainian cities and are inflicting atrocities on Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas. It is not unreasonable for political and military leaders to weigh these factors in determining whether to hold or cede particular population concentrations. Americans have not had to make such choices since 1865 and should not be quick to scorn considerations that would be very real to them were American cities facing such threats.

Ukrainian forces have previously employed a similar gradual attrition model to compel Russian operations in certain areas to culminate after months of suffering high personnel and equipment losses in pursuit of marginal tactical gains. Russian troops spent months attempting to grind through effective Ukrainian defenses in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in the early summer of 2022 and captured Lysychansk only after a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from the area.[1] The capture of Lysychansk and the Luhansk Oblast administrative border, however, quickly proved to be operationally insignificant for Russian forces, and the ultimate result of the Ukrainian defense of the area was the forced culmination of the Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast, leading to the overall stagnation of Russian offensive operations in Donbas in the summer and fall of 2022. Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut will likely contribute to a similar result—Russian forces have been funneling manpower and equipment into the area since May 2022 and have yet to achieve any operationally significant advances that seriously threaten the Ukrainian defense of the area. ISW continues to re-evaluate its assessment that the Russian offensive on Bakhmut may be culminating but continues to assess that Ukrainian forces are effectively pinning Russian troops, equipment, and overall operational focus on Bakhmut, thus inhibiting Russia's ability to pursue offensives elsewhere in the theater.

The West has contributed to Ukraine's inability to take advantage of having pinned Russian forces in Bakhmut by slow-rolling or withholding weapons systems and supplies essential for large-scale counteroffensive operations.

Milblogger discourse surrounding the reported replacement of Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky with Lieutenant General Oleg Makarevich as commander of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) has further emphasized the fracture between two main groups within the Russian MoD—the pro-Gerasimov camp, comprised of those who represent the conventional MoD establishment, and milblogger favorites who are less aligned with the MoD institution. A prominent milblogger announced Teplinsky's replacement on January 20, triggering a wave of discontent among other milbloggers who voiced their confusion and concern over the situation.[2] Several milbloggers questioned why the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would replace a well-respected career VDV commander with an "academic" with no combat experience.[3] One milblogger remarked that the Russian MoD has now "removed" two of the "key" commanders of Russian operations in Ukraine—Teplinsky and former theater commander Army General Sergey Surovikin (although Surovikin was merely demoted to a lower command position rather than removed from office).[4] Several milbloggers claimed that Teplinsky was dismissed following a disagreement with the Russian General Staff, most likely meaning the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, regarding the use of Russian paratroopers for planned offensive operations.[5] The staunch milblogger criticism of a move that was likely orchestrated by Gerasimov suggests that the Russian information space is increasingly viewing changes made within the Russian MoD in a binary with the pro-Gerasimov camp on one hand and those perceived as milblogger favorites on the other.

The milblogger discourse on this issue additionally offers insight into internal Russian MoD dynamics that may have led to Teplinsky's removal. The suggestion that Teplinsky was removed following an argument with the General Staff over the use of paratroopers in offensive operations suggests that Teplinsky may have resisted Gerasimov's desires to use VDV forces to support operations in the Bakhmut area, where Russian offensive operations are largely focused. ISW previously observed that VDV forces took high losses in the early phases of the war and were likely held in reserve following the Russian withdrawal from the right (west) bank of Kherson Oblast in the fall of 2022. Teplinsky could have resisted committing VDV units to highly attritional offensive efforts in Donetsk Oblast that have been largely led by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group on the grounds that traditional motorized rifle or tank units would have been more appropriate or for more purely parochial reasons.[6] He may have resigned or been fired over the disagreement. Gerasimov likely seeks to weaken the significant airborne mafia that has long protected the airborne troops (which are a separate service from the ground forces in Russia) from policies and reforms that applied to the ground forces by replacing

Teplinsky with Makarevich, a ground forces officer with no VDV experience.^[7] Milblogger discussion of this reported interaction suggests that Gerasimov is increasingly seeking to commit conventional Russian elements, including VDV elements, to operations in Ukraine, and the resulting pushback from the Russian information space indicates that his campaign to do so will not be well received.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has launched a series of information operations aimed at portraying himself as a sacrificial hero of Russia in a crusade against petty and corrupt Russian authorities. Prigozhin's personal press service on January 21 amplified a letter from the family of a deceased Wagner PMC soldier that contrasted "indifferent" local officials, who did not help with the funeral of their son, with Prigozhin, who listens to their appeals.^[8] The letter referred to Prigozhin as "the only Person [sic] who is not indifferent to the fate of the Defender of Russia and his family."^[9] Prigozhin also responded to reports that the Mayoral Office of Kamyshlovsky Raion, Sverdlovsk Oblast denied a Wagner Group fighter a funeral with honors with the claim that "we," likely showing solidarity with "the common man," will "deal with this scum" and "pull their children by the nostrils" to participate in the war in Ukraine.^[10] These statements set Prigozhin at odds with unpopular Russian officials who operate under a different set of rules from the majority of Russians and increase his appeal as a "hero" of the voiceless. They also support Prigozhin's ongoing campaign to gain legal recognition – primarily in the forms of recognition and funerary honors for Wagner PMC soldiers – for Wagner PMC, as private military companies remain illegal in Russia.^[11] Prigozhin is falsely portraying himself and Wagner Group as moral entities that will continue their moral acts despite prosecution. Prigozhin claimed on January 20 that he would not mind if someone brought a criminal case against him because he would be able to participate in Wagner PMC from prison and that international fighters seek out Wagner due to the "call of their conscience."^[12]

Prigozhin is simultaneously building his domestic power base and reputation as a significant international actor in an effort that is both fueled by and further fuels his information operations against the Russian government. Wagner-affiliated news outlet RIAFAN published staged footage of Wagner forces placing the bodies of supposed Ukrainian soldiers into coffins to send back to Ukraine, and Prigozhin claimed that he advocated sending 20 truckloads of bodies to Ukraine in a likely attempt to humanize Wagner Group and portray Wagner fighters as honorable while portraying Wagner Group as willing and able to act in place of the Russian state to return war dead to the opposing side.^[13] Some Russian milbloggers notably amplified this narrative of human and honorable Wagner fighters, while another accused Wagner of staging the whole scene.^[14] Prigozhin's press service challenged US Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council John Kirby to name the war crimes Wagner Group has committed in response to the US Treasury designation of Wagner as a transnational criminal organization.^[15] Prigozhin even claimed that the US designation of Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization "finally" indicates that the US and Wagner Group are "colleagues," implying that the US is also a transnational criminal organization.^[16] Wagner Group continues to operate militia training centers in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts in a likely effort to provide military support for regions that the Russian MoD supposedly neglects to defend, although neither faces any risk against which Wagner Group could defend.^[17]

The Sun reported that US intelligence estimates total Russian military casualties in Ukraine as 188,000 as of January 20, suggesting a possible 47,000 Russians killed in action in less than a year of fighting.^[18] The historical ratio of wounded to killed in war is 3:1, suggesting that Russian casualties in Ukraine thus far are close to the total US deaths in the Vietnam War.^[19] The US National Archives estimates that the total US battle deaths in Vietnam is roughly 58,000 across eight years of fighting.^[20] Soviet forces suffered 15,000 deaths across nine years of war in Afghanistan, a threshold that the UK Ministry of Defense assessed Russian casualties surpassed in May 2022 after just three months of hostilities.^[21]

Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut is likely a strategically sound effort despite its costs for Ukraine.
 - Milblogger discourse surrounding the reported replacement of Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky with Lieutenant General Oleg Makarevich as commander of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) has further emphasized the fracture between two main groups within the Russian MoD—the pro-Gerasimov camp, comprised of those who represent the conventional MoD establishment, and milblogger favorites who are less aligned with the MoD institution. The milblogger discourse on this issue additionally offers insight into internal Russian MoD dynamics that may have led to Teplinsky's removal.
 - Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has launched a series of information operations aimed at portraying himself as a sacrificial hero of Russia in a crusade against petty and corrupt Russian authorities.
 - The Sun reported that US intelligence estimates total Russian military casualties in Ukraine as 188,000 as of January 20, suggesting a possible 47,000 Russians killed in action in less than a year of fighting.
 - Russian forces conducted a small ground reconnaissance into northeastern Sumy Oblast.
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- Russian forces continued limited ground attacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
 - Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks around Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City. Russian forces are likely making incremental gains around Bakhmut.
 - Available open-source evidence as of January 21 indicates that Zaporizhia Oblast Russian occupation official Vladimir Rogov's January 20 claims of a major territorial capture are likely part of a Russian information operation.
 - Complaints from Russian milbloggers indicate that Russian forces continue to rely on cell phones and non-secure civilian technologies for core military functions – serious breaches of operational security (OPSEC).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 20, 2023

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

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

January 20, 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.

Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov continues to frame Chechen fighters' involvement in the war in Ukraine on distinctly religious grounds, thereby building out his reputation and the reputation of his power base. Kadyrov responded to the recent list of guidelines for grooming standards in the Russian army and noted that a majority of Chechen fighters wear beards in accordance with the Sunnah, and additionally claimed that his Chechen fighters have been responsible for major gains in Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk.[1] Kadyrov questioned the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s justifications for these guidelines and said they would demoralize fighters who are "waging a holy war."[2] Kadyrov additionally amplified a sermon given by Chechen theologian Magomed Khitanaev on January 20 that claimed that the "special military operation" in Ukraine is aimed at eradicating Ukrainian "satanism." [3] Kadyrov has repeatedly justified Chechen fighters' involvement in the war on distinctly religious grounds, thus presenting himself as the protector of Muslim fighters and bridging the gap between Chechen forces and Russian President Vladimir Putin's framing of the war on religious and moral grounds.[4]

Kadyrov also notably posted footage on January 20 of a group of Chechen theologians completing their training at the Russian Special Forces University in Grozny, Chechnya, and noted that over 300 qadis (magistrates and judges who implement sharia law) and imams are planning to undergo similar training and deploy into Ukraine.[5] The fact that Chechen qadis will supposedly be embedded in Chechen units that deploy to Ukraine is noteworthy—qadis typically serve a judicial role in criminal and civil matters, and their presence in Ukraine may suggest that Kadyrov intends Chechen forces to serve a basic governance function in occupied areas. ISW has previously reported on Kadyrov's efforts to position himself and his Chechen powerbase as a parallel and complementary structure to the conventional Russian armed forces.[6] Kadyrov may hope to use qadis and imams in Ukraine to set social conditions for the long-term resettlement of Muslim populations from the Caucasus in occupied areas of Ukraine, although there is no independent evidence of any such plans. ISW has previously reported on Kadyrov's efforts to import Chechen elements to Ukraine to fill administrative and law enforcement roles in occupied territories for similar purposes.[7]

The Wagner Group appears to be struggling to present itself as an effective parallel military structure, thus increasingly proving to be a parasitic paramilitary entity. Russian opposition outlet *TV Dozd* reported on January 20 that a woman whose husband reportedly died fighting with Wagner in Ukraine received her husband's sealed coffin, death certificate, and a medal of honor and buried what she thought was her husband before finding out that he was alive and in Ukrainian custody.[8] *TV Dozd* claimed that it has collected many such stories and that Wagner representatives have essentially intimidated family members into not checking coffins to confirm the deaths of their relatives.[9] Moscow Duma deputy Evgeny Stupin relatedly noted appeals he has received from constituents claiming that once their relatives signed contracts with Wagner and deployed to Ukraine, they ceased to hear from their relatives entirely.[10] These reports suggest that Wagner lacks basic administrative organs to maintain records of individual servicemen and communicate properly with authorities. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin ironically has gone to great lengths to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment, which he has accused of being inept in precisely these ways.

The Wagner Group may additionally be relying on the Russian MoD for the use of military assets on the frontline. A prominent Wagner Group-affiliated Russian milblogger posted an infographic on January 20 reportedly showing the array of military assets that Wagner is using around Bakhmut, including a TOS-1A thermobaric artillery system (typically a military district-level asset), various self-propelled guns and mortar systems, several armored vehicles, and an Su-25 aircraft.[11] The use of these assets, particularly aviation assets such as the Su-25, suggests that Wagner is working with the Russian MoD to access and operate these systems. While Wagner servicemen can feasibly operate these systems independently, they likely continue to rely on the MoD for logistical support and maintenance functions. Taken in tandem with reports of pervasive administrative and communication failures within Wagner's ranks, the use of MoD equipment suggests that Wagner is functioning more as a parasite attached to the Russian armed forces than as the entirely self-contained, parastatal organization that Prigozhin tries to present it as being.

US intelligence confirmed the rivalry between the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group on January 20. National Security Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby stated that a rift is forming between Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Russian MoD officials as a result of an ongoing competition between conventional Russian forces and Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine.[12] Kirby added that Wagner "is becoming a rival power center to the Russian military and other Russian ministries" with its 50,000-strong group of forces in Ukraine consisting of 40,000 convicts and 10,000 contractors.[13] ISW continues to monitor the progression of the Wagner-Russian MoD conflict in the information space, with the Russian MoD again deliberately avoiding directly acknowledging Wagner troops' participation in a claimed capture of Klishchiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on January 19.[14]

Prigozhin's quest for legal recognition of Wagner Group may also trigger some factionalization within the Russian government—whether he intentionally sets out to do so or not. Chairman of the Russian socialist Just Russia—For the Truth party Sergey Mironov published a picture of himself with a Wagner sledgehammer that he said was a gift from Prigozhin.[15] Prigozhin had engraved the settlement names of Bakhmut and Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, likely to support his ongoing effort to advertise his forces as victors of the Battle for Soledar. Mironov also responded to a comment from a social media user asking if he intended to use this sledgehammer in combat, sarcastically implying that he is already on the front lines and in the trenches at his current position.[16] Mironov's actions could suggest that he is a member of the pro-war faction that Prigozhin had previously referenced in his rants and may be advocating for the legalization of Wagner in Russia. Mironov had an exchange with a different commenter who had asked him to define Wagner and how the Kremlin regulates the group, to which he responded that the commenter was too late to the conversation.[17] That social media user, in turn, interpreted Mironov's response as disregarding the Russian Criminal Code provisions against illegal military structures such as private military companies.[18] ISW previously reported that Prigozhin used Mironov's likeness in his advertisements for the Wagner Center in St. Petersburg and is likely attempting to expand his group of backers within the Kremlin to support his commercial interests.[19]

The Kremlin is likely intensifying its efforts to present Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an existential war to set informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine. Russian and social media sources circulated images on January 19 and 20 showing Russian officials installing air defense systems on the roof of the Russian Ministry of Defense building in Moscow and elsewhere near the city.[20] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on the images, and State Duma Deputy Yevgeny Lebedev called them fake.[21] Some Russian milbloggers responded to these images with satisfaction that Moscow residents would finally be aware that Russia is involved in a "difficult war" in Ukraine.[22] The Kremlin likely deployed the air defense systems in Moscow to generate inflammatory images that portray the war as more threatening to the Russian public. It is unlikely, however, that the Kremlin believes that Ukraine would target Moscow and it likely engaged in this ostentatious play to support intensifying information operations to prepare the Russian domestic information space for a protracted war in Ukraine and further sacrifices.[23] This demonstration is also likely a part of the emerging information operation to contextualize the war in Ukraine in the Russian mythos of the Great Patriotic War, which is likely meant to increase Russian support for the war effort and further mobilization by absurdly portraying Ukraine as threatening Moscow and the rest of the Russian heartland in a way to the way Nazi Germany did during its invasion of the Soviet Union.[24]

Prominent Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin replaced Russian Commander of the Airborne Forces, Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, with First Deputy Head of the Russian General Staff Academy, Lieutenant General Oleg Makarevich, on January 20.[25] A prominent Russian news source initially claimed on January 13 that Teplinsky was only on a temporary leave and denied milblogger reports about Teplinsky's dismissal.[26] Some milbloggers complained that Makarevich is the least suitable candidate to command the Russian Airborne Forces and called for Putin to instead appoint Colonel Vadim Pankov, current commander of the 45th Separate Guards Spetsnaz Brigade.[27] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not yet confirmed Teplinsky's dismissal nor confirmed Makarevich's appointment. Teplinsky replaced former Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, Colonel-General Andrey Serdyukov, in mid-June 2022, as ISW previously reported.[28] Teplinsky visited rear areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast in late December.[29]

The Kremlin continues to promote information operations threatening escalation over Western military assistance to Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on January 20 that if Western defense ministers decided to provide Ukraine with heavy tanks at their meeting at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, then this would only "add problems for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people." [30] The Kremlin seeks to undermine Western willingness to offer aid to Ukraine by stoking fears of an escalation, whether between Russia and the West or of the war in Ukraine itself, that Russia cannot execute.[31] The Kremlin will likely continue to respond to Western conversations about further military assistance to Ukraine with vague threats of escalation that have no corresponding action.

Russian President Valdimir Putin fired Russian Security Council Assistant Secretary Alexei Pavlov on January 20, likely in response to Pavlov's antisemitic comments in Fall 2022. Pavlov had served as a subordinate to Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev since 2009. The Kremlin's newswire TASS reported that Pavlov's dismissal was in connection with his receiving a new unspecified position but did not provide the timeline for his next appointment.[32] Pavlov's dismissal, however, likely relates to his highly publicized comments regarding the need to "desatanize" Ukraine in a Moscow government-owned outlet *Argumenty i Fakty* in October 2022.[33] Pavlov stated that there is a need for "desatanization" because there are many religious cults in Ukraine following Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in 2014, such as the Hassidic Jews. Pavlov's antisemitic statement ignited criticism from Russian Hassidic Rabbi Berel Lazar and forced Patrushev to issue an apology promising that he would take appropriate measures to discipline the author of the piece.[34] It is unclear why Patrushev or Putin would have waited this long to take action.

Key Takeaways

- Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov continues to frame Chechen fighters' involvement in the war in Ukraine on distinctly religious grounds, thereby building out his reputation and the reputation of his power base.
- The Wagner Group appears to be struggling to present itself as an effective parallel military structure, thus increasingly proving to be a parasitic paramilitary entity.
- US intelligence confirmed the rivalry between the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group on which ISW has long reported.
- Prigozhin's quest for legal recognition of the Wagner Group may also trigger further factionalization within the Russian government.
- The Kremlin continues to engage in demonstrative public actions aimed at setting informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Russian Telegram sources claimed that Putin dismissed Russian Commander of the Airborne Forces Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, but these reports remain unconfirmed.
- The Kremlin continues to promote information operations threatening escalation over Western military assistance to Ukraine in order to weaken Western support.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued offensive operations near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations across the Donetsk Oblast front line. Russian sources continued to falsely claim that Russian forces are close to encircling Bakhmut.
- Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast are still likely preparing for a defensive operation in the long term despite recent claims of territorial gains.
- Russian officials and sources continue to indicate that mobilization measures are ongoing despite numerous claims that mobilization has officially concluded.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities continue deporting Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 18, 2023

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

January 19, 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.

Senior Kremlin officials continue holding high-level meetings with Belarusian national leadership – activity that could be setting conditions for a Russian attack against Ukraine from Belarus, although not necessarily and not in the coming weeks. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin discussed unspecified bilateral military cooperation, the implementation of unspecified strategic deterrence measures, and "progress in preparing" the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Troops (RGV) in a January 19 phone call.[1] Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk and discussed an unspecified Russo-Belarusian "shared vision" for Russia's war in Ukraine on January 19.[2] Lavrov and Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergey Aleinik discussed how Russia and Belarus can defeat an ongoing Western hybrid war against the states and signed an unspecified memorandum of cooperation on "ensuring biological security." [3] This memorandum could be a leading indicator of the intensification of an existing Russian information operation falsely accusing Ukraine of developing chemical and biochemical weapons in alleged US-funded biolabs in Ukraine that was part of the Kremlin's pretext for the February 2022 invasion.[4]

The most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a new Russian attack against Ukraine from Belarus in early 2023 seems less likely given current Russian military activity in Belarus. A new MDCOA of an attack from Belarus in late 2023 seems more likely. Russian forces currently deployed in Belarus are

undergoing training rotations and redeploying to fight in eastern Ukraine.^[5] There are no observed indicators that Russian forces in Belarus have the command and control structures necessary for the winter or spring 2023 attack against Ukraine about which Ukrainian issued warnings in late 2022.^[6] It seems more likely that Russian forces may be setting conditions for a new MDCOA of attacking Ukraine from Belarus in late 2023 given recent Ukrainian intelligence reports that Russia and Belarus plan to conduct major exercises (Zapad 2023 and Union Shield 2023), likely in September 2023.^[7] ISW is thus adjusting its forecast; the current assessed MDCOA is a Russian attack against Ukraine from Belarusian territory in late 2023. This is not simply a deferment of the timeframe for the previous MDCOA. It is an entirely new MDCOA given that it would occur in different circumstances. Russia will have completed the Autumn 2022 annual conscription cycle and be well into the Spring 2023 cycle, on the one hand, and may well have completed one or more additional reserve call-ups by Autumn 2023. A delayed timeline for this COA could allow Russia's military industry to gear up sufficiently to provide a greater proportion of the necessary materiel for a renewed invasion from Belarus than Russia can provide this winter. ISW continues to assess that a Russian attack against Belarus remains a highly unlikely scenario in the forecast cone this winter and unlikely but more plausible in Autumn 2023.

Russia's nationalist military bloggers continue to criticize the idea of Russian forces attacking Ukraine from Belarus. Russian milbloggers continue to react negatively every time the idea of Russian forces attacking Ukraine from Belarus resurfaces. One milblogger stated that it is a bad idea for Russia to significantly expand the front from Belarus because Russian forces' battlefield performance improved after compressing the front following Russia's withdrawal from upper Kherson.^[8] This milblogger stated that Russian forces do not have the capability to project deep into Ukraine along multiple axes of advance as Russia attempted to do in early 2022 and advocated that Russia prioritize reestablishing a strong conventional military capable of fighting NATO.^[9]

Lavrov attacked the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), underscoring the infeasibility of the Kremlin supporting a third Minsk-type agreement. Lavrov accused NATO and the European Union of using the OSCE against Russia and falsely claimed that the OSCE agreed to the Minsk agreements (the failed ceasefire accords that the Kremlin coerced Ukraine into accepting in 2014-2015, which stipulated major political concessions undermining Ukraine's sovereignty) only to buy time to prepare for a war against Russia.^[10] Lavrov accused unspecified OSCE Special Monitoring Mission staff in Ukraine of aiding Ukraine in conducting military operations against civilians.^[11]

The OSCE was a key neutral party in implementing the first two Minsk agreements in 2014 and 2015. Lavrov's attack against the OSCE indicates Moscow's unwillingness to engage in the future serious cooperation with the OSCE that would be necessary for another Minsk Accords-style ceasefire.^[12] Lavrov's attack may also be an attempt to justify Russian forces' reported illegal commandeering of OSCE off-road vehicles to support Russian combat operations in Luhansk Oblast.^[13]

Lukashenko continues to balance against the Kremlin by framing Belarus as a sovereign state within the Russia-dominated Union State. Lukashenko's readout of his meeting with Lavrov stated that he and Lavrov identified unspecified areas of cooperation to "preserve the sovereignty of the two countries in all respects."^[14] This rhetoric is consistent with Lukashenko's longstanding efforts to avoid ceding Belarusian sovereignty to the Kremlin-dominated Union State structure.^[15]

The Kremlin is intensifying its information operation to promote a false narrative that the war will escalate if Ukraine receives weapons capable of striking Russian forces in occupied Crimea. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded on January 19 to a *New York Times* report that US officials are considering providing Kyiv with weapons capable of striking Russian military infrastructure in occupied Crimea and southern Ukraine.^[16] Peskov stated that Western provisions of long-range weapons to Ukraine that can threaten Russian forces in Crimea will bring "the conflict to a new qualitative level, which will not go well for global and pan-European security."^[17] Peskov added that even the discussion of providing such weapons is "potentially extremely dangerous," but then noted that Ukraine already has weapons that it uses to strike occupied territories in Ukraine. Crimea is legally Ukrainian territory and Ukraine is within its rights under the laws and norms of armed conflict to strike Russian military targets in Crimea. It would be within its rights under international law and norms to attack targets in Russia as well, as the invading country retains no right to sanctuary for military targets within its own territory.

Peskov's threats are part of a Russian information operation designed to discourage Western support to Ukraine and do not correspond to Russia's actual capabilities to escalate against the West. Kremlin officials have made similar threats regarding select Western security assistance in the past and will likely continue to do so in the future. Russia forces, however, do not have the capacity to escalate their conventional war effort in Ukraine and certainly are not capable of conducting successful conventional military operations against the West and NATO in their current state. Russia has severely weakened its military posture against NATO by deploying military units and equipment – including air defense systems – away from NATO and to Ukraine and suffering horrific losses in men and materiel.^[18] The Kremlin never assessed that it could defeat NATO in a conventional war, moreover, an assessment that was at the heart of its hybrid warfare doctrine.^[19] The Kremlin seeks to minimize Western military aid to Ukraine by stoking fears of an escalation Russia cannot execute. Russian President Vladimir Putin's theory of victory likely depends on Putin's will to force his people to fight outlasting the West's willingness to support Ukraine over time.^[20]

The Kremlin is also very unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and extraordinarily unlikely to use them against the West despite consistently leaning on tired nuclear escalation threats. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, in response to NATO Command's planned January 20 meeting in Germany, stated on January 19 that Western officials do not understand that the "loss of a nuclear power in a conventional war can provoke the outbreak of a nuclear war."^[21] Medvedev argued that "nuclear powers [like the Russian Federation] have not lost major conflicts on which their fate depends."^[22] Medvedev routinely makes hyperbolic and inflammatory comments, including threats of nuclear escalation, in support of Russian information operations that aim to weaken Western support for Ukraine and that are out of touch with actual Kremlin positions regarding the war in Ukraine.^[23] Medvedev's consistently inflammatory rhetoric may suggest that the Kremlin has encouraged him to promote extremist rhetoric that aims to frighten and deter the West from giving further military aid to Ukraine over fears of escalation with Russia or that he is simply continuing a pattern of extremist rhetorical freelancing. ISW continues to assess that Russian officials have no intention of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine or elsewhere, and certainly not in response to the provision of individual weapons systems.^[24]

Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly siding with the adversaries of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, likely in an ongoing effort to degrade Prigozhin's influence in Russia. Putin met on January 18, 2023 with St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov – one of Prigozhin's overt enemies – for the first time since early March 2022 to discuss St. Petersburg's role in the Russian war effort.^[25] Beglov stated that his administration formed three volunteer battalions that support Russia's invasion of Ukraine under the Russian Western Military District (WMD). ISW previously reported that Prigozhin had launched an intensive campaign petitioning Russian State Duma officials to remove Beglov from his office and had even called on the Russian Prosecutor General's office to investigate Beglov for treason for failing to adequately support the Russian war effort.^[26] Prigozhin-affiliated outlets also published exposés on Beglov over summer

2022, claiming that Beglov deliberately impeded the advertising efforts for recruitment into the three local volunteer battalions.[27] Prigozhin had also suggested that he assisted Beglov in campaigning for the governor role – claiming that he had made Beglov's career and made several proposals to improve his administration.

Putin's demonstrative meeting with Beglov and their specific discussion of Beglov's contribution to the war effort directly challenges Prigozhin's ongoing effort to assert his own authority over Beglov and St. Petersburg. Putin had also recently reappointed Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, former commander of the Central Military District (CMD) as the Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces despite Lapin receiving significant criticism from the *sloviki* faction of which Prigozhin is a prominent member.[28] Putin had also doubled down on the official rhetoric that only Russian forces contributed to the capture of Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, rejecting Prigozhin's claims that Wagner forces had accomplished the tactical victory.[29] Putin is likely attempting to reduce Prigozhin's prominence in favor of the re-emerging professional Russian military and Russian government officials.

Prigozhin nevertheless continues to use claims about the Wagner Group's tactical success to elevate his position, likely deepening a conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for influence in the Russian information space. Prigozhin claimed on January 19 that Wagner Group elements captured Klishchiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and emphasized that Wagner Group forces were exclusively responsible for the tactical advances south of Bakhmut.[30] This statement is the first time Prigozhin has personally broken news of a purported Russian tactical success and likely supports Prigozhin's effort to promote himself as an independently successful wartime leader.[31] Russian sources largely responded to Prigozhin's claim as if it were an official confirmation that Russian forces took the settlement.[32]

Prigozhin's announcement generated widespread conversation among Russian milbloggers about the operational significance of the Russian capture of the settlement.[33] The Russian MoD's announcement concerning the capture of Sil, Donetsk Oblast near Soledar on January 18 generated far less conversation and excitement amongst Russian milbloggers.[34] The Russian Ministry of Defense previously tried to downplay the Wagner Group's involvement in the capture of neighboring Sil by referring to Wagner Group fighters as "volunteers of assault detachments" on January 18.[35] The Russian MoD has started to use more specific language for Russian units in its reporting on Russian operations likely in order to claim more responsibility for tactical advances and minimize Prigozhin's ability to claim that Wagner Group forces are the only Russian forces that are able to secure tactical advances in Ukraine.[36] The Kremlin is likely aware that Prigozhin's recent use of the Wagner Group's tactical success has had a greater effect in the Russian information space than its own efforts to portray the Russian military as an effective fighting force.

Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov reportedly declared that the Wagner Group does not belong in the structure of the Russian Armed Forces. Gerasimov allegedly responded to Moscow City Duma parliamentarian Yevgeny Stupin's inquiry on the status of the Wagner Group and its "operational interaction" with the Russian Armed Forces in an official letter, dated December 29, 2022, that Stupin shared on his Telegram on January 19.[37] Stupin stated that he had received numerous complaints from his constituents who have relatives serving in Wagner detachments that they are unable to contact officials that would connect them with their family members on the frontlines. Gerasimov stated in the letter that "the organization [Stupin] referred to as PMC Wagner does not belong to the structure of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" and that ~~the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is not responsible for Wagner servicemen~~ [38].^[39] Stupin asserted that the letter is real, although ISW has no independent verification of his claim.

Clear evidence indicates that Wagner Group has operated under the direction of the Russian chain of command[39].^[40] A Bellingcat investigation found that Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin reported to current Western Military District Commander Lieutenant General Evgeny [40] – among other Russian military intelligence officials – when Nikiforov was the Chief of Staff of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army in 2015.^[41] The Russian Ministry of Defense recently claimed on January 13 that Russian forces worked with the Wagner Group to capture [41].^[42] ISW assesses that Gerasimov's apparent letter is, at the very least, another pointed effort by the Russian government to undermine Prigozhin's influence. Its release at this time is noteworthy in this respect. Gerasimov was appointed overall commander of the Russian war effort in Ukraine on January 11, for one thing, and Stupin's publication of the nearly month-old correspondence comes in the midst of a concerted Kremlin campaign to clip Prigozhin's wings, on the other.[42]

Key Takeaways

- Senior Kremlin officials continue holding high-level meetings with Belarusian national leadership – activity that could be setting conditions for a Russian attack against Ukraine from Belarus, although not necessarily and not in the coming weeks.
- A new Russian attack against Ukraine from Belarus in early 2023 seems less likely given current Russian military activity in Belarus, although an attack from Belarus in late 2023 seems more plausible.
- Ultra-nationalist Russian milbloggers continue to criticize the idea of Russian forces attacking Ukraine from Belarus.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attacked the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), underscoring the infeasibility of the Kremlin supporting a third Minsk-type agreement.
- Lukashenko continues to balance against the Kremlin by framing Belarus as sovereign state within the Russian-dominated Union State.
- The Kremlin continues to falsely promote a narrative that the war will escalate if Ukraine receives weapons with the capability to strike Russian forces in occupied Crimea.
- An extremist Kremlin ally reintroduced nuclear escalation rhetoric aimed at scaring Western policymakers away providing additional military aid to Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly siding with the enemies of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, likely in an ongoing effort to reduce Prigozhin's influence in Russia.
- Prigozhin's continued use of the Wagner Group's claimed tactical success to elevate his position is likely deepening a conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for influence in the Russian information space.
- Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov may have officially declared that the Wagner Group does not belong in the structure of the Russian Armed Forces and that the Russian military does not collaborate with Wagner despite ample evidence to the contrary.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counteroffensive operations near Svatove, and Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks near Kremenna.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Klishchiivka amidst ongoing Russian offensive operations around Soledar, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka.

- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted localized offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials are reportedly continuing to prepare for a second wave of mobilization.
- Ukrainian partisans may have conducted an IED attack in Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 18, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, George Barros, Grace Mapes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 18, 8:00 pm ET

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech commemorating the Soviet forces' breaking of the siege of Leningrad illustrated that he remains uncertain about his ability to significantly shape the Russian information space. Putin used his January 18 speech to reiterate standard and longstanding Kremlin rhetoric that falsely maintains that Russia launched the invasion of Ukraine to protect residents in the Donbas from neo-Nazis who, the Kremlin claims, seized control of the Ukrainian government in 2014.^[1] Putin did not use the publicity of the event to make any announcements concerning the war in Ukraine, such as a new mobilization wave or a formal declaration of war, which some Russian milbloggers had floated.^[2] Putin has notably declined to use several high-profile public addresses, including his annual New Year's Speech and his canceled annual address to the Russian Federation Assembly, to make any notable new announcements about the war.^[3] Putin likely reiterated standard Kremlin rhetoric because it has resonated well with the Russian ultra-nationalist pro-war community, elements of which have been increasingly critical of his conduct of the war.^[4] Putin may seek to shape the Russian information space over time, but he appears to be unwilling or unable to attempt a dramatic speech that represents a significant inflection in his rhetoric.

Putin's speech is likely part of a larger and relatively new informational effort to wrap the "special military operation" inside the greater Russian national mythos of the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) to increase Russian support for a protracted war and increasing mobilization. Putin's speech was symbolically significant for the Russian domestic audience. Putin is fond of using symbolic dates and historical analogies to address the Russian people and delivered this speech in St. Petersburg to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Soviet forces breaking the Nazi siege of Leningrad. Putin said that Soviet forces defeated Nazi Germany's "genocide of Leningrad" and drew comparisons with how contemporary Russia is fighting "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" in Donbas—where Putin previously accused Ukraine of conducting a genocide to justify his 2022 invasion.^[5] Putin likely seeks to shape the information space over time to regenerate support for the invasion and for maintaining a protracted war by reintroducing pre–February 24 narratives about "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" and "genocide of Russians" to regain control over war coverage after having largely ceded this space to a variety of quasi-independent actors.^[6]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov augmented these efforts to increase Russian support for a protracted war by explicitly claiming that Ukraine and the West are pursuing the genocide of the Russian people. Lavrov accused the West of assembling a coalition of European countries to use Ukraine as a proxy in a war that aims to solve the "Russian question" in the same way that Adolf Hitler had sought a "final solution" to eradicate Europe's Jewish population.^[7] Lavrov argued that Western officials' desire for the strategic defeat of Russia is tantamount to the genocide of the Russian people.^[8] Lavrov likely made the comments to set more explicit information conditions for a protracted war by framing the war in Ukraine as just as existential for Russians as Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. Lavrov's comments are far more noteworthy than Putin's speech, which may suggest that the Kremlin is instructing high-ranking officials to attempt to substantially shape the Russian information space for a protracted war, and open themselves to criticism, instead of having Putin do so himself.

Lavrov's equations of the West with Nazi Germany and its support for Ukraine with an effort to exterminate the Russian people are ludicrous and almost certainly aimed at a domestic Russian audience. Ukraine has never threatened to invade or seize territory beyond the internationally recognized borders of 1991. Neither NATO as an alliance nor any individual member state has threatened to invade Russia, let alone to pursue the destruction of Russians as a people. The purpose of Lavrov's outrageous and absurd comparison was very likely meant to complement Putin's rhetoric and other Russian efforts to persuade the Russian people that Ukraine and its Western backers pose a real and imminent threat to Russian territory and to the Russian people in their homes. Russian governments, the Wagner Private Military Company, and the Russian military have dug trenches and established militias in areas bordering Ukraine for months, ostensibly to defend against the nonexistent threat of a Ukrainian invasion.^[9] These efforts, together with Putin's and Lavrov's statements wrapping themselves in the banners of the Red Army waging the Great Patriotic Special Military Operation, are meant to galvanize support for protracted mobilization and suffering in pursuit of Putin's unprovoked aggression and search for territorial conquest.

Putin and Lavrov continue to deny Ukrainian sovereignty and outright reject direct negotiations with Ukraine. Putin emphasized in his speech that Russia is fighting to protect people who live in its "historical territories" in Ukraine, a continuation of Kremlin rhetoric that rejects Ukrainian sovereignty and seeks to justify Putin's maximalist goals of territorial acquisition in Ukraine.^[10] Lavrov explicitly stated that "there can be no talk of negotiations with [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky" and argued that Western insistence on Ukraine's involvement in negotiations is "nonsense" as the West is in charge of making decisions in Ukraine.^[11] Lavrov stated that the Kremlin would respond seriously to any noteworthy proposals from the United States.^[12] Lavrov's and Putin's statements are indicative of ongoing Russian information operations that aim to reject Ukraine's sovereignty and delegitimize Kyiv's right to negotiate, shifting the onus for negotiations onto Western officials, whom the Kremlin believes to be more willing to offer concessions that Ukraine could not accept and could seek to compel Ukrainian officials to negotiate on terms more favorable to Russia.^[13]

Putin continues efforts to reinvigorate Russia's defense industrial base to support a protracted war in Ukraine. Putin visited workers at the Obukhov State Plant—part of the Almaz-Antey Russian state-owned defense industrial company—on January 18.^[14] Putin stated that the Russian defense industry currently can produce more than it could previously in an unspecified past time frame and stated that Russia will achieve the defense industrial production level that Russia needs.^[15] Putin acknowledged that workers at the Obukhov factory work three shifts a day and reiterated that defense industry workers were exempted from mobilization,

likely because Putin needs to keep specialized workers in Russia's defense industrial base.[16] Putin also used this visit to draw historical parallels between the Great Patriotic War and the current war in Ukraine. Putin and Obukhov workers discussed how over 6,500 workers at the Obukhov plant died during the Great Patriotic War and how Russia is "absolutely justified" in fighting against neo-Nazis in Ukraine today.[17]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is becoming increasingly bold in his verbal attacks against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Prigozhin criticized the MoD's new guidelines for Russian troops in Ukraine that restrict the use of certain personal electronic devices in combat zones and set stricter guidelines for men's grooming standards on January 18.[18] Prigozhin defended Russian line soldiers who do not adhere to grooming standards (Prigozhin observed that beards are customary for many Muslim and Orthodox Christian fighters) and claimed that soldiers' use of smartphones and tablets is necessary for modern warfare. [19] Prigozhin stated that "war is the time of the active and courageous, and not of the clean-shaven who turned in phones to the warehouse." [20] Prigozhin further criticized out-of-touch Russian MoD officials who must "develop along with the development of modern warfare, learn how to effectively kill the enemy and seize territories," and not "comb everyone under your ridiculous rules, principles and whims." [21] Prigozhin's statement was the latest of several designed to undermine confidence in the MoD and promote Prigozhin as the face of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine. [22] Prigozhin's comments reflect a cowboy approach to war that is unsuited to the development and maintenance of an effective large-scale and disciplined modern military.

Prigozhin directly attacked Russian President Vladimir Putin's presidential administration and insinuated that some officials working there are traitors who want Russia to lose the war in Ukraine—one of Prigozhin's boldest attacks against the Kremlin to date. [23] Prigozhin weighed in on an ongoing Russian policy debate about banning YouTube and stated that some officials in the Kremlin presidential administration oppose banning YouTube because it would undermine their effort to have the United States and Russia reestablish relations after Russia loses the war in Ukraine. [24] Prigozhin stated that such officials think that the United States will "forgive [Russia] its sins" of supporting "pro-Russian interests" and "supporting Putin" if Russia begs for Western forgiveness after losing the war. [25] Prigozhin called these officials "traitors of the people" who proclaim exalted pro-Russian values but nevertheless live and vacation abroad and "support the West in every possible way." [26]

Prigozhin and other notable voices in Russia are carving out a new space to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin without fear of retribution. Prigozhin and other prominent Russian nationalists such as Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, have been opening a new sector in the Russian information space where certain figures can criticize Putin and the highest echelons of the Russian government without any apparent retribution. Igor Girkin heavily implied that he would support the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from office in his most direct criticism of Putin to date on January 10, for example. [27] Putin has decided to not censor these voices for far.

A helicopter transporting Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs officials crashed in a residential area in Brovary, Kyiv Oblast on January 18. Ukraine's State Emergency Service announced that the crash killed 16, including Ukrainian Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky and three children, and injured 30, including 16 children. [28] The crash damaged a local kindergarten and a large residential building. [29] Ukrainian authorities have not yet specified the cause of the crash. [30]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech commemorating the siege of Leningrad continued to illustrate that Putin remains uncertain about his ability to significantly shape the Russian information space.
- Putin's speech is likely part of a larger informational effort to wrap the "special military operation" inside the greater Russian national mythos of the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) to increase Russian support for a protracted war and mobilization.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov augmented these efforts to increase Russian support for a protracted war by explicitly and ludicrously claiming that Ukraine and the West are pursuing the genocide of the Russian people.
- Putin continues efforts to reinvigorate Russia's defense industrial base to support a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Putin and Lavrov continue to deny Ukrainian sovereignty and outright reject direct negotiations with Ukraine.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is becoming increasingly bold in his verbal attacks against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin.
- Prigozhin and other notable voices in Russia are carving out a new space to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin without fear of retribution.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Soledar, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- The Russian MoD continues to attempt to downplay the role of the Wagner Group in claimed tactical advances in the Soledar area.
- Ukrainian officials have indicated that Russian forces are concentrating in Zaporizhia Oblast, possibly for a large defensive or offensive effort.
- Russian forces' increasing use of incendiary munitions to conduct what appear to be otherwise routine strikes in southern Ukraine supports ISW's recent assessment that Russian forces likely face a shortage of conventional artillery rounds.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources continued to indicate that Russian authorities are likely preparing for a second wave of mobilization.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 17, 2023

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

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

January 17, 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 Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced on January 17 that he will implement Russian President Vladimir Putin's directive to conduct large-scale military reforms between 2023-2026 to expand Russia's conventional armed forces, likely in preparation for a protracted war in Ukraine and also to set conditions to build a significantly stronger Russian military quickly. Shoigu stated that Putin ordered Russian authorities to increase the number of Russian

military personnel to 1.5 million (from the current 1.35 million). Shoigu outlined that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will institute unspecified “large-scale changes” in the composition, complement, and administrative divisions of the Russian Armed Forces between 2023-2026.[1] Shoigu noted that Russia also needs to strengthen the key structural components of the Russian Armed Forces. Shoigu announced that Russia will reestablish the Moscow and Leningrad military districts, form a new army corps in Karelia (on the Finnish border), form new self-sufficient force groupings in occupied Ukraine, and form 12 new maneuver divisions.[2] Shoigu added that Russia needs to increase its capabilities to adequately prepare its forces by developing more training grounds and increasing the number of trainers and specialists. Shoigu first foreshadowed aspects of this reform at the Russian MoD Collegium meeting on December 21 when he proposed that Russia form two new airborne assault divisions, three new motorized rifle divisions, and reform 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.[3] It appears that Shoigu did not include the reformation of five naval infantry brigades into divisions in his January 17 statement. It is unclear if that part of the plan has been dropped.

These reforms demonstrate Russia’s intent to reform the Russian military to conduct large-scale conventional warfighting in general and not just for the current war against Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed.[4] It is unclear if the Russian military will be able to grow as Shoigu described within three years.[5] Russia can nominally form new divisions but it remains unclear if Russia can generate enough forces to fully staff them to their doctrinal end strengths amid an ongoing war. Shoigu made previous announcements about Russian military reforms that never came to fruition, such as in May 2022 when he called for the formation of 12 new Western Military District (WMD) units of unspecified echelon by the end of 2022 and for the Russian MoD to recruit 100,000 reservists in August 2021.[6] Russia has previously faced challenges with fully staffing existing brigades and regiments, lacking sufficient trainers, and fully forming one new division it announced in 2020 before the start of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[7] The restructuring of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army) took over a year.[8] Russia will also continue to face economic problems, which may continue to strain the Russian military command’s ability to supply its forces.

Russia’s ability to generate large-scale rapid change in its military capacity depends on President Vladimir Putin’s willingness to redirect large portions of the federal budget to a military buildup and putting Russia on something like a war footing for several years. There are signs that Putin might be willing to do so. Reform and expansion on the scale Shoigu outlined will not happen in time to affect the war in Ukraine materially for many months, but it could change the correlation of forces going into 2024, and it could establish conditions for a much more formidable Russian military threat to its neighbors, including NATO, in the coming years. Ukraine likely continues to have a window of opportunity into and through the summer if the West provides it the support it needs.[9]

Putin may announce a second mobilization wave to expand his army in the coming days—possibly as early as January 18. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced on January 17 that Putin will deliver a speech in St. Petersburg on January 18 in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of Soviet forces breaking the Nazi siege of Leningrad, Putin’s hometown.[10] Putin is fond of using symbolic dates to address the Russian people, and some Russian pro-war milbloggers noted that he will seize this opportunity to either declare mobilization or war with Ukraine.[11] Ukrainian and Western intelligence also repeatedly warned of Putin’s mobilization preparations scheduled for mid-January.[12]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is trying to improve professionalism within the Russian armed forces and likely test and improve the effectiveness of its chains of command down to the small unit level. Several milbloggers commented on a reported list of guidelines for Russian troops in Ukraine that restricts the use of personal vehicles and certain personal electronic devices in the combat zone and sets stricter guidelines for the grooming standards of men on the frontlines.[13] The Russian MoD is likely attempting to institute these measures to instill greater professionalism in Russian troops and potentially gauge the ability of lower-level commanders to execute orders to standard, two issues that were brought to light in the wake of the December 31 Ukrainian strike on a Russian concentration area in Makiivka that killed up to 400 mobilized Russian servicemen. Following the Makiivka strike, the Russian MoD highlighted the lack of sound operational security (OPSEC) practices among Russian servicemen and blamed personal cellphone use—among other factors—for enabling the strike.[14] These guidelines likely are part of the ongoing Russian MoD line of effort to conduct widespread military reforms and bolster the overall professionalism of the Russian armed forces in order to avoid further failures such as the Makiivka strike.

The Russian MoD may have additionally issued these guidelines in an attempt to gauge the effectiveness of Russian commanders in executing orders. The issue of grooming on the frontlines, as ISW previously reported on January 16, has been a sticking point between lower-level commanders and undisciplined troops who refuse to obey orders to shave.[15] While the basic presentation of frontline troops may seem like a trivial matter, in reality, adherence to or disregard for such standards can indicate the professionalism or lack thereof of conventional forces. In poorly performing and demoralized units, failure to adhere to such standards can fuel demoralization and poor performance. Attempting to enforce those standards even in the circumstances facing the Russian military in Ukraine today, therefore, makes sense. The order to enforce such standards is also a way for higher echelons of the Russian command to test the ability of lower-level commanders to execute a relatively straightforward order on the individual soldier level.

Several prominent voices in the pro-war information space, including Russian and Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) officials, seized on these guidelines to support further criticisms of the Russian MoD, suggesting that the Russian MoD will likely face stiff resistance in continued attempts at professionalization and modernization. Moscow City Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev complained that the Russian MoD is ignoring real issues on the front and instead banning the movement of personal vehicles in combat zones, which, Medvedev noted, restricts the ability of volunteers to provide servicemen on the frontline with crowdfunded vehicles and supplies that the MoD has failed to procure for them.[16] Medvedev and Deputy DNR Information Minister Daniil Bezsonov both noted that the prohibition of certain personal electronics will impede soldiers’ ability to control quadcopters and store terrain maps offline.[17] These responses suggest that Russian military leadership will struggle to institute meaningful and sustainable reforms as long as they continue to place the onus for change on an individual basis. While these suggested changes are sound and prudent decisions in principle, the Russian MoD will likely struggle to effectively implement them due to continued fragmentations in the information space that skew strongly against the conventional MoD apparatus. The MoD faces a challenge using improved enforcement of standards to raise the quality of the Russian Armed Forces with such a significant trust deficit.

Serbian President Alexander Vucic called on the Wagner Group to cease recruitment in Serbia on January 16. Vucic posed a rhetorical question, asking why Wagner is violating Serbia’s laws.[18] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin stated that Wagner does not operate in Serbia and claimed that no Serbian nationals are enlisted in Wagner detachments because “Serbs themselves are doing an excellent job at handling their problems.”[19] Prigozhin’s statement may be a form of sarcasm, given recent tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.[20] Russian sources posted footage on January 17 purporting to show Serbian volunteers serving in a Russian volunteer battalion deployed to Zaporizhia Oblast, although ISW has not observed any Serbian nationals serving in Ukraine as a part of the Wagner Group. [21]

Key Takeaways

- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu announced on January 17 that he will implement Russian President Vladimir Putin's directive to conduct large-scale military reforms between 2023-2026 to expand Russia's conventional armed forces, likely in preparation for a protracted war in Ukraine and also to set conditions to build a significantly stronger Russian military quickly.
- Putin may announce a second mobilization wave in the coming days, possibly as soon as January 18.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is trying to improve professionalism within the Russian armed forces and likely test and improve the effectiveness of its chains of command down to the small unit level.
- Several prominent voices in the pro-war information space seized on these guidelines to support further criticisms of the Russian MoD, suggesting that the MoD will likely face stiff resistance.
- Serbian President Alexander Vucic called on the Wagner Group to cease recruitment in Serbia.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks near Kremenna as Ukrainian officials continued to suggest that Russian forces may be preparing for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive actions across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- The Russian information space is struggling to portray tactical Russian gains around Soledar as operationally significant.
- Russian forces in Kherson Oblast continue to struggle to maintain their logistics efforts in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast due to Ukrainian strikes.
- A Russian occupation official claimed that Putin will make an "important statement" pertaining to the war in Ukraine on January 18.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to establish the Wagner Group as a legal entity in Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 16, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Mason Clark

January 16, 7:15 pm ET

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The Kremlin continues to publicly challenge Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's claims that Wagner Group forces were solely responsible for capturing Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, on January 12. Russian President Vladimir Putin attributed the success on the frontlines to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and General Staff plans when responding to a journalist's question on January 15 regarding Russian advances in Soledar.^[1] Putin's statement was aired live on state-controlled TV and was likely a deliberate effort to undermine Prigozhin's influence within the Russian information space, given that Putin has previously refrained from commenting on tactical advances in Ukraine. Putin may have also sought to demonstrate he retains control over traditional Russian mass media, while Prigozhin continues to grow an audience on Telegram and other social media networks. The Russian MoD, in turn, also continued to report that Russian Southern Military District (SMD) assault detachments and Russian airborne troops are attacking Ukrainian positions around Bakhmut and likely deliberately excluded mentioning Wagner forces in its January 15 daily briefing.^[2]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov possibly indirectly accused Prigozhin of deliberately exposing the conflict between the Russian MoD and Wagner in the Russian information space. Peskov attempted to dispel reports of an ongoing conflict between Prigozhin and the Russian MoD, stating on January 16 that these reports are "products of information manipulations."^[3] Peskov, however, added that while most of such manipulations come from Russia's "enemies," the Kremlin has "friends" who also behave in a similar way. Peskov's statement may have been tacitly aimed at Prigozhin, whose criticism of the Russian MoD is growing increasingly brazen. Peskov also continued Putin's efforts to undermine Wagner's effort to advance a narrative that only Wagner forces were responsible for capturing Soledar, noting that Russians will remember both Russian servicemembers and Wagner forces for their achievements.

Prigozhin is continuing his efforts to undermine faith in the Russian MoD and in Putin-aligned actors. Prigozhin directly responded to Peskov's statement in an interview question about the MoD-Prigozhin conflict, stating that he has no reason to not trust Peskov.^[4] Prigozhin could have easily disproved reports of the conflict by simply denying them, but continued his tactic of using deliberately vague messaging in order to generate more discussion within the Russian information space, ultimately aimed at undermining confidence in the MoD and Putin. Prigozhin also presented medals to Wagner forces for the capture of Soledar on January 15, including symbolically awarding a fighter who previously received a medal of courage from Putin.^[5]

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the Russo-Ukrainian War is in a "decisive phase" on January 15.^[6] Stoltenberg told German news outlet *Handelsblatt* on January 15 that NATO countries recognize the current situation and must "provide Ukraine with the weapons it needs to win."^[7] Stoltenberg's statement supports ISW's January 15 assessment that the Kremlin likely intends to take decisive strategic action in 2023.^[8] Stoltenberg's statement does not entail that the war is in its final phase or that Russian forces are planning to employ all available resources in impending actions. Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications representative Andriy Yusov remarked on January 15 that Russian President Vladimir Putin has recognized that Russian forces cannot take Ukraine quickly and is considering waging a drawn-out war of attrition.^[9] ISW noted on January 15 that the Kremlin retains its long-term maximalist goals to seize Ukraine and is likely considering multiple courses of action to achieve those goals.^[10]

Stoltenberg dismissed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's repeated concerns that the Western provision of weapons to Ukraine could cause a nuclear escalation. Stoltenberg stated that "this risk of using nuclear weapons is low" and that countries including China conveyed to the Kremlin that "nuclear weapons must not be used."^[11] Stoltenberg's statements align with continuous ISW assessments that the Kremlin is extremely unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.^[12]

A prominent milblogger revived pre-February 2022 discussions of Kremlin intent to return close Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk to power in Ukraine. Igor Girkin, a former Russian officer and prominent nationalist voice, claimed on January 16 that the Kremlin hopes to place Medvedchuk at the head of an alternative Ukrainian government.[13] Girkin and Kremlin-linked milblogger Sasha Kots critiqued Medvedchuk's suitability and the feasibility of him ever taking such a position. [14] This conversation resembles prior media speculation of a potential Kremlin plan to install disgraced former Ukrainian former president Viktor Yanukovych as the leader of Ukraine in early 2022.[15]

The appointment of the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, as theater commander of Russian forces in Ukraine notably did not spark a significant wave of criticism within the Russian nationalist milblogger discourse. Milbloggers largely claimed that Gerasimov's appointment signifies that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is retaking responsibility for the war.[16] The milbloggers connected Gerasimov's appointment to several ongoing issues including internal MoD tensions; conflict between the MoD and the Wagner Group; and the poor state of the war.[17] Milbloggers adopted a defeatist stance regarding Gerasimov's appointment, noting that the fate of Gerasimov's own military career rests on the long-term outcome of the war.[18] Some more critical nationalist voices stated that Gerasimov's appointment is an example of the Kremlin's inability to learn from its historic defeats, given that Gerasimov failed to keep occupied territories in northern Ukraine at the start of the war, but such discourse has been limited.[19] Milbloggers have largely expressed hope that Gerasimov will continue to cooperate with his predecessor (now his deputy commander), Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces Army General Sergey Surovikin, and continue missile strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure.[20] The mixed hopeful but apathetic milblogger response may indicate their hopes that the Russian MoD and the Kremlin are beginning to realistically envision the war in Ukraine by introducing a centralized command structure to take charge of the military campaign.

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin continues to challenge Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's claims that only Wagner forces seized Soledar, Donetsk Oblast.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov possibly indirectly accused Prigozhin of deliberately exposing the conflict between the Russian MoD and Wagner in the Russian information space.
- Prigozhin continued his efforts to undermine faith in the Russian MoD and Putin-aligned actors.
- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the Russo-Ukrainian War is in a "decisive phase," which does not entail that the war is in its final phase or that Russian forces are planning to employ all resources in impending actions.
- A prominent milblogger revived pre-February 2022 discussions of Kremlin intent to return close Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk to power in Ukraine.
- The appointment of Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov as theater commander of Russian forces in Ukraine notably did not spark a significant wave of criticism within the Russian nationalist milblogger discourse.
- Russian forces continued to launch localized assaults to regain lost positions around Svatove and in the Kupyansk direction as Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations around Kreminna.
- Russian forces made additional territorial gains north of Bakhmut and may be intensifying attacks south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued efforts to accumulate manpower in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and to develop new logistic routes between Russia and southern Ukraine.
- Low discipline among Russian forces continues to directly endanger Russian soldiers and limit force effectiveness.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 15, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Mason Clark

January 15, 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, January 15. This report focuses on Russia's likely preparation to conduct a decisive strategic action in 2023 intended to end Ukraine's string of operational successes and regain the initiative.

The Kremlin is belatedly taking personnel mobilization, reorganization, and industrial actions it realistically should have before launching its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 invasion and is taking steps to conduct the "special military operation" as a major conventional war. Russian President Vladimir Putin began publicly signaling preparations for a protracted war in early December 2022, pledging that Russia will improve upon the mistakes of its earlier military campaigns and setting conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.[1] Putin notably remarked on December 7 that the "special military operation" in Ukraine could be a "lengthy process" and made several further public appearances throughout December indirectly outlining his goals to: improve the Russian war effort's mobilization processes, revitalize Russia's defense industrial base, centralize the Kremlin's grip over the Russian information space, and reinstate the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) authority.[2]

The Kremlin is likely preparing to conduct a decisive strategic action in the next six months intended to regain the initiative and end Ukraine's current string of operational successes. Russia has failed to achieve most of its major operational objectives in Ukraine over the past eleven months. Russian forces failed to capture Kyiv, as well as Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and to maintain gains in Kharkiv Oblast or hold the strategic city of Kherson. The Russian air and missile campaign targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure under Army General Sergey Surovikin in late 2022 also failed to generate significant operational effects or demoralize Ukrainian society, as the Kremlin likely intended. Putin and senior Kremlin officials continue reiterating that Russia has not abandoned its maximalist objectives despite Russian defeats on the battlefield.[3] While Putin has not changed his objectives for the war, there is emerging evidence that he is changing fundamental aspects of Russia's approach to the war by undertaking several new lines of effort.

ISW has observed several Russian lines of effort (LOEs) likely intended to support a decisive action in the next six months.

LOE 1: The Kremlin is intensifying both near- and long-term force-generation efforts. Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced plans to drastically expand the conventional Russian military by forming new divisions, reinstating pre-2010 military districts in western Russia, and increasing the conscription age — all indicating Russian *intent* (though likely not actual capability) to reform the Russian military to conduct large-scale conventional warfighting.[4] Ukrainian intelligence reported that the Kremlin seeks to raise the number of military personnel to two million by an unspecified date (from about 1.35 million personnel as of September 2022), while Western intelligence officials noted that Russian military command is in “serious preparations” for a potential second wave of mobilization. [5] Some Kremlin officials have begun discussing proposals to expand eligibility protocols for conscription, active mobilization, and the mobilization reserve, while Russian state structures are attempting to resolve past problems issuing mobilization summonses.[6] Putin himself signed orders that expanded eligibility for mobilization by allowing the mobilization of convicts on November 4.[7]

LOE 2: The Russian military is conserving mobilized personnel for future use — an inflection from the Kremlin’s initial approach of rushing untrained bodies to the front in fall 2022. Putin stated on December 7 that the Russian Armed Forces have not yet committed all mobilized personnel from the first mobilization wave to the frontlines, likely to take time to train and equip these forces for a later, concentrated use.[8] Conventional Russian forces (as opposed to the Wagner Group and the DNR/LNR proxy forces) have not conducted major offensive operations and have mostly maintained defensive positions since the series of successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in summer and fall 2022. ISW has monitored conventional Russian units regrouping and training in Belarus and in Russia.[9]

LOE 3: Russia is attempting to reinvigorate its defense industrial base (DIB): The Kremlin began placing a significant emphasis on the resurrection of the Russian DIB in December. Putin has held several senior meetings and visited defense enterprises throughout the country since December.[10] Putin publicly acknowledged issues with supplies, such as the lack of reconnaissance drones, and notably demanded that one of his ministers issue state defense procurement contracts in a shorter-than-planned timeframe.[11] Putin and other Kremlin officials have also entertained vague discussions that Russian authorities may nationalize property to support the Russian war effort.[12]

LOE 4: Putin is re-centralizing control of the war effort in Ukraine under the Ministry of Defense and appointed Russia’s senior-most uniformed officer, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, as theater commander. The Kremlin is also reinstating the original planners of the war and belatedly attempting to correct command-structure deficiencies. Army General Sergey Surovikin and previous Russian theater commanders failed to achieve the decisive operations Putin — likely unrealistically — intended them to achieve. The Kremlin appointed Gerasimov as the Commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine on January 11 after previously sidelining Gerasimov throughout the full-scale invasion.[13] The Russian MoD also appointed three deputies to closely work with Gerasimov on the expanded scale of tasks pertaining to the “special military operation.” The Kremlin likely intends Gerasimov and his newly appointed deputies to both prepare Russia for a protracted war and take command of a major effort in 2023.

LOE 5: The Kremlin is intensifying its conditioning of the Russian information space to support the war. The Kremlin is shaping the information space to regenerate support for the invasion by reintroducing pre–February 24 narratives and undertaking measures to regain control over war coverage, after previously ceding this space to a variety of independent actors. Kremlin officials resumed promoting a false narrative in late 2022 that the existence of an independent Ukraine threatens Russian sovereignty and culture, justifying Russia’s invasion and ongoing Russian sacrifices as inevitable and necessary “self-defense” measures. [14] Kremlin propagandists have also intensified narratives about the international legal consequences awaiting Russia if it does not win the war, likely to stoke fears of defeat and motivate rededication to the war.[15] The Kremlin has intensified efforts to develop relations with and co-opt prominent pro-war milbloggers who have emerged as a powerful alternative to Putin and the Russian MoD’s deliberately vague war coverage.[16]

The Kremlin’s effort to prepare for a likely intended decisive strategic action in 2023 is not mutually exclusive with the Kremlin’s efforts to set conditions for a protracted war. ISW is not forecasting a “last ditch” Russian effort to win the war in Ukraine. The war will not end, and Russia will not necessarily lose, if any of the possible actions discussed below fail. Russia’s rapid attempt to capture Kyiv and conduct a regime change within the first two weeks of the war was a failed strategic decisive action, for example. Many of the aforementioned indicators — such as the Russian MoD’s proposal to create many new Russian divisions — are almost certainly in part intended to support a long-term effort beyond any decisive action planned for calendar year 2023. However, ISW does not assess the Kremlin is simply staying its course as it prepares for a protracted war.

Russia’s decisive strategic action in 2023 can manifest itself in multiple possible courses of action (COAs) that are not mutually exclusive. According to US military doctrine, a military can undertake a decisive action at every level of war to produce a definitive result and achieve an objective.[17] Decisive actions can be at the tactical, operational, or strategic level and can be either offensive or defensive.[18]

COA 1: A major Russian offensive, most likely in the Luhansk Oblast area. Russian forces may seek to conduct a major offensive in the Luhansk Oblast area. The full capture of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts remain the Kremlin’s official war goals and are among Russia’s most achievable (though still highly challenging) objectives given Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are logically the easiest territories for Russia to capture. Russian forces have been deploying additional forces to Luhansk Oblast and undertaking other significant activities since 2022, which ISW assesses can support an offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast.[19] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are unlikely to conduct an offensive in southern Ukraine in Kherson or Zaporizhia oblasts.[20] The Dnipro River separates the frontline in Kherson Oblast and is a serious obstacle to maneuver. Russia’s layered field fortifications array in Kherson Oblast and extensive mining in Zaporizhia Oblast indicate Russian forces are prioritizing defensive operations in both provinces.[21]

COA 2: A Russian defensive operation to defeat and exploit a Ukrainian counteroffensive. The Kremlin redeployed significant military units from the southern (Kherson) direction to Luhansk Oblast in late 2022 and established field fortifications in Luhansk Oblast, as well as in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts in Russia.[22] ISW has reported on many observed indicators that Ukrainian forces seek to conduct counteroffensives in 2023.[23] Ukrainian officials have long been publicly signaling their intent to conduct counteroffensives in 2023.[24] Russian milbloggers have also been long warning about Ukrainian counteroffensives.[25] Russia seeks to secure Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts — territories the Russian government has (illegally) claimed as Russian territory — and to avoid another significant defeat like the rout in Kharkiv Oblast or the withdrawal from Kherson City. These were both significant events that degraded Russian morale and the perception of Russian forces’ ability to secure their larger objectives for the full “demilitarization and denazification” of Ukraine. Russian forces may seek to successfully defeat a Ukrainian counteroffensive and deprive Ukraine of the initiative by destroying a significant proportion of mechanized Ukrainian forces. Such a successful Russian decisive action could then enable Russian forces to develop a counteroffensive to exploit disorganized and exhausted Ukrainian forces.

Many of the aforementioned Russian lines of effort could support both COA 1 and COA 2; these scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Russian forces could be preparing for a major offensive operation or, alternatively, larger spoiling attacks short of a general offensive operation. The indicators could also support a counterattack to take advantage of a Ukrainian counteroffensive that Russian forces expect to stop.

The most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a Russian offensive against northern Ukraine remains unlikely at this time. However, the Kremlin is creating planning flexibility and will likely expand Russia's military presence in Belarus in the period leading up to planned major exercises (which could possibly support a combat operation) in September 2023. ISW continues to track Russian and Belarusian activities that could in time support a new Russian attack on Ukraine from Belarus. Russia will likely deploy more forces to Belarus under the rubric of the Zapad (West) 2023 and Union Shield 2023 exercises that will likely occur in September 2023.[26] The Kremlin deployed a senior Russian officer, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces Oleg Salyukov — one of Gerasimov's three newly appointed deputies — to Belarus on January 12.[27] Salyukov may be intended to create command-and-control structures necessary for a Russian operational strike group. These are anomalous activities that intensify the information operation that Russia will attack Ukraine from Belarus and could support an offensive, though ISW assesses an offensive is still a low-likelihood scenario at this time. There continues to be no evidence that Russian forces in Belarus have created the command-and-control structures necessary for an operational strike group as of this publication.[28]

The Kremlin retains its maximalist goals to seize all of Ukraine, despite its poor conduct of the war to date. The Kremlin has been slow to effectively fix its flawed invasion for almost a year and has repeatedly opted for short-term solutions such as: repeatedly cycling through theater commanders and retaining a fragmented command structure, introducing crypto-mobilization campaigns as opposed to full-scale mobilization, failing to control the Russian information space by allowing different pro-war factions to partition the information space, and consistently disrupting the Russian military's chain of command. The Kremlin's apparent new attention to Russian military failures will not allow the Kremlin to fix its conduct of the war in the immediate term if at all, and the flaws in Russia's original campaign design — and the subsequent losses incurred — will be difficult to replace.

Russian forces remain dangerous, and Ukraine requires sustained support. Ukraine requires further and timely Western support to adequately prepare for the Russian COAs for 2023 outlined above. Ukraine's Western allies will need to continue supporting Ukraine in the long run even if a Russian decisive action in 2023 fails, as the Kremlin is nonetheless preparing for a protracted war. The West must continue its support to Ukraine's efforts to defeat Russia's invasion — and must do so quickly. **The Russian military, as the saying goes, retains a vote on the course of the war despite its weaknesses and is actively setting conditions for major operations as the war enters its second year.**

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on January 15:

- Ukrainian officials specified that a Russian Kh-22 missile struck a residential building in Dnipro City on January 14, killing at least 25–30 civilians. [29] Ukrainian officials clarified inaccurate reporting that Ukrainian air defenses may have caused the destruction to the building, noting that Ukraine does not have the capability to shoot down Kh-22 missiles.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin awarded medals to Wagner Group forces for the capture of Soledar, likely in an ongoing effort to frame the capture of Soledar as a Wagner accomplishment rather than a joint effort with the Russian Armed Forces, as the Russian Ministry of Defense previously claimed.[30]
- The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground assaults near Makiivka and Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.[31] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are transferring Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) off-road vehicles from Russia to Luhansk Oblast, possibly for use in combat.[32]
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces finished clearing Soledar and attacked Ukrainian positions to the north, west, and southwest of the settlement.[33] A Ukrainian source reported that Russian forces captured a mine west of Soledar near Dvorichchia on January 15.[34]
- Russian forces continued to attack Bakhmut and areas to the north, east, south, and southwest of the city.[35] Russian forces made marginal territorial gains southwest of Bakhmut near Andriivka.[36]
- Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Advisor Serhiy Khilan stated that Russian forces increased their presence in occupied Kherson Oblast and that some Wagner Group forces arrived in Kherson Oblast.[37] Russian occupation head of Kherson Oblast Vladimir Saldo claimed that the restoration of the Henichesk-Arabat Spit bridge improved Russian logistics into occupied Kherson Oblast.[38]
- A Russian servicemember reportedly detonated a grenade in a building where Russian soldiers quartered in Belgorod Oblast, Russia, possibly in a fratricidal act of resistance against mobilization.[39] A Russian source reported that the grenade attack killed three and injured 10 mobilized personnel.[40]

ISW will continue to report daily observed indicators consistent with the current assessed most dangerous course of action (MDCOA): a renewed invasion of northern Ukraine possibly aimed at Kyiv.

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 the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible, and the risk of Belarusian direct involvement as very low. This new section in the daily update is not in itself a forecast or assessment. It lays out the daily observed indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, which we expect to update regularly. Our assessment that the MDCOA remains unlikely has not changed. We will update this header if the assessment changes.

Observed indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- Nothing significant to report.

Observed ambiguous indicators for MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 15 that unspecified Russian and Belarusian military units continue to perform unspecified tasks near the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.[41]

- Radar data indicates that Belarusian forces may have erected new structures around Velykiy Bokov airport near Mazyr, Belarus, 58km north of the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.[42]

Observed counter-indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that it has not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group as of January 15.[43]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 14, 2023

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

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

January 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 forces launched two waves of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure on January 14. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces conducted 50 missile and three airstrikes against Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odessa, Kryvyi Rih, Dnipro, Vinnytsya, and unspecified settlements in western Ukraine.[1] Russian missile strikes on Dnipro City damaged an apartment building, killing at least 5 people and wounding over 60.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces struck Ukrainian cities and settlements in two waves: first employing S-300 and S-400 systems in Belarus against ground targets in Kyiv and Kyiv Oblast in the morning and later launching 28 cruise missile strikes using Kh-101/Kh-555, Kh-22, sea-based Kalibr, and Kh-59 guided air missiles.[3] The Ukrainian General Staff added that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 cruise missiles and three guided air missiles.

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated that Russian forces used missiles fired with a sharp ballistic trajectory, possibly modified S-300 and S-400 missiles or Iskander-M systems, to strike Kyiv, noting that Ukrainian forces cannot currently shoot these missiles down when fired from short-range.[4] Ignat explained that S-300 and S-400 missiles launched from Belarus can hit Kyiv in less than two minutes. Ignat stated that Ukraine can only effectively prevent these strikes by destroying Russian S-300 complexes with Ukrainian long-range systems. Ignat added that Russian forces have previously used these modified systems to target Ukrainian infrastructure in Kharkiv and Mykolaiv oblasts.

The Kremlin continues to falsely claim that Ukraine poses an existential threat to Russia to reject Ukrainian offers of a peace summit and retain Putin's original maximalist goals. Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Security Council Vassily Nebenzya responded to Ukrainian proposals for a peace summit on January 13 with a series of false claims framing Ukraine as an aggressor that was, ludicrously, "about to attack Moscow." [5] Nebenzya stated that Russia's war in Ukraine will only end "when the threat to Russia no longer comes from the territory of Ukraine" and when "the discrimination [against] the Russian-speaking population" in Ukraine ends.[6] Kremlin claims of discrimination against Russian speakers in Ukraine are a longstanding information operation seeking to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[7] Nebenzya reiterated the Kremlin's narrative that Ukraine's refusal to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories and relationships with the West threaten Russia and claimed that Ukrainian ties with the West (rather than Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine) undermined Ukraine's sovereignty and cultural identity.[8] Nebenzya claimed Ukraine is not interested in negotiations and is no more than a NATO paramilitary company—both longstanding claims that the Kremlin intends to delegitimize Ukraine as an independent actor and shift the responsibility for negotiations onto Western officials, who the Kremlin likely believes Russia can pressure into preemptive concessions.[9] Nebenzya asserted that if the Kremlin cannot achieve its maximalist goals through negotiations, it will achieve them through military means.[10] Nebenzya's speech again demonstrates that the Kremlin has not abandoned its maximalist goals in Ukraine, false justifications for its unprovoked war of aggression, and will seek to coerce the West to negotiate over Ukraine's head.[11]

The Kremlin continues to use long-standing false narratives that the Ukrainian government is oppressing religious liberties as moral justification for its refusal to negotiate with Ukraine, likely in the hopes of turning international public opinion against Ukraine. Nebenzya claimed in his address that the "Zelensky regime" is an "authoritarian dictatorship" that desires "to destroy the canonical church in Ukraine—the Ukrainian Orthodox Church." [12] Nebenzya likely deliberately misrepresented the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP)—a Kremlin-affiliated institution—as the official Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is a separate entity from the UOC MP. Nebenzya argued that such an "authoritarian dictatorship" represents a major obstacle to peace talks and requested a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss alleged state persecution of the "Ukrainian Orthodox Church." [13] Ukrainian officials are not persecuting religious liberty or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, however. Russian officials are intentionally misrepresenting Ukrainian efforts to prosecute Kremlin-linked elements of the UOC MP as persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is an independent entity that continues to operate in Ukraine, while the UOC MP is a non-independent subordinate branch of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church, which has fiscally and rhetorically supported Russia's war in Ukraine.[14]

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to leverage the Wagner Group's role in capturing Soledar to elevate his political stature and indirectly criticize the conventional Russian military. Prigozhin published footage on January 14, which he claimed was filmed in Soledar, promoting Wagner's claimed role in capturing the town.[15] Prigozhin introduced the Wagner Group commander who oversaw the capture of the settlement and extolled Wagner's capabilities compared to the conventional Russian military.[16] Prigozhin stated the Wagner Group succeeded due to its wealth of experience, its independence, its effective military equipment, and its superior management system.[17] Prigozhin claimed the Wagner Group's management system incentivizes commanders and subordinates to work closely together on the ground and allows the complaints of regular fighters to be heard.[18] Prigozhin likely highlighted these elements, true or not, to distinguish the Wagner Group from the conventional Russian military and likely advertise for further recruitment and denigrate conventional Russian forces, lobbying for an increased role for Wagner Group—and himself—in the war in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces launched two waves of missile strikes targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure on January 14.
- The Kremlin continues to falsely claim Ukraine poses an existential threat to Russia to reject Ukrainian offers of a peace summit and retain Putin's original maximalist goals.
- The Kremlin continues to use long-standing false narratives that the Ukrainian government is oppressing religious liberties as moral justification for its refusal to negotiate with Ukraine and likely in the hopes of turning international public opinion against Ukraine.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to leverage the Wagner Group's role in capturing Soledar to elevate his political stature and indirectly criticize the conventional Russian military.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Soledar as well as in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas. Ukrainian forces are highly unlikely to still hold positions within the settlement of Soledar itself.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations and reinforced frontlines positions on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Western officials are increasingly joining Ukrainian authorities in warning that Russia is preparing for an imminent second wave of mobilization.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson continued measures to forcibly relocate residents to Russia.
- Ukrainian partisan attacks continue to disrupt Russian rear security efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 13, 2023

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Madison Williams, and Mason Clark

January 13, 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.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 13 that Russian forces seized Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, on the evening of January 12. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces can now form a "cauldron" around Bakhmut and threaten Ukrainian supply lines running southwest of Soledar that support Ukrainian troops in the city.^[1] The Russian MoD notably praised assault and army aviation, missile and artillery troops, and Russian airborne forces for seizing Soledar, without acknowledging Wagner Group's participation in the fighting for the city. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov maintained that the situation around Soledar is difficult and noted that it is unclear if Russian forces control the settlement at this time. At the same time, other Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued to fight in Soledar during the night of January 12-13.^[2] Ukrainian forces may still occupy some positions on the northwestern borders of Soledar but are unlikely to control significant territory within the settlement itself. ISW assessed on January 12 that Russian forces had likely captured Soledar on January 11, but such a victory is unlikely to presage an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.^[3]

The announcement sparked a significant backlash within the Russian information space due to the Russian MoD's failure to acknowledge the Wagner Group's participation in the capture of Soledar. The Russian MoD issued a follow-up announcement six hours later recognizing Wagner volunteers and assault detachments as participants in the Battle for Soledar and noting that the Russian MoD received numerous inquiries regarding its original commemoration of select Russian forces.^[4] The Russian MoD attempted to justify their snub of Wagner by claiming that a Russian "heterogeneous grouping of troops" executed a "joint plan" in the Soledar direction and attributed the assault against residential areas to Wagner forces. Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin vaguely responded to the Russian MoD's omission of Wagner, stating that he cannot comment on the situation and noting that journalists' questions about the matter expose their concern over commemorating Wagner's "heroic capture of Soledar."^[5]

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin staged conditions for such backlash by personally visiting Soledar days prior to its capture and taking his cadre of Wagner-affiliated milbloggers to commemorate Wagner forces' daily advances on Russian social media platforms.^[6] Prigozhin likely attempted to preempt the announcement on January 12 by accusing unnamed bureaucrats and government officials of "constantly trying to steal victory from [the] Wagner private military company" and belittling its merits.^[7] Milbloggers independent or affiliated with Wagner subsequently generated a series of criticisms calling out the Russian MoD for its misrepresentation of the claimed capture of Soledar.^[8]

The Russian MoD's announcement highlighted the existing conflict between the Wagner Group and the Russian MoD – a dynamic that ISW has previously observed and assessed. Several prominent milbloggers – including those affiliated with the Kremlin – stated that there is an ongoing conflict between the Russian MoD and Prigozhin behind closed doors and within the information space.^[9] Some noted that Prigozhin has overpowered the Russian MoD's deliberately vague rhetoric, forcing the Russian MoD, and by extension the Kremlin, to end its long-standing policy of refraining from recognizing Wagner and its war efforts.^[10] A Kremlin-affiliate milblogger, in turn, claimed that Prigozhin and the Russian MoD are both equally attempting to undermine each other and accused Prigozhin of refusing to recognize the Russian Armed Forces as a participating force on the battlefield.

Former Russian officer and prominent nationalist voice, Igor Girkin, condemned the "acute conflict" between traditional military command and unofficial forces (referring to Wagner) during a time of war and claimed that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov seek to disband private military companies like Wagner and incorporate its elements into the MoD structure.^[11] Girkin stated that Soledar has exposed a major dilemma for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who he framed as having the options of either intensifying his efforts to appease both the Russian MoD and Prigozhin; doubling down on either side at risk of losing support for his war; or becoming an arbitrator and the commander-in-chief. ISW had previously assessed that Putin's efforts to balance the at times mutually exclusive lines of effort of retaining Russian MoD support for his war, publicly distancing himself from military failures, and exploiting Prigozhin's parallel military forces, may have ramifications on his power.^[12]

Prigozhin likely seeks to use the victory in Soledar as a bargaining tool to elevate his authority in Russia. The Russian MoD's subsequent mention of Wagner forces in response to public outcry signals a significant victory for Prigozhin, solidifying him as a crucial actor in this war. Reznikov stated that Prigozhin needed a victory in Soledar to deliver proof to Putin that his forces are better than the conventional army.^[13] Prigozhin also publicized a journalist's question about his reported upcoming meeting with Putin to discuss victory in Soledar, singling out the question amidst an array of other similar questions on his response to the Russian MoD's announcement.^[14] Prigozhin told the journalist to read his original statement on Soledar instead of "doing nonsense," despite his comment stating that questions on

Russian MoD's exclusion of Wagner will "need answers but not now." Prigozhin, who has used intentionally vague messaging in the past, also noted that everyone will soon understand why he withheld comment. While ISW cannot confirm that Prigozhin will have a meeting with Putin, he had previously offered his critiques to Putin on the progress of the war and will likely seize this opportunity to his benefit.[15]

Putin may be taking measures to cultivate a cadre of milbloggers loyal to Putin and the Russian MoD to undermine Prigozhin's effort to elevate himself. United Russia Party Central Executive Committee Head Alexander Sidyakin, United Russia State Duma parliamentarian Artyom Turovyi, and Donetsk People Republic Head and Putin ally Denis Pushilin met with several milbloggers on January 13.[16] These senior Putin allies presented a group of over 10 milbloggers – including Alexander Sladkov and a journalist who works for Wargonzo – an official certificate of thanks signed by Secretary of the General Council of the United Russia Party Andrey Turchak.[17] This is the latest event in a string of Kremlin efforts to cultivate ties with select milbloggers.[18] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin undertook efforts to co-opt Sladkov, Wargonzo lead milblogger Semen Pegov, and other milbloggers who were willing to sell out in exchange for political prestige. [19] Putin may seek to cultivate ties with these Kremlin-pliant milbloggers to marshal their media reach against the Prigozhin-aligned milbloggers' efforts to promote Prigozhin and damage Putin's reputation in the Russian information space.

High-ranking Ukrainian officials continue to forecast that Ukrainian and Russian operations will likely intensify in the spring of 2023, while a Russian offensive from Belarus remains unlikely. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov stated in a January 13 interview with the BBC that "spring is the best period to refresh [military] movement for all sides" and that Ukrainian officials understand that Russian forces will be ready to start a higher pace of operations in the spring and therefore Ukrainian forces need to be ready to do so as well.[20] Reznikov also stated that the Russian military could be trying to accumulate forces, ammunition, and weapons for an offensive from areas it already occupies in southern and eastern Ukraine.[21] Reznikov's statement follows Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov's statement that Ukrainian forces intend to launch a major counteroffensive throughout Ukraine in the spring.[22] ISW has still not observed any indicators that Ukrainian forces intend to halt currently ongoing counteroffensive operations this winter in favor of conducting a major counteroffensive this spring. Ukrainian forces may instead use ongoing counteroffensive operations to set conditions for a potential larger counteroffensive operation this spring.[23] Reznikov's forecast of a higher pace of Russian operations in the spring partially supports ISW's assessment that Russian forces are likely preparing for an intended decisive military effort in 2023.[24]

Reznikov also stated that it "would take a lot of time" for Russian forces to prepare an offensive from Belarus and that the Russian military currently "has no resources" to support such an effort.[25] Ukrainian officials continue to routinely state that Russian forces are unlikely to invade Ukraine from Belarusian territory.[26] ISW continues to assess that the most dangerous course of action (MDCOA), a renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus, remains unlikely and that Belarusian forces are highly unlikely to join the fighting in Ukraine.

Disagreement over how to respond to Russians who have fled abroad risks dividing Russian officials and exposing the gap between the Kremlin and certain extreme nationalist actors. Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin proposed on January 12 that Russia amend its criminal code to confiscate the property of Russians who fled the country.[27] Occupation Head of Crimea Sergey Aksyonov praised Volodin's proposal to punish the "scoundrels" who "betrayed" Russia.[28] A prominent Russian milblogger amplified Volodin's proposal and polled his subscribers, finding that the majority supported or strongly supported Volodin's proposal.[29] Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov opposed Volodin's proposal, however.[30] Peskov claimed that Russian citizens who left the country "are all our citizens, all equally, and could have different reasons for leaving" and stated that Russian authorities should create conditions to entice Russians abroad to return.[31] The Kremlin may support the return of Russians abroad in hopes of solving growing labor shortages and demographic challenges, avoiding the ostracizing of more moderate Russian audiences, or distancing itself from the demands of the nationalist community. The Kremlin has rhetorically distanced itself from the prevalent nationalist milblogger demands by re-appointing widely criticized and favored military officials and may be attempting to regain control over the Russian information space.[32]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly ordered Russian occupation authorities to deport Ukrainian children to Russia using medical schemes at a meeting with members of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on December 7. The Kremlin published a list of official orders on January 12 that Putin gave to HRC members on December 7. The document includes an order for Russian occupation officials to take unspecified measures to "meet healthcare system needs" in occupied Ukraine.[33] Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Deputy Vladimir Rogov stated on January 12 that Putin personally ordered occupation authorities to administer preventative medical examinations to children in occupied Ukraine and that over 110,000 Ukrainian students have undergone medical examinations in occupied Zaporizhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts.[34] Rogov stated that over 450 Russian "specialists" from Crimea and Adygea are conducting these examinations and are discovering thousands of children with undiagnosed medical conditions and sending them – possibly to Russia – for "treatment."^[35] Putin previously thanked Russians for their efforts to send children from occupied Ukrainian territory on "holidays" in Russia in his annual New Year's speech.[36] ISW has previously reported instances of Russian officials using the guise of "holidays" and vacation schemes to justify the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea.[37] ISW maintains that the forced deportation of Ukrainian children represents a possible violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 13 that Russian forces seized Soledar on the evening of January 12.
- The MoD's initial announcement (which did not mention the Wagner Group) sparked a significant backlash within the Russian information space, forcing the MoD to issue a second announcement crediting Wagner.
- Prigozhin likely seeks to use the victory in Soledar as a bargaining tool to elevate his authority in Russia.
- Putin may be taking measures to cultivate a cadre of milbloggers loyal to Putin and the Russian MoD to undermine Prigozhin's effort to elevate himself.
- High-ranking Ukrainian officials continue to forecast an intensification of Ukrainian and Russian operations in the spring of 2023 and that a Russian offensive from Belarus remains unlikely.
- Russian officials' responses to Russians who have fled abroad risks dividing the Kremlin and the ultra-nationalist pro-war community even further.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly ordered Russian occupation officials to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under medical relocation schemes.

- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line while Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counteroffensive operations near Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Soledar, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian Intelligence reported that Russian forces seek to raise personnel numbers to two million by an unspecified date.
- Ukrainian partisan attacks continue to divert Russian resources away from the frontline to rear areas in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 12, 2023

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

Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, Layne Philipson, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark

January 12, 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' likely capture of Soledar on January 11 is not an operationally significant development and is unlikely to presage an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage posted on January 11 and 12 indicates that Russian forces likely control most if not all of Soledar, and have likely pushed Ukrainian forces out of the western outskirts of the settlement.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks against Sil in Donetsk Oblast—a settlement over a kilometer northwest of Soledar and beyond previous Ukrainian positions.^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff and other senior military sources largely did not report that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults against Soledar on January 12 as they have previously.^[3] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are still clearing Soledar of remaining Ukrainian forces as of January 12.^[4] Russian milbloggers posted footage on January 12 of Wagner Group fighters freely walking in Soledar and claimed that they visited the settlement alongside Russian forces.^[5] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not announced that Russian forces have captured Soledar, but Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov congratulated Russian forces for successful offensive operations in the settlement.^[6] All available evidence indicates Ukrainian forces no longer maintain an organized defense in Soledar. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's January 12 statement that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in Soledar may be referring to defensive positions near but not in Soledar.^[7]

Russian information operations have overexaggerated the importance of Soledar, which is at best a Russian Pyrrhic tactical victory. ISW continues to assess that the capture of Soledar—a settlement smaller than 5.5 square miles—will not enable Russian forces to exert control over critical Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Bakhmut nor better position Russian forces to encircle the city in the short term.^[8] Russian forces likely captured Soledar after committing significant resources to a highly attritional tactical victory which will accelerate degraded Russian forces' likely culmination near Bakhmut.^[9] Russian forces may decide to maintain a consistently high pace of assaults in the Bakhmut area, but Russian forces' degraded combat power and cumulative exhaustion will prevent these assaults from producing operationally significant results.^[10]

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks scapegoats for the Russian defense industrial base's struggle to address equipment and technological shortages. Putin publicly criticized Russian Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov for aviation industry enterprises not receiving state orders during a cabinet of ministers meeting on January 11.^[11] Putin stated that some enterprises have yet to receive state orders for 2023 and are not hiring more staff or preparing to increase output for potential orders in the future. Putin also interrupted Manturov's explanation that the ministry had already drafted orders for civil and military industries, leading Manturov to admit that Russia had not issued a portion of documents for aircraft manufacturers that would approve state funding for their projects. Putin argued that the enterprise directors informed him that they had not received any state orders amidst current "conditions" in Russia and urged Manturov to not "play a fool." Manturov attempted to soften the demand by stating that the ministry will "try to do everything possible," to which Putin responded that he should not try his best but instead complete the task within a month. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later downplayed the altercation as "a normal workflow."

This incident is likely part of an ongoing Kremlin information campaign to elevate Putin's image as an involved wartime leader. The Kremlin could have cut out the disagreement from its official transcript (as it often does for most of Putin's meetings, which are heavily edited and stage managed), but chose to publicize Putin's harsh response, possibly to identify other officials within the Kremlin as the culprits for Russian defense industrial base's challenges and possibly to threaten other officials. ISW previously reported that Putin began making more public appearances—including visiting defense industrial enterprises—in December and January, despite previously limiting his engagements throughout the span of the war in Ukraine.^[12] Putin is also likely attempting to appease Russian milblogger critiques regarding the lack of advanced military equipment and Russia's inability to task its defense industrial base to accommodate the war effort. ISW had also previously reported that some private armament manufacturers have criticized the Kremlin for failing to arrange any state contracts with their firms on their Telegram channels, feeding in their critiques into the milblogger discourse.^[13]

Manturov's attempts to soften Putin's timeline indicate his uncertainty that the Kremlin has the capacity to administer these contracts in a short time period. Manturov tried to explain to Putin that the ministry will authorize additional contracts "based on the opportunities that are formed by the budget, including the preferential program of the National Wealth Fund," highlighting the differences between the Russian financial reality and Putin's unrealistic objectives for a short-term revitalization of the Russian defense industrial sector.

Ukrainian intelligence confirmed that senior Russian military leadership is preparing for significant military reforms in the coming year, though ISW continues to assess Russia will struggle to quickly—if at all—implement planned reforms. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated on January 12 that Russian military leadership plans to increase military personnel to 1.5 million (from roughly 1.35 million as of September 2022) and form at least 20 new military divisions in 2023, which Hromov noted indicates "the Kremlin's intentions to engage in a long-term confrontation and preparations for conducting large-scale hostilities."^[14] Hromov stated that Russia's significant personnel, weapons, and equipment losses; the effects of international sanctions; and structural weaknesses in the Russian military apparatus have reduced Russia's force generation capabilities and ultimately raise doubts about whether Russian forces can implement these reforms within undisclosed deadlines.^[15] Hromov's statements come the day after the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced a major restructuring of the senior command structure for Russian operations in Ukraine and suggest that the Russian military apparatus writ large is engaged in a concerted campaign to reform and restructure multiple tactical, operational, and strategic aspects.^[16] ISW has also previously reported that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed the expansion of the size of the Russian military and the formation of 17 new maneuver divisions at a Russian MoD

Collegium in Moscow on December 21, 2022—it is unclear what additional 3 divisions Hromov is referring to.[17] ISW assessed that the Russian MoD has been steadily reversing the 2008 Serdyukov reforms (which sought to streamline the Russian ground forces and move to a brigade-based structure) by restoring maneuver divisions across Russian military districts since 2013, but that the Kremlin is unlikely to implement these reforms on a timeline that is relevant for Russia's war on Ukraine.[18] Restructuring of senior command structures, coupled with efforts to expand the military base in 2023, suggest that Russia is setting conditions for a long-term, concerted effort in Ukraine. The Russian MoD may also hold highly unrealistic expectations of its own ability to quickly restructure its ground forces.

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have likely captured Soledar on January 11, but this small-scale victory is unlikely to presage an imminent encirclement of Bakhmut.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin likely seeks scapegoats for the Russian defense industry base's struggle to address equipment and technological challenges, and retains unrealistic expectations of Russian capacity to rapidly replace losses.
- Ukrainian intelligence confirmed that senior Russian military leadership is preparing for significant military reforms in the coming year, though ISW continues to assess Russia will struggle to quickly—if at all—implement planned reforms.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremmin line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian officials and occupation authorities may be preparing for the mass deportation of Ukrainian citizens from occupied territories to the Russian Federation.
- Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Defense Andrei Kartapolov announced that Russian military recruitment offices may increase the age of eligibility for conscription as early as this spring's conscription cycle.
- Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces, Oleg Salyukov (who was appointed as one of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov's three "deputies" as theater commander in Ukraine), arrived in Belarus to take control of combat coordination exercises for the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 11, 2023

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

January 11, 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 Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 11 that Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov will take over as theater commander as part of a major reshuffle of the Russian command structure for the war in Ukraine. The Russian MoD officially announced Gerasimov as Commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces and named three deputies under Gerasimov's command: previous theater commander in Ukraine from October 8 to January 11 Army General Sergei Surovkin, Commander-in-Chief of the Aerospace Forces; Army General Oleg Salyukov, Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces; and Colonel General Alexei Kim, Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff.[1] Surovkin has served as commander of the Aerospace Forces since October 2017 and commanded the "Southern" group of forces in Ukraine from June to October 2022, before his appointment as overall theater commander.[2] Salyukov has served as commander-in-chief of the Russian Ground Forces since 2014, and Kim has served as Deputy Chief of the General Staff since September 2022 following several positions in Russian military higher education institutions.[3]

The Russian MoD's public announcement of this restructuring framed the change as necessary to both improve Russian command and control and to intensify Russian operations in Ukraine. The official MoD readout of the appointment states that these changes were made in association "with the expansion of the scale of tasks solved in [the special military operation's] implementation, the need to organize closer interaction between the services and branches of the Armed Forces, as well as improving the quality of all types of support and the effectiveness of command and control."^[4] Putin's decision to have the Russian MoD publicly announce the changes and their intent, unlike several previous changes to the Russian command structure that were not officially announced, indicate the Kremlin intends Gerasimov's appointment as a major shift—both in actual conduct of the war, as well as the framing of the Russian MoD's role. Gerasimov's appointment and the overall command restructure are likely in part intended to signal, both internationally and domestically within Russia, the Kremlin's dedication to the traditional power structures of the Russian MoD and Putin's willingness to fight a long war in Ukraine.

Gerasimov's appointment as theater commander likely advances two Kremlin efforts: an attempt to improve Russian command and control for a decisive military effort in 2023, and a political move to strengthen the Russian MoD against challenges from the Russian millbloggers and *siloviki*, such as Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, who have criticized the Kremlin's conduct of the war.

Gerasimov's appointment is likely intended to support an intended decisive Russian military effort in 2023, likely resumed Russian offensive operations. Putin has repeatedly demonstrated he misunderstands the capabilities of Russian forces and has not abandoned his maximalist war aims in Ukraine. Putin may have appointed Gerasimov, the highest-ranking officer in the Russian military, to succeed a series of theater commanders to oversee a major offensive that Putin—likely incorrectly—believes Russian forces can accomplish in 2023. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces appear to be preparing for a decisive military effort, possibly in Luhansk Oblast.^[5] ISW has also forecasted a most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a new Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus into northern Ukraine, though this remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone.^[6] Ongoing Russian force generation efforts are likely intended to support some form of further offensive operations, and Gerasimov, who approved and did not push back on Russia's disastrous February 2022 war plan, is unlikely to begin

resisting Putin now.[7] Putin may alternatively (or additionally) perceive the threat of further Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2023 and intend for Gerasimov to strengthen Russian forces against these likely attacks.

The elevation of Gerasimov and the Russian MoD over Surovikin, a favorite of Prigozhin and the *siloviki* faction, is additionally highly likely to have been in part a political decision to reassert the primacy of the Russian MoD in an internal Russian power struggle. The Russian MoD and the *siloviki* faction, often most publicly represented by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, have feuded throughout 2022 on Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin has increasingly criticized the Russian MoD's conduct of the war since late 2022.[8] Igor Girkin, former commander of Russian militants in Donbas and a prominent milblogger heavily implied that he would support the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from office in his most direct criticism of Putin to date on January 10. [9] Surovikin, the previous theater commander in Ukraine, was a public favorite of Prigozhin, and Ukrainian intelligence reported Surovikin is a rival of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.[10] It is unclear why Putin implicitly demoted Surovikin in favor of Gerasimov, unlike previously replaced Russian theater commanders who were blamed for battlefield setbacks. Gerasimov's elevation is likely in part a political move to weaken the influence of the broadly anti-MoD *siloviki* faction and a signal for Prigozhin and other actors to reduce their criticism of the MoD.

Putin's elevation of Gerasimov and the highly criticized Russian MoD may prompt *siloviki* like Prigozhin to further carve up the Russian information space and push back on the Kremlin's conduct of the war, however. Prigozhin has relentlessly promoted the Wagner Group at the expense of the Russian MoD's reputation and may double down on his flashy advertisements on Russian social media and state-affiliated outlets to assert the superiority of his forces.[11] Gerasimov's centralizing efforts will additionally likely face resistance from Prigozhin and other actors eager to retain their private stakes in the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin may have known of Putin's decision to reappoint these commanders and attempted to preempt this news by amplifying information about Wagner's efforts to seize Soledar in the past several days to claim a victory.[12] Putin's decision to elevate the MoD may also signal Putin's departure from attempts to appease *siloviki*-affiliated milbloggers in an effort to regain control over the dominant narrative. ISW will continue to monitor the sentiment among different milblogger factions regarding their ability to criticize the Russian MoD or Russian military commanders.

Gerasimov is unlikely to rapidly revitalize and reform Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine to achieve Putin's maximalist objectives. Gerasimov signed off on Putin's fundamentally flawed initial invasion plans before February 24 and largely faded into obscurity following the collapse of Russia's flawed initial planning assumptions. Gerasimov is highly unlikely to successfully meet Putin's unrealistic expectations for his performance. The Russian MoD announcement of the command restructure did not specify how the command chain under Gerasimov will function other than to name Gerasimov's three "subordinates" and the Russian command structure will likely remain fractured without a considerable pause to adjust Russia's conduct of the war. **Gerasimov will likely preside over a disorganized command structure plagued by endemic, persistent, and self-reinforcing failures that he largely set into motion in his initial role before the invasion of Ukraine.**

The Russian defense industrial base's inability to address munitions shortages will likely hinder the ability of Russian forces to sustain offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in 2023. US and Ukrainian officials told CNN on January 10 that Russia's daily rate of artillery fire has decreased in some areas by 75%, a historic low since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022.[13] These officials noted that Russian forces may be rationing artillery shells as a result of dwindling supplies, or could be reassessing their tactics. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian forces previously depleted their reserves of 122mm and 152mm artillery shells and other reserves over the summer of 2022 under an assumption that excessive artillery fire would lead to faster results.[14] Cherevaty noted that Russian forces must now transfer additional shells from rear areas in Russia and purchase additional munitions from foreign countries to counteract such shortages, resulting in a reduced rate of fire. Cherevaty added that Ukrainian strikes against Russian ammunition depots and logistics have also inhibited Russia's ability to unload munitions close to the frontlines, reducing the intensity of Russia's artillery fire.[15]

Russian sources are increasingly also acknowledging that Russia's ammunition and supply shortages are decisively impeding the ability of Russian forces to advance. A prominent Russian milblogger (and member of Russian President Vladimir Putin's mobilization working group) stated on a federal TV program that Russian force generation efforts such as mobilization are not sufficient, noting that Russia's success on the frontlines is contingent upon its economy and military-industrial complex. [16] ISW had previously assessed that the Kremlin's force generation campaigns are unlikely to decisively affect the course of the war unless Russia addresses its fundamental problems with supplying its war effort in Ukraine. Russian forces achieved some victories in the first stages of the invasion due to Russia's rapid use of its manpower and reliance on artillery superiority, and the Kremlin's inability to replace expended personnel and munitions may further undermine its ability to wage protracted combat.

Russian forces have not yet fully captured Soledar despite recent Russian advances, and the possible capture of Soledar is unlikely to enable Russian forces to capture Bakhmut. ISW assesses that Russian forces have not yet captured Soledar, despite numerous claims from Russian sources.[17] Russian claims about Russian advances in Soledar continue to generate discussion amongst Russian sources about the likelihood of Russian forces capturing Bakhmut.[18] Some Russian sources have begun discussing an implausible collapse of the current Ukrainian frontline and a Ukrainian retreat as far back as Slovyansk and Kramatorsk. [19] The Russian discussion about the imminent capture of Bakhmut and the collapse of Ukrainian defensive lines are divorced from the current operational reality in the Bakhmut area, where Russian forces remain far from severing Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) needed to encircle Bakhmut.[20] Russian offensive operations to capture Bakhmut have likely culminated due to degraded operational capabilities.[21]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly issued secret and preemptive pardons to Russian convicts fighting with the Wagner Group in Ukraine, potentially further empowering Wagner to operate with impunity in the theater. Russian Human Rights Council member Eva Merkacheva told Russian outlet RIA Novosti on January 9 that prisoners recruited by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group to fight in Ukraine receive pardons before they are released from penal colonies for deployment.[22] Under the Russian Criminal Code and Article 89 of the Russian Constitution, only the Russian President may issue a pardon.[23] Merkacheva stated that the presidential decree on pardoning convicts who participated in combat in Ukraine contains information that is classified as an official state secret per existing Russian legislation.[24] Prigozhin earlier announced pardons for the first group of Wagner Group returnees on January 5, and ISW noted at the time that Prigozhin has no legal authority under Russian constitutional or criminal law to grant such pardons himself.[25] However, the existence of the secret presidential pardons suggests that Prigozhin announced the pardons for merely performative reasons, to continue to promote the Wagner Group, and to legitimate its recruitment practices.

Preemptive presidential pardons are likely further driving Wagner Group recruitment within penal colonies and empowering Wagner Group fighters to operate with a large degree of impunity in Ukraine. The promise of a legal pardon for criminal activity likely incentivizes convicts to sign contracts with the Wagner Group, knowing that if they survive operations in Ukraine, they will be released back into Russian society following their deployment with clean records. ISW has previously observed that Wagner Group fighters recruited from prisons are deployed to the frontline in Ukraine chiefly as an expendable attritional force, and often show incredibly lax discipline in the theater. A Russian milblogger circulated imagery on January 10 of Wagner Group fighters in Soledar wearing Ukrainian uniforms in what likely constitutes a resort to perfidy in violation of international law.^[26] Wagner continues to build out its reputation as a brutal and attritional fighting force through instances such as this apparent war crime, and Prigozhin is likely empowering Wagner Group forces to continue similar conduct in the expectation that if they survive, they will return to Russia as free and respected men and without accruing further criminal records through actions in Ukraine. Putin's guarantee of a legal *carte blanche* for Wagner Group fighters will likely allow Prigozhin to use the promise of a pardon to drive recruitment efforts, therefore lending more untrained and unprofessional personnel as an attritional force that often perpetrates atrocities.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated that a renewed Russian offensive operation from Belarus remains highly unlikely. Zelensky stated during a coordination meeting on the security of Ukraine's northwestern borders on January 11 that Ukraine does not see any inflections in Belarus "apart from strong statements."^[27] Zelensky noted that Ukraine needs to prepare its northwestern borders and regions on the Ukraine-Belarus border for any situation. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukraine had not observed any formation of assault groups in Belarus on January 11, after deviating from its normal reporting pattern on Russian forces in Belarus on January 10.^[28] ISW continues to assess that a renewed invasion of northern Ukraine possibly aimed at Kyiv remains unlikely.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 11 that Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov will take over as theater commander as part of a major reshuffle of the Russian command structure for the war in Ukraine.
- Gerasimov's appointment is likely intended to support an intended decisive Russian military effort in 2023, likely in the form of resumed Russian offensive operations.
- The elevation of Gerasimov and the Russian MoD over Surovkin, a favorite of Prigozhin and the *siloviki* faction, is additionally highly likely to have been in part a political decision to reassert the primacy of the Russian MoD in an internal Russian power struggle.
- Gerasimov will likely preside over a disorganized command structure plagued by endemic, persistent, and self-reinforcing failures that he largely set into motion in his initial role before the invasion of Ukraine.
- The Russian defense industrial base's inability to address munitions shortages will likely hinder the ability of Russian forces to sustain offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in 2023.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated that a renewed Russian offensive operation from Belarus remains highly unlikely.
- Russian forces have not yet fully captured Soledar despite recent Russian advances, and the possible capture of Soledar is unlikely to enable Russian forces to capture Bakhmut.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly issued secret and preemptive pardons to Russian convicts fighting with the Wagner Group in Ukraine, potentially further empowering Wagner to operate with impunity in the theater.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks near Svatove as Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kremenna and struck rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian claims about Wagner Group and conventional Russian military formations' operations in the Soledar area likely reflect competing claims over the responsibility for the most recent notable Russian tactical advances in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast frontline.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces are withdrawing key assets and restructuring logistics networks in southern Ukraine due to Ukrainian strikes.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced a plan to improve the Russian defense industrial base.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 10, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, George Barros, Katherine Lawlor, and Mason Clark

January 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.

Russian media reported on January 10 that Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, former commander of the Central Military District (CMD) and Russian forces in eastern Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts, has been appointed Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces. Russian outlet URA, citing unidentified Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) sources, reported that Lapin took over from Colonel General Vasily Tonkoshukov as Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces on January 9.^[1] It is unclear why Tonkoshukov was removed from this position and what his next role will be. While official Kremlin and MoD sources have not confirmed the claim, it was widely circulated and responded to as fact among military commentators in the Russian information space.^[2] Lapin's appointment is notably to the position of Chief of Staff of the Russian *Ground Forces* (also known as the Russian Army), not the Russian *Armed Forces* as a whole. Army General Valery Gerasimov likely remains Chief of the General Staff of the Russian *Armed Forces*. The Chief of Staff of the Russian Army is not a frontline command position, and while Lapin's specific duties (in the currently fragmented Russian command structure) are unclear, he is unlikely to directly command troops in Ukraine.

Lapin's previous role as commander of the "Central" group of Russian forces in Ukraine and commander of the Russian Central Military District (CMD) was checkered with controversy following the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive that retook large swaths of territory in eastern Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts in September 2022. The Russian MoD confirmed Lapin's appointment as commander of the "Central" grouping on June 24, 2022, and noted he was responsible for operations in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area and likely the broader Luhansk-Donetsk Oblast border area.^[3] Lapin went on to receive a "Hero of

"Russia" medal on July 4 for his role in the Russian capture of Lysychansk.[4] Lapin was also the commander responsible for Lyman, Donetsk Oblast, and received strong criticism from prominent voices in the Russian information space for his claimed responsibility for massive Russian losses following successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in mid-September of 2022 that pushed Russian forces to the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.[5] Following the disastrous Russian loss of most of Kharkiv Oblast and the critical settlement of Lyman, the Kremlin reportedly removed Lapin from both command of the "Central" grouping and CMD.[6] The pro-war information space's response to Lapin's perceived command failures served as a catalyst for a fracture between a faction led by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin—the *siloviki*—and the Russian MoD establishment that milbloggers widely claimed Lapin represented.[7] Kadyrov's staunch and pointed criticism of Lapin at the time demonstrated that the *siloviki* faction saw itself as fundamentally at odds with the conventional Russian MoD and associated elements.[8]

Lapin's appointment as army Chief of Staff may be intended to serve as a counterbalance to the growing prominence of the *siloviki*. Prigozhin and Kadyrov both have largely private armed forces at their disposal (Kadyrov's Chechen fighters and Prigozhin's Wagner Group) and are capitalizing on the gains made by these forces to promote themselves politically, as ISW has frequently reported.[9] As the anti-Russian MoD voices gain more relevance and support throughout the Russian pro-war information space, which perceives this faction as generally more competent, motivated, and effective than the Russian MoD, Russian military leadership may seek to rehabilitate and bolster Lapin's reputation to establish the Russian MoD as a competent and structured wartime apparatus and balance out the growing influence of the Kadyrov-Prigozhin faction. Additionally, considering that the Chief of Staff of the Russian Army is more of a logistical and organizational oversight role than a command position, the Russian MoD may be using Lapin's appointment to posture a commitment to the sound structuring of Russian ground forces in response to continued criticisms of the efficacy of the Russian army. While the Kremlin has at times distanced itself and even blamed the Russian MoD for military failures in Ukraine, the Kremlin likely maintains a vested interest in bolstering public perceptions of the MoD's efficacy. The Russian military apparatus writ large likely benefits from the public perception that it is an appropriately managed wartime instrument. ISW has previously reported on the Kremlin's attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of the Russian MoD and affiliated elements, including prior efforts to rehabilitate Lapin's reputation.[10]

Lapin's appointment may alternatively suggest that the Russian MoD increasingly must fill important leadership positions with previously disgraced—or at minimum heavily publicly criticized—general officers. Former Russian Eastern Military District (EMD) commander Colonel-General Alexander Chaiko, who led failed Russian efforts to take Kyiv in the early stages of the war, went on to serve as commander of Russian Armed Forces in Syria after he was replaced following the Kharkiv counteroffensive.[11] Colonel General Andrei Serdyukov, former commander of the Russian airborne forces (VDV) who was reportedly dismissed due to the poor performance of Russian paratroopers, now appears to have replaced Chaiko as commander of the Russian grouping in Syria.[12] The Russian MoD appears to be using previously disgraced and unpopular general officers to fill other, non-frontline command roles, suggesting that there is a systemic lack of general officers more suited to these positions.

The news of Lapin's appointment generated further schisms in the already-fragmented pro-war Russian information space. Former militant commander and prominent milblogger Igor Girkin stated that Lapin's new role must be a "misunderstanding" because Russian forces under Lapin's command suffered major losses in Kharkiv Oblast.[13] Girkin concluded that Lapin represents a "boorish" attempt by the MoD to demonstrate their invulnerability.[14] A Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram group claimed that Lapin was also responsible for the disastrous May 5, 2022, Bilohorivka river crossing and additionally blamed Lapin for the loss of Lyman.[15] Other milbloggers responded more neutrally or even positively, with one suggesting that it was not Lapin but Lieutenant General Roman Berdnikov who was responsible for the loss of Lyman.[16] A pro-Kremlin milblogger credited Lapin with stabilizing the front after the collapse of Russian operations in Kharkiv Oblast.[17] The lack of consensus on who commanded the Lyman front among the Russian milblogger community further indicates the convoluted state of the Russian chain of command. Lapin's new role will likely further the divide between the *siloviki* and affiliated milbloggers and milbloggers who have historically been more favorable to the Kremlin and the Russian MoD. This decision will likely open to Russian MoD to more criticism of its intentions and capabilities instead of addressing these concerns.

Russian forces have not captured the entirety of Soledar despite several false Russian claims that the city has fallen and that Bakhmut risks imminent encirclement. Several Russian sources claimed that Wagner Group forces advanced into the west of Soledar on January 10.[18] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin refuted these claims, remarking that Wagner Group forces are still fighting against concerted Ukrainian resistance.[19] ISW has only observed visual confirmation of Wagner Group forces in central Soledar as of January 10.[20] The reality of block-by-block control of terrain in Soledar is obfuscated by the dynamic nature of urban combat, however, and Russian forces have largely struggled to make significant tactical gains in the Soledar area for months. Even taking the most generous Russian claims at face value, the capture of Soledar would not portend an immediate encirclement of Bakhmut. Control of Soledar will not necessarily allow Russian forces to exert control over critical Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Bakhmut, as ISW has previously assessed.[21]

Igor Girkin, former commander of Russian militants in Donbas and a prominent milblogger, heavily implied that he would support the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from office, his most direct criticism of Putin to date. Girkin criticized Putin for appointing and refusing to remove Russian military leaders who oversee frequent and disastrous military failures, in reference to Lapin's appointment.[22] Russian milbloggers have historically criticized Russian military leaders and MoD officials while upholding Putin as an effective wartime leader, as ISW has previously reported.[23] Girkin extended his criticisms to non-military Putin appointees and advisors whose decisions negatively impacted Russia's war performance and effort, noting that the common factor between these leaders is Putin's decision to appoint them.[24] Girkin caveated his criticisms with an implied loyalty to the Russian state, softening his call for Putin to leave office by stating he is against a change of presidential leadership during the war, as it would lead to military and civil "catastrophe".[25] Girkin's criticisms, which he said he hopes will spark change even if they have "suicidal" consequences, indicate that growing frustration with the state of the war may be reaching a boiling point after nearly a year of hostilities among some milbloggers, prompting some milbloggers to reduce their self-censorship.

Key Takeaways

- Russian media reported on January 10 that Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, former commander of the Central Military District and Russian forces in Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts during Russia's significant losses in September 2022, has been appointed Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces.
- The news of Lapin's appointment is generating further schisms in the already-fragmented pro-war Russian information space.
- Igor Girkin heavily implied that he would support the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from office, suggesting that a willingness to reduce self-censorship and directly criticize Putin may be growing among some milbloggers.

- The Ukrainian General Staff deviated from its normal reporting pattern about Russian forces in Belarus and near Ukraine's northern border on January 10, an indicator of possible Russian preparations for an offensive in northern Ukraine, though ISW assesses this course of action remains unlikely at this time.
- Ukrainian forces continued to make gains along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast frontline and made gains around Soledar but have not captured the settlement, despite false claims.
- The Kremlin continues to deny that Russian authorities are preparing for another wave of partial mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities are struggling to contain an effective partisan movement in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 9, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mapes, Madison Williams, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

January 9, 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.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to use reports of Wagner Group success in Soledar to bolster the Wagner Group's reputation as an effective fighting force. Wagner Group forces claimed to capture territory within Soledar over the past few days, and many Russian sources have discussed the gains as indicators that Wagner Group forces may soon encircle Bakhmut.[1] Combat footage widely circulated on social media on January 9 shows Wagner Group fighters engaging in fierce small arms combat near the city administration building in central Soledar.[2] Several Russian milbloggers remarked on January 8 and 9 that Wagner Group forces are responsible for block-by-block advances in Soledar and other critical settlements northeast of Bakhmut, as well as within Bakhmut. [3] Prigozhin emphasized on January 9 that "exclusively" Wagner Group units are taking ground in Soledar, and noted that Wagner fighters are currently engaged in "fierce battles for the city administration building." [4] Prigozhin will continue to use both confirmed and fabricated Wagner Group success in Soledar and Bakhmut to promote the Wagner Group as the only Russian force in Ukraine capable of securing tangible gains, as ISW has previously reported.[5]

Russian President Vladimir Putin submitted a bill setting conditions for further institutionalized corruption in Russia through domestic legislative manipulations. Putin submitted a bill to the Russian State Duma on January 9 denouncing the Council of Europe's Criminal Law Convention on Corruption and withdrawing Russia from the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).[6] Putin submitted the bill on the grounds that the Council of Europe terminated Russia's GRECO membership, thus removing Russia's ability to vote but requiring them to cooperate on several obligations.[7] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that this move does not undermine Russian legislative capacity to fight corruption and emphasized that corruption has not been eradicated anywhere in the world. [8] ISW has previously reported on Putin's efforts to institutionalize corruption through various legal manipulations, and Russia's discontinued membership in GRECO would likely serve as another means by which Putin can institute legislation supporting and enabling corrupt practices without facing international legal mechanisms to hold him to account.[9]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev likely gauged the willingness of the Russian information space to accept increased censorship of opposition voices in a Telegram message on January 8. Medvedev posted a message on Telegram on January 8 which he framed as a response to discussions in the Russian information space about "traitors who have gone over to the enemy." Medvedev stated that a serious conversation began "between the bosses" (likely in reference to Russian leadership) on whether to respond with rule of law or with justice.[10] Medvedev noted that "quiet groups of impeccably inconspicuous people" operated in Russia to enforce "special rules of wartime" during World War II with great success, likely alluding to internal censorship.[11] Some Russian milbloggers appeared to understand Medvedev's implied censorship and agreed, noting that Soviet security and counterintelligence organizations were highly effective at censorship and that "ideological people" are willing to assist these efforts.[12] Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have recently intensified efforts to silence Russian milbloggers who criticize the Russian government, as ISW has previously reported.[13]

Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to use reports of Wagner Group success in Soledar to bolster the Wagner Group's reputation as an effective fighting force.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to open the door for further institutionalized corruption in Russia through domestic legislative manipulations.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev likely gauged the willingness of the Russian information space for the censorship of figures deemed as pro-Ukrainian sympathizers, garnering some acceptance from the nationalist milblogger community.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Ukrainian partisans may be targeting Russian critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in rear areas of Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast frontline and made gains around Soledar and Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued to reinforce positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to construct defensive fortifications and transport military equipment in Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued concerns over a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in the area.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that a second wave of mobilization may be imminent or ongoing.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 8, 2023

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

January 8, 3:45 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, January 8. This report discusses the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) attempts to claim that Russian forces responded to the December 31 Ukrainian strike on Russian positions in Makiivka; the Russian MoD's use of a grievance-and-retaliation framework and the resulting creation of negative feedback loops in the pro-war Russian information space; Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's potential attempts to financially exploit Ukrainian natural resources around Bakhmut; and the United Kingdom Ministry of Defense's (UK MoD) assessment that Russian forces may be preparing for Ukrainian counteroffensive actions along the Zaporizhia and Luhansk oblast frontlines.

The Russian MoD's attempts to claim Russian forces responded to the December 31 Ukrainian strike against Russian positions in Makiivka are generating further discontent in the Russian information space. The Russian MoD announced on January 8 that Russian forces conducted a "retaliation operation" against Ukrainian forces for the December 31 strike on Makiivka that killed up to 400 mobilized soldiers due to Russian command failures and poor personnel dispersal practices.^[1] The Russian MoD falsely claimed the retaliatory strike targeted several temporary Ukrainian deployment points in Kramatorsk, Donetsk Oblast, and killed over 600 Ukrainian personnel.^[2] This claim is false — a Finnish reporter visited the site of the strike in Kramatorsk on January 8 and noted that it hit an empty school.^[3] Several Russian milbloggers responded negatively to the Russian MoD's claim, pointing out that the Russian MoD frequently presents fraudulent claims and criticizing Russian military leadership for fabricating a story to "retaliate" for the Makiivka strike instead of holding Russian leadership responsible for the losses accountable.^[4]

The Russian MoD application of a grievance-and-retaliation framework to many of its operations has created a negative feedback loop with prominent members of the pro-war Russian information space. At the beginning of the massive campaign of strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in October 2022, the Russian MoD employed a similar framing of "retaliation" against claimed Ukrainian strikes on the Kerch Strait Bridge and other Russian infrastructure.^[5] The Russian MoD partially used this framing to mollify escalated demands from the pro-war community to "avenge" Ukrainian actions but provoked an array of responses from milbloggers outlining other instances that the Russian MoD should equally "retaliate" for.^[6] The Russian MoD has thus created a negative feedback loop, wherein it attempts to respond to Ukrainian offensive successes with a discrete, retaliatory, offensive action, which then opens the MoD up to continued criticism from discontented Russian milbloggers highlighting their beliefs that the MoD is responding in the wrong manner or to the wrong event. The Russian MoD's response to the Makiivka strike is a clear continuation of this grievance-and-retaliation model that has once again opened Russian military leadership to staunch criticism of their conduct of the war.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to financially exploit Ukrainian natural resources around Bakhmut and is using the war in Ukraine to connect his military forces with Russian regional officials. An unnamed White House official stated on January 5 that the United States believes Prigozhin seeks to extract salt and gypsum from mines in the Bakhmut area for monetary gain.^[7] Prigozhin attempted to justify the importance of mines around Bakhmut and Soledar (which Russian forces have struggled to capture from Ukrainian defenders) on January 7, stating that these mines have "unique and historic defenses" that act as a "network of underground cities."^[8] Prigozhin added that these mines can house personnel and military equipment up to a depth of 80 to 100 meters and claimed that these mines are stocked with weaponry from World War I. Prigozhin's statements are likely an attempt to both explain the slow pace of Wagner's advances around Bakhmut but may also partially explain his months-long and costly determination to establish control of the area. A former Russian officer and milblogger criticized Prigozhin and Russian commanders, stating that everyone knew about the existence of these mines when developing an offensive plan and dismissed the claim of the presence of historic weapons in the area.^[9] The milblogger also noted even if Russian forces and Wagner troops seize Soledar, Prigozhin and the Russian military will lose strategically due to committing their best forces to an attritional battle.^[10] ISW had previously reported that another Russian *silovik*, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, is reportedly attempting to secure business opportunities in occupied Mariupol.^[11]

Prigozhin is also continuing to publicly align himself with select Russian governors in an effort to increase his influence and advance his personal interests in Russia, as opposed to strictly winning the war. Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit visited the Wagner training facility for the Kursk Oblast People's Militia on January 8 and reportedly trained alongside Prigozhin and "real men" who are patriots during his visit.^[12] Russian outlets claimed that Starovoit even received an offer to sign a contract with Wagner, which he declined due to his public duties.^[13] Some Russian outlets even framed Starovoit's visit to the training ground as model behavior for a Russian politician, further boosting Prigozhin's image as a patriotic wartime leader in the Russian information space.^[14] Prigozhin is likely attempting to rally up support for the legalization of Wagner Group in Russia.

The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) confirmed ISW's previous assessments that Russian forces are preparing for the possibility of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in Zaporizhia or Luhansk oblasts. The UK MoD reported on January 8 that in recent weeks, Russian forces have expanded defensive fortifications in Zaporizhia Oblast along the Vasylivka-Orikhiv line and are maintaining a large force grouping in this sector in a way that suggests that Russian commanders are concerned by the possibility of a major Ukrainian counteroffensive push in southern Ukraine.^[15] The UK MoD suggested that Russian forces are facing two equally exigent counteroffensive scenarios: A Ukrainian breakthrough on the Zaporizhia line that could seriously challenge the viability of the Russian land bridge linking Rostov Oblast with occupied Crimea, or a Ukrainian breakthrough in Luhansk Oblast that could further unhinge the Russian offensive objective of occupying the entirety of Donbas.^[16] ISW has previously noted indicators of preparations for a Russian decisive effort (likely of a defensive nature) along the Svatove-Kremenna line in Luhansk Oblast and assessed that the Russian force posture and prevalence of defensive structures in Zaporizhia Oblast suggest that Russian forces may be preparing for potential Ukrainian efforts against this sector.^[17]

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on January 8:

- Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated on January 8 that Russia plans to begin domestic production of Iranian-made drones.^[18]
- Russian forces continued counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line on January 8.^[19] Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on January 8 that Russian forces transferred several battalions from the Bakhmut area to the Kremenna area.^[20]

- Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated on January 8 that Russian forces do not control Soledar, and other official Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces captured Russian positions near Bakhmut.[21] Prominent Russian milbloggers expressed divergent opinions of the potential for the Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.[22]
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on January 7 that 300 Chechen Akhmat-1 OMON personnel deployed to Ukraine.[23]
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces used incendiary munitions to strike civilian infrastructure in Kherson City overnight on January 7–8. [24]
- Russian forces are continuing to intensify filtration measures to identify partisans in occupied territories. Russian occupation authorities claimed that likely Ukrainian partisans committed sabotage by mining a gas pipeline in Luhansk Oblast on January 8.[25]
- Russian occupation authorities intensified passportization efforts in occupied territories on January 8.[26]

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 7, 2023

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

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

January 7, 5:45pm 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.

Recent Russian gains in Soledar do not portend an imminent encirclement of Bakhmut, contrary to claims made by Russian sources. Even at the most generous interpretation of Russian milblogger narratives, which claim that Russian forces are fighting on the outskirts of Razdolivka (about 6km northwest of Soledar), Russian forces are still far from being within striking distance of an operational encirclement of Bakhmut.[1] In order to effectively cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Bakhmut, Russian forces would have to establish control of the T0513 Siversk-Bakhmut highway (currently 7km west of the furthest point of confirmed Russian advances in the Soledar area) and reach the E40 Slovyansk-Bakhmut highway (13km from the furthest point of confirmed Russian advance in the Soledar area) at least. Considering that the recent rate of gains in this area has been on the order of a few hundred meters a day, at most, it is highly unlikely that Russian forces will be successful in cohering a mechanized push towards these GLOCs and move towards encircling Bakhmut.[2] Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut would still have GLOCs available even if the Russians cut the E40, moreover, making the entire discussion of an encirclement at this point bizarre.

Russia continues to weaponize religion to perpetuate long-standing information operations and discredit Ukraine. Russian milbloggers responded to footage posted on January 7 of uniformed Ukrainian servicemen attending Orthodox Christmas services at the Kyiv-Perchesk Lavra and decried it as a reprisal and open war on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP).[3] Several milbloggers referred to the footage as evidence that the Lavra has been "captured" by "heretics and schismatics."^[4] The milblogger vitriol at the footage of Christmas services at the Lavra follows the decision by the Ukrainian government to take back control of the main cathedral of the Kyiv-Perchesk Lavra from the UOC MP and allow the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to hold Orthodox Christmas services at the Lavra on January 7.^[5] The Russian response to the Ukrainian government's decision to transfer control of the Lavra to the OCU exemplifies Moscow's continued weaponization of religion in order to frame Ukraine as evil and position Russia as the protector of Orthodox Christian values, as ISW has previously reported.^[6]

The Ukrainian government has not disrupted the ability of observers to celebrate Orthodox Christmas in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers falsely presented the legal transfer of the Kyiv-Perchesk Lavra from the UOC MP, which the Ukrainian government maintains has explicit links to the Kremlin and has provided material and spiritual support to the Russian war in Ukraine, to the OCU as an attack on the ability of observers of Orthodox tradition to celebrate Christmas. Orthodox services continued through Ukraine, including in the Kyiv-Perchesk Lavra, throughout the course of the day on January 7.^[7] The Ukrainian government position that elements of the UOC MP, from which Kyiv removed control of the Lavra, is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin's continued association with the Russian Orthodox Church. In his speech on Orthodox Christmas, Putin thanked the ROC for its continued support for Russian troops in Ukraine.^[8] Ukraine is not suppressing the religious liberties of Orthodox Christians, contrary to the Russian information operation, and is instead taking the steps it deems necessary to distance Ukrainian cultural heritage from religious elements it asserts are linked to the Kremlin and its conduct of the war.

Russian forces reportedly continue to deplete their missile arsenal but will likely continue to be able to threaten Ukrainian critical infrastructure and civilians at scale in the near term. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov published an infographic on January 6 detailing that Russian forces have expended roughly 81 percent of their strategic missile stocks and 19 percent of their tactical missile stocks.^[9] Reznikov reported that Russian forces reportedly have remaining of their pre-war and post-invasion production stocks:

92 Iskander 9M723 missiles (11 percent),
 52 Iskander 9M728/9M729 missiles (44 percent),
 118 Kh-101 and Kh-555/55SM missiles (16 percent),
 162 Kh-22/32 missiles (44 percent),
 53 Kh-47M2 Kinzhal missiles (84 percent), and
 59 sea-based Kalibr missiles (9 percent).^[10]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that it would never run out of sea-based Kalibr missiles while conducting a massive series of missile strikes on December 29, 2022.^[11] Russian forces last used sea-based Kalibr missiles in Ukraine during their ninth large-scale series of missile strikes against Ukrainian infrastructure on December 16.^[12] Although the Russian military's tactical missile stock is less expended, S-300 and 3M-55 Onyx missiles are less precise systems than Russian strategic missiles, which is likely why Russian forces have not used these systems extensively in large-scale missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.

Reznikov reported that Russia has managed to produce since the February 2022 invasion:

290 Kh-101 and Kh-555/55SM missiles (65 percent of the pre-war stock),
150 Kalibr missiles (30 percent of the pre-war stock),
36 Iskander 9M723 missiles (5 percent of the pre-war stock),
20 Iskander 9M728/9M729 missiles (20 percent of the pre-war stock),
and 20 Kh-47M2 Kinzhal missiles (47 percent of the pre-war stock).[13]

The Russian production of strategic missiles since the start of the invasion of Ukraine in comparison to the Russian military's pre-war stock highlights that Russia has not mobilized its military industry to support Russian military operations in Ukraine. A country would normally increase the production of missile, rocket, and other weapons systems and munitions before embarking on a major war and would normally put its military industry on a war footing once the war began. Russia has done neither. Putin's failure to mobilize Russian industry to support the Russian war effort in Ukraine may result from fears that further economic disruptions could produce further domestic discontent in Russia because Western sanctions regimes have placed significant constraints on Russian military industry, or because of inherent limitations of Russian industry and military industry—or some combination of these factors. The current level of the Russian military's depletion of strategic missile systems may constrain how often and at what scale Russian forces conduct future massive series of missile strikes in Ukraine, but Russian forces will be able to continue their campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure at scale in the near term and threaten the lives of Ukrainian civilians.

Russian forces have also reportedly depleted their arsenal of Iranian-made drones following an increased pace of drone attacks in Ukraine in the past month. Russian forces have reportedly expended 88 percent of their stock of the Shahed-131 and –136 drones that they have so far received from Iran, with only 90 Iranian-made drones remaining according to Reznikov.[14] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces increased their use of Shahed drones in attacks on Ukraine over the past month in order to maintain the pace of their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure without further depleting their more valuable missile stocks. [15] Russia's contract with Iran reportedly stipulates that Iran will send an additional 1,000 Shahed drones to Russia.[16] Russian forces will likely be able to conduct only a handful of massive drone attacks in Ukraine in the near term until Russia receives from Iran another delivery of drones, which reportedly come in batches of 200 to 300.[17]

Key Takeaways

- Recent Russian gains in Soledar do not portend an imminent Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.
- Russia continues to weaponize religion to perpetuate long-standing information operations and discredit Ukraine.
- Russian forces reportedly continue to deplete their missile arsenal and stock of Iranian-made drones but will likely continue to threaten Ukrainian infrastructure at scale in the near term.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces made marginal confirmed advances in Soledar amid continuing Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continue efforts to establish further control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian and European officials continue to warn that Russia is preparing for an imminent second wave of mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to transport Ukrainian children to Russian territory under the guise of medical rehabilitation schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 6, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 6, 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 officials and milbloggers largely did not react to the US announcement of more than \$3.75 billion in new military assistance to Ukraine, further highlighting that the Kremlin and the Russian information space selectively choose when to portray Western military assistance as an escalation. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on January 6 that the assistance would provide Ukraine with Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, artillery systems, armored personnel carriers, surface-to-air missiles, and ammunition.[1] Russian officials and milbloggers scarcely reacted to the latest announcement of military assistance, even though the Kremlin most recently portrayed the transfer of purely defensive Patriot air defense systems to Ukraine as an escalation.[2]

The lack of Russian reaction to the US announcement of military assistance that Ukrainian forces could use to support counteroffensive operations supports ISW's previous assessment that the Kremlin is more concerned with its information operations and the effect that Western military aid can have on specific Russian military operations in Ukraine than with any particular weapons systems, red lines, or the supposed Russian fears of putative Ukrainian offensive actions against the Russian Federation itself using Western systems.[3] The Kremlin selectively responds to Western military shipments and assistance to Ukraine to support information operations that aim to frame Ukraine as lacking sovereignty and to weaken Western willingness to provide further military assistance by stoking fears of Russian escalation.[4] The Kremlin and the Russian information space will likely seize upon future Western military aid that they believe can support these information operations rather than as a reflection of any actual Kremlin red lines or specific concerns about the potential threat Western weapons systems may pose. ISW has previously noted that these observations are worth considering in the context of the Western discussion of providing Ukraine with Western tanks, long-range attack systems, and other capabilities.

Russian officials and milbloggers continued to respond negatively to Russian President Vladimir Putin's January 5 ceasefire announcement as hostilities continued in Ukraine on January 6. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin remarked that a ceasefire does not mean that Russian troops will stop responding to "provocations by Ukrainian troops," or else Russian forces run the risk of affording Ukraine the opportunity to improve their positions in critical areas of the front.[5] Pushilin's statement was an implicit criticism of the ceasefire announcement and exemplifies the fact that the announcement was poorly received by

Russian military leaders. Former commander of militants in Donbas in 2014 and prominent milblogger Igor Girkin called the ceasefire "a bold and decisive step towards defeat and surrender" for Russian forces and criticized Russian leadership for failing to learn from the outcomes of previous ceasefires over the last eight years. [6] Other prominent milbloggers seized on the ceasefire announcement to criticize the Kremlin's conduct of the war and accuse Russian leadership of directly placing Russian soldiers in harm's way.[7] The ceasefire announcement will likely continue to serve as a point of neuralgia for voices in the information space that have historically enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship with Putin.

While many voices in the Russian information space strongly criticized the ceasefire announcement, certain hardline elements seized on Putin's statement to continue to propagate the narrative that Putin is a protector of religious values and morals. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Federation Security Council Dmitry Medvedev stated on January 6 that Putin offered "the hand to Christian mercy" to Ukraine and that Ukraine rejected it because Ukraine lacks faith. [8] Commander of the Chechen Akhmat Special Forces, Apti Alaudinov, responded to the ceasefire with glowing praise for Putin, whom he called a "true believing Christian," noted that Jesus is a revered prophet in Islam, and accused Ukrainian "Satanism" of being the reason why Kyiv refused to accept the truce.[9] Alaudinov's praise of the ceasefire on religious grounds is part of a specific and long-running Kremlin information operation that seeks to cater to various religious minority groups in the Russian Armed Forces by framing Ukraine as an immoral enemy whose lack of faith transcends offends Christians and Muslims alike.[10]

Prominent Russian milbloggers continued to use their platforms to advocate for the eradication of Ukrainian cultural and ethnic identity. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander Alexander Khodakovsky claimed on January 6 that Russia and Ukraine share a "common gene pool" and "spiritual space" that Ukraine is destroying as the war continues.[11] Khodakovsky's statement is a clear rejection of the Ukrainian people as sovereign and distinct from Russia. Similarly, another prominent milblogger claimed that the idea of a Ukrainian ethnicity has never existed and was manufactured by Ukrainian "nationalists." [12] The milblogger invoked the concept of "Malorossiya"- the imperial Russian ideation of Ukrainian territory as entirely part of and subordinate to Russia.[13] Another Russian war correspondent amplified the pre-February 24 fiction that Ukraine is oppressing Russian speakers and claimed that the war must continue in order to restore the Russian language to the "territory of the soon-to-be-former Ukraine."^[14] These prominent and widely followed voices in the Russian information space continue to openly advocate for the dehumanization and destruction of the Ukrainian people. So long as the Kremlin continues to provide space for such voices as it ruthlessly censors views that stray from its own information lines, the intent behind Putin's war remains clear.

Key Takeaways

- Russian officials and milbloggers largely did not react to the US announcement of more than \$3.75 billion in new military assistance to Ukraine.
- Russian officials and milbloggers continued to respond negatively to Russian President Vladimir Putin's January 5 ceasefire announcement as hostilities continued in Ukraine on January 6.
- Certain hardline elements of the Russian information space seized on Putin's statement to propagate the narrative that Putin is a protector of religious values.
- Prominent Russian milbloggers continue to use their platforms to advocate for the eradication of Ukrainian cultural and ethnic identity.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Kremenna and Svatove.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made gains in Soledar as Russian offensive operations continued around Bakhmut and the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.
- Russian authorities and military leaders continue to face backlash for their responses to the December 31 Ukrainian strike on a Russian base in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces and occupation authorities are continuing to target Ukrainian children to consolidate social control in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 5, 2023

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 5, 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement that Russian forces will conduct a 36-hour ceasefire between January 6 and January 7 in observance of Russian Orthodox Christmas is likely an information operation intended to damage Ukraine's reputation. Putin instructed Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to initiate a ceasefire from 1200 January 6 to 2400 January 7 along the "entire line of contact between parties in Ukraine" and called on Ukraine to accept the ceasefire to allow "a large number of citizens of citizens professing Orthodoxy" to attend services on the day of Russian Orthodox Christmas.^[1] Putin's announcement was ostensibly in response to an appeal by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church) for a temporary ceasefire in observance of Christmas Eve and the Day of the Nativity of Christ.^[2] Ukrainian and Western officials, including US President Joe Biden, immediately highlighted the hypocrisy of the ceasefire announcement and emphasized that Russian forces continued striking Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure on December 25—when many Orthodox Ukrainians celebrate Christmas—and New Year's.^[3]

Putin could have been seeking to secure a 36-hour pause for Russian troops to afford them the ability to rest, recoup, and reorient to relaunch offensive operations in critical sectors of the front. **Such a pause would disproportionately benefit Russian troops and begin to deprive Ukraine of the initiative.** Putin cannot reasonably expect Ukraine to meet the terms of this suddenly declared ceasefire and may have called for the ceasefire to frame Ukraine as unaccommodating and unwilling to take the necessary steps towards negotiations. This is an intentional information tactic that Russia has previously employed, as ISW has reported. [4] Ceasefires also take time to organize and implement. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov notably said on December 14 that Russia has no plans for a ceasefire for Russian Orthodox Christmas, so Putin's sudden January 5 announcement was surprising.^[5] The date of Russian Orthodox Christmas in 2023, after all, has been known for centuries. Had Putin been serious about a religiously motivated ceasefire he had ample time to prepare for it. The announcement of a ceasefire within 24

hours of when it is meant to enter into force suggests that it was announced with the intention of framing Ukrainian forces who continue to fight throughout the timeframe of the ceasefire as unwilling to work towards peace and wanting to fight at all costs.

Putin's framing of the ceasefire on religious grounds additionally reinforces another two-fold Russian information operation that frames Ukraine as suppressing religious groups and positions Putin as the true protector of the Christian faith. As ISW has previously observed, the Kremlin has weaponized discussions of Eastern Orthodox Christianity to accuse Kyiv of oppressing religious liberties in Ukraine.^[6] Russian sources have recently picked up on raids carried out by the Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) against Russian Orthodox churches and clergy members and Ukrainian sanctions against Kremlin-linked elements of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP).^[7] These measures are not efforts to suppress religious liberties in Ukraine but rather are aimed at explicitly pro-Kremlin elements of the Russian Orthodox Church that have materially, politically, and spiritually supported Russian aggression against Ukraine.^[8] The invocation of a ceasefire on distinctly religious grounds in line with Russian Orthodox Christian tradition is a subcomponent of this information operation. Suddenly announcing a ceasefire with Ukraine that should have been negotiated well in advance in observance of Russian Orthodox Christmas will allow Russia to frame Ukraine as infringing on the right of believers to celebrate the holiday as hostilities will likely continue into January 6 and 7. This information operation can support the baseless Kremlin narrative that Ukraine was persecuting Orthodox Christians and Russian speakers, a narrative that Putin has repeatedly advanced as justification for his illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The ceasefire announcement positions Putin as the guarantor of Christian values and beliefs. Putin and other Russian officials have frequently framed the war in Ukraine as a religious war against "Satanic" and "fanatical" elements of Ukrainian society that seek to undermine traditional religious values and morality.^[9] Putin's proposed ceasefire supports false Russian information operations that Russia is fighting a holy war against an immoral Ukrainian society and its secular Western overseers. In actuality, Russian forces have suppressed religious freedom in occupied Ukrainian territory since 2014.^[10]

The pro-war Russian milblogger information space responded to the ceasefire announcement with vitriolic discontent. Several prominent milbloggers emphasized that Russian soldiers do not want a ceasefire at all and remarked that it is a useless, defeatist ploy that is unlikely to succeed in the first place.^[11] One milblogger who was previously embedded with Russian units in Bakhmut and attended the annexation ceremony at the Kremlin in September employed overtly genocidal, dehumanizing rhetoric in response to the ceasefire and stated that Russian soldiers do not want compromise: They "want to kill every person dressed in the uniform of the enemy army, regardless of gender and the circumstances that forced the subhuman [sic] to wear this uniform."^[12] This level of vitriol originating from milbloggers who are typically fairly aligned with Putin's line on the war is noteworthy and undermines Putin's ability to present Russia as the party that is willing to negotiate. Putin's continued association with this milblogger community, especially those who frequently openly call for genocide, continues to demonstrate the fact that Putin has not decided to compromise his aims in Ukraine.

Putin reiterated his maximalist objectives in a telephone conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on January 5. Putin emphasized that Moscow remains open to negotiations with Kyiv as long as such negotiations "take into account new territorial realities."^[13] Accounting for "territorial realities" in the context of negotiations means hammering Ukraine into making concessions that directly undermine its territorial sovereignty.^[14] NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg also noted on January 5 that there are no indicators that the Kremlin's ambitions have changed.^[15]

The use of a ceasefire as an information operation, coupled with Putin's continued propagation of maximalist goals in Ukraine, continues to indicate that Putin has no desire to actually negotiate with Ukraine. Additionally, Putin's continued alignment with and decision to platform milbloggers who routinely use openly genocidal language and call for unrestrained hostilities offer clear indicators of his intentions along these lines. If and when Putin becomes serious about seeking compromises that Ukraine and the West could seriously contemplate accepting, he will have set conditions with the vocal and prominent nationalist community he is currently empowering and courting. He could threaten, marginalize, de-platform, co-opt, or cajole the pro-war milbloggers into accepting more limited objectives, but such activities would be apparent in the information space. As long as Putin continues to give air and prominence to such extremists, however, it will remain clear that he does not intend to abandon his maximalist aims.

Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that prisoners who volunteered with the Wagner Group in Ukraine received pardons, likely in a bid to inflate his influence and political power. Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti reported that Prigozhin told reporters that two dozen former prisoners completed six-month contracts with the Wagner Group fighting in Ukraine and received pardons.^[16] Russian sources published footage of Prigozhin holding a ceremony for the Wagner Group personnel at a rehabilitation center in Anapa, Krasnodar Krai, in which he awarded the former prisoners state medals and pardon papers.^[17] ISW has not observed any official Russian government source comment on whether the Wagner personnel did indeed receive these pardons. Under the Russian Criminal Code and Article 89 of the Russian Constitution, only the Russian President may issue a pardon to an individual, although regionally based pardon commissions and individuals may petition the Russian President to pardon specific individuals.^[18] It is possible that Prigozhin submitted petitions to pardon the former prisoners on their behalf. It is also possible that Prigozhin is claiming that the former prisoners received pardons when in actuality a Russian court may have issued them a "Release from Punishment" (a commuting of a prison sentence and/or other criminal punishment) or the State Duma of the Russian Federation granted the former prisoners amnesty.^[19] ISW has not observed any official Russian sources report that a Russian court or the State Duma has taken either of these legal actions on behalf of these former prisoners, although it is perfectly possible that they did. Previous reporting suggested that the Wagner Group promised prisoners "full exemption from their criminal punishment" and not necessarily that prisoners would receive pardons.^[20]

Prigozhin is likely using the ambiguity of the legal status of these former prisoners to create the impression that he is influential enough to be able to secure pardons for Wagner Group personnel. Prigozhin likely publicized the granting of the pardon papers to reflect this supposed influence in support of ongoing efforts to cast himself as the central figure in the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.^[21] By appearing to take public credit for pardoning these criminals Prigozhin risks seeming to arrogate to himself powers that only Putin actually wields.

Prigozhin also likely publicized the pardons to strengthen the Wagner Group's ongoing recruitment of prisoners and to assuage current Wagner Group personnel's possible concerns about promised legal rewards. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on December 22, 2022, that the Wagner Group currently has 50,000 personnel deployed to Ukraine, including 40,000 convicts recruited from Russian prisons.^[22] Kirby reported that over 1,000 Wagner Group personnel died in Ukraine in a month, and Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* reported on November 5 that 500 former prisoners volunteering with the Wagner Group died in Ukraine in two months.^[23] The Wagner Group likely needs to replenish its forces after heavy losses, predominantly of former prisoners, and Prigozhin likely publicized the supposed pardons to augment the Wagner Group's recruitment campaign in Russian prisons. Prigozhin also likely publicized the

pardons to reassure the reportedly 80 percent of deployed Wagner Group personnel in Ukraine who have been promised some type of legal reward for their participation in hostilities. Prigozhin has increasingly pinned his standing in the Russian ultra-nationalist pro-war community on the Wagner Group's ability to capture territory and, particularly, on its offensive on Bakhmut.[24] Prigozhin likely intends to further motivate Wagner personnel and generate new paramilitary forces in a misguided and implausible effort to reverse the culmination of the Bakhmut offensive.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement that Russian forces will conduct a 36-hour ceasefire in observance of Russian Orthodox Christmas is likely an information operation intended to damage Ukraine's reputation.
- Putin's framing of the ceasefire on religious ground reinforces another Russian information operation that falsely frames Ukraine as suppressing religious groups and positions Putin as the true protector of the Christian faith.
- Putin has not changed his fundamental maximalist objectives in Ukraine.
- Wagner Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that prisoners who volunteered with the Wagner Group in Ukraine received pardons, likely in a bid to inflate his influence and political power, strengthen Wagner Group's prisoner recruitment, and reassure Wagner Group criminals in uniform.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kremenna line, and Russian forces claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the area.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a successful counterattack as Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to operate sabotage and reconnaissance groups on the Dnipro River and reinforce positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers claimed recent Russian successes in Zaporizhia Oblast, likely to distract from the slow Russian offensive around Bakhmut that may be culminating.
- Mobilized Russian servicemembers likely continue to represent an outsized portion of Russian military casualties in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 4, 2023

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

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

January 4, 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 milblogger information space continues to seize on official responses to the Ukrainian HIMARS strike on a Russian base in Makiivka to criticize endemic issues in the Russian military apparatus. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) released an official response to the strike on January 4 and attributed it to the "presence and mass use by personnel, contrary to prohibitions, of mobile telephones within range of enemy weapons systems."^[1] The Russian MoD also claimed that the death toll of the strike is now 89, including a deputy regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bachurin.^[2] The clear attempt by the Russian MoD to blame the strike on individual mobilized servicemen, as ISW assessed the Russian MoD would likely do on January 2, drew immediate ire from Russian milbloggers.^[3] One milblogger emphasized that it is "extremely wrong to make mobile phones guilty for strikes" and concluded that "it is not cell phones and their owners that are to blame, but the negligence of the commanders."^[4] Several milbloggers noted that the use of cell phones on the frontline in the 21st century is inevitable and that efforts to crack down on their use are futile.^[5] The milblogger critique of the Russian MoD largely converged on the incompetence of Russian military command, with many asserting that the Russian military leadership has no understanding of the basic realities faced by Russian soldiers on the frontline and is seeking to shift the blame for its own command failures on the "faceless masses" of Russian mobilized recruits.^[6]

The Russian milblogger response to the Russian MoD deflection of blame onto individual servicemen accurately identifies the endemic unwillingness or inability of the Russian military apparatus to address systemic failures. Cell phone use may have aided the Ukrainian strike to some degree, but the Russian MoD's fixation on this as the cause of the strike is largely immaterial. An appropriately organized and properly trained and led modern army should not permit the convergence of the factors that contributed to the Makiivka strike in the first place. The Russian command was ultimately responsible for the decision to pack hundreds of mobilized men into non-tactical positions within artillery range of the frontline and near an ammunition depot.^[7] The Russian MoD is likely using the strike to further deflect blame for its own institutional failures in the conduct of the war onto mobilized forces, whose own conduct is additionally emblematic of the Russian force generation failures.^[8]

The continued construction of Russian units using solely mobilized recruits will not generate combat power commensurate with the number of mobilized personnel deployed. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin remarked in the wake of the Makiivka strike on January 4 that some of the officers of the targeted regiment were mobilized servicemen.^[9] Pushilin's indication that certain Russian units are relying on newly mobilized and poorly trained recruits for leadership roles, as opposed to drawing from the combat-hardened officer cadre, adds further nuance to the poor performance of and high losses within units comprised of mobilized recruits. Mobilized servicemen with minimal training and degraded morale in the role of officers are likely contributing to poor operational security (OPSEC) practices and lack the basic acumen to make sound tactical and operational decisions.

The Russian MoD has again shifted the rhetoric and format of its daily situational reports (SITREPs) likely to flood the information space with insignificant claimed successes and distract from its significant military failures. The Russian MoD instituted this shift on January 3, doubling the length of its previous SITREPs and focusing on claimed strikes against Ukrainian military assets that often lack operational significance rather than on its largely unsuccessful ground attacks.^[10] These SITREPs focus on small settlements and group strikes by target type rather than location, making it difficult for its audience to geographically orient

the SITREP and verify the claimed strikes. The Russian MoD also dedicated multiple Telegram posts to featuring a new missile carrier, the *Admiral Gorshkov*, that is very unlikely to conduct operations supporting Russian forces in Ukraine, a performative measure similar to those that Russian milbloggers have recently criticized, as ISW has previously reported.[11] The Russian MoD had previously attempted to emulate the Ukrainian General Staff's SITREPs in response to widespread milblogger criticism of the lack of transparency in official war coverage following Russia's military failures in the fall of 2022.[12]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces intend to launch a major counteroffensive throughout Ukraine in the spring of 2023. Budanov stated in an interview with ABC News published on January 4 that he expects fighting to be the most intense in March of 2023 and that the Ukrainian military is planning a major push in the spring that will liberate territory "from Crimea to Donbas" and deal "the final defeats to the Russian Federation."^[13] Ukrainian officials have previously indicated that Ukrainian forces will attempt to maintain the initiative through a series of ongoing and subsequent counteroffensive operations in the winter of 2023.^[14] This reportedly planned major Ukrainian counteroffensive in the spring of 2023 would not be mutually exclusive with Ukrainian counteroffensive operations continuing this winter, as Ukrainian forces could use ongoing and subsequent counteroffensive operations this winter to set conditions for a larger counteroffensive operation in the spring. ISW has not observed any indicators that Ukrainian forces intend to halt counteroffensive operations this winter in order to conduct a major counteroffensive this spring. Budanov stated that there would be further strikes "deeper and deeper" inside Russia but declined to comment on Ukraine's involvement in previous strikes on Russian rear areas in Russia.^[15]

Russian forces are increasingly reliant on Iranian-made drones in their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure and have likely significantly depleted their current stock of these systems. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky reported on January 4 that Russian forces have used about 660 Iranian-made Shahed-131 and -136 drones in Ukraine since their first use in September of 2022.^[16] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces have increased the pace of drone attacks against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the past month primarily using Shahed drones.^[17] Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat reported on January 4 that Russian forces use Shahed drones because they can better evade detection on radar because of how low they fly to the ground, particularly along the Dnipro River in attack routes focused on targets in Kyiv.^[18] Ihnat reported that Ukrainian air defenses have shot down 540 Russian strike drones but stated that even at a 100 percent shoot-down rate Shaheds are still able to damage Ukrainian cities as their warheads do not necessarily always explode when intercepted by Ukrainian anti-aircraft missiles and can detonate upon falling to the ground.^[19] Skibitsky reported that Russian forces use massive swarms of Shahed drones to break through Ukrainian air defenses and noted that Russian forces could not achieve similar results if they use five to 10 drones at a time.^[20] Russian forces, as a result, are running through a significant number of these drones that arrive from Iran in batches of 200 and 300 units.^[21]

Skibitsky reported that Russia's contract with Iran stipulates the transfer of 1,750 drones and that Russian forces currently need to replenish their stocks following a high use of these systems in previous days.^[22] Skibitsky also reported that the GUR has intelligence that suggests that Russia will receive another shipment of Iranian-made drones on an unspecified date.^[23] Russian forces have likely become reliant on the use of Iranian-made drones because they are a cheap alternative to more conventional high-precision missiles, the stock of which the Russian military has likely significantly depleted.^[24]

Russia will likely seek further bilateral cooperation with Iran in order to secure a greater number of high-precision weapons systems for use in Ukraine. An Iranian state-run media source claimed on December 28 that Iran will soon receive 24 Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia likely in exchange for Iranian-made drones and ballistic missiles.^[25] A Russian milblogger claimed that these high-precision weapon systems will allow Russian forces to more effectively target Ukrainian rear areas defended by Western anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems than their current manned aircraft.^[26] Senior US officials reported on December 9 that Russia is providing an unprecedented level of military and technical support to Iran in exchange for Iranian-made weapons systems.^[27]

Russian forces would use all the pledged 1,750 Iranian-made drones in Ukraine by May 2023 if they consume them at the same rate as between September and December 2022. Russia will therefore likely look to secure further agreements with Iran on the provision of Iranian-made high-precision weapons systems in order to augment its campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The Iranian government's *Islamic Republic News Agency* claimed on January 1 that Russia and Iran are building a new transcontinental trade route to bypass sanctions and "foreign interference."^[28] Russian and Iranian officials may be negotiating a trade route in part to support more consistent arms transfers between the two countries. ISW has previously assessed that Iran may be supplying drones and potentially ballistic missiles to the Russian Federation to more clearly establish an explicitly bilateral security relationship with Russia in which Iranians are more equal partners.^[29]

Key Takeaways

- The Russian milblogger information space continues to seize on official responses to the Ukrainian HIMARS strike on a Russian base in Makiivka to criticize endemic issues in the Russian military apparatus and its unwillingness to address systemic failures.
- The continued construction of Russian units using solely mobilized recruits will not generate combat power commensurate with the number of mobilized personnel deployed.
- The Russian MoD has again shifted the rhetoric and format of its daily situational reports (SITREPs) likely to flood the information space with insignificant claimed successes and distract from its significant military failures.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces intend to launch a major counteroffensive throughout Ukraine in the spring of 2023.
- Russian forces are increasingly reliant upon Iranian-made drones to strike Ukrainian critical infrastructure, and Russia will likely seek further bilateral cooperation with Iran in order to secure a greater number of high-precision weapons systems for use in Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kreminna line as Ukrainian strikes reportedly damaged Russian military logistics in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut amid continued indicators that the broader offensive may be culminating.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to rebuild force capability and conduct defensive operations in Kherson Oblast on January 4.
- Select Russian private armament manufacturers are continuing to criticize the Russian military campaign.

- Russian occupation authorities continued to take measures to resolve administrative issues associated with consolidating Russian control of occupied territories on January 4.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 3

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

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

January 3, 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 approved a series of instructions for Russian agencies and high-level officials on January 2 likely to address criticisms of the Kremlin's treatment of military personnel and portray the Kremlin as an involved war-time apparatus.[1] These instructions are ostensibly an effort to address grievances voiced by mothers of servicemen during a highly staged November 25 meeting with Putin.[2] The 11 instructions direct several high-ranking members of the Russian government—including Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin—and government agencies (including the Russian Ministry of Defense) to collaborate with other agencies and non-government organizations to generate a list of recommendations for addressing and improving supply, benefits, and healthcare processes for military personnel.[3] Putin instructed the Ministry of Culture to assist the nongovernmental organization “Committee of the Fatherland Warrior’s Families” to help create documentaries and other material to showcase the “courage and heroism” of Russian forces in Ukraine and to screen domestic documentaries to “fight against the spread of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist ideology.” These instructions are unlikely to generate significant changes and will likely take significant time to implement.

Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed that Russia is using a variety of social schemes to justify the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. In his annual New Year's speech, Putin thanked Russians for their efforts to send children from occupied Ukrainian territory on “holidays.”[4] ISW has previously reported instances of Russian officials using the guise of “holidays” and vacation schemes to justify the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea.[5] Putin's list of instructions also directs Russian Commissioner for the Rights of the Child Maria Lvova-Belova and the occupation heads of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts to “take additional measures to identify minors...left without parental care” in occupied areas to provide them with “state social assistance” and “social support.”[6] The Kremlin may seek to use this social benefit scheme to tabulate the names of children it deems to be orphans to identify children for deportation to Russia and potentially open avenues for their adoption into Russian families. ISW continues to note that 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.[7]

Systemic failures in Russia's force generation apparatus continue to plague personnel capabilities to the detriment of Russian operational capacity in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers claimed on January 3 that the Russian military has sent recently mobilized personnel trained as artillerymen and tankers following their mobilizations to infantry divisions in Ukraine with no formal infantry training.[8] Although the use of personnel in non-infantry branches in infantry roles is not unusual, the Russian military's practice in this case is likely very problematic. The Russian Armed Forces devoted too little time to training mobilized personnel for use in the branches they had previously served in before sending them to the front lines. They certainly did not have time to train them in additional specialties.

Russian forces have suffered significant losses of artillery systems and armored vehicles in operations in Ukraine since the start of partial mobilization in September of 2022, and, therefore, likely have excess personnel trained in the use of specific military equipment.[9] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Russian forces in eastern Ukraine are currently firing artillery shells at roughly one-third the rate of the summer of 2022.[10] The reduced rate of Russian artillery fire is likely a result of the depletion of ammunition stocks, given reports that Russian forces are deliberately transferring ammunition from one sector of the front to another.[11] Putting poorly-trained artillerymen into infantry units without training them for infantry combat operations will likely make them little more than cannon fodder.

Degraded Russian military personnel capabilities will likely further exacerbate Russian milblogger criticism of Russian force generation efforts and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). One Russian milblogger argued that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's proposals to create five new artillery divisions and the recent creation of an artillery division in the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 2nd Army Corps will be a waste of personnel and artillery munitions if the Russian MoD continues to train these personnel in just an artillery capacity without infantry training.[12] Another Russian milblogger argued inaccurately that putting a tanker or an artilleryman in service as a simple infantryman is a war crime that even Soviet commanders did not commit in the most difficult months of the Second World War in 1941.[13] (It certainly is not any sort of crime to allocate individuals with certain specialties to perform different roles and missions in war, and tankers and gunners in all armies at war have sometimes fought as infantry when their systems were destroyed or unavailable.) The Russian milblogger compared the current situation to a similar incident in 2015 when the Russian deployment of an artillery unit as infantry in the operation to capture Debaltseve, Donetsk Oblast, led to the death of 80 percent of the unit to argue that Russian commanders who make such decisions should face criminal prosecution.[14] Russian milbloggers have routinely criticized the Russian MoD for the poor conduct of partial mobilization and will likely continue to do so as Russian force generation efforts produce degraded personnel capabilities that will likely further constrain the Russian military's ability to achieve any operational success in Ukraine. The hyperbole of milblogger criticism of the MoD's personnel practices highlights the ever-increasing hostility toward and skepticism of the MoD among elements of the milblogger community.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin attempted to justify the Wagner Group's lack of progress in Bakhmut, partially supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces in Bakhmut are culminating.[15] Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti amplified a December 31 interview with Prigozhin on January 3 in which Prigozhin stated that Wagner Group forces in Bakhmut are unable to break through Ukrainian defenses in Bakhmut.[16] Prigozhin stated that Wagner's offensive operations in Bakhmut are highly attritional because each house in Bakhmut is a “fortress,” that Ukrainians have defensive lines every 10 meters, and that Russian forces must clear building-by-building.[17] This is a significant inflection for Prigozhin and the first time he has framed Wagner forces in Bakhmut as making effectively no gains. Prigozhin previously stated in October 2022 that Wagner forces operating in the Bakhmut area advance 100–200 meters a day.[18] The Wagner Group conducted information operations to assert that Wagner Group forces exclusively made gains in Bakhmut without the assistance of other Russian elements in December.[19]

Prigozhin is likely setting information conditions to blame Wagner Group's failure to take Bakhmut on the Russian Ministry of Defense or the Russian industrial base. Wagner Group soldiers told Prigozhin that they were unable to break through Ukrainian lines in Bakhmut due to insufficient armored vehicles, ammunition, and 100mm shell supplies during a likely scripted segment in the clip. This statement seeks to absolve the Wagner Group and Prigozhin of personal responsibility by attributing their failure to capture Bakhmut to the larger Russian resource allocation problems that Russian and Ukrainian sources have been increasingly discussing since late December.[20]

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a series of instructions for Russian agencies and high-level officials likely aimed at appeasing widespread criticisms of the provisioning and payment of benefits to Russian military personnel and propagandizing the war.
- Putin confirmed that Russia is using a variety of social schemes to justify the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia.
- Systemic failures in Russia's force generation efforts continue to plague Russian personnel capabilities to the detriment of Russian operational capacity in Ukraine.
- Degraded Russian military personnel capabilities will likely further exacerbate Russian milblogger criticism of Russian force generation efforts and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin attempted to justify the Wagner Group's lack of progress in Bakhmut, partially supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces in Bakhmut are culminating.
- Russian forces continued limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kremenna line as Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian military logistics in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and Avdiivka and may be reinforcing their grouping in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces have reportedly established positions on the Velikiy Potemkinsky Island in the Dnipro River delta as of January 2.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that promises additional benefits to Russian forces personnel and Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) who defend the Russian-Ukrainian border.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 2

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

George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 2, 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 air defenses reportedly intercepted all drones from two consecutive nights of Russian drone strike attacks against Ukraine on December 31 – January 2. Ukraine's air force reported on January 1 that Ukrainian air defense forces shot down all 45 Russian Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones that Russia fired at Ukraine on New Year's Eve.[1] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesman Yuriy Ignat stated on January 1 that Ukrainian forces used the US-provided NASAMS air defense system to shoot down these drones.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 2 that Ukrainian forces intercepted all 39 Shahed-136 drones launched against Ukraine between the night of January 1 and 2.[3] The Ukrainian General Staff again reported on January 2 that Ukrainian forces shot down all 27 Shahed-136 drones that Russian forces launched against Ukraine on January 2, though it is unclear if this figure includes the previously reported intercepts from the night between January 1 and 2.[4] Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky reiterated on January 1 that Russian forces only have enough cruise missiles to conduct two to three more large-scale missile attacks against Ukraine.[5]

Russia's air and missile campaign against Ukraine is likely not generating the Kremlin's desired information effects among Russia's nationalists. Russian forces conducted a cruise missile strike against an object in Khmelnytskyi Oblast — reportedly a base of the Ukrainian 8th Separate Special Forces Regiment — on December 31.[6] A Russian milblogger stated that the strike, while well-executed and a good information operation, is too little too late.[7] The blogger argued that Russia needed to systematically conduct such strikes earlier on in the war, that the strike should have had follow-up strikes to ensure maximum damage, and that the timing of this strike was inopportune since Ukrainian elements were unlikely to be at the base on New Year's Eve.[8] The blogger noted that this was not the first time that Russian forces failed to deliver effective strikes due to an absence of secondary strikes and that Russia should generally be more thorough in its destruction.[9]

A devastating Ukrainian HIMARS strike on a Russian base in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on December 31 generated significant criticism of Russian military leadership in the Russian information space. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that a Ukrainian precision strike on a Russian manpower and military equipment concentration point in Makiivka destroyed up to 10 pieces of equipment but did not release an official casualty number as of January 2.[10] The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated on January 1 that the strike killed 400 mobilized personnel and injured 300.[11] Geolocated footage published on January 1 also placed the aftermath of the strike at the Vocational School No. 19, fewer than 13km east of the frontline.[12] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) acknowledged the strike, claiming that four of the six rockets killed 63 Russian servicemen.[13] Samara Oblast Governor Dmitry Azarov confirmed that among the deceased servicemen are residents of the oblast, and some Russian sources claimed that 600 servicemen of a mobilization regiment were in the school building at the time of the strike.[14] Some milbloggers claimed that the death count was about 110, with over 100 wounded personnel.[15]

The Russian MoD is likely attempting to deflect the blame for its poor operational security (OPSEC) onto Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) officials and mobilized forces. DNR law enforcement officials told Russian state wires that the strike occurred when Russian servicemen violated operational security by using personal cell phones, allowing Ukrainian forces to conduct a precision strike at the base.[16] Kremlin-leaning outlets and some milbloggers amplified the claim, stating that Russian forces should not underestimate the Ukrainian ability to exploit poor OPSEC practices on the frontlines and called on the Kremlin to introduce stricter guidelines on cell phone use among servicemen.[17] Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Deputy Interior Minister Vitaly Kiselyov amplified milblogger reports that military commanders are demanding the resignation of DNR Head Denis Pushilin.[18] Some DNR public officials have also called for the punishment of the official who had

decided to use the school.[19] The Russian MoD may have deliberately relied on the DNR officials to blame OPSEC violations on mobilized servicemen for the attack in an effort to make the DNR the responsible party.

The Russian MoD's vague acknowledgment of the strike generated criticism towards the Russian military command, however. Wagner-affiliated milbloggers stated that Russian military command had made it easy for the Ukrainian forces to strike several hundred servicemen in one location, calling the DNR explanation of cell phone usage a "lie."^[20] A former Russian officer had also stated that Russian forces stored ammunition in the school's basement, enabling the devastating strike.^[21] Other milbloggers stated that the Russian command witnessed similar strikes throughout the past 11 months but were "criminally negligent" and failed to disperse the Russian forces quartered in Makiivka into smaller groups further in the rear.^[22] Several milbloggers referred to a Putin statement about the necessity for the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to take accountability and listen to criticism on December 21 while calling on the Kremlin to punish the commander responsible for the OPSEC failures.^[23] Wagner financier and avid critic of the Russian military command, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, offered an uncharacteristic and vague comment about the situation — stating that he could not reveal how Wagner prevents similar OPSEC problems.^[24] ISW previously reported on two other instances of mass milblogger criticism: the failed Russian river crossing in Bilohorivka in May 2022 and the botched Russian offensive operation on Pavlivka in October 2022.^[25]

Such profound military failures will continue to complicate Putin's efforts to appease the Russian pro-war community and retain the dominant narrative in the domestic information space. Russian sources claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the military and the Investigative Committee to investigate the incident in Makiivka by January 6.^[26] Putin's inability to address the criticism and fix the flaws in Russia's military campaign may undermine his credibility as a hands-on war leader.

Russian sources responded lukewarmly to Russian President Vladimir Putin's staged New Year's address, while Russian milbloggers lauded Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin's appearances on the frontlines over the New Year's holidays. Several Russian milbloggers amplified social media criticisms that Putin used background actors rather than standing with real soldiers during his address.^[27] These criticisms and a chain of Putin's canceled public appearances and meetings with ordinary citizens may show Putin as out of touch. One pro-Kremlin milblogger acknowledged the debate via an editorial in a popular Russian newspaper in which he vehemently denied that Putin used actors at his speech.^[28] Former militant commander and prominent Russian milblogger Igor Girkin drew a direct comparison between Putin and Prigozhin.^[29] Girkin posted that he would not comment on Putin's speech but that Prigozhin decided to fight bureaucracy and corruption and gave a sensational New Year's speech.^[30] Meanwhile, several Russian sources praised Prigozhin for a series of appearances with real Russian soldiers on the frontlines in Ukraine on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.^[31]

Prigozhin used reporting on deceased Wagner Group mercenaries and his prominence in New Year's features to continue to push for legal recognition of Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) and to criticize bureaucrats not favorable to Wagner PMC. Prigozhin continues to seek increased legitimization of and state benefits for Wagner forces, although private military companies are illegal in Russia.^[32] Prigozhin told a reporter who questioned why Wagner soldiers' relatives are not receiving the bodies of their deceased soldiers that Wagner forces took care of the dead even on New Year's while the Russian government, which is supposed to provide death certificates, has "[rested] since the beginning of the war."^[33] Prigozhin accused bureaucrats of desecrating the memory of the dead by treating dead servicemembers as objects in plastic bags.^[34] Prigozhin publicly visited a Wagner-specific cemetery and memorial and the main base of the Wagner Group in Krasnodar Krai on January 1.^[35] Prigozhin has previously complained that Russian authorities refuse to allow for the burial of Wagner mercenaries in Russian military cemeteries, as ISW has reported.^[36]

The Kremlin is likely co-opting some Russian milbloggers who are willing to sell out in exchange for political prestige. Prominent Russian milbloggers Alexander Sladkov and Yevgeniy Poddubny attended the Kremlin primetime New Year's Eve television show *Goluboy Ogonek* 2023 in Moscow on December 31.^[37] This program airs immediately after Putin's annual New Year's Eve speech and is attended by Putin and Kremlin political and cultural elites. Sladkov and Poddubny have both criticized the Russian military's failures in Ukraine. The creators of the prominent Telegram channel *Rybar* had also stated that they received offers to create an open-source intelligence (OSINT) program to benefit Russian private businesses and force structures.^[38] *Rybar* added that they already gave a lecture at the elite Russian state-run Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and are continuing to work in Putin's "special military operation" working group.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian air defenses reportedly intercepted all drones from two consecutive nights of Russian drone strike attacks against Ukraine on December 31 – January 2.
- Russia's air and missile campaign against Ukraine is likely not generating the Kremlin's desired information effects among Russia's nationalists.
- A devastating Ukrainian HIMARS strike on a Russian base in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on December 31 generated significant criticism of Russian military leadership in the Russian information space.
- The Russian MoD is likely attempting to deflect the blame for its poor operational security (OPSEC) onto Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) officials and mobilized personnel.
- Russian sources responded lukewarmly to Russian President Vladimir Putin's staged New Year's address, while Russian milbloggers lauded Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin's appearances on the frontlines over the New Year's holidays.
- Russian forces continued to carry out unsuccessful attempts to improve their tactical positions northwest of Svatove after reportedly conducting a tactical pause.
- The Ukrainian Center for Defense Strategies reported that Russian forces are continuing to deploy personnel on the Kharkiv-Siversk frontline.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces are redeploying along the eastern axis while struggling to maintain their pace of artillery strikes.
- Russian forces attempted limited offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and continued efforts to reinforce defensive structures.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to extend financial promises made to Russian soldiers as Ukrainian officials continue to warn of an impending wave of Russian mobilization.

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