

UKRAINE CONFLICTS UPDATES JANUARY 2 TO MAY 31, 2024

May 31, 2024 - ISW Press

This page is a collection of ISW and CTP's Ukraine War updates from January 2 to May 31, 2024

This 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.

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[Click here](#) to see ISW's collection of reports from 2023.

[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, May 31, 2024

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

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

May 31, 2024, 6:45pm ET

US and German officials confirmed that the United States and Germany have changed their policies to allow Ukraine to use US- and German-provided weapons to strike Russian territory with some restrictions but did not offer precise details about these restrictions. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on May 31 that President Joe Biden approved Ukraine's use of US-supplied weapons to defend against Russian aggression, "including against Russian forces that are massing on the Russian side of the border and then attacking into Ukraine."^[1] Western media reported on May 30 that the Biden administration gave Ukraine permission to use US-provided weapons, including GMLRS rockets, for "counter-fire purposes" against the Russian forces conducting assaults in northern Kharkiv Oblast but has not changed its policy restricting Ukraine from using US-provided weapons, such as ATACMS, to conduct long-range strikes elsewhere into Russia.^[2] Blinken's May 31 statement did not specify which US-provided weapons Ukraine would be able to use or if the United States would allow Ukraine to use US-supplied weapons to strike Russian concentrations in Kursk and Bryansk oblasts as well. It is also unclear from Blinken's statement if the United States will allow Ukraine to strike Russian forces that are massing across the border but have not yet attacked into Ukrainian territory. Blinken responded to a journalist's question on May 31 about

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whether the United States would allow Ukraine to use US-provided weapons to strike deeper into Russian territory, stating that the United States will "as necessary adapt and adjust."^[3]

German Federal Government Spokesperson Steffen Hebestreit stated on May 31 that Ukraine has a "right under international law to defend itself" against Russian attacks and that Ukraine can use German-provided weapons "for this purpose."^[4] Hebestreit noted that Russian forces have attacked Ukraine "in the Kharkiv areas from positions in the immediately adjacent Russian border region" but did not specify whether Germany will only allow Ukraine to use German-provided weapons to strike Russian territory near Kharkiv Oblast. German Ambassador to the UK Miguel Berger, however, specifically stated on May 31 that the German government has allowed Ukraine to use German weapons to "defend itself against attacks on [Kharkiv Oblast] from bordering Russian territory," and select Western media similarly reported that Germany had geographically restricted Ukraine to use German-provided weapons against the adjacent Russian border area (presumably only Belgorod Oblast) to defend northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[5] Other Western states continue to emphasize that they are imposing few to no restrictions on the use of weapons they are providing to Ukraine, however. *Radio Svoboda* reported on May 31 that Dutch Foreign Minister Hanke Bruins-Slot stated that the Netherlands does not oppose Ukraine's use of F-16s against military targets on Russian territory for self-defense.^[6]

Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against a Russian long-range radar system in occupied Crimea and an oil depot in Krasnodar Krai on May 31 following the May 30 Ukrainian strike against the Kerch Strait ferry crossing. Ukrainian media, citing unspecified sources, reported on May 31 that Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) conducted a successful drone strike against a Russian "Nebo-IED" long-range radar system near occupied Armyansk, Crimea, and estimated that the system is worth \$100 million.^[7] The radar system reportedly serviced a 380-kilometer-long section of the frontline, and Ukrainian forces reportedly observed a shutdown of the radar's radiation signature following the drone strike, indicating that the strike took the system offline. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted a strike on an oil depot near the port of Kavkaz, Krasnodar Krai with several Neptune anti-ship missiles early in the morning on May 31, and geolocated footage published on May 31 shows a fire at the oil depot.^[8] Krasnodar Krai Governor Veniamin Kondratyev stated that Russian air defenses repelled an unspecified large number of Ukrainian drones targeting Krasnodar Krai and that the strike damaged three petroleum tanks at an oil depot in Temryuk Raion.^[9] Russian opposition outlet *Astra* stated that Ukrainian forces struck at least two additional facilities at the port and damaged a substation that provides power to the Kerch Strait Bridge.^[10] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian drones also struck a railway train carrying fuel near the oil depot.^[11]

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 30 that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful ATACMS strike on a ferry crossing and damaged two ferries that Russian forces were using to transport forces and equipment across the Kerch Strait to occupied Crimea on the night of May 29 to 30.^[12] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenichuk stated on May 31 that Russian forces still rely on the ferry crossing because the railway line across the Kerch Strait Bridge is unfinished and that the strike should affect the provisioning of the Russian force grouping in occupied Crimea.^[13] Russian sources issued conflicting reports on May 30 about the results of the May 29 to 30 Ukrainian strike – a Crimean occupation administration official claimed that the strike damaged two pilot boats, a car, and a section of the railway line, while Russia opposition outlet *Astra* stated that the strike sunk the *Mechta* pilot boat.^[14] The port of Kavkaz reportedly specializes in servicing rail and truck ferry vessels, and the May 31 strike may be another aspect of Ukraine's strike against the ferry crossing.^[15]

Ukraine signed long-term bilateral security agreements with Sweden, Iceland, and Norway on May 31. The Ukraine-Sweden agreement stipulates that Sweden will provide 6.5 billion euros (about \$7 billion) of military assistance for the next decade, will transfer an unspecified amount of ASC 890 advanced early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, and continue efforts to transfer JAS 39 Gripen aircraft to Ukraine.^[16] The Swedish military assistance package announced on May 29, worth about \$1.25 billion and containing an ASC 890 aircraft, is likely part of this bilateral security agreement.^[17] The Ukraine-Iceland agreement stipulates that Iceland will provide at least \$30 million annually from 2024 to 2028 to finance and purchase defense materials and help develop Ukraine's defense industry.^[18] The Ukraine-Norway agreement stipulates that Norway will provide assistance worth 75 billion kroner (about \$7.1 billion) from 2023 to 2027, including at least 13.5 billion kroner (about \$1.2 billion) in 2024.^[19] Norway will also provide Ukraine with air and missile defense systems, including NASAMs, and help develop Ukraine's aircraft capabilities including with F-16 fighters.

Germany and Poland announced additional large military assistance packages for Ukraine. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced on May 30 a package worth 500 million euros (about \$542 million) that includes a Patriot air defense system, a "large number" of IRIS-T SLM air defense

missiles, a smaller number of shorter-range IRIS-T SLS air defense missiles, reconnaissance and combat drones, and spare parts including artillery gun barrels.[20] Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski announced on May 31 that Poland is preparing a military assistance package for Ukraine worth four billion euros (about \$4.3 billion).[21]

Russia's continued efforts to rally Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member countries around an imagined confrontation with the West likely stems from Russian concerns about the CSTO's longevity as a vector for Russian influence. Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov addressed a meeting of the CSTO Council of Defense Ministers in Almaty, Kazakhstan on May 31 and claimed that a tense situation in Eastern Europe and an alleged NATO military buildup threaten the security of CSTO members.[22] Belousov alleged that the US and its allies are a destabilizing geopolitical force and that NATO countries seek to strengthen their positions in the Caucasus and gain access to resources in the Caspian Sea and direct access to Central Asia. [23] Belousov warned that the West has unleashed an information war and sanctions against CSTO members to undermine the organization and called on CSTO members to coordinate their foreign policies to present a united front.[24] Belousov stated that Russia is specifically concerned about alleged US and NATO plans to involve nominal CSTO member Armenia in the West's sphere of interest.[25] Armenia has effectively ceased participation in the CSTO following Russia's failure to prevent Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia remains a CSTO member only in name. [26] The Kremlin has explicitly threatened Armenia if Armenia does not resume active engagement in the CSTO and return to a pro-Kremlin alignment.[27] Armenia has specifically questioned the value of its CSTO membership following the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Kremlin is likely concerned that deteriorating relations with Armenia could prompt other CSTO members to question the utility of their CSTO membership.[28] Recent tensions in the Russian-Tajik relationship following the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack and Central Asian concerns about the impacts of secondary sanctions may be incentivizing the Kremlin to intensify efforts to convince CSTO members that the organization and their involvement in other Russian-led multilateral organizations is worthwhile.[29]

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are unlikely to buy into the Kremlin's imagined geopolitical confrontation with the West, and the Kremlin will likely have to offer more concrete promises to maintain the CSTO as a viable collective security organization oriented around Russian interests. Belousov met with Tajikistani Defense Minister Sherzod Mirzo in a bilateral meeting on May 31 and stressed that the CSTO will address the escalating situation on the CSTO's southern border. [30] Belousov claimed that the situation in Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism remain the main sources of instability in Central Asia and that the CSTO must have timely responses to this threat, including strengthening the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.[31] Russia is currently considering delisting the Taliban as a prohibited organization and will likely strengthen cooperation with the Taliban to combat the Islamic State's Afghan branch IS-Khorasan (IS-K), which conducted the Crocus City Hall attack.[32] IS-K recruited Tajikistani citizens for the Crocus City Hall attack, and Tajikistan likely views multilateral counterterrorism operations as a way to repair strained relations with Russia while also combating transnational terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan.[33] Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the Russian Security Council on May 31 and also emphasized strengthening international cooperation on counterterrorism.[34] Other Central Asian states, including CSTO members Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, likely view Russian offers for counterterrorism cooperation as attractive benefits of continued security relations with Russia.

Although Russian forces made significant tactical gains in northern Kharkiv Oblast in early May 2024, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov heavily overestimated Russian advances in Ukraine since the start of 2024. Belousov claimed on May 31 that Russian forces have seized 880 square kilometers thus far in 2024.[35] ISW has observed evidence confirming that Russian forces have only seized approximately 752 square kilometers in 2024, however. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces seized about 516 square kilometers between January 1, 2024, and April 29, 2024. [36]

Ukraine and Russia conducted a one-for-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange on May 31, the first POW exchange since February 8. Ukrainian and Russian officials announced that Ukraine and Russia exchanged 75 Ukrainian POWs for 75 Russian POWs, and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) credited the United Arab Emirates with mediating the exchange.[37] Russian authorities recently blamed "far-fetched" Ukrainian demands for causing the several-month-long suspension of POW exchanges.[38]

The People's Republic of China (PRC) announced on May 31 that it will not join the June 2024 Ukraine peace summit. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Mao Ning stated on May 31 that the PRC will not attend the upcoming Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland because the meeting falls "far short of China's requests and expectations" and emphasized that "both Russia and Ukraine" should "endorse" the peace process.[39] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky previously

stated that Ukraine will only be open to negotiations with Russia after developing a peace plan with its allies, and Ukrainian officials have recently emphasized that it is imperative for both the United States and China to attend the June 2024 peace summit as their participation is "decisive" in compelling Russia to participate in the process of restoring peace and security.[40] Senior Kremlin officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have recently endorsed the PRC's vague 12-point peace plan in Ukraine to falsely portray the Kremlin as willing to negotiate with Ukraine.[41] Senior Russian officials have repeatedly signaled that Russia is unwilling to engage in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine and has no interest in ending the war on terms that would prevent Putin from pursuing the destruction of an independent Ukraine.[42]

Key Takeaways:

- US and German officials confirmed that the United States and Germany have changed their policies to allow Ukraine to use US- and German-provided weapons to strike Russian territory with some restrictions but did not offer precise details about these restrictions.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against a Russian long-range radar system in occupied Crimea and an oil depot in Krasnodar Krai on May 31 following the May 30 Ukrainian strike against the Kerch Strait ferry crossing.
- Ukraine signed long-term bilateral security agreements with Sweden, Iceland, and Norway on May 31.
- Russia's continued efforts to rally Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member countries around an imagined confrontation with the West likely stems from Russian concerns about the CSTO's longevity as a vector for Russian influence.
- Although Russian forces made significant tactical gains in northern Kharkiv Oblast in early May 2024, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov heavily overestimated Russian advances in Ukraine since the start of 2024.
- Ukraine and Russia conducted a one-for-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange on May 31, the first POW exchange since February 8.
- The People's Republic of China (PRC) announced on May 31 that it will not join the June 2024 Ukraine peace summit.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Vovchansk, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- Russian State Duma Information Policy Committee Chairperson Alexander Khinshtein announced on May 30 that he and Duma Security Committee Chairperson Vasily Piskarev submitted a bill for the Duma's consideration that would eliminate toll fees for Russian military, Rosgvardia, and Federal Security Service (FSB) vehicles.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 30, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

May 30, 2024, 8:50pm 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 1:30pm ET on May 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

US President Joe Biden reportedly approved a policy change that will permit Ukraine to use US-provided weapons, including GMLRS rockets — but not longer-range ATACMS missiles — to strike within Russian territory near the border with Kharkiv Oblast. US officials and people familiar with the policy told Western media on May 30 that the Biden administration quietly gave Ukraine permission to use US-provided weapons for "counter-fire purposes" against the Russian forces conducting assaults in northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[1] An unnamed US official clarified that the Biden administration has not changed its policy restricting Ukraine from using US-provided weapons to conduct long-range strikes, such as ATACMS, elsewhere into Russia. Several of Biden's advisors told *The New York Times* (NYT) in a story published on May 29 that a limited reversal of the US policy restricting strikes in Russia was "inevitable" and correctly assessed that the policy reversal would likely come with restrictions on how Ukraine could use US-provided weapons against military targets and forces just within Russia's borders that are actively involved in attacks and strikes on Ukraine.^[2] *The Washington Post* reported that another unnamed US official stated that the US has placed no restriction on Ukraine's use of US-provided air defenses to shoot down Russian missiles or fighter jets over Russian territory "if they pose a threat to Ukraine."^[3] NYT reported on May 22 that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been urging Biden to lift these restrictions on Ukraine.^[4] It is unclear how far into Belgorod Oblast the US is permitting Ukrainian forces to strike with US-provided weapons, or if Ukraine would be allowed to strike Russian force and equipment concentrations in Kursk and Bryansk oblasts. Russian military targets outside the immediate border area with Kharkiv Oblast are also legitimate military targets, however, and continued restrictions on Ukraine's ability to strike targets elsewhere in Russia hinder Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russian aggression. Russia still enjoys some sanctuary in which the Russian military can shield military forces before they get close enough to Kharkiv, or enter other parts of Ukraine. Russia will continue to benefit from any partial sanctuary so long as Western states continues to impose restrictions on Ukraine's ability to defend itself. ISW continues to assess that the US should allow Ukraine to strike all legitimate military target in Russia' operational and deep rear with US-provided weapons.

Ukraine's European allies continue to announce their support for allowing Ukraine to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia. Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen confirmed during a press conference on May 30 in Brussels that Denmark will allow Ukraine to use Danish-provided weapons and promised F-16 fighter jets to strike military targets in Russia.^[5] Rasmussen stated that this is not a new position and that Denmark has long made its support for Ukraine's right to strike military targets in Russia clear. Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky stated during a NATO ministerial meeting on May 30 that Ukraine should have the right to strike military targets in Russia.^[6] *Politico* reported on May 29 that sources familiar with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's positions stated that Scholz is now in favor of granting Ukraine permission to use Western weapons to strike military targets in Russia.^[7] ISW assesses that the reversal of the policy will play a critical role in Ukraine's defense of its territory and future counteroffensive operations.^[8]

Senior Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are transferring forces to northern Kharkiv Oblast from other sectors of the frontline, indicating that the Russian military continues to prioritize efforts to draw and fix Ukrainian forces in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi and the Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 30 that the Russian military is transferring elements of an unspecified number of additional regiments and brigades from other unspecified areas of the frontline and from training grounds to the Strilecha-Lyptsi (north of Kharkiv City) and Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City) areas in northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[9] Syrskyi reported that the Russian military does not have enough forces in northern Kharkiv Oblast to conduct a full-scale offensive and break through Ukrainian defenses, however. Kharkiv Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Synehubov also reported that Russian forces are transferring reserves to the Lyptsi and Vovchansk directions to draw and fix as many Ukrainian forces in northern Kharkiv Oblast as possible and maintain the current tempo of Russian

offensive operations in the area.[10] Synehubov stated that Russian forces have not concentrated a "strike group" near Zolochiv Hromada, Kharkiv Oblast (northwest of Kharkiv City) but that Russian forces could redirect forces in the Lyptsi and Vovchansk directions to the Zolochiv direction. Several Russian milbloggers purposefully misreported Synehubov's statements about possible evacuations in the event of Russian attacks and claimed that he had stated that Russian forces are preparing offensive operations in the Zolochiv direction.[11] The Russian military's transfer of reinforcements to Kharkiv Oblast indicates that the Russian military likely continues to prioritize efforts to draw and fix Ukrainian forces from critical sectors of the frontline in eastern Ukraine and establish a "buffer zone" in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[12] Russian forces likely intend to launch the second phase of their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast following their intended seizure of Vovchansk, although positional fighting and possible Ukrainian counterattacks could require Russian forces to conduct another wave of intensified assaults in the area to complete the seizure of the settlement. ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are likely holding back many of the reserves from the Northern Grouping of Forces, which is staffed with elements of the 11th Army Corps (AC), 44th AC, and 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA) — all part of the Russian Leningrad Military District (LMD) — until the Northern Grouping of Forces is closer to its reported planned end strength of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel.[13] The Northern Grouping of Forces, even at the upper limit of its reported end strength, will lack the necessary manpower needed to conduct a successful operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City.

French officials reportedly may soon announce that France is sending military trainers to Ukraine. *Reuters* reported on May 30 that three unspecified diplomatic sources stated that France may announce the measure during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to France on June 6.[14] Two diplomats reportedly stated that France would send a limited number of personnel to Ukraine to assess the situation before sending several hundred trainers, according to the current proposal.[15] *Reuters*' diplomatic sources added that the French personnel would offer training focused on demining and maintaining Western equipment and that France also intends to finance, arm, and train a new Ukrainian mechanized brigade.[16]

Western countries continue efforts to increase artillery production and procurement for Ukraine. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on May 30 that the Czech-led initiative to purchase artillery ammunition for Ukraine is struggling to compete with Russia to purchase ammunition from non-NATO countries.[17] Czech Governmental Envoy for Ukraine's Reconstruction Tomas Kopecný stated that some unspecified countries are supplying ammunition to both Russia and Western procurement efforts for Ukraine.[18] Kopecný suggested that Russia can make cash pre-payments to ammunition suppliers faster than the West and that this could allow Russia to purchase millions of rounds from the same suppliers. The owner and chairperson of Czech domestic arms producer Czechoslovak Group (CSG), Michal Strnad, stated that about half of the components CSG acquired from countries in Africa and Asia for the Czech-led initiative required more work before CSG could send it to Ukraine and that some of the shells had missing components.[19] Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala stated on May 28 that the first "tens of thousands" of 155mm artillery ammunition sourced through the Czech-led initiative will arrive in Ukraine within "days." [20] The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on May 30 that US defense company General Dynamics will open a new facility in Mesquite, Texas that will make 30,000 artillery shells each month once it reaches full capacity.[21] The NYT reported that US production facilities in Pennsylvania produce about 35,000 artillery shells per month and that IMT, an Ohio-based defense firm, will reportedly produce about 34,000 artillery shells per month. The NYT noted that this would allow the US to reach the US Department of Defense's (DoD) production target of 100,000 shells per month by the end of 2025.

NATO member states reportedly lack sufficient air defense capabilities to protect members of the Alliance in Central and Eastern Europe in the event of a full-scale attack. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on May 29, citing people familiar with confidential 2023 NATO defense plans, that NATO countries can provide "less than five percent of air defense capacities deemed necessary" to protect NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe against a full-scale attack.[22] A senior NATO official told *FT* that NATO currently does not have the ability to defend against missile and air strikes in Eastern Europe, but that these capabilities are a "major part" of NATO's plan to defend Eastern Europe from a potential invasion. Another NATO official stated that air defense is "one of the biggest holes [that NATO has]." ISW continues to assess that NATO rearmament is necessary to deter — and if necessary, defeat — any future Russian attack on NATO's eastern flank, given that Kremlin officials

are increasingly threatening NATO member states, and NATO and its member states are increasingly warning of Russian sabotage and hybrid operations against NATO members in their territory. [23] Continued Western military support for Ukraine directly contributes to pushing Russia's air defense network east and away from NATO members, given that a Russian military victory in Ukraine would allow Russian forces to station long-range systems in occupied Ukraine to further threaten NATO's eastern flank.[24]

The Russian government approved a package of amendments to the Russian tax code on May 30 that will introduce a progressive income tax scale starting in 2025, marginally placing some of the financial burdens of Russia's long-war effort in Ukraine onto Russia's wealthy elite.

[25] The Russian Ministry of Finance announced the tax reform on May 29, which will introduce a progressive income tax scale for those that make over 2.4 million rubles (\$26,600) a year, raise the current corporate income tax rate from 20 percent to 25 percent, and remove existing tax benefits for some Russian businesses.[26] Russia previously had a flat income tax rate of 13 percent, with some high-income earners paying a 15 percent income tax.[27] The new progressive income tax scale will raise taxes from 13 percent to 15 percent on yearly income between 2.4 million rubles and five million rubles (\$55,400), from 15 percent to 18 percent on income between five million rubles and 20 million rubles (\$221,600), from 15 percent to 20 percent on income between 20 million rubles and 50 million rubles (\$554,000), and from 15 to 22 percent on income over 50 million rubles.[28] The new tax measures will generate an additional 2.6 trillion rubles (\$28.8 Billion) in 2025, roughly eight percent of the current planned 33.55 trillion rubles (\$371.7 Billion) federal budget for 2025.[29] Russia is currently spending a record amount on defense and has been heavily relying on oil revenues to mitigate growing budget deficits.[30] The costs of the Kremlin's long war effort in Ukraine will likely produce greater budget deficits in the coming years, and the Kremlin likely understands that it must raise its fiscal revenue as the war continues.[31] The new tax reform is a measured and relatively marginal burden on Russia's wealthy elite, likely meant to enlist Russia's oligarchs further into shouldering the costs of Russia's war effort without causing pronounced discontent. The tax reform also allows the Kremlin to deliver on Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent populist economic promises about a fairer Russian economy and persuade the wider Russian public that all Russians, no matter their wealth or status, are equally sharing the costs of the war in Ukraine.[32] The Kremlin's desired restrained approach to increasing fiscal revenue does not provide the funds needed for a large-scale mobilization of Russia's economy and manpower, and even the gradual expansion of Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and the financial requirements of ongoing force generation efforts will likely compel the Kremlin to place greater financial burdens on wealthy Russians as the war prolongs.[33]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued efforts to address Russia's ongoing demographic crisis as part of the "Year of the Family" 2024 domestic policy initiative. Putin held a video conference on May 30 with large families from several Russian regions and occupied Donetsk Oblast, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia for Social Policy, Labor, Health Care, and Pension Provision Tatyana Golikova, and Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova, during which he discussed the state's vision for Russian families.[34] Putin stated that that Russian families with three or more children should become a norm and that Russian parents should be confident that the state is ready to provide support for them and their children. Putin stated that Russian state policy's fundamental task is to create the necessary conditions to stimulate an increase in the number of large families and claimed that the number of large families in Russia has increased by 26 percent in recent years. Putin also demonstratively awarded the order of "Parental Glory" to parents who are raising more than seven adoptive children and the title "Mother Heroine" to mothers who have birthed 10 or more children. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev established the order of "Parental Glory" in 2008, claiming that this order was first introduced in Russia in 1914.[35] Putin resurrected the Soviet honorary title of "Mother Heroine" — which was originally introduced in July 1944 and later discontinued in 1991 — in August 2022.[36] Putin signed a decree on January 23 officially defining families with three or more children as "large families" and establishing various social support measures for "large families." [37] ISW previously assessed that Putin's focus on 2024 as the "Year of the Family" is likely meant to provide an ideological underpinning to Russian efforts to increase Russian birthrates and remedy Russian demographic issues.[38] Russia had been facing a demographic crisis since the beginning of the 1990s, and Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine has further exacerbated this crisis with large Russian casualties in Ukraine and the mass migration of Russian men from Russia.[39] The Kremlin likely hopes to increase Russian birth rates in the coming generations by offering parents financial and state incentives but is unlikely to achieve the dramatic improvements in standard of living necessary to rectify decades-long demographic crisis.[40]

Russian peacekeepers in Moldova's Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria are reportedly conducting a month-long unauthorized inspection of their armored vehicles and may conduct further provocations in the coming months. Moldova's delegation to the Joint Control Commission (JCC) — a trilateral peacekeeping force and joint military command structure from Moldova, Transnistria, and Russia that operates in a demilitarized zone on the border between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine — announced in a statement on May 17 that Russian peacekeepers informed Moldovan military officials that Russian forces will conduct an internal inspection of Russian armored vehicles stationed at peacekeeping posts in Transnistria from May 17 to June 17 shortly after a recent JCC meeting.[41] The Moldovan delegation noted that conducting military exercises within the security zone between Moldovan — and Transnistrian — controlled territory without prior discussion and approval violates the JCC's protocols and called on the peacekeeping forces to cancel the inspections to avoid destabilizing the region. The Moldovan delegation to the JCC noted in a statement on May 30 that Russian peacekeepers failed to inform Moldovan authorities before conducting a rapid response group training exercise using armored vehicles near Bender, Transnistria and using "imitation means" at a nearby peacekeeping post on May 28.[42] The Moldovan delegation criticized the peacekeepers' actions as "provocative" and denied the Russian delegation's reported claim that Russian forces are not obligated to notify the JCC before military exercises. Russian peacekeepers similarly conducted unauthorized military exercises in late December 2023 and April 2024.[43]

Head of the Transnistrian delegation to the JCC Oleg Belyakov in turn recently accused Moldovan forces and authorities of attempting to escalate the Transnistrian conflict and increasing "militarization" along the security zone. Belyakov claimed on May 28 that Moldovan forces are accumulating military equipment, including heavy weaponry and armored personnel carriers, at a training ground near Bulboaca (southeast of Chisinau), and claimed on May 30 that 120 Moldovan paratroopers arrived in Vadul-lui Voda (northeast of Chisinau) and criticized Moldovan authorities for not notifying the JCC of these troop deployments.[44] Belyakov claimed that the Russian peacekeepers' May 28 training exercise was part of their scheduled activities and that it is "puzzling" that Moldova is concerned about standard Russian training while conducting full-scale NATO exercises. Belyakov characterized the recent NATO exercises in Moldova and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's and German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius' visits to Moldova as "alarming" and indicative of perceived Moldovan aggression and militarization.[45] Belyakov's accusations against Moldova are likely part of an ongoing Kremlin information operation justifying Russian aggression and subversive involvement in Moldova under the guise to protecting Russian citizens and pro-Russian "compatriots abroad." *Deutsche Welle* reported on May 22 that the negotiations regarding Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU) will most likely start on June 25, 2024 during the upcoming European Council summit.[46] Pro-Russian actors may intend to conduct an unspecified provocation ahead of the reported negotiations and Moldova's upcoming presidential election and EU accession vote in October 2024. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is engaged in efforts to destabilize Moldova and prevent Moldova's EU accession and is likely trying to exploit Transnistria and Gagauzia — Moldova's other pro-Russian autonomous region — as part of these wider efforts.[47]

Key Takeaways:

- US President Joe Biden reportedly approved a policy change that will permit Ukraine to use US-provided weapons, including GMLRS rockets — but not longer-range ATACMS missiles — to strike within Russian territory near the border with Kharkiv Oblast.
- Ukraine's European allies continue to announce their support for allowing Ukraine to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.
- Senior Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are transferring forces to northern Kharkiv Oblast from other sectors of the frontline, indicating that the Russian military continues to prioritize efforts to draw and fix Ukrainian forces in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- French officials reportedly may soon announce that France is sending military trainers to Ukraine.
- Western countries continue efforts to increase artillery production and procurement for Ukraine.

- NATO member states reportedly lack sufficient air defense capabilities to protect members of the Alliance in Central and Eastern Europe in the event of a full-scale attack.
- The Russian government approved a package of amendments to the Russian tax code on May 30 that will introduce a progressive income tax scale starting in 2025, marginally placing some of the financial burdens of Russia's long-war effort in Ukraine onto Russia's wealthy elite.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued efforts to address Russia's ongoing demographic crisis as part of the "Year of the Family" 2024 domestic policy initiative.
- Russian peacekeepers in Moldova's Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria are reportedly conducting a month-long unauthorized inspection of their armored vehicles and may conduct further provocations in the coming months.
- Ukrainian forces recently advanced near Vovchansk and Russian forces recently advanced near Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russia formed a new unnamed airborne (VDV) regiment based in occupied Crimea, which currently operates in the Zaporizhia direction.

[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 29, 2024](#)

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Angelica Edwards, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 29, 2024, 7:15pm ET

Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhaylo Podolyak stated that US-provided military aid has started arriving on the frontline but that it will take "weeks" for the gradual increase in US-provided military aid to reach "critical volumes."^[1] Podolyak told *Bloomberg* in an article published on May 29 that Russian forces currently have the "absolute advantage" in shells and missiles and that Russian forces will continue to try to advance along the frontline presumably to take advantage of the time before US military assistance arrives in sufficient quantities at the front. Podolyak warned that Russia may be trying to force Ukraine and its allies to freeze the current frontline — a situation that ISW has long assessed would be advantageous to Russia by giving the Russian military time to reconstitute and prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine.^[2] Additional Western military assistance will also likely take time to reach the frontlines and to be properly integrated into Ukrainian frontline troop formations. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala stated on May 28 that the first "tens of thousands" of 155mm artillery ammunition sourced through the Czech-led initiative for Ukraine will arrive in Ukraine within "days."^[3]

Sweden announced its 16th and largest military aid package to Ukraine, worth 13.3 billion kronor (about \$1.25 billion), on May 29.^[4] The Swedish Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the package includes ASC 890 Airborne Surveillance and Control aircraft (the Swedish version of an airborne early warning and control [AWACS] airborne radar system) and RB 99-AMRAAM medium-range air-to-air missiles (that are also modified to be ground-to-air) to strengthen Ukrainian air defense capabilities, additional 155mm artillery ammunition, and "the entire Swedish stock" of Pansarbandvagn 302 armored vehicles among other provisions.^[5]

Western officials are increasingly suggesting that they support Ukraine's right to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia. French President Emmanuel Macron stated on May 28 at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that France supports Ukraine's use of French-provided weapons to strike Russian "military sites from which missiles are fired" and other Russian "military sites from which Ukraine is attacked" in Russian territory.^[6] Macron noted that Ukraine should not strike "other military" or civilian targets in Russia, likely referring to Russian sites that are not actively involved in attacks on Ukraine. Scholz stated at the May 28 press conference that Germany recognizes Ukraine's right to defend itself against Russian strikes under international law as long as "regulations" on Ukraine's use of Western-provided weapons are "within the framework of international law."^[7] Scholz's recognition of Ukraine's right to strike military targets on Russian territory is notable as it defines the issue in terms of international legal norms but ultimately does not reflect a change in Germany's position against providing Ukraine with long-range Taurus missiles or allowing Ukraine to strike military targets in Russia with German-provided weapons.^[8]

Other Western countries have recently noted that they do not impose restrictions on Ukraine's ability to use weapons they have provided to strike military targets in Russia. Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly stated on May 29 that Canada "does not have any conditions for the use of arms supplied to Ukraine" and that Canada does not oppose Ukraine using Canada-provided weapons against military targets in Russia.^[9] Polish Deputy Defense Minister Cezary Tomczyk stated that

Poland also has no restrictions on Ukraine's use of Polish-supplied weapons on military targets in Russia.[10] Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen stated that Finland has not set "special restrictions" on its military assistance to Ukraine as Finland "assumes that it will be used in accordance with international law."[11] Thus far 10 countries have expressed support for Ukraine's use of weapons they have provided to strike military targets on Russian territory with some or no restrictions: the UK, France, Sweden, Czechia, Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Canada.[12] US Pentagon Spokesperson Sabrina Singh and US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby both reiterated on May 28 that there is no change in the US position against using US-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.[13]

Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed Russian Presidential Aide Alexei Dyumin as Secretary of Russia's State Council on May 29.[14] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that Dyumin will "resolve issues" regarding the functions of the State Council, which is an advisory body that tasks and coordinates the implementation of domestic and foreign policy between Russia's federal, regional, and municipal authorities, including occupation administrations in occupied Ukraine, and assists in drafting Russia's "strategic goals." [15] Putin recently appointed Dyumin to the supervisory board of state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec and has specifically tasked Dyumin with assisting Russian efforts to provide the Russian military with its necessary weapons and equipment and oversee Russia's defense industrial base (DIB). [16] Some Russian milbloggers amplified the news of Dyumin's new position, and one Russian milblogger claimed that Dyumin has "all [the] best qualities" of the infamous Soviet director of the Soviet People's Commissariat for International Affairs (NKVD) Lavrentiy Beria. [17] The milblogger is likely referring to Beria's lesser-known role in expanding the Soviet Union's defense production by mobilizing slave labor in the Soviet Union's Gulag — a system of labor camps and prisons that imprisoned millions of criminals and political prisoners — insinuating that Dyumin will similarly succeed in expanding Russia's defense production.[18]

Russia blamed Ukraine for the recent several-month-long suspension of prisoner of war (POW) exchanges over the backdrop of reports of pervasive Russian abuses against Ukrainian POWs. Kremlin-appointed Russian Commissioner for Human Rights Tatiana Moskalkova accused Ukraine of making "far-fetched demands" that caused a pause in POW exchanges over the past several months and claimed that Russia has done its best to maintain a dialogue with the Ukrainian government and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) regarding POW affairs. [19] Representative for the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs Petro Yatsenko noted in November 2023 that Russia previously paused POW exchanges over the summer of 2023 for an unspecified reason. [20] The last POW exchange between Russia and Ukraine took place on February 8, 2024, with the facilitation of the United Arab Emirates. [21] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) noted on May 29 that Ukraine has had to open a third camp for Russian POWs due in part to "the actual blocking of exchanges by the Russian side," and in part due to the growing numbers of Russian deserters who become POWs, consistent with several recent Ukrainian statements that Russian officials are the ones resisting the continuation of POW exchanges. [22]

In recent months following the last POW exchange, Russia has perpetrated a series of apparent abuses against Ukrainian POWs, including summarily executing Ukrainian POWs and using POWs as human shields on the battlefield (both violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs) and purportedly operating a "black market" to sell Ukrainian POWs to Russian paramilitary groups. [23] Russia is also using a battalion comprised mainly of Ukrainian POWs to fight in Ukraine, another blatant violation of the Geneva Convention on POWs. [24] Moskalkova's accusation that Ukraine is the party responsible for the cessation of POW exchanges may be an attempt to rhetorically shift the blame towards Ukraine and obfuscate a litany of well-documented Russian abuses of Ukrainian POWs, potentially to stoke discontent in Ukrainian society or to discourage Western support for Ukraine. The Kremlin appears to be using the politics of POW exchanges as another rhetorical device to undermine Ukrainian decision-making.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues his efforts to prepare the Russian population for a protracted war effort. Putin stated during a meeting of Russia's Council for Strategic Development and National Projects and the State Council commission for socio-economic development on May 29 that all Russians must understand that they are living through a unique and historical moment and must "work as if [they are] on the frontline" and "feel mobilized" for Russia to achieve its goals. [25] Kremlin officials often invoke the mythos of the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) to inspire support and confidence in Russia's war effort. Putin likely intended to invoke similar memories of Soviet sacrifice and full-scale social and economic mobilization. [26] ISW previously assessed that Putin's decision to appoint Andrei Belousov as Russian Defense Minister was a significant development in his efforts to mobilize Russia's economy for a protracted war effort against Ukraine and possibly prepare for a future confrontation with NATO, and Putin will likely continue various informational and rhetorical efforts to prepare Russian society for greater economic mobilization if he

intends to pursue such an unpopular policy of further economic and social mobilization in the mid- to long-term.[27]

Belarus suspended its participation in the Cold War-era Conventional Armed Forces (CFE) in Europe Treaty on May 28.[28] The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) claimed that Belarus would resume its implementation of the CFE Treaty if NATO member countries also implement the CFE Treaty.[29] Russia withdrew from the CFE Treaty in 2023, and Belarus' and Russia's respective suspension and withdrawal from the treaty are likely part of ongoing attempts to deter the West from providing military aid to Ukraine and from allowing Ukraine to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.[30] Russian officials criticized Moldova's suspension of the CFE Treaty in March 2024 and claimed that it was against Russian interests.[31] Russian officials notably did not criticize Belarus for suspending the CFE Treaty, and Kremlin newswire TASS claimed that Belarus had "made every effort" to preserve the CFE treaty, although it is unclear what efforts TASS is referring to. [32]

Key Takeaways:

- Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhaylo Podolyak stated that US-provided military aid has started arriving on the frontline but that it will take "weeks" for the gradual increase in US-provided military aid to reach "critical volumes."
- Sweden announced its 16th and largest military aid package to Ukraine, worth 13.3 billion kronor (about \$1.25 billion), on May 29.
- Western officials are increasingly suggesting that they support Ukraine's right to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed Russian Presidential Aide Alexei Dyumin as Secretary of Russia's State Council on May 29.
- Russia blamed Ukraine for the recent several-month-long suspension of prisoner of war (POW) exchanges over the backdrop of reports of pervasive Russian abuses against Ukrainian POWs.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues his efforts to prepare the Russian population for a protracted war effort.
- Belarus suspended its participation in the Cold War-era Conventional Armed Forces (CFE) in Europe Treaty on May 28.
- Russian forces recently advanced north and northeast of Kharkiv City, near Kremenna, Chasiv Yar, and Avdiivka.
- Russia continues efforts to expand social benefits for Russian military personnel, veterans of the war in Ukraine, and their families.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 28, 2024

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May 28, 2024, 7:45pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin grossly misrepresented the Ukrainian Constitution and Ukrainian domestic law on May 28 in order to further promote the Kremlin information operation claiming that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is no longer the legitimate president of Ukraine. Putin claimed on May 28 during a press conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan that the Ukrainian Constitution provides for the extension of the powers of the Verkhovna Rada but "does not say anything about the extension of the powers of the president."^[1] Putin claimed that although the Ukrainian law on martial law prohibits presidential elections during martial law, which Ukraine was under for one month in 2018 and has been under since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, "this does not mean that [the Ukrainian president's powers] are prolonged." Putin cited Article 111 of the Ukrainian Constitution, which he alleged provides that "in this case...presidential powers are transferred to the speaker of the parliament." Putin claimed that "the only legitimate authority" remaining in Ukraine is the Verkhovna Rada and the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada. Putin claimed that "if [the Verkhovna Rada] wanted to hold presidential elections, then the law on martial law would have been abolished...and elections would be held."

The Ukrainian Constitution states that "if the term of office of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine expires during the period of martial law or a state of emergency, its powers shall be extended until the day of the first meeting of the first session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine elected after the abolition of the state of martial law or emergency."^[2] The Ukrainian law "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" prohibits "conducting elections for the President of Ukraine" while martial law is in effect.^[3] Putin inaccurately cited Article 111 of the Ukrainian Constitution, however, which actually states: "The

President of Ukraine may be removed from office by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine by impeachment if he commits treason or another crime."^[4] Article 112 describes how "the performance of the duties of the President of Ukraine for the period before the election and entry into office of the new President of Ukraine is entrusted to the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine." Article 112, however, specifies that this transfer of power from the President to the Speaker only applies "in the case of **early termination** [emphasis added] of the powers of the President of Ukraine in accordance with Articles 108, 109, 110, 111 of this Constitution," which describe how "the powers of the President of Ukraine are prematurely terminated in the event of their resignation, inability to fulfill their powers due to their health, removal from office by impeachment, and death." Putin's baseless claim that the Verkhovna Rada could abolish martial law and hold presidential elections "if [it] wanted to" is also incorrect, as the law "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" states that "before the end of the period for which martial law was imposed, and on the condition that the threat of attack or danger to the state independence of Ukraine and its territorial integrity is eliminated, the President of Ukraine may issue a decree on the abolition of martial law on the entire territory of Ukraine or in some of its localities, which must be immediately announced through the media."^[5] **Not only is the Verkhovna Rada not responsible for lifting martial law, but the Ukrainian President is also legally unable to lift martial law while Russia continues to attack Ukraine and pose a danger to Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity, as it clearly does.**

Ukrainian Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Ruslan Stefanchuk directly responded to Putin's deliberate misinterpretation of Ukrainian law and explicitly stated that the Ukrainian Constitution and laws stipulate that Zelensky remain in office until the end of martial law in Ukraine.^[6] Stefanchuk specifically drew attention to Part 1 of Article 108, which reads: "The President of Ukraine shall exercise their powers until the newly elected President takes office."^[7] Stefanchuk advised "curious readers" of the Ukrainian Constitution to not read "selectively."^[8] Putin observed correctly, for the first time on this issue, during his remarks in Tashkent that "this is a preliminary analysis" and "we need to take a closer look."^[9]

Russian allegations about Zelensky's lack of legitimacy are a known Kremlin information operation that Kremlin officials have been promoting extensively in recent weeks, in part targeted at foreign audiences. Putin made similar claims rejecting Zelensky as the president of Ukraine during a press conference in Minsk, Belarus on May 24.^[10] Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov also denied Zelensky's legitimacy in an interview with *Newsweek* on May 25. ^[11] Putin's May 28 allegations contain specific legal jargon and references - largely incorrect or taken out of their legal context - to the text of the Ukrainian Constitution and laws. Putin is likely purposely inflating his statements with such nuanced legalese language to make it seem that he is highly educated in Ukrainian legal matters and is a definitive voice on the matter. The use of such language is likely also meant to cause listeners to believe Putin's false narratives without fact-checking, as legal jargon is inherently dense and opaque. The Ukrainian Constitution and the law relating to martial law, however, are not so opaque that a normal reader cannot understand them. The fact that Kremlin officials have recently promoted these narratives in detail at events in foreign countries and major Western publications suggests that this Kremlin information operation is largely aimed at foreign – predominantly Western – audiences.

Reuters paraphrased Putin's statements under a headline that misrepresented even the thrust of Putin's comments on May 28 but did not note the obvious errors in Putin's claims.^[12] Reuters wrote that "Zelensky has not faced an election despite the expiry of his term, something he and Kyiv's allies deem the right decision in wartime" without offering the actual legal context that Putin's comments misrepresented the Ukrainian legal framework that specifically stipulates that martial law remains in force, that presidential elections not be held during Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine's independent and sovereign territory and people and that Zelensky remains the legitimate president of Ukraine until his successor takes office.

Russian forces recently conducted four reduced-company-sized or smaller mechanized assaults on multiple operational axes in Donetsk Oblast without making significant advances, likely to test Ukrainian reactions following the first wave of the Russian offensive effort in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Footage published on May 27 and 28 shows Russian forces conducting reinforced platoon-sized mechanized attacks east of Chasiv Yar and east of Novopokrovsk (northwest of Avdiivka) and roughly-company sized mechanized attacks near Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City) and in Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka).^[13] Russian forces only marginally advanced in the attacks east of Novopokrovsk and in Staromayorske and did not make confirmed advances near Chasiv Yar or Novomykhailivka. Russian forces have reduced their tempo of attacks and advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast and increased their tempo of attacks in the Pokrovsk (Avdiivka) direction in recent days.^[14] These Russian mechanized attacks – one across each of Russia's current four operational axes – are limited in comparison to prior Russian mechanized attacks at the start of or during a dedicated offensive effort. The May 27 and 28 attacks

were likely intended to gauge Ukrainian forces' reactions and defensive abilities in the Donetsk direction. The recent Russian offensive effort in northern Kharkiv Oblast likely aimed to take advantage of Ukrainian manpower and materiel shortages before anticipated Western military assistance arrives at the frontline and create opportunities for Russian forces elsewhere, and Russian forces likely aimed to test whether and where any of these opportunities for exploitation may exist on the Donetsk Oblast frontline.[15]

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)'s Committee on Culture supported a resolution that recognizes Russia's deliberate erasure of Ukrainian culture as an element of Russia's genocidal campaign in occupied Ukraine, consistent with ISW's longstanding assessment that Russia is pursuing a broad occupation strategy premised on eradicating Ukraine's national identity and independence. PACE Committee on Culture Chairperson and Ukrainian Servant of the People Representative Yevheniia Kravchuk stated on May 28 that the PACE Culture Committee unanimously supported her resolution on "Countering the Destruction of Cultural Identity in War and Peace," which the Committee will vote on in June 2024 and notably recognizes that Russia uses "cultural purges" as a tool of war in Ukraine that indicate "specific genocidal intent to destroy the Ukrainian nation by destroying Ukrainian identity and culture." [16] Kravchuk emphasized that the resolution affirms that Russia's cultural genocide in Ukraine is part of the wider genocidal campaign that Russia is pursuing against the Ukrainian people. If PACE's Culture Committee adopts the resolution in June 2024, it would represent an important international recognition of cultural genocide as a constituent element of a wider genocidal policy.[17] International legal procedure has not yet created an official legal definition for cultural genocide, and it is not formally defined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. [18] The Genocide Convention, however, defines genocidal acts as those that intend to destroy "in whole or in part" a specific group, and Russia's pursuit of cultural genocide in Ukraine is explicitly intended to destroy the Ukrainian nation and people "in whole or in part." [19] ISW has reported at length on Russian efforts to destroy Ukrainian cultural, linguistic, and historic heritage in occupied Ukraine and completely supplant it with Russian cultural conceptions.[20] Russia's cultural genocide in Ukraine cannot be viewed in isolation from its wider genocidal policy in Ukraine, as it is a fundamental component of Russia's efforts to completely subsume and subjugate Ukraine and its people.

Russian authorities are preparing to intensify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia throughout Summer 2024, further consolidating another component of Russia's genocidal campaign in Ukraine. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik announced on May 27 that Russian federal subjects (regions that are constituent entities of the Russian Federation) will "host" over 12,000 children from occupied Luhansk Oblast over the course of 2024 and that the Russian "Useful Vacations" program will sponsor 40,000 children from occupied Ukraine to "visit" Russia for summer camps and educational activities.[21] Pasechnik also reported that summer camps for children in occupied Crimea and within Russia are preparing to "host" over 600 children from occupied Ukraine throughout the summer, including the "Okean" summer camp in Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai (which is closer to Alaska than it is to Ukraine).[22] The Kherson Oblast occupation Ministry of Labor also announced that an unspecified number of children from occupied Kherson Oblast will travel to the "Okean" camp for an "educational, sport, and cultural program." [23] Kherson Oblast occupation senator Andrey Alekseenko reported on May 27 that 575 children from occupied Kherson Oblast will attend three-week summer camps in occupied Crimea and in Russia's Adygea Republic on Russian federal subject funds.[24] The LNR's Ministry of Education and Science reported that an unspecified number of adolescents from occupied Luhansk Oblast will attend a military-patriotic sports camp at the "Avangard" camp in Russia's Volgograd Oblast and train in military engineering, tactics, fires, parachuting, communications, national security fundamentals, drone operation, and tactical medicine.[25]

Despite Russian efforts to frame summer camps for Ukrainian children as temporary recreational and educational affairs, they are a fundamental component of Russia's campaign to deport Ukrainians, including children, to Russia.[26] The forcible transfer of children from one group to another is a recognized act constituting genocide, and Russia's multifaceted schemes deporting Ukrainian children to Russia may therefore be classed as genocidal acts.[27] Ukrainian children who have been deported to Russia for such "vacations" or "summer camps" face Russification programs premised on isolating them from their Ukrainian families, language, culture, and history.[28] Russian authorities will likely escalate deportation efforts throughout the summer under the guise of summer vacations, but these programs represent genocidal acts against the Ukrainian people despite Russian efforts to cloak them as temporary and positive educational opportunities.

Iran's continued support for Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and provision of lethal aid to Russia is bolstering Russia's technological output and military capabilities on the battlefield in Ukraine. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published a report on May 28 detailing Russian efforts to produce Shahed-136/131 drones at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the Republic of

Tatarstan using Iranian-provided technologies and a labor force recruited largely from eastern Africa. [29] *WSJ* cited the international hacking group Prana Network, which reportedly hacked an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) email server in February 2024 and revealed that Russia intends to produce 6,000 Shahed drones at the Alabuga SEZ in 2024 alone. The Institute for Science and International Security (IISS) assessed that the Alabuga SEZ has already produced 4,500 Shaheds as of the end of April 2024, ahead of schedule, and could produce all 6,000 by mid-August 2024. [30] *WSJ* found that Russia is currently producing more advanced models of Iranian Shaheds domestically and intensively using them to strike Ukraine. [31] *WSJ* also noted that Russian authorities are recruiting from African countries, particularly Uganda, and especially enticing young women to participate in work-study programs at Alabuga to produce Shahed drones. Russia would not be able to operate the Alabuga SEZ without Iran's consistent support for the Russian war effort—Iranian production models for Shahed drones and Iranian drone technologies are at the center of the entire Alabuga enterprise. [32] German outlet *BILD* similarly reported on May 27 that Iran has also likely supplied Russia with Qaem-5 television-guided air-to-ground bombs, which Iran started producing as recently as 2019. [33] *BILD* noted that an Iranian-provided Mohajer-6 drone carrying the Qaem-5 bombs crashed in Kursk Oblast for an unknown reason but that Russian forces may have intended to strike Sumy Oblast. ISW has not yet observed confirmation that Russia has used these projectiles in Ukraine, but their use would be consistent with the pattern of continued and intensified Iranian military support to Russia. [34]

The Georgian Parliament overrode Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili's veto of Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" law in an 84-to-4 vote on May 28. Sixty-six Georgian parliament members spoke against the presidential veto. [35] The Georgian Constitution requires Zurabishvili to sign and publish the law within three days of the vote, but if she refuses, Georgian Parliament Chairperson Shalva Papuashvili can sign and publish the law within five days of the vote. [36] Papuashvili is a member of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which initiated the foreign agents bill, and will therefore likely sign the bill into law, as Zurabishvili will likely refuse to sign the bill into law given her initial veto of the bill. Zurabishvili addressed protestors against the foreign agents bill outside the Georgian parliament on May 28 and called on Georgian protestors to gather signatures to allow her to call for a referendum on the foreign agents bill. [37] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*'s Georgian service noted that the Georgian Constitution allows the president to call for a referendum at the request of the parliament, the government, or at least 200,000 citizens, but that holding a referendum requires signatures from both the president and prime minister in cases when the parliament or citizens call for a referendum. [38] Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze would likely oppose such a referendum against the foreign agents bill. Kobakhidze claimed that the passage of the foreign agents law will strengthen Georgia's sovereignty and improve its chances to achieve European Union (EU) membership. [39] The EU has repeatedly emphasized that the Georgian foreign agents law "goes against EU core principles and values," that the law's enactment "leads to a backsliding on at least three out of the nine steps" that the EU Commission recommended for Georgia's EU candidacy status, and that the law negatively impacts Georgia's path to EU membership. [40] ISW continues to assess that Georgian Dream actors likely intend to purposefully derail long-term Georgian efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration, which plays into continued Russian hybrid operations to divide, destabilize, and weaken Georgia. [41]

A limited segment of the Russian ultranationalist information space has resumed its standard public criticisms of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and warned that new Defense Minister Andrei Belousov may not solve certain systemic issues within the Russian MoD and military. A Russian milblogger and former Storm-Z instructor warned that any "emerging progress" from Belousov's appointment and the dismissals of several senior defense officials may "not be allowed" to go far enough to address systemic issues currently hindering the Russian war in Ukraine. [42] The former Storm-Z instructor particularly highlighted the poor, incomplete, and short training of new personnel as having a compounding effect on other systemic issues, including "excessive and unjustifiably" high casualties, no troop rotations, poor tactical and operational decision-making, degradation of combat-experienced units, inability to preserve combat knowledge, and lack of command-staff accountability. [43] The Storm-Z instructor claimed that these issues are all interconnected and cyclical and that Russia has accumulated significant reserves that are not undergoing training due to these systemic issues. [44] Other Russian milbloggers, many of whom frequently complained about the Russian MoD prior to the mass MoD dismissals in late April-May 2024, agreed with the Storm-Z instructor and claimed that Russian "middle management" has been operating under the assumption that the current war in Ukraine is not actually a war, which is consistent with prior milblogger complaints that the Kremlin has failed to mobilize Russian society into a wartime mindset. [45] The Storm-Z instructor claimed that the fact that certain high-ranking officials, such as Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, have retained their positions further supports this complaint and that the appointments of new deputy defense ministers will indicate whether or not Belousov may be able to solve some of these systemic issues. [46]

The Russian ultranationalist information space has largely praised Belousov and the dismissals and arrests of senior Russian defense officials thus far. The milbloggers' praise of Belousov and the dismissals comes with harsh criticisms of the corruption and ineptitude under former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, representing a significant break with the self-censorship largely enforced by the MoD following the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023.[47] The condemnation of the MoD's ineptitude prior to the dismissals and the resulting praise for Belousov's appointment has largely benefited the MoD thus far as it helps rehabilitate the MoD's image to Putin's core ultranationalist constituency, secure their loyalty, and message to MoD officials that no one is safe from the consequences of falling from Putin's favor.[48] The former Storm-Z instructor's warning and resulting skepticism among like-minded milbloggers may represent the start of a return to prior complaints that undermined the MoD. The former Storm-Z instructor highlighted in his complaint that he was censoring himself throughout the conversation, suggesting that the MoD may not intend to lift censorship and self-censorship requirements on Russian milbloggers even if the bounds on what is acceptable criticism have shifted in the short term.[49]

Portugal and Belgium both signed long-term bilateral security agreements with Ukraine on May 28. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Portuguese Prime Minister Luís Montenegro signed a bilateral security agreement during Zelensky's visit to Lisbon on May 28.[50] The bilateral security agreement provides for at least €126 million (\$138 million) in Portuguese military support for Ukraine in 2024 and reaffirms Portugal's commitment to Ukraine through various international cooperation platforms. Zelensky also met with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo in Brussels on May 28 and signed a long-term bilateral security agreement with Belgium that provides for at least €977 million (\$1 billion) in Belgian military aid to Ukraine in 2024, as well as continued military support for the next 10 years.[51] Zelensky noted that the bilateral Ukraine-Belgium agreement also specifies that Belgium will provide 30 F-16 jets to Ukraine by 2028, including an unspecified number sometime in 2024. [52] Belgium and Portugal are the eleventh and twelfth countries, respectively, to sign long-term bilateral security agreements with Ukraine.[53]

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support on May 28 for delisting the Taliban as a prohibited organization in Russia, indicating that Russia will likely do so soon. Putin stated that it is necessary for Russia to build relations with the Taliban because the Taliban controls Afghanistan. [54] Putin claimed that Russia is considering the opinion of each country in the region surrounding Afghanistan and will work with them when Russia considers whether to recognize the Taliban. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev stated on May 28 that Russia is close to establishing "fully-fledged" relations with the Taliban.[55] Russia has maintained contacts with the Taliban since the Taliban deposed the Afghan government in August 2021, and ISW recently assessed that Russia may be hoping to leverage its relationship with the Taliban to degrade the Taliban's adversary, Afghan-based Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), which conducted the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow.[56] Putin's statement that Russia is working with the countries of the region when considering whether to recognize the Taliban indicates that Russia likely is following Central Asian states in normalizing relations with the Taliban.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin grossly misrepresented the Ukrainian Constitution and Ukrainian domestic law on May 28 in order to further promote the Kremlin information operation claiming that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is no longer the legitimate president of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Ruslan Stefanchuk directly responded to Putin's deliberate misinterpretation of Ukrainian law and explicitly stated that the Ukrainian Constitution and laws stipulate that Zelensky remain in office until the end of martial law in Ukraine.
- Russian allegations about Zelensky's lack of legitimacy are a known Kremlin information operation that Kremlin officials have been promoting extensively in recent weeks, in part targeted at foreign audiences.
- The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)'s Committee on Culture supported a resolution that recognizes Russia's deliberate erasure of Ukrainian culture as an element of Russia's genocidal campaign in occupied Ukraine, consistent with ISW's longstanding assessment that Russia is pursuing a broad occupation strategy premised on eradicating Ukraine's national identity and independence.
- Russian authorities are preparing to intensify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia throughout Summer 2024, further consolidating another component of Russia's genocidal campaign in Ukraine.
- Iran's continued support for Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and provision of lethal aid to Russia is bolstering Russia's technological output and military capabilities on the battlefield in Ukraine.

- The Georgian Parliament overrode Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili's veto of Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" law in an 84-to-4 vote on May 28.
- A limited segment of the Russian ultranationalist information space has resumed its standard public criticisms of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and warned that new Defense Minister Andrei Belousov may not solve certain systemic issues within the Russian MoD and military.
- Portugal and Belgium both signed long-term bilateral security agreements with Ukraine on May 28.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support on May 28 for delisting the Taliban as a prohibited organization in Russia, indicating that Russia will likely do so soon.
- Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances near Lyptsi, and Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- The Russian military is reportedly intensifying efforts to recruit citizens from Central African countries to fight in Ukraine.

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

May 27, 2024, 6:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on May 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly called on member states to lift their prohibitions against Ukraine using Western-provided weapons to strike within Russian territory. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly adopted a declaration on May 27 calling for NATO states to support Ukraine's "international right" to defend itself by lifting "some restrictions" on Ukraine's use of Western weapons to strike Russian territory.^[1] The declaration also calls for member states to accelerate their deliveries of critical weapons to Ukraine, and more than 200 representatives of NATO member states supported the declaration. Some NATO states, including the UK, have already lifted such restrictions on weapons they provide to Ukraine, but not enough Western states have done so to allow Ukraine to challenge Russia's sanctuary from which it can freely conduct airstrikes or stage ground operations against Ukraine.^[2] Swedish Defense Minister Pal Jonson told Swedish outlet *Hallandsposten* on May 26 in response to a question about Ukraine using Swedish-provided weapons against Russian territory that Sweden supports Ukraine's right under international law to defend itself through combat operations against Russian territory so long as these operations comply with international laws on combat.^[3]

Spain signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement with Ukraine on May 27.^[4] The agreement stipulates that Spain will provide Ukraine with one billion euros (about \$1.08 billion) worth of military aid in 2024 and another five billion euros (about \$5.4 billion) worth of aid before 2027.^[5] *E/Pais* reported on May 27 that the new military aid package will include 19 restored Leopard tanks (likely referring to 19 previously-announced Leopards), Patriot air defense missiles, a "large batch" of 155mm artillery ammunition, and other Spanish-produced weapons.^[6] *E/Pais* reported that Spain intends to send 10 refurbished Leopard tanks to Ukraine before June 30.^[7]

Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian long-range early warning radar systems and oil and gas infrastructure within Russia on May 26 and 27. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported on May 27 citing its sources in Ukrainian special services that the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) flew drones a record 1,800 kilometers to strike a Voronezh-M long-range early warning radar system in Orsk, Orenburg Oblast on May 26.^[8] Satellite imagery dated May 26 and 27 shows new burn marks near the radar system, but the extent of damage to the system is unclear.^[9] Oryol Oblast Governor Andrey Klychkov claimed on May 27 that Ukrainian drone strikes damaged an administrative building at a Rosneft fuel station in Livny, Oryol Oblast, and images of the aftermath show extensive damage to the building.^[10] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces also intercepted a drone over Bryansk Oblast, another drone over Belgorod Oblast, six drones over Oryol Oblast, and four drones over Krasnodar Krai overnight.^[11] Krasnodar Krai Governor Veniamin Kondratyev claimed that falling drones caused fires in Krinitsa and Dzhankhot, Krasnodar Krai.^[12]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that Ukraine is not an independent state and that Russia can unilaterally and forcibly change Ukraine's borders. Ukrainian media reported that Scholz stated at the Freedom for Democracy Festival in Berlin on May 26 that Putin stated that "Ukraine and Belarus are parts of Russia" and that Scholz's discussion with Putin demonstrated that Putin thinks that one can change borders "with the help of force."^[13] Putin has consistently demonstrated that he does not consider Ukraine an independent state with its own history, identity, and culture separate from Russia, as evidenced by his 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"; that his war aims include the total defeat of Ukraine; and that he has expansive territorial ambitions in Ukraine.^[14]

The New York Times (NYT) reported on May 26 that Western intelligence officials stated that the Russian General Staff's Main Directorate (GRU) are behind a series of low-level sabotage operations throughout Europe that aim to disrupt Western arms supplies to Ukraine and create the appearance of a European movement opposing support for Ukraine.^[15] The NYT stated that the GRU often recruits locals to conduct arsons and noted that the concerted Russian effort has targeted a paint factory in Poland, homes in Latvia, an IKEA store in Lithuania, and a warehouse in the United Kingdom connected with arms supplies to Ukraine. Western officials have recently reported on widespread Russian sabotage efforts throughout Europe, and NATO reported on May 2 that Russia is intensifying its hybrid activities in Europe.^[16] Russian investigative outlet *The Insider* reported on April 29 that GRU agents established a long-term presence in the Czech Republic and Greece and have been conducting operations, including attacks on ammunition depots and assassination attempts, since 2014.^[17]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on May 27 that he signed documents that will allow French military instructors to visit training centers in Ukraine. ^[18] Syrskyi stated that he and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov had a video call with French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu, and Syrskyi welcomed France's initiative to send French military instructors to Ukraine. Syrskyi also expressed optimism that France's determination would encourage other Ukrainian partners to join this "ambitious project." The French Defense Ministry told French outlet *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) on May 27 that France has been discussing sending French military instructors to Ukraine since French President Emmanuel Maron met with European leaders on February 26 to discuss European support for Ukraine but did not explicitly confirm that France would send French military instructors to Ukraine.^[19]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) offered to help Armenia mitigate the effects of flooding in northern Armenia, although Armenia has not publicly requested help from Russia. The Russian MoD claimed on May 27 that it commanded the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia to allocate personnel and equipment to help Armenia mitigate the effects of floods and mudflows.^[20] The Russian MoD stated that it will send Russian military personnel to the disaster areas at Armenia's request. The Russian MoD's phrasing obscures whether Armenia has actually requested help from Russia, however. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on May 26 that the Russian-Armenian Center for Humanitarian Response (RACHR) (an organization under the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations) gave portable motor pumps to the Armenian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to assist with rescue operations in flooded areas and that the RACHR is in "constant contact" with the Armenian MVD's Center for Crisis Management.^[21] ISW has not observed reports from Armenian officials or Armenian media that Armenia specifically requested assistance from Russia. Armenian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ani Badalyan stated on May 27 that Armenia would coordinate measures for mitigating the impacts of the floods with international partners after assessing the overall damage.^[22] Russian officials are likely publicizing Russian offers to help Armenia mitigate the effects of a natural disaster to portray Russia as a reliable ally amid Armenia's ongoing attempts to distance itself from political and security relations with Russia.^[23]

Russian officials are considering delisting the Taliban as a prohibited organization in Russia and will likely do so in the near term. Russian Special Representative to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov stated on May 27 that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Justice reported to Russian President Vladimir Putin that Russia can remove the Taliban from its list of prohibited organizations.^[24] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the Taliban is the "real power" in Afghanistan and that the initiative to remove the Taliban from the prohibited organization list "reflects objective reality."^[25] Russian officials have yet to delist the Taliban as a prohibited organization, but Kabulov's and Lavrov's comments suggest that Russia will do so in the near term. Kabulov added that Taliban representatives will attend the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in early June 2024.^[26] Putin met with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Tashkent on May 27 and signed a statement on bilateral commitments, which included intentions to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan.^[27] The Kremlin has maintained contacts with the Taliban since the Taliban deposed the Afghan government in 2021, although more outright Russian recognition of the Taliban as the

legitimate government of Afghanistan will likely portend increased Russian-Taliban cooperation. Russia likely hopes to leverage its relationship with the Taliban to degrade the operations of Afghan-based Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), which organized and conducted the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow, among other things.[28] The Taliban continue efforts to repress anti-Taliban groups throughout Afghanistan, including ISKP, and Russia may hope to help the Taliban intensify its anti-ISKP activities.[29] Kazakhstan delisted the Taliban as a terrorist organization in December 2023, and Uzbekistan has expanded agreements with the Taliban in recent years. [30] Russia may view direct engagement with the Taliban as an increasingly normalized trend among Central Asian states.

Russia may sign an agreement with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) exchanging weapons for a Russian logistics hub at Port Sudan on the Red Sea. SAF Assistant Commander-in-Chief Yasser Al-Atta stated on May 25 that a SAF delegation will travel to Russia in the near future to conclude an agreement exchanging "vital weapons and munitions" for a Russian logistics hub at Port Sudan.[31] Al-Atta described the planned Russian hub as "not exactly a military base."^[32] A prominent, Kremlin-awarded Russian milblogger also claimed on May 27 that the SAF was able to recapture several areas of Khartoum due to supplies of Iranian drones.[33] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative for the Russian President in Africa and the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov met with SAF head Abdel Fattah al Burhan and several other Sudanese officials during a two-day visit to Sudan on April 28 and 29.[34] ISW previously assessed that Russia may be switching sides in the Sudanese civil war to support the SAF in pursuit of acquiring a Red Sea naval base and that Russian backing of the SAF would greatly benefit Iran by aligning Russian and Iranian policy and strategy in the region.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- The NATO Parliamentary Assembly called on member states to lift their prohibitions against Ukraine using Western-provided weapons to strike within Russian territory.
- Spain signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement with Ukraine on May 27.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian long-range early warning radar systems and oil and gas infrastructure within Russia on May 26 and 27.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that Ukraine is not an independent state and that Russia can unilaterally and forcibly change Ukraine's borders.
- The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on May 26 that Western intelligence officials stated that the Russian General Staff's Main Directorate (GRU) are behind a series of low-level sabotage operations throughout Europe that aim to disrupt Western arms supplies to Ukraine and create the appearance of a European movement opposing support for Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on May 27 that he signed documents that will allow French military instructors to visit training centers in Ukraine.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) offered to help Armenia mitigate the effects of flooding in northern Armenia, although Armenia has not publicly requested help from Russia.
- Russian officials are considering delisting the Taliban as a prohibited organization in Russia and will likely do so in the near term.
- Russia may sign an agreement with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) exchanging weapons for a Russian logistics hub at Port Sudan on the Red Sea.
- Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances near Lyptsi and Russian forces advanced near Svatove and northwest of Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continue formalization efforts for irregular units.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 26, 2024

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Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, and Frederick W. Kagan
Russian forces are reportedly concentrating forces of unspecified size in western Belgorod Oblast near the border with Ukraine, likely to fix and draw Ukrainian forces to the area and prepare for offensive operations that aim to expand the Russian foothold in the international border area in northeastern Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on May 26 that Russian forces are preparing for new offensive actions and are concentrating a grouping of an unspecified size near the Ukrainian border 90 kilometers northwest of Kharkiv City.^[1] Zelensky appears to be referring to the Grayvoron-Borisovka-Proletarskiy area in western Belgorod Oblast, and ISW has observed satellite imagery of the area that suggests that Russian forces have expanded

activities at depots and warehouses in settlements in the area in recent weeks.[2] The current size of the possible Russian force concentration in the Grayvoron-Borisovka-Proletarskiy area remains unclear, however. Ukrainian State Border Service Representative Andrei Demchenko stated on May 26 that Russian forces may launch offensive operations into Sumy Oblast or areas of Kharkiv Oblast bordering Sumy Oblast in order to stretch and fix Ukrainian forces further along the international border area in northeastern Ukraine.[3]

The Grayvoron-Borisovka-Proletarskiy area would notably offer Russian forces opportunities to launch offensive operations to the south in the direction of Zolochiv and Bohodukhiv, two Ukrainian towns northwest of Kharkiv City within 25 kilometers of the international border, or to the west in the direction of settlements along the P-45 highway that connects Bohodukhiv with Sumy City. Russian forces could pursue offensive operations in either one or both directions, and the Russian concentration here could be intended to cause Ukrainian forces to commit manpower and materiel to a wider section of the border in Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts. Russian forces are also concentrating limited forces in Kursk and Bryansk oblasts close to the border with Sumy Oblast, and even limited concentrations in the areas could aim to achieve the likely desired effect of further drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces in the international border area.[4] Russian forces are currently bringing the Northern Grouping of Forces in the international border area up to its reported planned end strength and will likely launch only limited offensive operations along the Sumy-Kharkiv axis until the Northern Grouping of Forces is closer to its end strength.[5] Even limited Russian offensive operations in these areas will add pressure that stretches Ukrainian manpower and materiel along a wider front and possibly allow Russian forces to establish tactical footholds to support subsequent operations either northwest of Kharkiv City or in the direction of Sumy City. The Northern Grouping of Forces, even at the upper limit of its reported end strength, will lack the necessary manpower needed to conduct a successful operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv or Sumy cities, however.

Western officials continue to publicly debate Ukraine's right to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia amid Russian efforts to persuade the West to continue its self-imposed limitations and divide the NATO alliance. Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski stated during an interview with *The Guardian* published on May 25 that Poland supports Ukraine's right to strike military targets within Russia and that the West must stop "constantly limiting" its support for Ukraine.[6] Sikorski noted that Russia continues to strike civilian infrastructure in Ukraine and that Europe must improve its ability to "play the escalation game... by keeping Putin guessing." Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani stated on May 26 that Ukraine should only use Italian-provided weapons within Ukraine, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that there is "no reason" to lift the West's restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western weapons to strike within Russia as Germany's restrictions "work."^[7] Chairperson of Ukraine's Permanent Delegation to NATO's Parliamentary Assembly Yehor Chernev insinuated that the White House is reviewing its policy restricting Ukraine's ability to strike targets in Russia with US-provided weapons, which is consistent with the *New York Times* May 22 report that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is urging US President Joe Biden to lift these restrictions.^[8] ISW continues to assess that Western limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border area from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.^[9]

Sikorski also insinuated during his May 25 interview that US officials have threatened to strike Russian military concentrations and frontline positions in Ukraine if Russia uses tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, which prompted a response from Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev who threatened that a US strike against a Russian target in Ukraine would "start a world war."^[10] Medvedev denied that the US has issued such a threat, criticized Sikorski as inept, and threatened that Poland would "get its share of radioactive ash" if NATO places tactical nuclear weapons in Poland. Medvedev issued this threat on his English language X (formerly Twitter) account, suggesting that his statements are meant for an international audience. Medvedev may be attempting to single out Sikorski's statements as escalatory in order to drive a wedge between Poland and other NATO member states. Russian officials will likely continue to demand that the West respect arbitrary "red lines" on Western support for Ukraine in the face of continual Russian war crimes and aggression, particularly as the West continues to debate allowing Ukraine to use Western weapons to strike targets in Russia.

Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) will reportedly manufacture and refurbish three times as many artillery shells as the West will produce in 2024, although Russian shells reportedly suffer from quality-control issues and Ukrainian artillery is reportedly more precise than Russian artillery. *Sky News*, citing open-source research from US-based consulting firm Bain & Company, reported on May 26 that Russian DIB producers will likely be able to manufacture and refurbish 4.5 million artillery shells in 2024 compared to 1.3 million artillery shells that the US and European countries will collectively produce in 2024.^[11] *Sky News* reported that it costs Western

countries about \$4,000 to produce one NATO-standard 155mm shell – although this price "significantly" varies depending on the country of production – while it costs Russia about \$1,000 to produce one 152mm shell. The report does not make clear if the dollar value comparison between the price to produce one shell accounts for the difference in purchasing power parity between Western countries and Russia, however. A Ukrainian artillery battery commander operating in northern Kharkiv Oblast told *Sky News* that Russian forces operating in this area have a five-to-one artillery shell advantage but noted that Ukrainian forces can "completely destroy" a target using one to three shells. Ukrainian and Western officials and several Russian milbloggers previously stated that Ukrainian artillery is more precise than Russian artillery despite the fact that Russian artillery supplies greatly outnumber those of Ukrainian forces.^[12] Russian milbloggers recently complained that the amount of gunpowder in Russian artillery shells widely varies, causing artillery systems to perform inconsistently.^[13] The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported in March that Russia currently has about three million rounds of old artillery ammunition in its stockpiles, but that much of it is in poor condition.^[14] RUSI and other Western analysts also assessed that Russia's current domestic ammunition production is not sufficient for its war in Ukraine, so Russia will likely continue relying on supplies from partners.^[15] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported in February that Russia had imported about 1.5 million rounds of ammunition from North Korea, but that about half of the munitions did not function and the other half required restoration or inspection before use.^[16]

Kremlin officials continue to indicate that Russia is not interested in meaningful negotiations with Ukraine and promote Kremlin information operations that aim to push the West to make concessions on Ukraine's sovereign territory and people. Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin claimed on May 26 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky violated the Ukrainian constitution by "canceling" elections and is not the legitimate leader of Ukraine.^[17] Volodin alleged that Zelensky therefore has no right to make official decisions, including announcing mobilization. Volodin claimed that Ukraine "ceased to exist as a rule of law state" in 2014 and that "any agreements with an illegitimate president are invalid and may be challenged in the future." Volodin's statements are in line with multiple longstanding Kremlin narratives about Ukrainian electoral law and Ukraine's legitimacy over the past decade. Putin claimed on May 24 that the Ukrainian parliament and constitutional court need to examine the Ukrainian constitution to determine the legality of officials remaining in office past their stated terms.^[18] The Ukrainian law defining martial law, which Ukraine has been under since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, clearly states that "conducting elections of the President of Ukraine" is "prohibited in the conditions of martial law."^[19] The Kremlin has also consistently promoted narratives that the Ukrainian state and government lost its legitimacy, sovereignty, and independence as a result of the EuroMaidan movement in 2014.^[20] Volodin's May 26 statement suggests that Russia does not consider any agreements it made with Ukraine since 2014 as valid and that Russia will likely also not respect any future agreements it makes with the current Ukrainian government, including any possible future negotiated settlement. The Kremlin has repeatedly promoted information operations that aim to persuade the West to make concessions on Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty.^[21] Any negotiated settlement that does not directly involve the legitimate government of Ukraine would be ignoring Ukraine's sovereignty as an independent state.

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian forces are reportedly concentrating forces of unspecified size in western Belgorod Oblast near the border with Ukraine, likely to fix and draw Ukrainian forces to the area and prepare for offensive operations that aim to expand the Russian foothold in the international border area in northeastern Ukraine.**
- **Western officials continue to publicly debate Ukraine's right to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia amid Russian efforts to persuade the West to continue its self-imposed limitations and divide the NATO alliance.**
- **Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) will reportedly manufacture and refurbish three times as many artillery shells as the West will produce in 2024, although Russian shells reportedly suffer from quality-control issues and Ukrainian artillery is reportedly more precise than Russian artillery.**
- **Kremlin officials continue to indicate that Russia is not interested in meaningful negotiations with Ukraine and promote Kremlin information operations that aim to push the West to make concessions on Ukraine's sovereign territory and people.**
- **Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Svatove, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.**
- **Former Wagner Group fighters reportedly continue to form new units under Rosgvardia and Chechen Akhmat Spetsnaz.**

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 25, 2024

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

May 25, 2024, time 7:20pm ET

Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces are increasingly contesting the tactical initiative in northern Kharkiv Oblast and characterized Russian operations in the area as defensive, although Russian forces are likely attempting to bring the Northern Grouping of Forces up closer to its reported planned end strength before possibly intensifying offensive operations in the area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 24 that Ukrainian forces are pushing Russian forces back from Ukrainian defenses in northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[1] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces established "combat control" over an unspecified section of the border where Russian forces had initially crossed into northern Kharkiv Oblast following the start of Russian offensive operations on May 10.^[2] A Ukrainian commander operating in the Lyptsi direction (north of Kharkiv City) stated that Ukrainian forces have completely stopped Russian offensive operations in the Strilecha-Hlyboke direction (north of Lyptsi) and that Ukrainian forces are now focused on regaining territory in the area.^[3] The commander stated that Ukrainian forces are successfully pushing Russian forces out of captured positions but that Russian forces are saturating the area with manpower and equipment to prevent Ukrainian forces from seizing the tactical initiative.^[4] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces have partially transitioned to the defensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast after consolidating captured positions and are currently focused on destroying reserves that Ukrainian forces have concentrated near Kharkiv City.^[5] The milblogger assessed that Ukrainian forces would have to launch counterattacks in the area at the end of May 2024 to push Russian forces out of northern Kharkiv Oblast and that future Russian plans on this axis likely depend on the outcome of Ukrainian counterattacks.^[6] Russian forces launched their offensive operation into northern Kharkiv Oblast with limited manpower and have yet to commit significant reserves to the area, leading to a decreasing tempo of Russian advances and offensive operations.^[7] This decreasing tempo is likely presenting Ukrainian forces with tactical opportunities to counterattack, although Ukrainian forces are not yet conducting a limited counteroffensive operation that aims to push Russian forces completely out of northern Kharkiv Oblast.

The disparate Russian elements currently operating in northern Kharkiv Oblast and the Russian military's apparent hesitance to commit available reserves to fight suggests that Russian forces are likely attempting to bring the Northern Grouping of Forces up to its reported planned end strength before intensifying offensive operations and pursuing subsequent phases of the offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Russian forces reportedly had roughly 35,000 personnel in the international border area as a part of the Northern Grouping of Forces when they started offensive operations on May 10, whereas Ukrainian sources had been indicating that the Russian military intends to concentrate a total of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel in the international border area.^[8] Russian forces likely launched the offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast earlier than intended with an understrength force hoping to establish a foothold before the arrival of resumed US military aid to the front made that task more difficult.^[9] Ukrainian sources have identified elements of the 11th Army Corps [AC], 44th AC, and 6th Combined Arms Army [CAA] as the main elements of the Northern Grouping of Forces, and limited elements of these formations have participated in the offensive operation and have reportedly suffered significant casualties.^[10] Zelensky stated in an interview published on May 25 that Russian forces have suffered an eight-to-one casualty ratio in northern Kharkiv Oblast in the past two weeks, although these losses do not appear to have forced the Russian military to commit significant reserves from the 11th AC, 44th AC, or 6th CAA to sustain Russian offensive operations in the area.^[11]

Instead, Russian forces appear to be relying on limited elements of units that are part of various different force groupings in eastern Ukraine. Limited elements of the 47th Tank Division's 153rd Tank Regiment and 272nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (1st Guards Tank Army [GTA], Moscow Military District [MMD]) and limited elements of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division's 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment (1st GTA, MMD) are reportedly operating near Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City).^[12] Elements of the 47th Tank Division and the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division are currently heavily committed to intensified Russian offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, and Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets previously reported that the Russian Western Grouping of Forces is "leasing" limited elements to the Northern Grouping of Forces.^[13] Elements of a battalion of the 98th Airborne (VDV) Division's 217th VDV Regiment are reportedly operating in a border area in Kursk Oblast, even though elements of the 217th VDV Regiment and other elements of the 98th VDV Division are participating in intensified assaults on Chasiv Yar's eastern outskirts.^[14] Russian forces have either

been attacking with an understrength 217th VDV Regiment in the Chasiv Yar area for some time or have recently transferred a battalion of the regiment to the Northern Grouping of Forces.

Russian forces are likely holding back reserves of the 11th AC, 44th AC, and 6th CAA in order to establish the Northern Grouping at closer to its intended end strength. The Russian military command may be waiting to intensify offensive operations and pursue a second phase of the operation because its plans require a grouping of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel strong. Russian forces likely intend to launch the second phase of their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast following their intended seizure of Vovchansk, although positional fighting and possible Ukrainian counterattacks could require Russian forces to conduct another wave of intensified assaults in the area to complete the seizure of the settlement.[15] Russian forces currently aim to establish a "buffer zone" in northern Kharkiv Oblast and advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City, and it is unclear which goal a second phase of the operation will support or if Russian forces have a more ambitious operational objective in mind.[16] **The Northern Grouping of Forces, even at the upper limit of its reported end strength, will lack the necessary manpower needed to conduct a successful operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City.**

The likely premature start of Russian offensive operations appears to have undermined

Russian success in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Russian forces reportedly managed to surprise Ukrainian forces on May 10 and made tactically significant gains in areas that Ukrainian officials reported were less defended.[17] The Ukrainian State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) announced on MAY 25 that it has launched an investigation into improperly prepared Ukrainian defenses in the area and the abandonment of Ukrainian positions in the Lyptsi and Vovchansk directions.[18] The SBI noted that this allowed Russian forces to advance to a second line of Ukrainian defenses in the area, although it appears that limited manpower prevented Russian forces from achieving a deeper penetration. While it is possible that the Russian military command thought the accumulation of a larger force would have alerted Ukrainian forces and prevented the opportunity for operational surprise, the Russian decision to not immediately introduce significant reserves likely prevented Russian forces from achieving rapid gains and a deeper penetration. Ukrainian forces have now established themselves at defensive positions in the area, and Russian forces have likely expended their tactical opportunity to make relatively rapid gains against lightly-held positions in this area.

Russian forces continue to leverage their sanctuary in Russian airspace to strike Kharkiv City to devastating effect, likely as part of efforts to depopulate the city and demoralize

Ukrainians. Russian forces conducted four distinct missile and glide bomb strikes against Kharkiv City on May 25: a missile strike with an Iskander-M missile and S-300/S-400 air defense missiles against an educational facility just after midnight; a strike with two KAB precision-guided glide bombs against the Epicenter construction hypermarket in the city at around 1300; a strike with unspecified munitions against Central Park in Kharkiv City just after 1700; and a strike in a residential area in central Kharkiv City just after 1900.[19] The hypermarket strike sparked a fire that spread to more than 15,000 square meters and engulfed the entire hypermarket.[20] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that up to 200 people could have been in the hypermarket at the time of the strike, and Ukrainian officials have since confirmed that the Epicenter hypermarket strike has killed at least five people, injured at least 40 and that 16 are currently missing.[21] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Head Oleh Synehubov reported that the evening strike against a central Kharkiv residential area has injured at least 18 people.[22]

The Russian use of precision-guided bombs against civilian areas in Kharkiv City indicates that Russia likely intends for these strikes to scare Ukrainians into leaving the city. Russian forces have been heavily targeting Kharkiv City with missile strikes and glide bombs – often FAB and KAB bombs modified with glide modules frequently equipped with guidance systems – in recent weeks in part to force residents to flee.[23] Russian aircraft have conducted these strikes from their sanctuary in Russian territory without fear of Ukrainian air defenses due to Western constraints on Ukraine using Western-provided systems against military targets in Russian territory and airspace.[24] Russian forces will very likely continue these strikes as part of the offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast as long as Western prohibitions prevent Ukrainian forces from adequately challenging the Russian military's sanctuary in Russian territory.

Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities reportedly impacted the effectiveness of select Western weapon systems in Ukraine in 2023 as Ukraine and Russia continue to compete in a technical offense-defense race. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* (NYT) reported on May 24 and 25, respectively, that senior Ukrainian military official sources and confidential Ukrainian military assessments described how Russian EW has previously decreased the effectiveness of Western weapons in Ukraine.[25] The NYT reported that the success rate of M982 Excalibur guided artillery shells fell from 55 percent to seven percent between January and August 2023 and that Ukrainian forces stopped using the shells.[26] Ukrainian forces also reportedly experienced issues

with Joint Direct Attack Munition-Extended Range (JDAM-ER) guided munitions in early 2023.[27] US JDAM-ER manufacturers reportedly delivered more EW-resistant systems to Ukraine in May 2023, but Russian forces adapted their countermeasures, causing the JDAM-ER's success rate to drop to its lowest point in July 2023. The *Washington Post* noted, however, that the JDAM-ER's success rate was more than 60 percent for much of 2023. The *Washington Post* reported that the effectiveness of Ukraine's M30/M31 rockets for multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) also decreased but that the Ukrainian military assessment that the *Washington Post* reviewed did not discuss these issues. The *NYT* stated that Russian forces often deploy EW systems near headquarters and command centers, and Thomas Withington of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) told *NYT* that Ukrainian forces have focused on striking fixed Russian radars and other EW equipment, especially in occupied Crimea, in order to then strike Russian command posts and supply depots.[28] The *Washington Post* noted that the United States has the means to combat Russian EW jamming, stating that the US military would likely not experience the same issues with Russian EW since the United States has a more advanced air force and "robust" EW countermeasures.[29] Ukrainian forces have notably recently conducted successful ATACMS missile strikes on Russian targets in occupied Ukraine, including Crimea, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have been able to at least partially overcome Russian jamming and/or that Russian EW capabilities are not pervasive throughout all of occupied Ukraine.[30] Both the *NYT* and the *Washington Post* noted that Russia and Ukraine are engaged in an offense-defense race as both sides aim to adapt to the other's innovations – as ISW has frequently assessed.[31]

Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov categorically rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy and outlined Russia's maximalist conditions for peace negotiations during an interview with Newsweek on May 25.[32] Antonov denied Western statements that Russia is unwilling to negotiate with Ukraine and criticized these statements as a "deliberate attempt" to misrepresent reality. Antonov stated that any Russian-Ukrainian peace agreement must account for the battlefield situation and be signed by a "legitimate" Ukrainian leader, but that it is unclear who could sign such a document since Zelensky has "lost [his] legitimacy." ISW has previously noted that the Ukrainian constitution allows a sitting president to postpone elections and remain in office past the end of his term during times of martial law, which is currently in effect in Ukraine due to Russia's full-scale invasion.[33] Russian officials' focus on Zelensky's presidential term is only the latest talking point in the Kremlin's ongoing information operation to discredit Zelensky and frame any pro-Western Ukrainian government as illegitimate.[34] Antonov also dismissed the upcoming Ukrainian Peace Conference in Switzerland as meaningless and as part of a perceived Western effort to legitimize Zelensky's presidency.[35] Antonov threatened that Ukraine would lose much more territory if the United States continued to ignore Russia's peace proposals, highlighting the Kremlin's persistent belief that Russia could subvert Ukraine's interests and sovereignty by negotiating with the West.[36]

Antonov insinuated that Russia would reject any peace agreement predicated on the retreat or withdrawal of Russian forces from any part of occupied Ukraine, likely including recently occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast.[37] Antonov claimed that Russia's constitution prohibits the external division of Russian territory and that Russia's "new federal subjects" — referring to the illegally annexed and occupied areas of Crimea and Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts — are now part of Russia's clearly marked border and thus cannot and should not return to Ukrainian control. Antonov's claim insinuates that Russian authorities have clearly determined the borders of the Ukrainian territory that Russia has illegally annexed, but occupation authorities have previously presented conflicting assessments of the extent of Russia's illegally annexed territory. Occupation authorities published conflicting maps in honor of the anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory in September 2023, with some maps showing the entirety of occupied Crimea and Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts up to their administrative borders as claimed Russian territory and others showing claimed Russian territory extending roughly to the frontlines.[38] It is unlikely that the Kremlin has taken further steps to determine the boundaries of the Ukrainian territory it illegally annexed in September 2022, and it is unclear how the Kremlin envisions the previously and recently occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast fitting into this framework. Official Russian statements continue to support ISW's assessment that Putin remains uninterested in meaningful negotiations and any peace agreement that would prevent him from pursuing the complete destruction of an independent Ukrainian state and the subjugation of the Ukrainian people.[39]

Russia is likely helping North Korea develop its defense industrial base (DIB) in exchange for North Korean munitions supplies, and US officials reportedly assess that Russia may also be supplying North Korea with military equipment, weapons, or technology. NBC reported on May 24 citing six senior US officials that the Biden administration is concerned that the Russian-North Korean relationship could help North Korea expand its nuclear capabilities.[40] US officials reportedly stated that Russia may push North Korea to conduct its "most provocative military actions in a decade" close to the US presidential election in November 2024. NBC reported that a senior US official stated

that US intelligence officials assess that Russia is providing North Korea with nuclear submarine and ballistic missile technology in return for North Korea's provision of munitions to Russia. US officials reportedly assess that Russia may be helping North Korea develop a long-range ballistic missile that can re-enter the atmosphere with its payload intact — likely referring to the capability required to field an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). NBC noted, however, that US officials stated that they do not have an "entirely clear understanding" of what technology Russia is giving to North Korea as it is difficult to detect and track military technology exchanges. NBC reported that US officials also stated that North Korea may want Russian ballistic missile parts, aircraft, missiles, and armored vehicles and that Russia may help North Korea develop its own DIB. Known facts suggest that Russia is likely at least helping North Korea develop its DIB. Western officials previously stated that North Korea supplied Russia with more than one million artillery shells in 2023.[41] Although these shells are reportedly mostly old, North Korean authorities likely would have agreed to relinquish such a high quantity of munitions only if they thought they would be able to replenish their stockpiles in the near future.[42] North Korea's ability to produce such a high quantity of shells rapidly would likely require some level of Russian funding and assistance.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces are increasingly contesting the tactical initiative in northern Kharkiv Oblast and characterized Russian operations in the area as defensive, although Russian forces are likely attempting to bring the Northern Grouping of Forces up closer to its reported planned end strength before possibly intensifying offensive operations in the area.
- The likely premature start of Russian offensive operations appears to have undermined Russian success in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces continue to leverage their sanctuary in Russian airspace to strike Kharkiv City to devastating effect, likely as part of efforts to depopulate the city and demoralize Ukrainians.
- Russian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities reportedly impacted the effectiveness of select Western weapon systems in Ukraine in 2023 as Ukraine and Russia continue to compete in a technical offense-defense race.
- Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov categorically rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy and outlined Russia's maximalist conditions for peace negotiations during an interview with *Newsweek* on May 25.
- Russia is likely helping North Korea develop its defense industrial base (DIB) in exchange for North Korean munitions supplies, and US officials reportedly assess that Russia may also be supplying North Korea with military equipment, weapons, or technology.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Donetsk City.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has cancelled its annual "Army Games" international competition for the second year in a row, prompting celebration among critical Russian ultranationalist milbloggers.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 24, 2024

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

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

May 24, 2024, 8:45pm ET

Western media continues to report that Russian President Vladimir Putin is interested in a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine, although Kremlin rhetoric and Russian military actions illustrate that Putin remains uninterested in meaningful negotiations and any settlement that would prevent him from pursuing the destruction of an independent Ukrainian state. Reuters reported on May 24 that four Russian sources who currently work or have worked with Putin stated that Putin is ready to negotiate a ceasefire that recognizes the current frontlines and that Putin is prepared to present the current amount of occupied Ukrainian territory as a Russian military victory to the Russian public.[1] Western media reported similar interest from Putin in a negotiated ceasefire or settlement based on statements from unspecified Russian sources with some level of alleged connection to Putin or the Kremlin in December 2023 and January and February 2024. [2] Western media has cited limited unspecified US and international officials as confirming that Putin has expressed interest in a ceasefire, although other Western media has reported that US sources have denied that there has been any official Russian outreach to the US on the matter.[3]

The Kremlin routinely feigns interest in meaningful negotiations as part of a longstanding information operation that aims to persuade the West to make concessions on Ukrainian territorial integrity and

sovereignty, and it is unclear if the unspecified Russian sources talking to Western media are advancing these efforts or accurately portraying Putin's interests and viewpoints.^[4] ISW cannot determine the veracity of the Russian sources' claims about Putin's intentions, and these private anonymous statements contrast sharply with Russian official public rhetoric and action. Putin and the Kremlin have notably intensified their expansionist rhetoric about Ukraine since December 2023 and have increasingly indicated that Russia intends to conquer more territory in Ukraine and is committed to destroying Ukrainian statehood and identity completely.^[5] Russian forces have conducted offensive operations in recent months that aim to make operationally significant advances and collapse the frontline, have opened a new front in Kharkiv Oblast (which Russia has not claimed through illegal annexation), and have sought to cause long-term damage to Ukrainian warfighting capabilities and economic potential in regular large-scale missile and drone strikes.^[6] These military operations suggest that the Kremlin is more interested in achieving its long-term goal of maximalist victory in Ukraine than in any settlement that would immediately freeze the frontline where it is currently located.

Russian sources that have spoken to Western media have also offered mutually contradictory characterizations of Putin's stance on negotiations. *Reuters* reported that a Russian source stated that Putin aims to take as much territory as possible in order to compel Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to negotiate, but another Russian source assessed that Putin is unwilling to negotiate with Zelensky.^[7] Russian sources also told *Reuters* that Putin believes that the West will not give Ukraine enough weapons but understands that making any "dramatic" Russian advances would require another Russian nationwide mobilization.^[8] Delays in Western security assistance have severely constrained Ukrainian defensive capabilities in recent months, and if Putin believes that there are limits to Western support for Ukraine, then he would logically conclude that such constraints could reemerge in the medium term and allow Russian forces with their current capabilities to make "dramatic" gains without conducting a wider mobilization of manpower or the Russian economy.^[9] A Russian source stated that Putin is concerned that a longer war will generate more dissatisfied veterans with poor job prospects and economic situations that could generate domestic tensions, although this assessment is at odds with Russia's ongoing chronic labor shortages and the Kremlin's effort to prepare Russian society for a long war effort.^[10] These contradictions cast further doubt on the accuracy with which these Russian sources are reflecting Putin's actual thinking.

These Russian sources notably highlighted territorial concessions as part of Putin's alleged envisioned ceasefire but have sparsely addressed the wider strategic objectives of Putin's war in Ukraine. *Reuters* reported that its Russian sources stated that Putin views Russia maintaining control over currently occupied Ukrainian territory as a non-negotiable basis for negotiations, and previous Western reporting about Putin's openness to negotiations has similarly highlighted Russian territorial desires.^[11] *Bloomberg* reported in January that two unspecified sources close to the Kremlin stated that Putin signaled to senior US officials that he may be willing to drop demands for Ukraine's "neutral status" and even may ultimately abandon his opposition to Ukraine's NATO accession.^[12] Russian demands for Ukrainian "neutrality" and a moratorium on NATO expansion have always been and continue to be one of Putin's central justifications for his invasion of Ukraine and any hypothetical concession on these demands would represent a major strategic and rhetorical retreat on Putin's behalf that Putin is extremely unlikely to be considering at this time.^[13] Putin also launched his invasion of Ukraine to replace the Ukrainian government with one he determined appropriate and to "demilitarize" the Ukrainian military so that Russia could unilaterally impose its will on Ukraine in the future without facing significant Ukrainian resistance.^[14] Russian sources that have talked about a ceasefire to Western media have not mentioned these two goals, which Kremlin officials regularly reiterate.^[15] The repeated focus on the recognition of occupied Ukrainian territory as Russian territory does not indicate that Russia would drop these wider strategic objectives, however. A ceasefire that cedes currently occupied territory would concretize the idea that Ukrainian territorial integrity is negotiable, a precedent that the Kremlin would most certainly revisit to push for further territorial concessions and contest the idea of Ukrainian statehood altogether.^[16]

A ceasefire does not preclude Russia from resuming its offensive campaign to destroy Ukrainian statehood, and Russia would use any ceasefire to prepare for future offensive operations within Ukraine. Russia's military intervention in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 violated numerous Russian international commitments to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Russia's recognition of Ukraine as an independent state in 1991 and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia specifically committed not to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty or territorial integrity.^[17] There is no reason to assess that the Kremlin will respect any new agreement obliging Russia to not violate Ukrainian sovereignty or territorial integrity. A ceasefire would provide Russia with the opportunity to reconstitute degraded forces, divert manpower to large-scale expansion and reform efforts instead of ongoing fighting in Ukraine, and allow Russia to further mobilize its defense industrial base (DIB) without the constraints of immediate operational requirements in Ukraine.^[18] Russia could use a ceasefire to prepare a force more suitable to pursue a subsequent

series of offensive operations in pursuit of regime change, demilitarization, and conquest in Ukraine. A ceasefire would provide Ukraine opportunities of its own to address force generation and defense industrial capacity, to be sure, but the Kremlin may not unreasonably expect that a frozen frontline will make support for Ukraine less urgent and salient for the West and allow Russia to outpace Ukraine in preparing for a resumption of hostilities.

Russia is currently preparing for the possibility of a conventional war with NATO, and the Kremlin will likely view anything short of Ukrainian capitulation as an existential threat to Russia's ability to fight such a war.[19] Russian military leaders planning a war against NATO will have to assume that Ukraine might enter such a war on NATO's behalf regardless of Ukraine's membership status.[20] A front with NATO along Russia's entire western border with Europe presents the Russian military with serious challenges, as ISW has previously assessed, whereas a Ukrainian defeat would give Russia the ability to deploy its forces along Europe's entire eastern flank from the Black Sea to Finland.[21] Russian victory in Ukraine would not only remove the threat of Ukraine as a potential adversary during a possible conventional war with NATO but would also provide Russia with further resources and people to commit to a large-scale confrontation with NATO. Regardless of how Russian victory would partition Ukraine between Russian annexation and the Kremlin-controlled puppet state that would follow Putin's desired regime change, Russia would have access to millions more people it could impress into military service and the majority of Ukraine's resources and industrial capacity. Putin and the Kremlin therefore likely view victory in Ukraine as a prerequisite to being able to fight a war with NATO and any ceasefire or negotiated settlement short of full Ukrainian capitulation as a temporary pause in their effort to destroy an independent Ukrainian state.

The Kremlin will continue to feign interest in negotiations at critical moments in the war to influence Western decision-making on support for Ukraine and to continue efforts to extract preemptive concessions from the West. The Kremlin has repeatedly engaged in a large-scale reflexive control campaign that aims to influence Western decision-making.[22] Reflexive control is a key element in Russia's hybrid warfare toolkit and relies on shaping an adversary with targeted rhetoric and information operations in such a way that the adversary voluntarily takes actions that are advantageous to Russia.[23] Kremlin officials claimed that Russia was open to negotiations in December 2022, likely to delay the provision of Western tanks and other equipment essential for the continuation of Ukrainian mechanized counteroffensives.[24] Western reporting on Putin's alleged interest in negotiations in Winter 2023-2024 coincided with prolonged debates in the US about security assistance for Ukraine, and the Kremlin may have feigned interest in a ceasefire at this time to convince Western policymakers to pressure Ukraine to negotiate from a weakened position and agree to what would have very likely been a settlement that heavily favored Russia.[25] The Kremlin may again be feigning interest in negotiations in order to influence the ongoing Western debate about lifting restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia and convince Western policymakers that changes in these restrictions may lead to Russian unwillingness to negotiate in the future. The Kremlin may also be feigning interest in negotiations again to preemptively influence any future Western discussions about the provision of the additional aid that Ukrainian forces will need to contest the initiative and launch their own counteroffensive operations in the medium term. ISW continues to assess that the consistent provision of key Western systems will play a crucial role in Ukraine's ability to contest the theater-wide initiative and conduct future counteroffensive operations.[26] US officials have recently stated that the resumption of US security assistance will help Ukrainian forces withstand Russian assaults throughout the rest of 2024 and that Ukrainian forces will look to conduct counteroffensive operations to recapture territory in 2025.[27]

Putin directly rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president on May 24, the latest in a series of efforts to dismiss Zelensky's authority to engage in or reject negotiations with Russia and undermine Ukrainians' trust in Zelensky. Putin stated during a press conference with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus on May 24 that Russia is willing to negotiate with Ukraine but that the "legitimacy of the current [Ukrainian] head of state has ended," referring to a Russian information operation falsely claiming that Zelensky is no longer the legitimate president of Ukraine after his term was set to expire on May 20.[28] Putin claimed that the Ukrainian parliament and constitutional court need to examine the Ukrainian constitution to determine the legality of officials remaining in office past their stated terms, which Putin described as an internal Ukrainian matter (about which he nevertheless chose to opine).[29] **Putin's invocation of the Ukrainian constitution while explicitly denying Zelensky's legitimacy is odd because the Ukrainian constitution explicitly allows a sitting president to postpone elections and remain in office past the end of his term during times of martial law.[30]** Zelensky's decision to postpone the March 2024 elections is in full accordance with the Ukrainian constitution. While Putin seems to lack an understanding of Ukrainian law, his statements advance a broader Russian information operation that aims to degrade Ukrainians' trust in Zelensky by portraying him as the sole obstacle to a negotiated peace in Ukraine.

The Kremlin is trying to foment domestic unrest in Ukraine centered around distrust in the Ukrainian government under Zelensky. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) warned on February 27 that Russia is running an information operation entitled "Maidan 3" that uses multiple rhetorical lines to undermine domestic trust and international support for the Ukrainian government, undermine Zelensky's legitimacy, sow panic, and incite conflict.[31] GUR Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov warned on April 27 that "Maidan 3" has "advanced" and aims to disguise pro-Russian actors, ideals, and movements as social tensions and other issues to influence Ukrainian society.

[32] The GUR warned that the "Maidan 3" operation will peak in March-May 2024, and GUR Spokesperson Andriy Yusov similarly warned on May 23 that Russia will continue to intensify the "Maidan-3" operation through July 2024.[33] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* reported on May 20 that anonymous online accounts called on groups of hundreds of Ukrainian Telegram users to participate in "Maidan-3" demonstrations in Kyiv's Independence Square on May 21, including some offering payments of 1,000 hryvnia (just under \$25) per hour.[34] *RFE/RL* noted that all these Telegram groups chose the May 21 date to coincide with the end of Zelensky's first presidential term had Ukraine held elections in March 2024.[35] *RFE/RL* reported that a similar information operation is occurring on TikTok, both calling on users to demonstrate against Zelensky and spreading propaganda claiming that Zelensky is no longer a legitimate president.[36]

The Kremlin may be setting informational conditions to eventually declare a Kremlin-backed actor as Ukrainian president instead of Zelensky. Putin stated on May 24 that Russia seeks to understand who the "legitimate [Ukrainian] authorities" are before engaging in negotiations, implying that the Kremlin could declare a figure of its choice as "legitimate" at some point in the future.[37] Independent monitoring project Belarusian Hajun reported that the plane of former pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych—who fled Ukraine to Russia during the 2014 EuroMaidan protests against his rule—notably arrived in Minsk on May 24, coinciding with Putin's and Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov's visit to Minsk for extensive Union State negotiations.[38] It is unclear why Yanukovych would be in Minsk or with whom he met. Western and Ukrainian media have floated Yanukovych as a possible Kremlin-picked replacement for Zelensky had the initial days of the Russian invasion forced Ukraine to capitulate.[39] Yanukovych last visited Minsk in March 2022, and Ukrainian intelligence told *Ukrainska Pravda* that the trip was for the Kremlin to prepare Yanukovych for a "special operation" to be reinstated as president of Ukraine.[40]

Unnamed Russian government officials and sources within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin told the independent Russian outlet *The Moscow Times* that the ongoing effort to remove senior Russian defense officials and uniformed commanding officers will likely continue in the coming weeks and months.[41] *The Moscow Times*, citing unnamed sources, reported on May 24 that the Russian Federal Security Service's (FSB) recent arrests of five high-ranking defense officials are likely the first of dozens or hundreds of anticipated arrests. Russian authorities have notably arrested five senior Russian MoD officials and former military commanders since April 24, including Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov, Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Yuri Kuznetsov, former commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) Major General Ivan Popov, Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Head of the Main Communications Directorate Lieutenant General Vadim Shamarin, and Head of the Russian MoD's Department for State Procurement Vladimir Verteletsky.[42] A source told *The Moscow Times* that the FSB is "mopping up" defense officials associated with former Defense Minister and recently appointed Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu and that the FSB could only conduct this type of operation with Russian President Vladimir Putin's approval. The source claimed that "more arrests await us," and an unnamed acting Russian government official claimed that these arrests could spiral into the largest effort to remove Russian military officials in modern Russian history. The official suggested that Russian authorities will arrest up to hundreds of defense officials of various unspecified ranks this year. Another acting Russian government official claimed that the FSB hopes to install FSB-affiliated officials in the Russian MoD and take control of the MoD's budget.

A source close to the Kremlin claimed that these arrests indicate that the FSB is "triumphing" over the Russian MoD and that the arrests are part of the FSB's effort to convince Putin that the Russian MoD is responsible for the failures during the initial weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Kremlin has undoubtedly debated which department deserves the blame for the Russian military's initial failures in Ukraine, but it is unclear if Putin remains interested in assigning blame for the initial months of the invasion over two years later.[43] Moreover, the FSB is one of the most logical arms of the Russian government to conduct these arrests as it is tasked with addressing domestic security issues, counterintelligence, economic crimes, and surveillance of the Russian military.[44] While Putin has been known to balance his favor between *siloviki* (Russian strongmen with political influence) and encourage infighting, it is at least as likely that the FSB's involvement in the ongoing removal of high-ranking Russian defense officials and military officers is due to its mandated responsibilities as guided by the Kremlin and not as part of a wider FSB conspiracy to gain control of or divert blame to the MoD.[45]

Ukrainian forces conducted a series of successful missile strikes against military targets in Russian-occupied Ukraine on May 23 and 24. Geolocated footage published on May 24 shows that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian S-400 air defense system, destroying four of its missile launchers and its radar station in occupied Obrizne, Donetsk Oblast.[46] Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces used ATACMS missiles in the strike.[47] Geolocated footage published on May 23 shows a strike near occupied Alushta, Crimea, and Ukrainian Crimean-based "Atesh" partisan group stated that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian military communications center.[48] "Atesh" stated that the strike likely significantly damaged equipment and possibly destroyed the control center. Crimean occupation administration head Sergei Aksyonov claimed that Ukrainian forces struck an unspecified target in Simferopol and an empty commercial property near Alushta.[49] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched up to 16 missiles toward Crimea, including ATACMS, and that some missiles penetrated Russian air defense systems.[50] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces destroyed three ATACMS missiles over Crimea and three naval drones in the Black Sea overnight.[51]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a drone strike against a Russian early warning radar system in Krasnodar Krai, Russia on the morning of May 23. Ukrainian and Russian sources posted photos of the aftermath of a Ukrainian drone strike on a Voronezh-DM ground-based early warning radar station on the territory of the Russian 818th Radio Technical Center near Armavir, Krasnodar Krai.[52] The sources noted that Russian forces used the radar to detect intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at a range of up to 6,000 kilometers.[53] Radio Svoboda published satellite imagery from shortly after the strike showing damage to the radar system.[54]

The Ukrainian military command continues to address Ukraine's manpower challenges. Head of the Ukrainian General Staff's Main Department of Defense Planning Brigadier General Yevgeny Ostryanskyi stated on May 24 that the Ukrainian military command plans to reduce the General Staff's personnel by 60 percent and reallocate the personnel following a functional survey of the General Staff in February and March 2024.[55] Ostryanskyi stated that the General Staff will disband 25 percent of its elements and will transfer the other 35 percent to other branches of the Ukrainian military. Ostryanskyi stated that the Ukrainian military command plans to re-staff operational and tactical level management bodies and combat military units, presumably by reallocating these personnel, in order to conduct rotations on the frontline. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on March 22 that the Ukrainian military was optimizing its military organization structures to simplify and maximize the quality and efficiency of Ukraine's force management.[56] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on May 17 that consistent rotations for frontline units are an important step in improving Ukrainian morale and noted that Ukraine must sufficiently staff its units in order to conduct counteroffensive operations in the future.[57]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a military assistance package worth \$275 million on May 24 to help Ukrainian forces repel Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[58] The package includes HIMARS ammunition; 155mm and 105mm artillery ammunition, Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracker, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; anti-tank systems, precision aerial munitions, mines, and other parts and equipment.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on May 24 that NATO member states should consider lifting restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.[59] Stoltenberg stated that these restrictions make it difficult for Ukrainian forces to defend against the Russian offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast. ISW continues to assess that Western limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border area from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.[60]

Key Takeaways:

- Western media continues to report that Russian President Vladimir Putin is interested in a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine, although Kremlin rhetoric and Russian military actions illustrate that Putin remains uninterested in meaningful negotiations and any settlement that would prevent him from pursuing the destruction of an independent Ukrainian state.
- Russian sources that have spoken to Western media have also offered mutually contradictory characterizations of Putin's stance on negotiations.
- These Russian sources notably highlighted territorial concessions as part of Putin's alleged envisioned ceasefire but have sparsely addressed the wider strategic objectives of Putin's war in Ukraine.
- A ceasefire does not preclude Russia from resuming its offensive campaign to destroy Ukrainian statehood, and Russia would use any ceasefire to prepare for future offensive

operations within Ukraine.

- Russia is currently preparing for the possibility of a conventional war with NATO, and the Kremlin will likely view anything short of Ukrainian capitulation as an existential threat to Russia's ability to fight such a war.
- The Kremlin will continue to feign interest in negotiations at critical moments in the war to influence Western decision-making on support for Ukraine and to continue efforts to extract preemptive concessions from the West.
- Putin directly rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president on May 24, the latest in a series of efforts to dismiss Zelensky's authority to engage in or reject negotiations with Russia and undermine Ukrainians' trust in Zelensky.
- Unnamed Russian government officials and sources within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin told the independent Russian outlet *The Moscow Times* that the ongoing effort to remove senior Russian defense officials and uniformed commanding officers will likely continue in the coming weeks and months.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of successful missile strikes against military targets in Russian-occupied Ukraine on May 23 and 24.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a drone strike against a Russian early warning radar system in Krasnodar Krai, Russia on the morning of May 23.
- The Ukrainian military command continues to address Ukraine's manpower challenges.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a military assistance package worth \$275 million on May 24 to help Ukrainian forces repel Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on May 24 that NATO member states should consider lifting restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Vovchansk, Svatove, Kreminna, and Donetsk City.
- The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on May 23 that Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksandr Lytvynenko stated that Russia recruited more than 385,000 military personnel in 2023.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 23, 2024

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

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

May 23, 2024, 7pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on May 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin is pursuing a concerted effort to remove senior Russian defense officials and has likely expanded this effort to senior officers commanding Russian combat operations in Ukraine. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on May 23 the arrests of Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Head of its Main Communications Directorate Lieutenant General Vadim Shamarin and Head of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) Department for State Procurement, Vladimir Verteletsky.^[1] Shamarin is accused of accepting a bribe of at least 36 million rubles (about \$392,000), and two defendants in the Russian telecommunications industry have agreed to testify against him.^[2] Verteletsky is accused of corruption and accepting a large bribe with total damages of 70 million rubles (about \$763,000).^[3] Five senior Russian MoD officials and former military commanders have been arrested on corruption charges since the arrest of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24, and a Russian insider source previously claimed that six more MoD officials plan to resign following former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's removal from the MoD.^[4] The Kremlin is likely using the guise of corruption charges as an excuse to hide the real reasons for ousting specific individuals from the MoD who have fallen from favor, as ISW has recently assessed.^[5]

Russian ultranationalist milbloggers also claimed that the Russian MoD dismissed the commander of the 20th Combined Arms Army (Moscow Military District [MMD], formerly Western Military District [WMD]), Lieutenant General Sukhrab Akhmedov.^[6] ISW is unable to confirm Akhmedov's removal, but claims of his removal are notable as this would be the first removal of an officer actively commanding Russian forces in Ukraine as a part of the most recent round of dismissals. The 20th CAA is currently heavily committed to offensive operations in the Lyman direction and failed to achieve significant tactical gains in the area during the Winter-Spring 2024 offensive on the Kharkiv-Luhansk axis.^[7] The

milbloggers also directly connected Akhmedov's arrest with significant command issues in Ukraine, referencing their prior complaints about Akhmedov by name for his role in commanding attritional Russian assaults near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast in winter 2022–2023 when he commanded the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade or his role in Russian forces suffering significant casualties due to a Ukrainian rear area strike in summer 2023.[8]

Official Kremlin statements and milblogger speculation about the arrests and command changes signal that more senior officers could face removal. Russian state newswire TASS cited Russian law enforcement on May 23 as saying there will be continued investigations in connection with Shamarin's arrest.[9] Some Russian milbloggers and insider sources have alleged that some of the arrested officials have ties to Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov but have largely not gone so far as to claim that Gerasimov himself will be removed.[10] Peskov oddly stated on May 13 that "no changes are foreseen yet" when specifically asked about Gerasimov's position, however, suggesting that Gerasimov's tenure over the longer term is not assured.[11] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov notably denied on May 23 that there is a "campaign" against Russian MoD officials, instead asserting that the MoD arrests are part of a consistent fight against corruption. [12] Peskov has previously deflected reporters' questions about the Russian MoD, and his decision to answer questions about the MoD's command changes and arrests indicates that the Kremlin may want its support of these purges.[13] Peskov's claim that the removals are part of a consistent effort are difficult to square with the sudden flurry of dismissals and arrests at an anomalous rate and with high publicity.

Russian milbloggers largely celebrated the arrests of Russian MoD officials they have claimed were inept and speculated about possible additional removals of senior commanders and officials. Russian ultranationalist milbloggers celebrated the arrests of Shamarin and Verteletsky and the alleged removal of Akhmedov and have offered criticisms of MoD officials and military officers more vocally than they had been doing before the start of the arrests in late April.[14] The milbloggers began speculating about which officials and commanders could be removed or charged next. Some named a deputy defense minister as likely next to face investigation and pointed to supposed connections between arrested or dismissed individuals and remaining MoD and military officials, presumably to indicate future possible targets.[15] Many milbloggers vaguely claimed that Russian authorities are not done with their investigations and detentions of these officials and celebrated the arrests as the start of an effort to bring corrupt officials to justice under new Defense Minister Andrei Belousov.[16] The Kremlin is likely allowing these criticisms because they are specifically directed against individuals the MoD is targeting, thereby supporting Belousov's image as the one who will solve issues within the MoD in a way that Shoigu has not. The Kremlin also benefits from allowing the milbloggers to emphasize that no Russian defense or military official is safe from the consequences of falling from Putin's favor. The Kremlin is likely attempting to secure the loyalty of the milbloggers who have long argued for significant changes in the Russian MoD and military command by allowing them to criticize the ousted individuals after months of active censorship and self-censorship as long as the criticism advances larger Kremlin objectives.

Russian border guards removed buoys in Estonian waters of the Narva River, which demarcates the Estonian-Russian international border, likely to set conditions to further question maritime borders and test NATO resolve. The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board reported on May 23 that on the night of May 22 to 23 Russian border guards removed 24 buoys used to mark shipping routes in Estonian waters in the Narva River, which demarcates the international border between Estonia and Russia.[17] The Estonian Eastern Prefecture Border Guard Bureau Head Eerik Purgel stated that Estonia had placed the first 50 of a planned 250 buoys on May 13 in accordance with a 2022 Estonian-Russian agreement made prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[18] Purgel reported that Russia announced that it did not agree with the locations of about half of the planned placements of the buoys earlier in 2024. The Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that Russia's removal of the buoys "fits well within the broader pattern of Russia's provocative behavior" and stated that Estonia would treat the event as a "provocative border incident." [19] The Estonian MFA demanded an explanation from Russian border and diplomatic officials and the buoys' immediate return. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stated that "Russia uses border issues as a means to create fear and anxiety."[20] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proposed on May 21 that the Russian government reassess its maritime borders in the Baltic Sea, and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov called the Russian MoD's proposal "appropriate steps" to "ensure [Russian] security" in response to the escalation of tensions and the increased level of confrontation in the Baltic region.[21] Russian border guards are likely attempting to create contention along the international border between Russia and a NATO member country to gauge NATO reactions to future Russian efforts to challenge established delimitations.

Select US officials are reportedly pressing for a reconsideration of the White House's current policy prohibiting Ukraine from using US-provided weapons to strike within Russia. The New

York Times (NYT) reported on May 22 that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is urging US President Joe Biden to lift restrictions on the Ukrainian use of American weapons for strikes within Russia but noted that the proposal is in a formative stage.[22] NYT reported that two US officials stated that it is still unclear how many people within the Biden administration support the measure and added that the proposal's proponents have yet to formally present it to Biden.[23] ISW assesses that Western limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border areas from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and settlements and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.[24]

Polish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Paweł Wronski stated on May 23 that Poland is considering using its air defense to protect Ukrainian airspace against Russian strikes. [25] Wronski stated that Poland is considering protecting unspecified airspace along the Ukrainian-Polish border and acknowledged that Ukrainian officials have submitted a request to Poland on the matter.[26] Wronski stated that Poland has yet to make any decisions on the policy and that international law and technical specialist should review it.[27] Russian forces have targeted Ukrainian energy and gas infrastructure in western Ukraine in recent months, including in Lviv Oblast, which borders Poland.[28]

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a series of drone strikes against Russian defense industrial facilities in the Republic of Tatarstan on May 23. Sources in Ukrainian special services told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* that the GUR's drones attacked Russian defense industrial facilities in Kazan and Nizhnekamsk, which is notably just south of the Shahed-136/131 drone production facility in Tatarstan's Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

[29] *Suspilne* and Russian media outlets reported that Russian officials evacuated employees from the Nizhnekamsk Thermal Power Plant, Teneko oil refinery, Taif-Nk oil refinery, Nizhnekamskneftekhim petrochemical facility, and Nizhnekamskshina tire production facility in Nizhnekamsk and the Kazanorgsintez chemical plant in Kazan.[30] Yelabuga City Mayor Rustem Nuriyev stated that Russian air defenses destroyed a Ukrainian drone near the city and denied that the strikes caused any damage in the area.[31] Footage published on May 23 purportedly shows Russian air defenses destroying at least one Ukrainian drone near Nizhnekamsk.[32] Ukrainian forces conducted a long-range strike against Russian defense industrial and oil refining infrastructure in the Alabuga SEZ on April 2, and ISW assessed that the April 2 strike represented a significant inflection in Ukraine's demonstrated ability to conduct long-range strikes far into the Russian rear.[33]

Iranian leaders have used the occasion of President Ebrahim Raisi's funeral events to emphasize close ties with Armenia even as tensions between Yerevan and Moscow continue to increase. NOTE: A version of this text appears in ISW-CTP's May 23 Iran Update. Mokhber met with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister Sameh Shoukry, and Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon on May 22.[34] Mokhber emphasized that Iran will continue its policy of "expanding relations and cooperation" with neighboring countries during his meeting with Pashinyan.[35] Mokhber added that Iran will continue to adhere to its "commitments and agreements" with Armenia. Pashinyan also met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on May 22.[36] It is notable that Khamenei and Mokhber met with Pashinyan amid his deteriorating relations with Russia. Pashinyan's meetings with Khamenei and Mokhber come shortly after he indirectly accused Russia of helping Azerbaijan to prepare for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.[37]

It is also notable that the Azerbaijani prime minister and foreign affairs minister, who both traveled to Iran to attend Ebrahim Raisi's funeral, have not yet met with senior Iranian officials, such as Khamenei and Mokhber, on the sidelines of the funeral.[38] Raisi inaugurated a dam on the Iran-Azerbaijan border with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev shortly before his death on May 19.[39] Iranian media highlighted on May 22 that Aliyev, along with the presidents of Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Venezuela, did not attend Raisi's funeral.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin is pursuing a concerted effort to remove senior Russian defense officials and has likely expanded this effort to senior officers commanding Russian combat operations in Ukraine.
- Russian border guards removed buoys in Estonian waters of the Narva River, which demarcates the Estonian-Russian international border, likely to set conditions to further question maritime borders and test NATO resolve.
- Select US officials are reportedly pressing for a reconsideration of the White House's current policy prohibiting Ukraine from using US-provided weapons to strike within Russia.

- Polish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Paweł Wronski stated on May 23 that Poland is considering using its air defense to protect Ukrainian airspace against Russian strikes.
- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a series of drone strikes against Russian defense industrial facilities in the Republic of Tatarstan on May 23.
- Iranian leaders have used the occasion of President Ebrahim Raisi's funeral events to emphasize close ties with Armenia even as tensions between Yerevan and Moscow continue to increase.
- Ukrainian forces advanced near Lukyantsi and Kreminna, and Russian forces advanced near Berestove, Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and Velyka Novosilka.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proposed applying regular military punishments to volunteers, likely as part of the MoD's continued formalization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 22, 2024

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

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

May 22, 2024, 8:40pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on May 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proposed on May 21 that the Russian government reassess Russia's maritime borders in the Baltic Sea so that these borders "correspond to the modern geographical situation."^[1] The Russian MoD produced a since-deleted document, which appeared on the Russian government's legal portal on May 21, proposing that the Russian government should reassess the 1985 maritime borders in the Gulf of Finland because these borders were based on outdated "small-scale nautical navigation maps" developed in the mid-20th century.^[2] The document proposed to partially recognize the 1985 resolution as "defunct." The document suggested that the Russian government should adjust the maritime border coordinates in the Gulf of Finland in the zone of Jähi, Sommers, Gogland, Rodsher, Maly Tyuters, and Vigrund islands and near the northern delta of the Narva River. The document also proposed that the Russian government revise the area of the Curonian Spit, Cape Taran, a cape south of Cape Taran, and the Vistula Spit in the Baltic Sea. Sommers, Gogland, Rodsher, Maly Tyuters, and Vigrund island are under Russian control, while Russia and Finland split control over the Jähi island. The northern delta of the Narva River is located between Russia and Estonia, while the Curonian Spit leads to the international border between Russia and Lithuania. The Vistula Spit (also known as the Baltic Spit in Russia) is split between Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia and Poland, and Cape Taran is just northwest of Kaliningrad City. The document stated that these proposed changes would establish a system of baselines for maritime borders on the southern part of the Russian islands in the eastern part of Gulf of Finland as well as in the areas of Baltiysk and Zelenogradsk, both in Kaliningrad Oblast. The document also noted that these changes will allow Russia to use corresponding water areas as Russian internal sea waters, and that the line of the Russian state border will shift due to the changes in the position of the external border of the territorial sea.

Kremlin and Russian MoD officials denied on May 22 that Russia is planning to change the Russian maritime border, but invertedly implied that the Russian government is considering undertaking some "security" measures in the Baltic Sea. Russian state news agencies *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* published statements from unnamed military-diplomatic sources, who claimed that "Russia did not have and does not have any intentions of revising the state border line, economic zone, and continental shelf in the Baltic [region]."^[3] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that the Russian MoD's proposal is not politically motivated, despite the fact that the "political situation has changed significantly" since 1985.^[4] Peskov added that the escalation of tensions and the increased level of confrontation in the Baltic region "requires appropriate steps" from relevant Russian agencies to "ensure [Russian] security." Russian officials did not explain why the MoD proposal was removed from the government's legal portal.

Western officials noted that Russia may be reassessing the basis for maritime borders in order to revise maritime zones in the Baltic Sea.^[5] Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen stated on May 22 that the Finnish Foreign Ministry (MFA) is reviewing the reports about Russia's reassessment and that Finland expects Russia to act according to the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea.^[6] Finnish Prime Minister stated that Russia's review of maritime borders will likely be routine and that Finland is not worried about the reassessment.^[7] Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis announced that Lithuania summoned the Russian charge d'affaires in connection with the reassessment.^[8] The

Lithuanian MFA told *Politico* that Lithuania sees Russia's actions as "deliberate, targeted, escalatory provocations to intimidate neighboring countries and their societies."^[9] The Lithuanian MFA added that the Russian MoD's proposal is "further proof that Russia's aggressive and revisionist policy is a threat to the security of neighboring countries and Europe as a whole." Swedish Commander-in-Chief Mikael Byden expressed concern about Russian ambitions in the Baltic Sea and warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin aims to control the Baltic Sea and that Putin "has his eyes" on the island of Gotland.^[10] Byden did not rule out the possibility that Russia is already using oil tankers to conduct reconnaissance and sabotage in the Baltic Sea and near Gotland.^[11]

The Kremlin appears to be developing a system to legalize the status of Russia's so-called "compatriots abroad," likely as part of its efforts to set information conditions to justify further aggression and hybrid operations abroad as "protecting" Russia's compatriots. Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) General Director Yevgeny Primakov stated during an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS published on May 22 that Rossotrudnichestvo is developing an "Electronic Card of Compatriots" program that will allow Russia's compatriots abroad to access unspecified government services, visit and work in Russia, and even apply for Russian citizenship in the future.^[12] Primakov stated that Russia is preparing to launch a pilot version of the program in several unspecified neighboring countries and may begin issuing the first cards by the end of 2024. Primakov stated that Russia's compatriots can provide their personal identifiable information through an online application in exchange for a card and access to these various services, which will presumably be available through an unspecified online platform. Primakov noted that while some of Russia's compatriots abroad do not have Russian citizenship and are "skeptical" of Russia's policies, they are still compatriots in "one way or another" and that this program will help compatriots and their children maintain ties with Russia. Primakov estimated that Russia has between 20 and 40 million compatriots abroad, although it is unclear what definition of "compatriot abroad" Primakov is using. Primakov also emphasized the importance of Russia's educational and cultural exchange programs with students from Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and other countries and noted that the Russian government has been increasing the number of foreign students allowed to study in Russia over the past several years. Primakov stated that Russia has set a goal of having 500,000 foreign students studying in Russia every year by 2030. Primakov noted that Rossotrudnichestvo is having issues operating in the US, United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and other Western countries due to "unfriendly" Western policies and absurdly claimed that Russian Houses (*Russkyi Dom*) in Europe "do not engage in political propaganda or anything else" and only conduct "cultural activities." Moldovan and Ukrainian officials have previously warned that Russian officials use *Russkyi Dom* to promote Russian propaganda and conduct "subversive work" abroad.^[13]

Rossotrudnichestvo has been working on the "Electronic Card of Compatriots" project since at least 2021 but has yet to publicly launch the program, and Primakov stated in June 2023 that Rossotrudnichestvo plans to open "certification centers" in *Russkyi Dom* centers throughout the world where compatriots can verify their identity as part of the application process.^[14] The Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), a Kremlin-controlled organization and a known tool within the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit, issued a series of recommendations during the World Russian People's Council on March 27 and 28, which included a call for Russia to prioritize the mass repatriation of "compatriots" to Russia, and the "Electronic Card of Compatriots" program could be a viable pathway for Russia to pursue this recommendation.^[15] Russia's compatriots abroad — whom Russian President Vladimir Putin has previously defined as anyone with historical, cultural, or linguistic ties to Russia — are a key aspect of the Kremlin's *Russkyi Mir* (Russian World) narrative, which the Kremlin intends to use to justify future Russian aggression under the guise of "protecting" Russian compatriots.^[16] The Russian government previously eased language and ancestry requirements for compatriots interested in moving to Russia and may be attempting to further broaden its vague definition of a compatriot to encompass as many people as possible.^[17]

United Kingdom (UK) Defense Minister Grant Shapps stated on May 22 that US and UK intelligence have evidence that the People's Republic of China (PRC) "is now or will be" providing lethal military assistance to Russia, a statement that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan questioned.^[18] Shapps stated that this evidence is a "significant development" as the PRC has previously presented itself as a "moderating influence" but did not provide further information about the supposed intelligence. Sullivan stated during a press conference that he has previously warned that the PRC may supply Russia with lethal military assistance but that the US has "not seen that to date."^[19] Sullivan stated that he will speak with his British counterparts to ensure that the US and UK have a "common operating picture" and to clarify Shapps' comment.

Western officials warned that Russian intelligence services intend to increase sabotage activities and other hybrid operations against NATO member countries. Norway's Police Security Service (PST) and the Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) warned on May 22 that there is an

increased threat of Russian sabotage against Norwegian arms supplies and other Norwegian organizations involved in the delivery of military materiel to Ukraine.[20] PST Counterintelligence Head Inger Haugland stated that the PST has warned Norwegian arms suppliers to be on high alert and previously warned that Russian actors were planning acts of sabotage in western Norway, where Norwegian naval bases and oil and gas infrastructure are located.[21] Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned on May 20 that Polish authorities have recently arrested and charged nine suspects for engaging in acts of sabotage in Poland on behalf of Russian security services.[22] Haugland stated that Russian security services have used non-Russian nationals to conduct sabotage in Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom in order to have deniability.[23] Tusk also warned on May 21 that Russian actors plan to illegally smuggle thousands of migrants from Africa to Europe and that more than 90 percent of those recently apprehended illegally entering Poland have had Russian visas in their passports.[24] Russian officials recently attempted to create an artificial migrant crisis on the Finnish border in late 2023 in an effort to destabilize NATO and the European Union (EU).[25] Russian security services are likely intensifying sabotage operations in European countries to disrupt the arrival of resumed US security assistance to Ukraine and will likely continue hybrid operations aimed at fomenting discord in Europe ahead of European Parliament elections scheduled for early June 2024.

US Space Command reported on May 21 that Russia recently launched an anti-satellite weapon, the most recent report that Russia intends to field disruptive anti-satellite capabilities. [26] US Space Command reported that Russia launched the COSMOS 2576 satellite on May 16 and that US intelligence assesses that it is a counterspace weapon presumably capable of attacking other satellites in low Earth orbit.[27] Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder added that Russia deployed the COSMOS 2576 satellite into the same orbit as a US government satellite.[28] Russia reportedly launched a separate satellite as part of its program to develop a nuclear anti-satellite weapon in early February 2022.[29] Russia reportedly has yet to field nuclear components of the nuclear anti-satellite weapon and that weapon is likely not yet operational, although the most recent anti-satellite weapon likely is.[30] Russian efforts to field anti-satellite capabilities aimed at disrupting US and partner satellites likely aim to support preparations with a future confrontation with NATO.[31]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan indirectly accused Russia and directly accused Belarus of helping Azerbaijan to prepare for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, against the backdrop of deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that he and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev conversed before the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and concluded that Azerbaijan could be victorious during Lukashenko's May 16-17 state visit to Azerbaijan.[32] Lukashenko also visited Fizuli and Shusha, two settlements that Azerbaijani forces took control of in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Pashinyan responded to Lukashenko's statement at a question-and-answer session between the Armenian National Assembly and the Armenian government by stating that Lukashenko said aloud "what he has been trying to metaphorically say to Armenia for four years." [33] Pashinyan added that he knows of at least two Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member countries that "participated in preparations for the war [in 2020]" and claimed that Azerbaijan's objective in the war was to destroy the "independent state of Armenia." [34] Pashinyan's implication that Russia helped Azerbaijan prepare for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, and by extension, supported Azerbaijan's objective of destroying Armenia, is part of Pashinyan's continued criticisms of Russian-Armenian relations and efforts to distance Armenia from political and security relations with Russia.

Pashinyan met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Interim President Mohammad Mokhber on May 22.[35] Pashinyan's meeting with Khamenei and Mokhber indicates that Iran may intend to pursue positive relations with Armenia amid Armenia's souring relations with Russia.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proposed on May 21 that the Russian government reassess Russia's maritime borders in the Baltic Sea so that these borders "correspond to the modern geographical situation."
- Kremlin and Russian MoD officials denied on May 22 that Russia is planning to change the Russian maritime border, but invertedly implied that the Russian government is considering undertaking some "security" measures in the Baltic Sea.
- Western officials noted that Russia may be reassessing the basis for maritime borders in order to revise maritime zones in the Baltic Sea.
- The Kremlin appears to be developing a system to legalize the status of Russia's so-called "compatriots abroad," likely as part of its efforts to set information conditions to justify further aggression and hybrid operations abroad as "protecting" Russia's compatriots.

- United Kingdom (UK) Defense Minister Grant Shapps stated on May 22 that US and UK intelligence have evidence that the People's Republic of China (PRC) "is now or will be" providing lethal military assistance to Russia, a statement that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan questioned.
- Western officials warned that Russian intelligence services intend to increase sabotage activities and other hybrid operations against NATO member countries.
- US Space Command reported on May 21 that Russia recently launched an anti-satellite weapon, the most recent report that Russia intends to field disruptive anti-satellite capabilities.
- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan indirectly accused Russia and directly accused Belarus of helping Azerbaijan to prepare for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, against the backdrop of deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations.
- Ukrainian forces recently recaptured territory near Vovchansk and Chasiv Yar, and Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Vovchansk, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and Velyka Novosilka.
- Russian courts reportedly began forcibly hospitalizing Russians charged with political crimes such as spreading "fake" information about the Russian military, in psychiatric hospitals.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 21, 2024

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

May 21, 2024, 9:15pm ET

The Kremlin continues to time its nuclear saber-rattling to coincide with major policy discussions in the West as part of a Kremlin reflexive control campaign to influence Western decision-makers. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 21 that missile elements of the Southern Military District (SMD) began the first stage of non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons exercises.^[1] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian Aerospace Forces will also exercise with Iskander ballistic missiles and Kinzhal aeroballistic missiles. The Russian MoD announced the preparations for these exercises on May 6.^[2] A prominent Kremlin-awarded milblogger explicitly tied Russian tactical nuclear weapons exercises to Kremlin efforts to influence Western decision-making — particularly targeting the recent discussions about the restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia — echoing ISW's assessment that Russia's tactical nuclear weapons tests are part of a Kremlin reflexive control campaign that often uses nuclear saber-rattling to influence Western decision-makers to engage in self-deterrance.^[3] Reflexive control is a key element of Russia's hybrid warfare toolkit — it is a tactic that relies on shaping an adversary with targeted rhetoric and information operations in such a way that the adversary voluntarily takes actions that are advantageous to Russia.^[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated to the *New York Times* (NYT) on May 20 that Russia currently enjoys a sanctuary in Russian territory from which Russian forces can conduct missile and glide bomb strikes against Ukraine and launch offensive operations with forces amassed in the international border area, as is the case with the ongoing limited Russian offensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[5] ISW continues to assess that US and Western policies limiting Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia are severely compromising Ukraine's ability to defend itself against current Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast or any area along the international border where Russian forces may choose to conduct offensive operations in the future.^[6]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that the limited Russian offensive in northern Ukraine is achieving its goal of drawing attention away from intense Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. Zelensky stated in an interview with *Reuters* published on May 20 that the situation in northern Kharkiv Oblast is now stable but that "no one" is paying attention to the wave of Russian offensive operations in Donbas in the Chasiv Yar (Bakhmut), Pokrovsk (Avdiivka), and Kurakhove (west of Donetsk City) directions.^[7] Zelensky stated that the situation in northern Kharkiv Oblast has been stable for about a week, which is consistent with the slowing pace of Russian advances in the Lyptsi (north of Kharkiv City) and Vovchansk directions following the initial few days of relatively rapid tactical advances.^[8] Russian forces recently intensified their efforts to seize the operationally-significant town of Chasiv Yar west of Bakhmut as the tempo of operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast decreased, highlighting how the northern Kharkiv Oblast effort aims to draw and fix Ukrainian forces and create opportunities for Russian forces elsewhere in the theater.^[9] As

ISW has consistently reported, Russian forces' most immediate prospect for operationally-significant gains remains the Chasiv Yar direction, as seizing Chasiv Yar would enable Russian forces to set conditions to attack part of a "fortress belt" of cities forming the backbone of Ukraine's Donetsk Oblast defenses, and Russian forces likely seek to exploit unfavorable situations for Ukrainian forces defending near Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka before US military assistance arrives at the frontlines at scale. [10] The Ukrainian General Staff has reported for the past week that Russian forces maintain a higher tempo of offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction even as the situation in northern Kharkiv Oblast has stabilized.[11]

The Russian military command reportedly initially planned that Russian forces would quickly make significant advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast, but the limited force grouping deployed to the area suggests that the Russian military command likely changed these plans in the lead up to offensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast. The *Economist* reported on May 20 that it viewed Russian military plans from an unspecified date about a planned Russian offensive in the Kharkiv City and Vovchansk directions.[12] The Russian plans reportedly called for Russian forces to advance to Borshchova (about 20 kilometers northeast of Kharkiv City and about 16 kilometers from the international border) within 72 hours in order to place Russian forces within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City. The Russian plans also reportedly called for Russian forces to advance to Pecheniy (south of Vovchansk and about 50 kilometers from the international border) in an unspecified time frame. The Russian offensive was reportedly initially planned to begin May 15 to 16, and the *Economist* stated that it is unknown why Russian forces pushed forward their offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast to May 10 instead. ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced a maximum of about 10 kilometers deep in the Kharkiv City direction and a maximum of about seven kilometers deep in the Vovchansk direction since May 10. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitsky reported on May 2 that Russian forces had concentrated about 35,000 personnel in the international border area and planned to concentrate a total of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel.[13] Russian forces reportedly launched offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast when the Northern Grouping of Forces was understrength and have only committed a limited amount of combat power to the area thus far.[14]

The Russian military command very likely did not expect these limited and understrength forces to be able to reach these objectives, and a Ukrainian reserve officer observed that Russian forces have focused on "creeping advances" rather than swift drives to an operational depth since their military failures in 2022.[15] The *Economist* did not specify when the Russian military command created these reported plans, and it is possible that the Russian military command created the plans before it became clear that the Northern Grouping of Forces would not be staffed at its desired end strength or that an earlier or more limited attack was desired. The Russian military command may have also decided to start offensive operations with an understrength grouping to take advantage of Ukrainian manpower and materiel shortages before the arrival of Western aid at scale to the frontline.

Russian authorities recently arrested the former commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), Major General Ivan Popov, on fraud charges. Popov was largely responsible for Russian defenses against the Ukrainian Summer 2023 counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[16] The 235th Garrison Military Court reported that authorities arrested Popov on May 17 for large-scale fraud and will hold Popov in detention for two months.[17] Popov's lawyer stated that authorities investigated the case for eight months before arresting Popov.[18] A prominent Russian milblogger, who alleged that they knew about Popov's arrest before it was officially announced, claimed that authorities charged Popov with fraud worth 100 million rubles (about \$1.1 million) after Popov was involved in the sale of 2,000 tons of metal products intended for the construction of fortifications in the 58th CAA's area of responsibility in the Zaporizhia direction.[19] The milblogger claimed that an unspecified entrepreneur from Krasnodar Krai and an unspecified high-ranking Southern Military District commander are also defendants in the case. A Russian insider source claimed that the Russian military command summoned Popov to Moscow from Syria at an unspecified date and threateningly urged him to resign but Popov refused.[20] A Kremlin-awarded milblogger claimed that when they tried to clarify information last year about Popov's removal, unspecified sources did not mention any corruption charges but only discussed Popov's "military mistakes." [21] Select Russian milbloggers responded to the news of Popov's arrest by praising Popov as a competent and respected military commander and expressing hope that authorities would forgive him and allow him to return to military service.[22] Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov fired Popov in July 2023 after Popov voiced his concerns over the need for troop rotations in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid the Ukrainian Summer 2023 counteroffensive.[23] Popov claimed in leaked audio that former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu dismissed him for expressing persistent grievances about problems in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[24]

The Kremlin is likely using the pattern of recent arrests of high-ranking officials on corruption charges in the Russian MoD to conceal the real reasons for Popov's punishment almost 10

months after his conflict with the Russian military command and subsequent dismissal from his command position. Russian authorities likely did not want to publicly punish Popov in July 2023 out of fear of a rush of public support for the competent commander. The Kremlin also likely did not want to draw attention to issues in the Russian military command in the aftermath of the June 2023 Wagner Group's rebellion.[25] Popov's arrest comes after multiple recent high-profile arrests of MoD officials reportedly close to Shoigu on corruption charges.[26] The Kremlin likely hopes that arresting Popov in the middle of this alleged wide-scale anti-corruption campaign will minimize attention to Popov's previous insubordination. Popov's arrest, however, sends a clear signal to Russian military commanders that insubordinate senior officers will face serious punishments eventually and that Russian President Vladimir Putin values loyalty over competence.

Satellite imagery indicates that Ukrainian forces likely damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) *Tsyklon* small missile ship in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on May 19. Satellite imagery dated May 20 shows a damaged building, a rescue ship, and a floating crane near the port where the *Tsyklon* was docked on May 17.[27] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported on May 20 that Ukrainian forces struck the Russian *Tsyklon* Karakut-class (project 22800) small missile ship in Sevastopol Bay with three US-provided ATACMS missiles on May 19.[28] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command and Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated on May 21 that that there are no more Russian Karakut-class ships in the Black Sea following the Ukrainian strike against the *Tsyklon* on May 19.[29] Pletenchuk stated that the *Tsyklon* was the "last missile carrier" in occupied Crimea and that Russian forces have likely moved all remaining BSF missile carriers to basing in Novorossiysk.[30] Pletenchuk stated that the *Tsyklon* had only been in service for a year and had not yet launched a cruise missile strike. Pletenchuk stated that Russia planned to deploy five Karakut-class ships in the Black Sea, but that Ukrainian forces previously destroyed the *Askold* in November 2023, that Russian forces moved the *Amur* and *Tucha* from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, and that the fifth unnamed ship is still under construction in Taganrog, Krasnodar Krai.[31]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin continues to time its nuclear saber-rattling to coincide with major policy discussions in the West as part of a Kremlin reflexive control campaign to influence Western decision-makers.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that the limited Russian offensive in northern Ukraine is achieving its goal of drawing attention away from intense Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine.
- The Russian military command reportedly initially planned that Russian forces would quickly make significant advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast, but the limited force grouping deployed to the area suggests that the Russian military command likely changed these plans in the lead up to offensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities recently arrested the former commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), Major General Ivan Popov, on fraud charges.
- The Kremlin is likely using the pattern of recent arrests of high-ranking officials on corruption charges in the Russian MoD to conceal the real reasons for Popov's punishment almost 10 months after his conflict with the Russian military command and subsequent dismissal from his command position.
- Satellite imagery indicates that Ukrainian forces likely damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) *Tsyklon* small missile ship in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on May 19.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Vovchansk, Kreminna, Chasiv Yar, and Donetsk City.
- A Russian milblogger claimed that frequent Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian vehicles that lack electronic warfare (EW) systems along the frontline have created an "urgent" shortage of off-road vehicles.
- Russian authorities continue to illegally and forcibly deport Ukrainian citizens, including children, to Russia and to forcibly remove Ukrainian citizens deeper into occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 20, 2024

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

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

May 20, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on May 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian sources indicated that Russian forces are concentrating limited, understaffed, and incohesive forces in the Sumy direction, but even such a Russian grouping of forces will be able to achieve the likely desired effect of drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces in the international border area. The deputy commander of a Ukrainian brigade operating in northern Kharkiv Oblast reported on May 20 that Russian forces, including Chechen forces, are accumulating in the Sumy direction but that the limited number of Russian personnel suggests that the Russian objective is to draw and fix Ukrainian forces to the international border area.^[1] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on May 20 that the Russian grouping in Kursk Oblast consists of 9,000–10,000 personnel.^[2] Mashovets stated that this grouping consists of up to three under-strength motorized rifle regiments (each lacking one to two battalions); eight motorized rifle, tank, and infantry battalions; and one airborne (VDV) battalion all redeployed from various units, formations, and military districts; and at least two assault detachments at the echelon of a reinforced company or an under-strength battalion.^[3] Mashovets also reported on May 5 that an unspecified VDV battalion is part of the Russian grouping in Kursk Oblast, and a Russian milblogger (who has an avowed bias against the VDV and "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky) claimed that the Russian 3rd VDV Battalion of the 104th VDV Regiment (76th VDV Division) is in Kursk Oblast.^[4] ISW continues to assess that even limited Russian activity in other areas of the international border below the threshold of Russian offensive operations could have the effect of stretching Ukrainian forces along a wider front and that Russian forces will be able to draw and fix Ukrainian forces to this area as long as Russia threatens penetrations of other border areas beyond northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[5]

Kremlin officials expressed their condolences to senior Iranian officials following the announcement of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian's deaths on May 20. Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a condolence letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in which he called Raisi a "true friend of Russia."^[6] Putin had a telephone call with Iranian Interim President Mohammad Mokhber on May 20 and expressed condolences to Mokhber, Khamenei, and the Iranian people.^[7] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that Putin and Mokhber discussed their desire to further strengthen Russo-Iranian relations.^[8] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called Raisi and Abdollahian "true friends" who were "invaluable" in strengthening Russo–Iranian cooperation.^[9] Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu stated that Russia is ready to help investigate the cause of the helicopter crash.^[10] Putin instructed Head of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations Alexander Kurenkov on May 19 to send specialists and equipment to assist in search and rescue operations in Iran.^[11]

Russian President Vladimir Putin fired Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yury Sadovenko on May 20, replacing him with former Deputy Economic Minister and current Federation Council Accounts Chamber Auditor Oleg Savelyev.^[12] Sadovenko had held his position in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) since January 2013, and a Russian insider source speculated that Sadovenko may become a defendant in a criminal case for violating anti-corruption laws.^[13] The insider source added that some additional Russian deputy defense ministers who worked closely with former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu may soon resign. Russian milbloggers observed that Savelyev's appointment is consistent with the Kremlin's effort to improve the wartime economy, given that Savelyev has an extensive background in economics and experience in overseeing the audits of defense, national security, and law enforcement activities.^[14] The milblogger added that recently appointed Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov is beginning to form his own team within the Russian MoD.^[15] Putin likely replaced Sadovenko with Savelyev in an effort to remove Shoigu's allies from the Russian MoD and appoint economic advisors to the agency to improve the wartime economy.

Putin also dismissed Presidential Advisor Alexandra Levitskaya on May 20, but the reason for Levitskaya's dismissal is unclear.^[16] Putin appointed Levitskaya as a presidential advisor in August 2013. Levitskaya previously served as the deputy minister of health and social development from 2007 to 2012, and the Russian Government's first deputy chief of staff in 2012.^[17] Putin transferred several presidential assistants to the presidential advisor rank on May 14 as part of changes to the presidential administration leadership.^[18]

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reiterated the White House's unwillingness to approve Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons in strikes against military targets in Russia following a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein format) on May 20. Austin stated that the US expects that Ukraine will "continue to use the weapons that [the US] provided on targets inside of Ukraine."^[19] Austin vaguely noted that "the aerial dynamic is a little bit different," but stated that he would not speculate further. ISW continues to assess that US and other

Western limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border areas from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and settlements and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.[20] These US and Western policies are severely compromising Ukraine's ability to defend itself against current Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast or any area along the international border where Russian forces may choose to conduct offensive operations in the future.[21] UK Foreign Minister David Cameron recently announced that Ukrainian forces may use UK-provided weapons to strike targets in Russian territory, and other European countries may be considering lifting similar restrictions.[22] French National Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson Jean-Louis Bourlanges stated on May 19 that France should allow Ukrainian forces to use French-provided weapons to strike military targets inside of Russia and noted that "the right to self-defense excludes the right to protect the territory of the aggressor."[23] Bourlanges stated that lifting the current restriction is not a question of Western intervention in the theater of operations but would "lift an unjustifiable taboo."

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stated that some unspecified countries, presumably NATO member states, have already sent personnel to train Ukrainian soldiers "on the ground."

[24] Kallas stated to the *Financial Times* (FT) on May 19 that some countries have assumed the risk of sending personnel to train Ukrainian soldiers "in a risk zone" during the war and stated that NATO states should not fear the risk of escalation from such deployments.[25] Kallas' statement is the latest in a series of back-and-forth comments between senior Estonian officials about whether Estonia is planning to send its own personnel to perform non-combat support roles in deep rear areas in Ukraine. [26]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev amplified a known Russian information operation aimed at directly undermining Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president. Medvedev gave a long interview to Kremlin newswire TASS on May 20 in which Medvedev doubled down on the Russian information operation falsely portraying Zelensky as an illegitimate president and deepened the information operation by tying it to other Kremlin rhetorical lines.[27] Other Russian officials and ultranationalist milbloggers either made or amplified similar statements on May 20 accusing Zelensky of now "illegally" holding office.[28] Medvedev likely timed his statements to reinject the narrative into the Russian information space on May 20, when Zelensky's current presidential term would have ended had Ukraine held presidential elections in March 2024. The Ukrainian constitution permits postponing elections and allows a sitting president to serve after the designated end of his term under martial law, and Zelensky's decision not to hold elections during its existential defensive war is fully in accord with Ukraine's constitution.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian sources indicated that Russian forces are concentrating limited, understaffed, and incohesive forces in the Sumy direction, but even such a Russian grouping of forces will be able to achieve the likely desired effect of drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces in the international border area.
- Kremlin officials expressed their condolences to senior Iranian officials following the announcement of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian's deaths on May 20.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin fired Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yury Sadovenko on May 20, replacing him with former Deputy Economic Minister and current Federation Council Accounts Chamber Auditor Oleg Savelyev.
- Putin also dismissed Presidential Advisor Alexandra Levitskaya on May 20, but the reason for Levitskaya's dismissal is unclear.
- US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reiterated the White House's unwillingness to approve Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons in strikes against military targets in Russia following a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein format) on May 20.
- Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stated that some unspecified countries, presumably NATO member states, have already sent personnel to train Ukrainian soldiers "on the ground."
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev amplified a known Russian information operation aimed at directly undermining Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Vovchansk, Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and the Dnipro River Delta.

- Russian opposition outlet Vazhnye Istorii (iStories) reported that Russian military authorities and Kazakh law enforcement acting on Russian orders detained at least two more servicemen in Kazakhstan who had deserted from the Russian military.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 19, 2024

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

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

May 19, 2024, 5:15pm ET

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian military infrastructure and oil refineries in occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Leningrad Oblast on the night of May 18 to 19. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces destroyed nine ATACMS missiles over occupied Crimea.^[1] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched 12 ATACMS against Sevastopol Bay — nine of which Russian forces shot down near Sevastopol and Belbek airfield, and three of which struck a vessel in Sevastopol port.^[2] Footage published on May 19 purportedly shows Russian forces attempting to repel Ukrainian drones over the port in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai.^[3] Krasnodar Krai Governor Venyamin Kondratyev claimed that Russian air defense suppressed over 10 drones near Novorossiysk and that falling debris caused fires.^[4] Sources in Ukrainian intelligence told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* that Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) and Unmanned Systems Forces conducted successful drone strikes against the Slavyansk oil refinery in Slavyansk-on-Kuban, Krasnodar Krai and against the Kushchyovskaya airfield in Krasnodar Krai where Russian forces station Su-34, Su-25, Su-27, and MiG-29 aircraft used to conduct strikes in Ukraine.^[5] The sources stated that the Ukrainian drone strikes damaged several aircraft at the Kushchyovskaya airfield and several distillation columns at the Slavyansk oil refinery. Slavyanskiy Raion Head Roman Sinyagovsky claimed that six drones fell on the Slavyansk oil refinery, and Krasnodar Krai Operational Headquarters reported that Russian air defense suppressed at least 10 drones over Slavyanskiy and Kushchyovskiy raions.^[6] Ukrainian forces previously conducted successful drone strikes against the Kushchyovskaya airfield in April 2024 and the Slavyansk oil refinery in March and April 2024.^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces also destroyed the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) Kovrovets Natya-class minesweeper, although it is unclear if Ukrainian forces destroyed the minesweeper near occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, or Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai as the BSF has redeployed the majority of its naval assets to Novorossiysk over the past year.^[8] *Suspilne* also reported on May 19 that its sources within Ukrainian special services stated that Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) caused explosions at an unspecified number of vertical fuel tanks at the Vyborg oil depot in Leningrad Oblast with three explosive devices.^[9] Geolocated footage published on May 18 shows a large fire at the oil depot, although Leningrad Oblast Governor Alexander Drozdenko denied reports that drone strikes caused the explosions and claimed that pyrotechnics caused the explosions near the oil depot.^[10]

Russian milbloggers appear to be experimenting with different ways to express critical opinions of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) following the recent appointment of Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov. A prominent Russian milblogger posted a photo on May 18 of an undated document allegedly from the Russian MoD's Head of the Missile and Artillery Weapons Service responding to an appeal about the inaccuracy of Russian artillery.^[11] The document claimed that any issues with artillery ammunition are due to Russian servicemen's improper handling of the rounds and demanded that Russian servicemen follow the Russian Chief of the General Staff's previously issued order prohibiting military personnel from disassembling and weighing artillery ammunition. The milblogger then described the alleged issues by using general terms as well various code words, such as names of other countries or places from popular science fiction films, that multiple Russian milbloggers have repeatedly used recently to cautiously discuss issues in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).^[12] The milblogger claimed that Russian military personnel noticed that artillery systems were performing strangely, subsequently discovered that the amount of gunpowder in the ammunition shells widely varied, and reported the issue to the Russian military command but to no avail. Another Russian milblogger responded and used some of the same code words to criticize the Russian MoD and to express hope that Belousov will make reforms that solve the larger bureaucratic issues in the MoD.^[13] A third milblogger, who previously served as a "Storm-Z" unit instructor, however, was direct with his criticisms of the Russian military and claimed that he has previously heard information from Russian servicemen about the inconsistent amounts of gunpowder in some artillery shells.^[14] The milblogger claimed that this issue began in Spring 2022 and that the alleged order from the Russian General Staff described in the document indicates that the Russian military leadership has been aware of the issue for some time. The milblogger criticized the Russian

military command for not finding a solution and claimed that Russian artillery systems are also suffering from barrel wear (which is very likely given their extremely heavy use).

Founder of the Kremlin-linked *Rybar* Telegram channel, Mikhail Zvinchuk, whom the Kremlin likely co-opted as part of the Kremlin's wider efforts to gain control over the Russia information space, gave an uncharacteristically public interview in which he criticized the Russian MoD and directly connected some of the milbloggers' code words to the Russian MoD on May 18.[15] Although it is unclear if Zvinchuk gave this interview with Kremlin approval or not, the Kremlin's permittance of criticisms by select prominent Russian milbloggers of the Russian MoD could increase public pressure for reforms, that would, if implemented, assist Russia's war effort in Ukraine.[16]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev threatened Russian internet technology and telecommunications company Yandex because its large language model failed to provide responses that cohere with ongoing Russian information operations. Medvedev criticized Yandex's Alisa voice assistant (ostensibly similar to Amazon's Alexa) on May 19 for being unable to answer questions about the US law approving the seizure of Russian foreign assets or supposed monuments in Ukraine to Nazi sympathizers.[17] Medvedev asserted that Yandex's artificial intelligence (AI) is a "coward" for failing to provide his desired answers to these questions and suggested that Yandex may be concerned about offending its Western clients. Medvedev suggested that Yandex's supposed unwillingness to provide answers to these questions greatly undermines trust in Yandex's products and could provide grounds for the Russian government to recognize Yandex's services as "incomplete" and even identify Yandex's current managers as "foreign agents." Russian news outlet *RBK* reported that Russian officials have previously submitted complaints against similar large language models for failing to generate sufficiently patriotic responses.[18] Russian officials will likely continue to struggle with shortcomings of large language models that are well known to others with more experience of those systems as the Kremlin continues efforts to solidify its control over the Russian information space.

A St. Petersburg court ruled that Russian authorities can seize over 700 million euros (\$760 million) of assets from three large European banks on May 18 on behalf of a Gazprom subsidiary.[19] The court determined that Russian authorities could seize assets, accounts, property and shares belonging to Deutsche Bank, German Commerzbank, and Italian bank UniCredit after ruling in favor of a suit from Gazprom subsidiary RusChemAlliance.[20] The European banks were among the guarantor lenders under a contract for the construction of a gas processing plant in Russia with German-based engineering company Linde, which involved parties terminated due to Western sanctions following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[21] The court also ruled that Deutsche Bank cannot sell its subsidiary businesses in Russia without the approval of Russian President Vladimir Putin and stated that the measure is necessary to prevent the bank from "alienating its property in Russia."^[22]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian military infrastructure and oil refineries in occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Leningrad Oblast on the night of May 18 to 19.
- Russian milbloggers appear to be experimenting with different ways to express critical opinions of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) following the recent appointment of Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev threatened Russian internet technology and telecommunications company Yandex because its large language model failed to provide responses that cohere with ongoing Russian information operations.
- A St. Petersburg court ruled that Russian authorities can seize over 700 million euros (\$760 million) of assets from three large European banks on May 18 on behalf of a Gazprom subsidiary.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced within Vovchansk and near Chasiv Yar and Donetsk City.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 18, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

May 18, 2024, 9:15pm ET

Russian forces have recently intensified their effort to seize the operationally significant town of Chasiv Yar, seeking to exploit how Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast and ongoing offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine have generated greater theater-wide pressure on Ukrainian forces. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful roughly reinforced company-sized mechanized assault with two tanks and 21 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) in the direction of the Novyi Microraiion in eastern Chasiv Yar on May 17.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted a roughly reinforced platoon-sized mechanized assault in the same area on May 18.[2] Geolocated footage published on May 17 shows Russian forces attacking with at least seven armored vehicles near Ivanivske (east of Chasiv Yar).[3] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces are widely using armored vehicles in the Chasiv Yar area, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky thanked Ukrainian forces near Chasiv Yar for destroying at least 20 Russian armored vehicles (presumably over the past day).[4] Russian forces have not made notable tactical gains in the Chasiv Yar area since conducting a company-sized mechanized assault on the town's eastern outskirts on April 4 and have not conducted similar sized-mechanized assaults in the area until May 17.[5] The April 4 mechanized assault was followed by intensified Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, and recent Russian mechanized assaults in the area likely portend an overall intensification of the Russian effort to seize the town. [6] The Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would be operationally significant since it would provide Russian forces with favorable positions to launch subsequent offensive operations against Kostyantynivka and Druzhkivka, cities that form the southern portion of a Ukrainian defensive belt that is the backbone of Ukraine's defense of Donetsk Oblast.[7]

Russian forces launched a limited offensive operation into northern Kharkiv Oblast on May 10 that aims to strategically draw and fix Ukrainian manpower and materiel from ongoing Ukrainian defensive operations in eastern Ukraine.[8] Russian forces have maintained the tempo of their offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine in the previous week and will likely continue to do so in order to exploit any vulnerabilities from the transfer of Ukrainian materiel and manpower to defensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[9] Ukrainian forces have recently transferred elements of a Ukrainian brigade defending in the Chasiv Yar area to the Vovchansk area, and Russian forces have likely intensified offensive operations near Chasiv Yar to quickly take advantage of weakened Ukrainian defenses.[10] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that Russian forces aim to force Ukrainian forces to commit available reserves to the defensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian forces may hope that intensified offensive operations near Chasiv Yar will be more successful if Ukraine cannot commit additional reserves to the area in the future.[11] Russian forces will likely pursue an offensive operation in Ukraine over the coming months that aims to stretch Ukrainian forces across a wide frontline and maintain regular offensive pressure to attempt to weaken the Ukrainian defensive line in aggregate.[12] Russian forces likely hope to make an operationally significant penetration anywhere along the frontline but will likely prioritize the Chasiv Yar area, where Russian forces have the most immediate prospects for an operationally significant advance, and the front west of Avdiivka, where Russian forces have been able to achieve tactically significant gains in recent weeks.[13] Russian forces are currently attempting to achieve tactically and operationally significant gains in Ukraine before the arrival of US security assistance at scale in June and July 2024 allows Ukrainian forces to blunt Russian advances.[14]

Russian forces are likely preparing for the second phase of their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast, which Russian forces likely intend to launch following their anticipated seizure of Vovchansk. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on May 18 that Russian forces advanced between five and 10 kilometers in northern Kharkiv Oblast before Ukrainian forces stopped Russian advances and that Russian forces are conducting the first of several waves of offensive operations in the area.[15] A second wave of tactical attacks is not the same as the second phase of the operation, and Russian forces may need to launch several "waves" of tactical attacks to achieve the objective of any given singular phase of their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Zelensky stated that the Russian military command seeks to attack Kharkiv City but that Russian forces lack the manpower required to seize such a large city, so Russian forces will slowly push towards Kharkiv City as part of efforts to force Ukrainian forces to withdraw from the area. Available evidence indicates that Russian forces have so far only committed a limited amount of the prepared forces that Russia maintains in Belgorod, Kursk, and Bryansk oblasts for offensive operations in the area.[16] Ukrainian sources previously stated that Russian forces have committed 2,000 personnel to the frontline along the border and have 1,500 to 2,000 personnel in immediate reserve as of May 11.[17] Ukrainian sources, however, have noted that the Russian forces so far committed to offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast may already be degraded after suffering heavy losses.[18] Ukrainian sources have also recently stated that Russian forces are "leasing" limited elements of Russian formations operating in the Svatove area as part of the Western Grouping of Forces but that other Russian forces groupings do not have "free" combat-ready forces or regiment- or

brigade-level assets to transfer to the Northern Grouping of Forces to help sustain and intensify Russian offensive operations along the border.[19] The Russian military command is likely not committing available reserves from the Northern Grouping of Forces to current offensive operations because it intends for these elements to support later phases of the offensive operations or subsequent waves of assaults.

Russian forces reportedly launched offensive operations in the international border area before they completed bringing the Northern Grouping of Forces up to its reported planned end strength and will likely continue offensive operations in the border area in waves as the Russian military attempts to reinforce the grouping. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi recently reported that Russian forces have roughly 35,000 personnel deployed to the border area in Kursk, Bryansk, and Belgorod oblasts and that Russian forces intend to establish a grouping in the area that is between 50,000 to 75,000 personnel in size.[20] Ukrainian sources also recently reported that an additional 3,750 Russian personnel may arrive in the northern Kharkiv Oblast area in the near future. Russian forces have repeatedly conducted offensive operations along different sectors of the front in "pulses" with one sector decreasing in intensity as another increases, and Russian forces may temporarily slow offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast in order to replenish losses and bring the Northern Grouping of Forces up to its desired end strength before resuming the tempo in a second wave at a later time of their choosing.[21]

Russian forces are currently prioritizing the seizure of Vovchansk because it is likely one of the remaining tactical objectives of the first phase of offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Russian forces conducted strikes on bridges across the Siverskyi Donets River to quickly isolate the battlefield east of the river in order to improve their chances to degrade Ukrainian ground lines of communication and quickly seize Vovchansk.[22] Russian forces are reportedly conducting a larger number of glide bomb strikes on the settlement than elsewhere along the border and appear to have committed more manpower to the area than in the Lyptsi direction.[23] The Russian military command likely chose the seizure of Vovchansk as one of the key tactical objectives of the first phase of the offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast, since Vovchansk is the largest settlement immediately on the border that would provide Russian forces a staging ground close to the Russian rear to prepare for and launch the second phase of the Russian offensive operation. It is unclear if the second phase of the Russian offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast will prioritize Russia's operational objective to expand the desired "buffer zone" further in width along the international border or Russia's operational objective to advance to within effective tube artillery range of Kharkiv City and its environs. [24] Russian forces could also envision a subsequent phase of the offensive operation from Vovchansk that aims to advance towards Velykyi Burluk to threaten the operational rear of the Ukrainian force grouping defending in the Kupyansk direction.[25]

Zelensky also outlined materiel requirements for Ukraine to combat Russia's air superiority and defend against the Russian air threat, especially given US-imposed restraints on Ukraine that prohibit Ukraine from striking targets within Russian territory and airspace.[26] Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces only have 25 percent of the air defenses that Ukraine needs to defend against Russian strikes and called for Western countries to send two Patriot batteries, which Ukraine would specifically deploy to Kharkiv Oblast, as a show of strength against the Russian offensive. Zelensky also stated that Ukraine would need about 120-130 F-16s or other advanced fighter aircraft to achieve air parity with Russia. Air parity is the lowest level of air control, in which no side controls the sky.[27] Zelensky stated that Russia's biggest advantage is Ukraine's restriction against using Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia, and ISW has recently noted that this restriction creates a sanctuary for the Russian military in Russia to strike Ukraine safely without leaving Russian airspace.[28] Ukrainian forces have been able to strike Russian airbases in Russia and occupied Ukraine with some success, but Ukrainian forces have not made a sufficient impact to deter Russian forces from conducting missile and drone strike campaigns against Ukrainian deep-rear areas or glide bomb strikes on frontline and near rear areas.[29] Zelensky's proposed two Patriot batteries in northern Kharkiv Oblast will have a limited effectiveness in defending against Russian airstrikes if Ukrainian forces cannot use the Patriots to intercept Russian fighter-bombers in Russian airspace.[30]

Ukrainian officials have reportedly asked the US presidential administration to ease the restriction against using US-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia. The New York Times (NYT) and Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on May 17, citing Ukrainian and US officials, that Ukraine submitted the request within the past week.[31] The NYT and WSJ reported that Ukraine also requested additional targeting assistance for military targets inside Russia, and former Ukrainian military officials reportedly told the NYT that targeting assistance would allow Ukrainian forces to more accurately plan for drone and missile strikes given the requirements for more detailed terrain mapping for these strikes. White House officials state that the United States does not want to encourage or enable attacks within Russia, and the NYT noted that the White House has rejected

similar appeals in the past. ISW continues to assess that this US policy severely compromises Ukraine's ability to defend itself, particularly against Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[32]

Zelensky noted that Ukraine must overcome its manpower challenges in order to contest the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine. Zelensky stated that Ukraine is currently forming a significant number of brigades as part of its reserve and that Ukraine still needs to fully staff some of these units. [33] Zelensky stated that consistent rotations for frontline units are an important step in improving Ukrainian morale and noted that Ukraine must first stabilize the frontline and sufficiently staff its units in order to conduct counteroffensive operations in the future. ISW has repeatedly assessed that addressing Ukraine's manpower challenges will be crucial to Ukraine's ability to conduct counteroffensive operations and contest the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine in the future.[34] ISW continues to assess that Ukraine should contest the initiative as soon as possible as Russian forces are reaping a variety of benefits from holding the initiative, including deciding where and at what scale offensive operations will occur throughout the theater and how much materiel Ukrainian forces will have to expend to defend against such efforts.[35]

Ukraine's new mobilization law went into effect on May 18 and will help Ukraine stabilize its force generation apparatus amid ongoing manpower constraints.[36] The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted the law, which included lowering the mobilization age from 27 to 25, on April 11 and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed the law on April 16.[37] Ukrainian officials have repeatedly emphasized that Ukraine's new mobilization law will help address its manpower challenges and, alongside the delivery of US military assistance, empower Ukraine's defense in critical areas and future counteroffensive operations.[38]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev called for Russia's envisioned "buffer zone" to encompass all of Ukraine, illustrating that the Kremlin's concept of the buffer zone is a thinly veiled justification for Russia's long-held intent to subsume the entirety of Ukraine and likely an effort to garner domestic support for the Russian war effort. Medvedev stated in a post on his Russian-language Telegram channel on May 17 that Russia's "sanitary [buffer] zone" must at least extend over all central Ukraine and a significant part of western Ukraine in order to place Russian cities out of the range of Ukraine's Western-provided long-range strike systems. [39] Medvedev claimed that if Ukraine continues to strike Russian cities, then Russian forces will have to extend the sanitary zone further to Ukraine's western border with Poland or within Poland itself. Mikhail Zvinchuk, founder of the *Rybar* Telegram channel, also called during an interview on May 18 for Russian forces to occupy additional areas of Ukraine as part of a "buffer zone," claiming that Russian forces should seize areas of Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts along the Russian border. [40] Russian President Vladimir Putin recently characterized Russia's offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast as part of Russia's effort to develop a "buffer zone" on Ukrainian territory to defend Belgorod City against Ukrainian strikes.[41] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested during an interview on April 19 that Russian forces will have to keep attacking further into Ukraine to protect the settlements that come under Russia's expanding buffer zone, insinuating that the Kremlin intends to use the creation of a buffer zone to justify Russian offensive operations even further into Ukraine. [42] Medvedev's and Zvinchuk's comments highlight Russia's likely intent to use this buffer zone narrative to justify Russia's occupation of all of Ukraine. Medvedev's decision to publish this post on his Russian-language Telegram channel suggests that his message is intended for a domestic Russian audience, and Medvedev may intend to generate support and excitement around an imagined future Russian victory in Ukraine ahead of Russia's anticipated summer 2024 offensive operations, which will likely result in large-scale Russian personnel losses.

Founder of the Kremlin-linked *Rybar* Telegram channel, Mikhail Zvinchuk, gave an uncharacteristically public interview in which he criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and speculated on possible changes within the MoD. Zvinchuk gave an interview to Russian-language diaspora-focused outlet *RTVi* on May 18 that focused on the replacement of former Russian Defense Minister and current Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu and corruption in the Russian MoD.[43] Zvinchuk complained about the Russian MoD's bureaucratic issues and claimed that recently appointed Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov will need to start to make "positive changes" to the MoD within three months before people "start asking questions." Zvinchuk claimed that Belousov will likely replace former Russian Deputy Defense Minister Ruslan Tsaliukov, who reportedly submitted his resignation to Shoigu a week before Shoigu's replacement, because Tsaliukov was Shoigu's "right hand man," not Belousov's. Zvinchuk also claimed that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Tatyana Shevtsova and Russian Deputy Defense Minister and Head of the Russian MoD's Main Military-Political Directorate Viktor Goremykin will remain in their positions. A Russian insider source, who has previously accurately reported on Russian military command changes, claimed on May 14 that Shevtsova will likely resign, however.[44] Zvinchuk claimed that he has information that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov will leave

his post to head the Russian MoD's Africa Corps and that Head of the Russian MoD's Main Directorate of Military Police General Sergei Kuralenko will replace Yevkurov.

Should the Kremlin allow select prominent Russian milbloggers to increase their criticisms of the Russian MoD, public pressure may grow in favor of reforms that would, if implemented, assist Russia's war effort in Ukraine. The Russian MoD notably awarded Zvinchuk in December 2023 for his efforts in military-patriotic education and military-political work for the Russian military, and Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Zvinchuk with the Russian Order of Merit to the Fatherland Second Class in November 2023.[45] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin awarding Zvinchuk, whose Telegram channel has over 1.2 million followers as of May 18, was likely part of wider efforts to gain control over and co-opt the often-critical Russian milblogger information space.[46] Russian milbloggers have largely reduced their personal criticisms of Shoigu and Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion in June 2023. [47] Zvinchuk may be trying to use his public interview to gauge the Kremlin's response to critical voices following Shoigu's replacement with Belousov. Considering Zvinchuk's affiliations with the Kremlin, however, the Kremlin may have tasked Zvinchuk with criticizing the Russian MoD publicly while dictating the content and severity of his statements, which may establish an accepted bound of criticisms against the MoD. Any possible Kremlin permittance of increased criticisms of the Russian MoD from Russian milbloggers could lead to bureaucratic reforms that improve the efficacy of Russia's war effort in Ukraine, especially when coupled with Belousov's and Putin's intentions to mobilize the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to support a protracted war in Ukraine and possibly prepare for a future confrontation with NATO.[48]

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili vetoed the Russian-style "foreign agents" bill on May 18, but the ruling Georgian Dream party will likely override Zurabishvili's veto in the coming weeks. Zurabishvili announced on May 18 that she vetoed the foreign agent bill that is "fundamentally Russian" and contradicts both Georgia's constitution and all European standards after she previously signaled that she would veto the bill should it pass Georgian parliament.[49] The Georgian parliament passed the foreign agents bill in its final reading on May 14 in an 84-30 vote largely spearheaded by the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has the votes needed to override Zurabishvili's veto.[50] The Georgian parliament will reportedly meet again in four weeks, and Georgia Dream will likely propose to override Zurabishvili's veto to pass the foreign agents bill at that time.[51]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces have recently intensified their effort to seize the operationally significant town of Chasiv Yar, seeking to exploit how Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast and ongoing offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine have generated greater theater-wide pressure on Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for the second phase of their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast, which Russian forces likely intend to launch following their anticipated seizure of Vovchansk.
- Zelensky also outlined materiel requirements for Ukraine to combat Russia's air superiority and defend against the Russian air threat, especially given US-imposed restraints on Ukraine that prohibit Ukraine from striking targets within Russian territory and airspace.
- Ukrainian officials have reportedly asked the US presidential administration to ease the restriction against using US-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia.
- Zelensky noted that Ukraine must overcome its manpower challenges in order to contest the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine.
- Ukraine's new mobilization law went into effect on May 18 and will help Ukraine stabilize its force generation apparatus amid ongoing manpower constraints.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev called for Russia's envisioned "buffer zone" to encompass all of Ukraine, illustrating that the Kremlin's concept of the buffer zone is a thinly veiled justification for Russia's long-held intent to subsume the entirety of Ukraine and likely an effort to garner domestic support for the Russian war effort.
- Founder of the Kremlin-linked Rybar Telegram channel, Mikhail Zvinchuk, gave an uncharacteristically public interview in which he criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and speculated on possible changes in the MoD.
- Should the Kremlin allow select prominent Russian milbloggers to increase their criticisms of the Russian MoD, public pressure may grow in favor of reforms that would, if implemented, assist Russia's war effort in Ukraine.
- Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili vetoed the Russian-style "foreign agents" bill on May 18, but the ruling Georgian Dream party will likely override Zurabishvili's veto in the coming weeks.

- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Avdiivka, Hulyaipole, and Robotyne.
- The *BBC News Russian Service* reported on May 18 that Russian military authorities in Astana, Kazakhstan, detained a Russian contract service personnel (*kontraktnik*) for desertion on April 23 – the first such instance in Kazakhstan.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 17, 2024

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

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

May 17, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin framed Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast as part of Russian efforts to create a "buffer zone" to protect Russian border areas from Ukrainian strikes, confirming ISW's previous assessments. Putin responded to a journalist's question about Russian forces' objectives in the Kharkiv direction, stating that Russian forces are achieving success "according to plan" and that Russian forces have no immediate plans to seize Kharkiv City.^[1] Putin stated that Russian offensive operations in the Kharkiv direction are aimed at creating a "buffer zone" to protect Russian border areas, including Belgorod City, from Ukrainian strikes. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces appear to be prioritizing the establishment of a "buffer zone" along the international border over setting conditions for deeper penetrations into northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[2]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the front in northern Kharkiv Oblast and that Russian forces have not reached Ukraine's "concrete" and "most powerful" line of defense in the area.^[3] Zelensky stated that Russian forces have currently reached the "first line" that Ukrainian forces built further from the border and that Ukrainian forces have also built a second and third line of defense. Zelensky described the third line of defense as the "most powerful" as it is further from the border and was not under threat of Russian shelling during its construction. Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the situation in the area and that the deepest Russian forces have advanced is 10 kilometers, which is consistent with ISW's assessment of Russian advances near Lyptsi. Western and Ukrainian media reported on May 10 that Ukrainian military sources stated that Russian forces intend to establish a 10-kilometer-deep buffer zone along the northern border of Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian forces will likely prioritize leveling the front in northern Kharkiv Oblast at this depth over deeper penetrations.^[4]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that elements of the Russian military command strengthened the Northern Grouping of Forces with elements of the 6th Combined Arms Army and 11th and 44th Army Corps (all of the Leningrad Military District [LMD]), echoing previous statements from Ukrainian military observers about the Northern Grouping of Forces' composition.^[5] Syrskyi stated that Russian forces launched offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast "well ahead of schedule" when Ukrainian forces were "turning over," possibly referring to a Ukrainian troop rotation.^[6] Russian forces made their narrow penetration towards Ocheretyne in late April by attacking during a Ukrainian brigade-level rotation on the frontline, and Russian forces may have sought to take advantage of similar situations to penetrate Ukrainian positions.^[7]

Russian forces will likely be able to stretch Ukrainian forces along a wide front and fix Ukrainian troops in the international border area even as the tempo of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast slows. Syrskyi stated that Russian forces have expanded the area of active hostilities by about 70 kilometers since starting offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast and are trying to force Ukrainian forces to commit brigades from reserves to the frontline.^[8] ISW continues to assess that Russian offensive operations along the Kharkiv international border likely have the strategic objective of drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces to this axis to enable Russian advances in other areas of eastern Ukraine.^[9] Geolocated footage published on May 17 shows Ukrainian forces striking two Russian tanks moving towards the international border near Sumy Oblast.^[10] Even limited Russian activity in other areas of the international border below the threshold of Russian offensive operations could have the effect of stretching Ukrainian forces along a wider front. Russian forces will be able to draw and fix Ukrainian forces to the border area as long as Russia sustains a presence in northern Kharkiv Oblast and threatens penetrations of other border areas. Russian forces have shown a propensity for conducting offensive operations along different sectors of the front in "pulses" with one sector decreasing in intensity as another increases, and Russian forces may slow offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast for a time but resume the tempo at a later time of their choosing.^[11]

Russian forces reportedly leveraged notable electronic warfare (EW) capabilities to support tactically significant gains during the first days of their limited offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast. The *Washington Post* reported on May 17 that elements of a Ukrainian brigade operating in northern Kharkiv Oblast lost connection to drone and communications systems due to intense Russian EW jamming when Russian forces began their incursion into Kharkiv Oblast on May 10.[12] The *Washington Post* reported that the Ukrainian soldiers stated that the Russian EW jamming completely disrupted Ukrainian forces' satellite internet connection via Starlink devices, reportedly the first time that Russian EW has completely knocked out Ukrainian Starlink connection since the start of the full-scale invasion.[13] A Ukrainian soldier told the *Washington Post* that these disruptions forced Ukrainian forces to communicate only through radio and phones and prevented Ukrainian forces from conducting basic reconnaissance.[14] Russian and Ukrainian forces have been in an offense-defense race involving EW systems and counter-EW adaptations, and it is notable that Russian forces were able to achieve such a widespread effect with their EW capabilities in northern Kharkiv Oblast. [15] Russian forces may have waited to deploy a new EW adaptation to achieve widespread disruptions during the beginning of their limited offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Both Russian and Ukrainian forces have previously adapted quickly to changes in each other's EW capabilities, and Russian forces may have decided that leveraging a new capability to make tactically significant gains at the outset of a new offensive operation would be the most worthwhile use of the capability's novelty.[16]

Senior NATO military commanders confirmed ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces do not have sufficient forces to achieve a "strategic breakthrough" in Ukraine. NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe and US European Command Commander General Christopher Cavoli stated on May 16 that Russian forces do not have the necessary number of troops or the skill to conduct operations at the scale necessary to achieve and exploit a strategic-level breakthrough in Ukraine, and expressed confidence that Ukrainian forces will "hold the line" near Kharkiv City. [17] Cavoli noted that NATO member states have not observed Russian forces accumulate the resources required for such a breakthrough, further supporting ISW's recent assessments that Russian forces are unlikely to make operationally significant gains against more well-provisioned Ukrainian forces during the Russian summer offensive effort.[18] NATO commanders also indicated that Russian forces are preparing for a longer-term war effort, however. Cavoli stated that Russian forces have improved in some unspecified areas but failed to improve in others, but that the Russian military has proven that it is a learning organization.[19] NATO Military Committee Chairperson Lieutenant Admiral Rob Bauer stated that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is more efficient than the Western DIB but that Russian forces still struggle with troop quality and training, all consistent with ISW's longstanding assessments about Russia's attempts to sustain its long-term war effort amid short to medium-term struggles with manpower and materiel.[20]

Ukrainian forces conducted a series of large-scale aerial and naval drone strikes against Russian energy and port infrastructure in Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea on the night of May 16 to 17. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported on May 17 that its sources in Ukrainian intelligence stated that Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) and Security Service (SBU) struck Russian military facilities in Novorossiysk and Tuapse, Krasnodar Krai and in occupied Sevastopol on the night of May 16 to 17.[21] The Ukrainian intelligence sources reportedly stated that the GUR and SBU targeted Black Sea Fleet (BSF) ships in Sevastopol and Novorossiysk. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 17 that Russian forces destroyed 123 drones over Crimea and Krasnodar Krai and 25 unmanned boats in the Black Sea in the past day.[22] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched over 140 drones and 20 unmanned boats in the overnight strikes on Sevastopol and Krasnodar Krai.[23] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Ukrainian forces struck a port and fuel terminal in Novorossiysk.[24] The Krasnodar Krai operational headquarters stated that falling drone debris caused a fire at an oil refinery in Tuapse on the morning of May 17, and Russian milbloggers and opposition media posted footage of the Ukrainian strike on the Tuapse oil refinery.[25] *Reuters* reported that two unspecified sources stated that Russian authorities conducted an emergency shutdown of the Tuapse oil refinery after the drones hit the facility's liquified petroleum gas production unit but that the refinery will likely restart "relatively soon." [26] The SBU reportedly struck the Rosneft oil refinery in Tuapse in late January 2024, and *Reuters* reported that the oil refinery resumed operations in late April 2024.[27] Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev stated that drone debris damaged a power substation near Sevastopol and caused partial blackouts in the city.[28]

US officials reiterated the White House's unwillingness to support Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons in strikes against military targets in Russia. US Defense Department Spokesperson Sabrina Singh stated on May 16 that the Biden Administration has not changed its position against Ukrainian forces using US weapons to strike targets within Russia and that the administration believes that the equipment should be used to liberate occupied Ukrainian territory. [29] ISW continues to assess that US and other Western limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike

military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border areas from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and settlements and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.[30] This US policy is severely compromising Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[31]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to further known Russian information operations intended to directly undermine Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president. Putin claimed during his press conference in Harbin on May 17 that the current Ukrainian government "has its origins" in a Western-facilitated coup d'état, referring to the Kremlin's information operation falsely asserting that Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 was an externally organized and funded coup against pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych that installed a series of pro-Western governments in Ukraine.[32] Putin additionally claimed that Ukraine's political and legal systems must determine if Zelensky will still be considered Ukraine's legitimate president when his first term technically expires on May 20. Ukraine would have held its presidential election on March 31 and would have begun a new presidential term on May 20 if Russia had not illegally invaded Ukraine. [33] Ukraine's constitution permits postponing elections and allows a sitting president to continue to serve after the designated end of his term under martial law, and Zelensky's decision not to hold elections given Ukraine's ongoing existential defensive war is fully in accord with the Ukrainian constitution.[34] Ukrainian officials have repeatedly warned that the Kremlin is currently running a series of information operations aimed at undermining and questioning Zelensky's legitimacy.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin framed Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast as part of Russian efforts to create a "buffer zone" to protect Russian border areas from Ukrainian strikes, confirming ISW's previous assessments.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the front in northern Kharkiv Oblast and that Russian forces have not reached Ukraine's "concrete" and "most powerful" line of defense in the area.
- Russian forces will likely be able to stretch Ukrainian forces along a wide front and fix Ukrainian troops in the international border area even as the tempo of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast slows.
- Russian forces reportedly leveraged notable electronic warfare (EW) capabilities to support tactically significant gains during the first days of their limited offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Senior NATO military commanders confirmed ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces do not have sufficient forces to achieve a "strategic breakthrough" in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of large-scale aerial and naval drone strikes against Russian energy and port infrastructure in Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea on the night of May 16 to 17.
- US officials reiterated the White House's unwillingness to support Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons in strikes against military targets in Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to further known Russian information operations intended to directly undermine Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's legitimacy as president.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Avdiivka.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the annual Russian-Chinese Expo and forum on interregional cooperation and visited Harbin Polytechnic University during the second and last day of his trip to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on May 17.
- Ukrainian and Western sources continue to report that Russian forces are committing war crimes in newly occupied areas of Kharkiv Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 16, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

May 16, 2024, 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.

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 May 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are stabilizing the situation along the northern border in Kharkiv Oblast and that the tempo of Russian offensive operations in the area continues to decrease. Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn stated on May 16 that Ukrainian forces are partially stabilizing the situation in the Kharkiv direction, and the Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian forces have so far denied Russia's tactical objectives to penetrate Ukrainian defenses within Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City) and establish a foothold in the area.^[1] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian forces have forced Russian forces to significantly decrease the tempo of their offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces continue to inflict significant losses on Russian forces in the area.^[2] Kharkiv Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Synehubov stated that Ukrainian forces have stopped Russian forces' active advance in Kharkiv Oblast and that Ukrainian forces have regained more favorable positions in some unspecified areas.^[3] Synehubov added that Russian forces are transferring reserves to the area in an attempt to continue advancing.^[4]

Zelensky stressed in an interview with *ABC News* on May 16 that the situation in the Kharkiv direction is very serious and that Ukrainian forces cannot afford to lose Kharkiv City.^[5] Zelensky argued that Russia will not be able to seize Kharkiv City if Ukrainian forces receive two Patriot air defense systems to deploy to the area.^[6] Russian fixed-wing aircraft have increasingly targeted Kharkiv City and its environs with glide bombs and various missile strikes in recent weeks to degrade Ukrainian defenses and prompt residents to flee the city.^[7] Sufficient air defense coverage in the Kharkiv City area would allow Ukrainian forces to constrain Russian aviation operations, but only if Western countries permitted Ukraine to use the systems to intercept Russian aircraft in Russian airspace, since Russian aircraft can strike Kharkiv City without ever leaving Russian airspace.^[8] Russia is leveraging Russian airspace as a sanctuary to strike Kharkiv Oblast due to prohibitions on the use of Western-provided systems to strike targets within Russia.^[9]

Ukrainian Internal Affairs Minister Ihor Klymenko reported that Russian forces have executed civilians and taken civilians captive in Vovchansk. Klymenko stated on May 16 that Russian forces in northern Vovchansk are preventing residents from evacuating and are holding civilians captive in basements in the settlement.^[10] Klymenko stated that Russian forces have begun to execute civilians and reported that in one instance Russian forces killed a fleeing civilian who refused to follow Russian commanders' orders.^[11] The detention and summary execution of civilians is a war crime and emblematic of Russian forces' behavior in all occupied Ukrainian territories. The United Nations (UN) reported in December 2023 that it had documented at least 142 cases of Russian forces executing Ukrainian civilians.^[12] Russian military massacres like the massacres in Bucha and Izyum are a microcosm of Russian atrocities throughout Russian-occupied areas, and the Russian military has shown no indication that it has attempted to constrain Russian forces from brutally victimizing Ukrainian civilians and committing other war crimes.^[13] For almost the past year and half Russian forces have mainly been gradually advancing near small settlements that have been largely depopulated by the war, and it is notable that relatively rapid Russian tactical advances into a populated settlement were immediately accompanied by the detention and execution of civilians. Russian forces committed blatant war crimes in Bucha and Mariupol in the first months of the full-scale invasion; and over two years of fighting in Ukraine and the Kremlin's corresponding dehumanization of Ukrainians have likely inured Russian forces to such crimes. Russian attempts to seize major population centers like Kharkiv City do not just threaten Ukraine with operationally significant setbacks but also with war crimes and violations that accompany Russian occupation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely views Russia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as decisive to his effort to further mobilize the Russian economy and defense industry to support a protracted war in Ukraine. Putin arrived in Beijing and met with PRC President Xi Jinping on May 16, and the two leaders signed a series of documents intended to recognize and deepen their bilateral cooperation.^[14] Putin and Xi signed a joint statement, several agricultural and ecological agreements, an infrastructure and engineering construction agreement, and several media agreements.^[15] Putin and Xi highlighted bilateral trade and economic cooperation throughout their public speeches, and Putin's delegation included several Russian officials and

businessmen likely involved in Putin's efforts to further mobilize the Russian defense industry, including Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov, Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu, Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Head Dmitry Shugaev, Russian aluminum company RUSAL founder Oleg Deripaska, Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, and Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Kirill Dmitriev.[16] Belousov professed his intention to focus on integrating the Russian military's economy into the general Russian military economy during a speech on May 14, and Putin announced that Shoigu will work with the Presidential Administration's Military-Industrial Complex Commission on May 15.[17] The Russian delegation likely aimed to expand cooperation with their Chinese counterparts that will facilitate increased economic ties between Russia and the PRC. *The Economist* reported on April 29 that Russia's defense industry has increasingly relied on the PRC to provide dual-use goods, such as semiconductors and navigational equipment, to support arms production.[18] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on May 1 that PRC exports of dual-use goods to Russia have helped Russia significantly increase its defense production and that 70 percent of Russia's machine tools and 90 percent of its microelectronics are from the PRC.[19] The PRC has previously signaled concerns that its economic relationship with Russia may place PRC entities under threat of secondary sanctions, and Putin likely intends to head off these concerns as the Russian defense industry grows increasingly reliant on the PRC.[20]

Putin also used his meeting with Xi to promote known Kremlin narratives feigning interest in peace negotiations and a diplomatic resolution to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Putin and Xi signed a joint statement on May 16 that alluded to Russia's support for the PRC's proposed peace plan and a possible future PRC-led negotiation to end the war in Ukraine.[21] The statement claims that both Russia and the PRC are against any efforts that prolong or further escalate the war and that both countries support a "sustainable settlement" for the "Ukraine crisis." Xi stated during a joint press conference with Putin that the PRC and Russia both perceive a political settlement as the right way to resolve the situation in Ukraine.[22] ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin will continue to use any calls for peace negotiations to feign interest in negotiations in hopes of undermining Western support for Ukraine and prompting the West to force Ukraine into negotiations with Russia that make concessions on Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[23]

Russian forces are reportedly able to conduct fixed-wing drone reconnaissance deep in the Ukrainian rear due to Ukraine's lack of air defense interceptors. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported on May 14 that Ukraine has had to husband its diminishing supply of surface-to-air missiles (SAM), which has allowed Russian reconnaissance drones to fly more freely into Ukrainian rear areas, including over Kharkiv City, and optimize Russian forces' reconnaissance fire complex (RFC).[24] RUSI stated that Ukraine's decreased air defense interceptor supplies have forced Ukraine to increasingly make difficult decisions between deploying air defense coverage to critical infrastructure in rear areas or to frontline areas, as ISW has repeatedly assessed.[25] RUSI noted that well-provisioned Ukrainian forces were previously able to curtail Russian reconnaissance capabilities for most of the full-scale invasion.[26] Russian forces have been conducting a large-scale air campaign against Kharkiv City as part of their offensive operations in northern Kharkiv City and have been using glide-bomb strikes to enable Russian ground maneuver in Kharkiv Oblast.[27] Russian forces notably used glide-bomb strikes to tactical effect during their seizure of Avdiivka.[28] Ukrainian forces require Western-supplied air defense interceptors in order to destroy Russian reconnaissance drones in both rear and frontline areas at scale and defeat the optimized Russian RFC that is enabling Russian tactical advances along the front.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against a Russian defense industrial plant in Tula City on the night of May 15 to 16. Ukrainian intelligence sources told several Ukrainian outlets that Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted successful drone strikes against the "Bazalt" defense industrial plant, which produces weapons and ammunition for the Russian military.[29] Footage published on May 16 purportedly shows the strike in Tula City.[30] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 16 that Russian forces downed two Ukrainian drones over Tula Oblast, and Bazalt denied claims that any drones struck its production facilities in Tula City.[31]

Russian missile strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure since March 2024 have likely caused long-term damage to Ukrainian energy infrastructure and repeated energy blackouts. Ukraine's largest private energy operator DTEK reported energy blackouts in Kyiv City and Oblast on May 14 and stated that blackouts occur without warning.[32] Ukrainian energy company Yasno stated that Russian strikes cause Ukrainian energy operators to conduct emergency blackouts in order to balance the power system.[33] Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrenergo's supervisory board member Yuriy Boyko stated that Ukraine may experience power outages that began on May 14 until August or September 2024.[34] The Ukrainian Energy Ministry reported on May 16 that it began receiving emergency electricity from Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.[35] DTEK warned in late March that more accurate and concentrated Russian strikes are inflicting greater damage to

Ukrainian energy facilities than previous Russian attacks did.[36] Russian forces will likely continue to conduct mass strikes to cause long-term damage to Ukrainian energy infrastructure as degraded Ukrainian air defense capabilities persist until US-provided air defense missiles and other Western air defense assets arrive at scale.[37] Long-term damage to Ukraine's energy grid that generates persisting energy disruptions threatens to constrain Ukrainian efforts to expand its defense industrial base (DIB).[38]

A Russian insider source, who has previously accurately reported on Russian military command changes, claimed that senior Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials are vying for the position of Chief of the General Staff. The insider source claimed on May 14 that unspecified Russian deputy defense ministers and heads of unspecified main directorates in the Russian MoD are likely competing to become Russian Chief of the General Staff, a position that Army General Valery Gerasimov has held since 2012.[39] The insider source claimed that some unspecified actors are prioritizing placing disgraced Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin in the position of Chief of the General Staff, but that there are other considerations for Surovikin to take other roles, and that it is too early to determine whether Gerasimov's position as Chief of the General Staff is coming to an end. The insider source claimed that there are three main "centers of power" within the Russian MoD. The "preservation group" reportedly consists of Russian deputy defense ministers Ruslan Tsalikov, Colonel General Viktor Goremykin, and Nikolai Pankov. The "lockout group" reportedly consists of Russian deputy defense ministers Colonel General Alexander Fomin, Army General Pavel Popov, Colonel General Yury Sadovenko, Alexey Krivoruchko, and Tatyana Shevtsova — all of whom the insider source claimed will likely resign. The insider source did not expound upon the designations of "preservation group" and "lockout group." The insider source claimed that the "bastions" in the Russian MoD include Gerasimov and deputy defense ministers Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Lieutenant General Andrei Bulyga. The insider source claimed that Bulyga will likely resign. ISW cannot independently verify any of the insider source's claims. Several Russian milbloggers and insider sources claimed on May 13 that Tsalikov and Krivoruchko submitted their resignations to former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu a week before Putin removed Shoigu as defense minister.[40]

Kremlin and Georgian officials promoted established Kremlin information operations alleging that the West is orchestrating protests against Georgia's "foreign agent" law in order to overthrow the Georgian government. Several officials from the ruling Georgian Dream party alleged that Iceland, Lithuania, and Estonia are taking "hostile" steps and trying to overthrow the Georgian government after the Icelandic, Lithuanian, and Estonian foreign ministers visited protests in Tbilisi against the "foreign agents" law on May 15.[41] Russian Federation Council Vice Speaker Konstantin Kosachev similarly claimed that the West is orchestrating protests in Georgia in order to overthrow the Georgian government and that the Georgian "foreign agents" law is necessary to protect Georgia from "externally sponsored coups."^[42] Kosachev reiterated longstanding Kremlin narratives about the US government's alleged involvement in Ukrainian protests in 2013–2014. ISW assessed on May 15 that Kremlin and Georgian officials would increasingly allege that the West is attempting to interfere in Georgian affairs, and ISW has recently observed how Georgian Dream and Georgian security officials have intensified their use of established Kremlin information operation and are increasing their rhetorical alignment with Russia against the West.^[43] Georgian Dream actors likely intend to purposefully derail long-term Georgian efforts for European integration, which play into continued Russian hybrid operations to divide, destabilize, and weaken Georgia.^[44]

Turkey and Russia are reportedly exploiting European Union (EU) sanctions regulations to export Russian oil to the EU, allowing Russia to continue to receive significant oil revenues to fund its war effort in Ukraine. *Politico* reported on May 15 that the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air, the Center for the Study of Democracy, and *Politico*'s independent reporting indicate that Turkey is likely disguising the origin of Russian oil in order to exploit EU sanctions regulations that allow "blended" oil containing certain proportions of Russian oil that have undergone "substantial transformation" to enter the EU.^[45] *Politico* stated that Russian oil imports to the Turkish ports of Ceyhan, Marmara Ereğlisi, and Mersin significantly increased between February 2023 and February 2024 while these three ports' oil exports to the EU also significantly increased — "strongly" indicating that Turkey is "repackaging" large amounts of Russian oil. *Politico* stated that not all of the Turkish ports are "substantially transforming" Russian oil into entirely new products — as required by EU sanctions regulations — and that Turkey is "rebranding" the oil with a Turkish "certificate of origin." *Politico* reported that this scheme likely has generated up to three billion euros (about \$3.2 billion) of revenue for Russia between February 2023 and February 2024 from these three ports alone.

Russia reportedly launched a satellite as part of its program to develop a nuclear anti-satellite weapon in the weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely as part of Russian preparations for a future confrontation with NATO. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on May 16 that US officials stated that Russia launched a satellite in space as part of its nuclear anti-satellite

weapon development program on February 5, 2022 — 19 days before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[46] US officials reportedly stated that the satellite Russia launched does not contain a nuclear weapon but contains components of the new weapon system that Russia is developing to destroy hundreds of satellites in low Earth orbit, particularly in areas where there are many US government and commercial satellites, including SpaceX's Starlink satellites.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are stabilizing the situation along the northern border in Kharkiv Oblast and that the tempo of Russian offensive operations in the area continues to decrease.
- Ukrainian Internal Affairs Minister Ihor Klymenko reported that Russian forces have executed civilians and taken civilians captive in Vovchansk.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin likely views Russia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as decisive to his effort to further mobilize the Russian economy and defense industry to support a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Putin also used his meeting with Xi to promote known Kremlin narratives feigning interest in peace negotiations and a diplomatic resolution to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces are reportedly able to conduct fixed-wing drone reconnaissance deep in the Ukrainian rear due to Ukraine's lack of air defense interceptors.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against a Russian defense industrial plant in Tula City on the night of May 15 to 16.
- Russian missile strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure since March 2024 have likely caused long-term damage to Ukrainian energy infrastructure and repeated energy blackouts.
- A Russian insider source, who has previously accurately reported on Russian military command changes, claimed that senior Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials are vying for the position of Chief of the General Staff.
- Kremlin and Georgian officials promoted established Kremlin information operations alleging that the West is orchestrating protests against Georgia's "foreign agent" law in order to overthrow the Georgian government.
- Turkey and Russia are reportedly exploiting European Union (EU) sanctions regulations to export Russian oil to the EU, allowing Russia to continue to receive significant oil revenues to fund its war effort in Ukraine.
- Russia reportedly launched a satellite as part of its program to develop a nuclear anti-satellite weapon in the weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely as part of Russian preparations for a future confrontation with NATO.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Lyptsi, Vovchansk, Kupyansk and Donetsk City.
- Several Russian opposition media outlets reported on May 16 that Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov rejected a bill that would grant deferment from mobilization to certain Russian civilians, likely to support ongoing and future crypto-mobilization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 15, 2024

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

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

May 15, 2024, 7:35pm 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 1:15pm ET on May 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The tempo of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast continues to decrease after Russian forces initially seized areas that Ukrainian officials have now confirmed were less defended. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukrainian forces have partially stabilized the situation in northern Kharkiv Oblast bordering Russia.^[1] Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn stated that Russian forces are attempting to make tactical gains near Lukyantsi and Vovchansk to create footholds for future advances, but that Ukrainian counterattacks and artillery and drone strikes are preventing Russian forces from gaining a foothold in these areas.^[2] Kharkiv Oblast Administration officials stated on May 15 that constant Russian shelling makes it impossible for Ukrainian forces to establish fortifications within three to five kilometers of the international border in Kharkiv Oblast and that Ukrainian forces constructed the first and second lines of defense about 12 to 13 kilometers and 20 kilometers from the international border, respectively.^[3] ISW currently assesses that Russian forces have advanced no more than eight kilometers from the international border in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Russian forces operating in Russia could easily conduct artillery strikes against Ukrainian defensive positions close to the international border, and Western prohibitions on the use of Western-provided weapons systems for strikes against rear Russian areas across the border make potential fixed Ukrainian defensive positions close to the international border vulnerable and possibly indefensible. Russian forces have been able to make tactical advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast since May 10 in areas where Ukrainian forces purposefully did not establish significant defensive lines and currently appear to be prioritizing the creation of a "buffer zone" over a deep penetration into Kharkiv Oblast.^[4]

The US Helsinki Commission stated that the US should allow Ukraine to conduct strikes against military targets in Russia's border areas amid an ongoing Russian offensive operation into Kharkiv Oblast from Russia, although US officials continue to express unwillingness to support such strikes. The US Helsinki Commission stated on May 15 that the US should "not only allow but encourage" Ukrainian forces to strike Russian forces firing and staging in Russia's border areas as part of Russia's offensive operations into northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[5] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated earlier on May 15 that the US has not "encouraged or enabled" Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory but noted that Ukraine must decide how to conduct this war. [6] *Politico* reported on May 14, citing two unnamed US officials, that the Biden Administration's policy prohibiting Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons to strike Russian territory has not changed. [7] *Politico*'s sources stated that US military assistance to Ukraine is "for the defense and not for offensive operations" into Russian territory. **A Ukrainian operation to strike systems in Russia that are directly supporting Russia's offensive ground operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast would be an inherently defensive effort and to characterize such an effort as "offensive" would be inaccurate.** ISW recently assessed that US limitations on Ukraine's ability to strike military targets in Russia have created a sanctuary in Russia's border areas from which Russian aircraft can conduct glide bomb and missile strikes against Ukrainian positions and settlements and where Russian forces and equipment can freely assemble before entering combat.^[8] This US policy is severely compromising Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast.^[9]

Russian President Vladimir Putin emphatically downplayed the threat of Ukrainian counterattacks along the entire frontline, further indicating that he assesses that Ukraine cannot and will not be able to liberate territory seized by Russian forces and that this will allow Russian forces to pursue creeping advances indefinitely. Putin stated on May 15 in a meeting with Russia's military district commanders that Russian forces are repelling all Ukrainian counterattacks and that Russian forces are constantly improving their positions in all directions in Ukraine.^[10] The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) 2024 Annual Threat Assessment reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin "probably believes" that Russian forces have blunted Ukrainian efforts to retake significant territory and that US and Western support for Ukraine is "finite."^[11] Limited Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast suggest that Putin and the Russian military command may be evaluating the risks, prospects, and timeline of offensive operations based on the assumption that Russian forces will be able to advance in any area of the front and consolidate any gains without having to account for Ukrainian tactical counterattacks or a significant Ukrainian counteroffensive operation in the future.^[12]

Putin likely has made this assumption based on months of gradual gains throughout eastern Ukraine, but this calculus fundamentally misjudges the tactical capabilities that Ukrainian forces will have once US security assistance begins to arrive to the front at scale. The *New York Times* reported on May 15 that US officials have expressed confidence that the arrival of US security assistance to Ukrainian forces at scale by July 2024 will likely allow Ukrainian forces to reverse many of the tactical gains that Russian forces have achieved in recent weeks.^[13] US officials were reportedly hesitant to discuss how US security assistance may facilitate Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2025, however.^[14] It is imperative for Ukrainian forces to be able to pursue large-scale counteroffensive operations that

liberate Russian-occupied territory as soon as conditions permit, otherwise Putin will likely continue to believe that he can pursue grinding offensive operations indefinitely and force Ukraine into the strategic defense until achieving victory.[15]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to publicly prioritize the further mobilization of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) while also attempting to assuage possible domestic fears about the negative effects of increased Russian defense spending. Putin met with the commanders of the Russian military districts and with officials involved in the Russian DIB on May 15 and focused both meetings on the need to develop the Russian DIB and economy.[16] Putin appointed Russian Presidential Aide Alexei Dyumin and Minister of Industry and Trade Anton Alikhanov to the supervisory board of state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec and specifically tasked Dyumin with assisting Russian efforts to provide the Russian military with the necessary weapons and equipment. [17] Putin stated that Russia's "cumulative defense and security spending" in 2024 will be about 8.7 percent (likely referring to defense spending as percentage of GDP), but noted that although this amount is significant, it is much less than Soviet defense spending in the mid-1980s of about 13 percent.[18] Russian business journalists estimated in November 2023 that Russian authorities planned to spend about 39 percent of the 2024 federal budget on defense and law enforcement, and *Reuters* reported in October 2023 that the 2024 Russian federal budget would allocate 29.4 percent to national defense.[19] Putin attempted to downplay the negative effects of increased defense spending on civilians' lives while also claiming that increased defense spending will boost the civilian sector of the economy. Putin stated that even as Russian defense spending grows, the Russian state must fulfill all its social obligations to Russian citizens and develop Russian social spheres, such as education, healthcare, support for veterans, and pensions. Putin claimed that increased Russian defense spending is connected to various civilian production sectors and boosts overall industrial development and job creation. Putin's continued focus on social spending indicates that Putin remains concerned about Russian domestic opinion and is unwilling to rapidly put the Russian economy on a full wartime footing in a way that generates fundamental economic disruption.

Putin specifically noted that the Russian DIB must increase the quality of Russian weapons. Putin stated that "whoever masters the latest means of armed struggle faster, wins" and called for the Russian defense industry to "double, triple" production and create more effective, accurate, and powerful weapons in order to decrease Russian losses.[20] Putin's focus on how technology can facilitate victory is likely a response to Ukrainian officials' recent discussions about how Ukraine needs to innovate technologically in order to beat a numerically superior Russian force.[21] Putin's emphasis on producing higher quality weapons is likely a direct response to Ukraine's higher-quality Western weapons and equipment. Ukrainian officials have noted recently that although Russian artillery supplies have greatly outnumbered those of Ukrainian forces, Ukrainian artillery is more precise than Russian artillery.[22] Although Russian forces have been able to exploit under-provisioned Ukrainian forces and make tactically significant advances along several sectors of the front recently, Russian forces have been unable to make operationally significant gains with their numerical manpower and materiel advantages alone.[23] Putin has consistently indicated that he is unwilling to transfer Russia to a full wartime economy, and a Russian DIB on a full wartime footing would likely still suffer from limiting factors, such as continued labor shortages in Russian defense industrial enterprises and the lack of the domestically produced goods required for advanced systems, and would likely not be able to produce the quantity of all types of weapons and equipment required to sustain Russian operations in Ukraine for years.[24]

Putin is likely concerned about the economic and diplomatic implications of decreased Russian arms exports. Putin thanked former Defense Minister and current Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu for reshaping the Russian military in recent years and claimed that no one, including Russia, understood the "modern methods of conducting armed struggle" before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine — a likely attempt to soften the blow of Shoigu's de facto demotion. Putin stated that Shoigu will work with the Military-Industrial Complex Commission under the Presidential Administration as well as the Federal Service for Cooperation with Foreign Countries.[25] Putin stated that Russia must ensure its contractual obligations to supply weapons and military equipment to foreign countries but noted that the Russian military's needs are the first priority. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported in March 2024 that Russia exported major arms to 31 countries in 2019 and only 12 in 2023 with Russian arms exports falling by 53 percent between 2014-2018 and 2019-2023.[26] Putin's renewed emphasis on arms exports is likely due to concerns about how the continued loss of federal budget revenue from arms exports will affect the Russian government's ability to sustain or even increase defense spending. Putin's statement about arms exports also suggests that Putin is concerned with how Russia's inability to fulfill arms export contracts since the start of the war in Ukraine has negatively affected Russia's bilateral relations, particularly with non-Western countries with which Russia is trying to curry favor in hopes that these countries will join Russia's imagined wide coalition opposing the collective West. Russia, for example, reportedly delayed the delivery of air defense systems to India, and Indian government sources have

previously stated that India wants to distance itself from Russia because the war in Ukraine has limited Russia's ability to provide India with munitions.[27]

The Kremlin confirmed the appointments of the newly formed Moscow and Leningrad military districts (MMD and LMD) and other military district commanders on May 15. Putin met with the Russian military district commanders and senior Russian defense officials on May 15 thereby confirming that former Russian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin became LMD commander and former Southern Military District (SMD) Colonel General Sergei Kuzovlev became MMD commander.[28] The Kremlin meeting also confirmed that Lieutenant General Alexander Sanchik replaced Colonel General Sergei Kuzmenko as acting Eastern Military District (EMD) commander, that Colonel General Gennady Anashkin replaced Kuzovlev as acting Southern Military District (SMD) commander, and that Colonel General Andrey Mordvichev will remain Central Military District (CMD) commander.[29] A Russian insider source, who has routinely been accurate about past Russian military command changes, correctly reported on these command changes in early May.[30] ISW has routinely observed that Putin regularly rotates officials and military commanders in and out of favor with the aim of incentivizing different factions to strive to accomplish his objectives and continues to assess that the Kremlin may have decided to change the leadership of the military districts in preparation for its expected summer offensive effort, which is forecasted to begin in late May or in June.[31]

Russian sources speculated that the May 13 detention of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Yuri Kuznetsov is only the beginning of a wider effort to root out corruption within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed on May 15 that Kuznetsov's detention and the April 24 detention of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on charges of accepting bribes prompted rumors that Russian authorities may arrest other unspecified corrupt officials serving in the Russian MoD's Main Operational-Mobilization Directorate, Main Directorate of Combat Training, and other high-level directorates.[32] The milblogger noted that bribery schemes have been incredibly common and pervasive in Russia over the last 15 years and that Russian authorities may limit their efforts to corruption cases that have caused tangible issues with Russian forces' combat effectiveness or operational security. Several Russian milbloggers lamented the pervasiveness of corruption and ineptitude among the Russian high command, and one Russian milblogger called on the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Investigative Committee to "shake out" all of the corrupt officials within the Russian MoD.[33]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced during a joint press conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on May 15 that the US will provide a two billion dollar "defense enterprise fund" to Ukraine.[34] Blinken stated that the fund has three components: assisting Ukraine in acquiring needed weapons, investing in Ukraine's defense industrial base (DIB), and helping Ukraine purchase military equipment and weapons from the US and other countries.

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly struck a Russian fuel depot in Rostov Oblast on the night of May 14 to 15.[35] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported that its sources stated that GUR attacked a fuel depot in Proletarsky Raion, Rostov Oblast with drones and that a fire broke out at the facility.[36] *Suspilne*'s sources added that Russian forces used the fuel depot for military purposes.[37] Rostov Oblast Governor Vasyl Golubev stated that two Ukrainian drones caused explosions at the facility but denied that there was a fire at the facility.[38]

The Kremlin continues to add European officials to Russia's wanted list as part of Russia's efforts to assert the jurisdiction of Russian federal law over sovereign NATO member states. Russian opposition outlet *Medazona* published an updated review of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MVD) wanted list on May 15 and noted that the Russian MVD added several dozen more Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Czech, and Polish officials to the wanted list since February 2024. [39] *Medazona* reported that there are currently 88 Latvian and 66 Lithuanian politicians from various government levels; five Polish mayors; an unspecified number of former and current council members of several Czech municipalities; and four current and former Estonian officials, including current Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and Minister of Internal Affairs Lauri Laanemets, on Russia's wanted list. *Medazona* noted that the Russian MVD also recently added and removed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, as ISW previously reported.[40] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's efforts to assert the jurisdiction of Russian law in sovereign European states are intended to set information conditions justifying possible future Russian aggression against NATO.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- The tempo of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast continues to decrease after Russian forces initially seized areas that Ukrainian officials have now

confirmed were less defended.

- The US Helsinki Commission stated that the US should allow Ukraine to conduct strikes against military targets in Russia's border areas amid an ongoing Russian offensive operation into Kharkiv Oblast from Russia, although US officials continue to express unwillingness to support such strikes.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to publicly prioritize the further mobilization of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) while also attempting to assuage possible domestic fears about the negative effects of increased Russian defense spending.
- Putin specifically noted that the Russian DIB must increase the quality of Russian weapons.
- Putin is likely concerned about the economic and diplomatic implications of decreased Russian arms exports.
- The Kremlin confirmed the appointments of the newly formed Moscow and Leningrad military districts (MMD and LMD) and other military district commanders on May 15.
- Russian sources speculated that the May 13 detention of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Yuri Kuznetsov is only the beginning of a wider effort to root out corruption within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced during a joint press conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on May 15 that the US will provide a two billion dollar "defense enterprise fund" to Ukraine.
- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly struck a Russian fuel depot in Rostov Oblast on the night of May 14 to 15.
- The Kremlin continues to add European officials to Russia's wanted list as part of Russia's efforts to assert the jurisdiction of Russian federal law over sovereign NATO member states.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast, near Siversk, and west of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksandr Lytvyyenko assessed on May 15 that Russian forces will have enough tanks and armored fighting vehicles for the next year and half of fighting in Ukraine at their current operational tempo.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 14, 2024

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Karolina Hird, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 14, 2024, 8:35pm ET

The pace of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast appears to have slowed over the past 24 hours, and the pattern of Russian offensive activity in this area is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are prioritizing the creation of a "buffer zone" in the international border area over a deeper penetration of Kharkiv Oblast. Several Ukrainian military officials reported on May 14 that they believe the situation in Kharkiv Oblast is slowly stabilizing — Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on May 14 that the situation in Kharkiv Oblast began stabilizing on the night of May 13 into May 14 as additional Ukrainian units deployed to the area and began defending against Russian advances. [1] The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn noted that Ukrainian forces have begun to "clear" Vovchansk by targeting visible Russian assault groups in the settlement. [2] Several Russian and Ukrainian sources also reported that Russian forces are using new tactics in this direction — using smaller assault groups of no more than five people to penetrate Ukrainian positions before merging with other small assault groups to unite into a larger strike group. [3] Drone footage purportedly from Vovchansk shows Russian foot mobile infantry operating within the settlement in small squad-sized assault groups, consistent with Ukrainian reports. [4]

The use of small assault groups, however, may be contributing to higher Russian manpower and materiel losses and slowing the overall pace of the Russian offensive in this direction. One Russian military commentator, who previously served as a "Storm-Z" unit instructor, complained that footage of small Russian assault groups is indicative of poor training and preparation, not an effective new tactic. [5] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets noted that growing Russian losses in this direction are leading to a decrease in the overall pace of offensive operations. [6] Ukrainian Chief of the General Staff Major General Anatoliy Barhylevych suggested that Russian forces have lost up to 1,740 soldiers in this direction over just the past day, which would be a very high rate of losses. [7] ISW cannot independently confirm this number, but the purported loss rate may be consistent with the generally slower rate of offensive operations observed on May 14. If the pace of Russian operations

remains relatively lower, Russian forces will likely focus on consolidating new positions and building out a lateral salient in Kharkiv Oblast by merging the Lyptsi and Vovchansk efforts and creating a "buffer zone" in the border area, as opposed to pushing further into the oblast, as ISW has previously assessed.[8]

Russian President Vladimir Putin's candidate for Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov outlined his and Putin's intended priorities for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) during a speech to the Russian Federation Council on May 14. Belousov stated that Putin has set two tasks for a Belousov-led Russian MoD – ensuring the full integration of the Russian military's economy into the general Russian economy and making the Russian MoD as open to innovation as possible. [9] Belousov stated that the Russian MoD's "most pressing issue" is equipping and supplying the Russian military with modern equipment, ammunition, missiles, communications equipment, drones, and electronic warfare (EW) systems. Belousov stated that his other top priorities are the implementation of the 2025 state defense order, the Russian MoD's annual request for new weapons and equipment from the Russian defense industry, and recruitment efforts, but noted that there is no need to discuss "emergency measures" such as a partial or general mobilization of Russian citizens. Belousov noted that the Russian MoD must optimize its spending and gain greater control over the Russian defense industry. Belousov's identified priorities are largely consistent with ISW's assessment that Belousov's appointment indicates that Putin is taking significant steps towards mobilizing the Russian economy and defense industry to support a protracted war effort in Ukraine and possibly prepare for a future confrontation with NATO.[10]

Russian authorities detained Russian Deputy Defense Minister and Russian MoD Main Personnel Directorate Head Lieutenant General Yuri Kuznetsov on May 13 on charges of accepting large-scale bribes. The Russian Investigative Committee and Russian media reported on May 14 that the Russian 235th Garrison Military Court detained Kuznetsov on suspicion of accepting a large bribe in the period 2021-2023 while serving as the head of the Russian General Staff's 8th Directorate, which is in charge of the protection of state secrets.[11] The Russian Investigative Committee reported that authorities raided Kuznetsov's home and discovered over 100 million rubles (about \$1 million) worth of cash, including foreign currency, and luxury items. Moscow's Basmanny Raion Court also detained Russian businessman Lev Martirosyan as part of Kuznetsov's case. [12] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported that Martirosyan bribed Kuznetsov with a total of 30.5 million rubles (\$333,935) to help Martirosyan's hotel companies win government contracts. [13] *Kommersant* reported that the same Investigative Committee department is investigating Kuznetsov's and detained Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov's cases and that the Investigative Committee is forming a special team to investigate similar cases involving high-ranking military personnel. Russian authorities detained Ivanov on April 24 on charges of accepting bribes. [14] Ongoing speculation about further changes within the Russian military and political leadership prompted Russian sources to speculate about the possible return of disgraced Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin to Russian President Vladimir Putin's favor, but Russian sources concluded that insider reports that Surovikin is in Moscow are inaccurate.[15]

Putin appointed former Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin and former Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev as his presidential assistants on May 14, further re-balancing his ministerial cabinet for his fifth term.[16] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov noted that Dyumin will oversee issues regarding the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), State Council, and sports policy, while Patrushev will oversee the strategic development of the Russian shipbuilding industry as well as "other areas, perhaps." [17] Russian presidential assistants typically help the Russian president in the execution of their powers, including by preparing proposals for presidential work and by participating in official meetings alongside the president.[18] Presidential assistants may perform other tasks as the president orders. Dyumin's appointment as Putin's assistant on DIB issues is consistent with Putin's apparent effort to restructure the Russian economy for a protracted war — Dyumin generally has a positive reputation amongst Russian commentators and is seen as a solid and effective professional, and Putin likely is hoping to leverage Dyumin's good reputation to manage his own.[19]

Russian commentators received the news of Patrushev's new position less certainly, however. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza*, citing sources close to the Kremlin, stated that its sources were "stunned" when they saw that Putin had removed Patrushev from the Security Council, and even more "shocked" that his new position is to be Putin's assistant on shipbuilding.[20] Putin may have moved Patrushev to this new position in order to rebalance the *siloviki*-run power vertical that exists within the Russian security services, as ISW previously reported Putin tends to do with powerful *siloviki*. [21] Patrushev is reportedly a close Putin ally, the individual personally responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Putin's personal diplomat who frequently conducted diplomatic trips on Putin's behalf, according to Western reporting.[22] Putin can

continue to use Patrushev's connections and experience even if Patrushev is nominally acting as an expert on "shipbuilding" strategy. The new position is nevertheless an obvious demotion.

The Georgian parliament passed Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" bill in its third and final reading on May 14, amid continued protests against the bill in Tbilisi. The Georgian parliament passed the bill in an 84 to 30 vote, after which it will go to Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili to for final signature.[23] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Georgian service reported that members of the European Socialist party and the People's Force party, a breakaway party from the ruling Georgian Dream, supported the bill alongside Georgian Dream members. [24] Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili previously stated that she intended to veto the bill, although RFE/RL's Georgian service noted that Georgian Dream has enough votes to override her veto.[25] Zurabishvili also proposed postponing the law's entry into force until November 1, after the October 26 Georgian parliamentary elections.[26] Georgian opposition figures and Western officials have expressed concern that the Georgian government could also utilize the bill to target and justify domestic repression and that its passage could block Georgia's path to joining the European Union (EU).[27] US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien previously met with senior Georgian officials and opposition members in Tbilisi on April 14. O'Brien stated that Georgian Dream party founder and former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili refused to meet with him because Ivanishvili claimed that the US had "de facto" sanctioned him, which O'Brien stated was false.[28] ISW has recently observed Ivanishvili and the Georgian State Security Service (SUS) intensifying their use of established Kremlin information operations and increasing rhetorical alignment with Russia against the West.[29] Georgian Dream actors likely intend to purposefully derail long-term Georgian efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration, which plays into continued Russian hybrid operations to divide, destabilize, and weaken Georgia.[30]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the United States is interested in a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine during a visit to Kyiv on May 14. Blinken stated during a speech in Kyiv that more than 32 NATO states are negotiating 10-year bilateral security commitments with Ukraine, including nine states with completed agreements.[31] Blinken also reiterated the US commitment to supporting Ukraine's military and industrial efforts. Blinken met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on May 14 and is expected to meet with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on May 15.[32] Zelensky and Blinken discussed the importance of newly arrived US security assistance in helping Ukrainian forces repel Russian attacks along the frontline and long-term security and economic support for Ukraine.

Likely Ukrainian actors conducted a strike against a Russian railway line in Volgograd Oblast on May 14. Geolocated footage published on May 14 purportedly shows the aftermath of a likely Ukrainian drone strike against a train in Samofalovka.[33] The train was allegedly transporting fuel. [34] Volga Railway's Press Service stated that "unauthorized persons" derailed several cars of a freight train, and unspecified Russian operational services reported that the derailment and subsequent fire damaged almost 300 meters of railway tracks.[35]

Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur clarified that Estonia is not currently considering sending its forces to deep rear areas in Ukraine for non-combat roles.[36] Pevkur stated on May 14 that previous discussions about possibly sending troops to deep rear areas of Ukraine have not gained traction in either Estonia or the European Union (EU) and noted that Estonia would not take such a measure alone. *Breaking Defense* reported on May 13 that National Security Advisor to the Estonian President, Madis Roll, stated that the Estonian government is "seriously" considering sending Estonian troops to western Ukraine to take over non-combat roles in the rear from Ukrainian troops, allowing Ukrainian forces to deploy to frontline areas.[37] Roll clarified to *Breaking Defense* on May 14 that the discussion of sending Estonian forces to Ukraine in non-combat roles is "not dead" and "ongoing in Estonia in general."^[38]

Key Takeaways:

- The pace of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast appears to have slowed over the past 24 hours, and the pattern of Russian offensive activity in this area is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are prioritizing the creation of a "buffer zone" in the international border area over a deeper penetration of Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's candidate for Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov outlined his and Putin's intended priorities for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) during a speech to the Russian Federation Council on May 14.
- Russian authorities detained Russian Deputy Defense Minister and Russian MoD Main Personnel Directorate Head Lieutenant General Yuri Kuznetsov on May 13 on charges of accepting large-scale bribes.

- Putin appointed former Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin and former Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev as his presidential assistants on May 14, further rebalancing his ministerial cabinet for his fifth term.
- The Georgian parliament passed Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" bill in its third and final reading on May 14, amid continued protests against the bill in Tbilisi.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the US is interested in a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine during a visit to Kyiv on May 14.
- Likely Ukrainian actors conducted a strike against a Russian railway line in Volgograd Oblast on May 14.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Lyptsi, Vovchansk, Svatove, Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and Krynyk.
- The Russian MoD is reportedly coercing Russian citizens and migrants into Russian military service through false job opportunities, likely as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Ukrainian officials continue efforts to return forcibly deported Ukrainian children to Ukrainian-controlled territory from Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 13, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 13, 2024, 8:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:45pm ET on May 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces continued to make tactically significant advances north and northeast of Kharkiv City on May 13 and currently appear to be prioritizing the rapid establishment of a "buffer zone" along the international border over setting conditions for deeper penetrations into northern Kharkiv Oblast. Geolocated footage published on May 13 shows that Russian forces have advanced into Hlyboke (north of Lyptsi) and raised a flag in the center of the village, but Russian sources claimed that Russian forces have not yet seized the entirety of Hlyboke and advanced west of the settlement along the west (left) bank of the Kharkiv River.^[1] Additional geolocated footage shows that Russian forces advanced southwest of Oliinykove (northeast of Lyptsi) and north of Lukyantsi (northeast of Lyptsi and southeast of Oliinykove).^[2] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces achieved unspecified tactical success near Lukyantsi.^[3] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces entered Lukyantsi, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.^[4] Russian forces also continued attacking in the Lyptsi direction near Pylna (northeast of Lyptsi and Oliinykove), and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Hlyboke.^[5]

Geolocated footage published on May 12 shows that Russian forces seized the Vovchansk Meat Processing Plant in northern Vovchansk, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also captured a shoe factory in northern Vovchansk on the morning of May 13 and advanced into central Vovchansk up to the northern (right) bank of the Vovcha River by the evening.^[6] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are also clearing Starytsya and Buhruvatka (both west of Vovchansk on the C-210817 road) but that Russian forces do not control the settlements, and also advanced in a forest area further south of Ohirtseve (northwest of Vovchansk).^[7] Russian forces also attacked on the Izbytske-Starytsya-Buhruvatka line west of Vovchansk and near Tykhe (east of Vovchansk), where the Russian MoD also reported Ukrainian counterattacks.^[8] Russian sources claimed that fighting continued between the Lyptsi and Vovchansk salients near Zelene (on the international border between Lyptsi and Vovchansk) and that Ukrainian forces partially withdrew from Ternova (immediately southeast of Zelene).^[9]

Russian forces' relatively rapid rate of advances in Vovchansk and their reported destruction of several bridges across key waterways within the settlement suggest that Russian forces are prioritizing the creation of a "buffer zone" over a deeper penetration, as ISW previously assessed they would.^[10] ISW has not yet observed claims or confirmation that Russian forces have crossed to the southern (left) bank of the Vovcha River in Vovchansk or its immediate environs. Russian forces notably conducted strikes against bridges over the Vovcha River immediately west and east of Vovchansk on May 12 and began targeting bridges over the river and logistics lines in Vovchansk itself on May 13, reportedly only leaving Ukrainian forces with two usable bridges over the Vovcha in Vovchansk.^[11] It is unclear why Russian forces would largely target bridges they would need to cross and ensure stable logistics across the Vovcha River for offensive operations deeper into

northern Kharkiv Oblast, so these strikes suggest that Russian forces may be prioritizing immediate gains in an unfortified area of northern Ukraine. Russian forces are also reportedly fielding armor in this area -- Russian sources reported that Russian forces conducted a mechanized attack with an unspecified number of tanks against Vovchansk on the night of May 12 and continued armored attacks during the day on May 13.[12] The deployment of armored assets in this area suggests that Russian forces are seeking to make rapid gains, but they do not appear to be setting conditions at this time for such gains to be on the southern side of the Vovcha River deeper into northern Kharkiv Oblast. These indicators collectively suggest that Russian forces are likely trying to create the promised "buffer zone" in the border area instead of pursuing deeper gains into Kharkiv Oblast or towards Kharkiv City.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin officials have frequently suggested that Russia establish a "demilitarized buffer zone" in occupied Ukraine to protect Russian territory from Ukrainian strikes, and Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov directly connected this buffer zone with intensified Russian offensive operations south of Belgorod Oblast on May 13.[13] Ukrainian and Western officials have also recently stated that Russian forces intend to establish a 10-kilometer buffer zone in Kharkiv Oblast, and ISW has recently noted that this buffer zone would simultaneously bring Russian forces within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City and remove major Russian logistics hubs from Ukrainian tube artillery range.[14] A Ukrainian battlefield commander recently expressed concern that Ukrainian fortifications in northern Kharkiv Oblast are not along the immediate international border area, enabling Russian forces' quick and relatively shallow advance.[15] More senior Ukrainian commanders have recently stated that Ukrainian forces have established a multi-layered defense-in-depth deeper in the oblast, which is congruent with the other battlefield commanders' reports.[16] The current pace of Russian advances on this axis is not necessarily indicative of the further offensive capabilities of the Russian forces conducting the offensive operations, although Russia reportedly retains considerable reserves available to exploit initial successes on this axis.

Newly appointed Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu participated in his first Security Council meeting as secretary on May 13, amid continued reports that Russian President Vladimir Putin is focusing on mobilizing the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to support a protracted war in Ukraine.[17] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov clarified that Shoigu will also be a "curator" of the Russian Military-Industrial Commission but will not lead it.[18] Russian opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported on May 13, citing its sources in the Russian government and presidential administration, that Shoigu's alleged criticisms of Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec General Director Sergei Chemezov for failing to provide a sufficient number of modern weapons to the Russian military for the past several months contributed to Shoigu's removal from the Russian MoD.[19] This claim further emphasizes that Putin is focused on improving the Russian DIB's capacity and ability to modernize and produce new technologies. [20] Several Russian milbloggers expressed hope that Shoigu's removal as defense minister and Andrei Belousov's appointment will improve the bureaucratic issues within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian DIB's efficiency.[21] Russian milbloggers also largely attempted to alleviate concerns that Belousov's lack of military experience would hinder his ability to effectively serve as defense minister and portrayed him as a competent manager who can root out corruption. [22] Belousov's lack of military experience is not anomalous in the context of Putin's ministerial management, and Shoigu also lacked military experience before becoming defense minister.[23] Putin has always appointed a civilian defense minister since firing Boris Yeltsin-appointed Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeyev in 2001.[24]

Putin's decision to remove Shoigu from the Russian MoD appears to have also opened the door for the departure of certain Shoigu affiliates from the MoD, likely one of the intended effects of Putin's recent cabinet reshuffles. Several Russian milbloggers and insider sources claimed on May 13 that two deputy defense ministers—Ruslan Tsalikov and Alexey Krivoruchko—submitted their resignations to Shoigu a week before Putin removed Shoigu as defense minister. [25] Russian milbloggers claimed that Tsalikov was "Shoigu's right-hand man" for many years and oversaw troop support and the Russian MoD's department on information policy and information warfare.[26] Krivoruchko is also reportedly close with Shoigu and oversaw military-technical support, weapons development, special equipment, and the implementation of state defense orders. [27] Russian sources claimed that both Tsalikov and Krivoruchko were embroiled in corruption scandals, and one Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger noted that frontline troops directly suffered as a result of their corrupt practices.[28] Russian insider sources claimed that Russian authorities questioned Tsalikov over possible corruption charges in late April, and suggested at the time that Tsalikov would be forced into retirement.[29] Russian authorities recently removed former Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov, also a reported close Shoigu ally, from his position on corruption charges.[30] Tsalikov and Krivoruchko may have resigned in hope of receiving new positions outside of the MoD in order to avoid criminal prosecution on charges similar to Ivanov's charges. Kremlin-awarded milblogger suggested that Tsalikov will also take a new role in the Russian Security Council

following Shoigu.[31] Russian insider sources speculated that Belousov, as new defense minister, will only want to leave a maximum of two to three officials affiliated with Shoigu in the Russian MoD, suggesting that more Shoigu affiliates may still resign or be fired in the coming weeks.[32] One Russian milblogger speculated that Shoigu and his affiliates were part of the alleged "pro-China" party in the Russian MoD and suggested that other MoD officials associated with Russia's China policy will be removed or resign alongside Shoigu, Ivanov, and others, although ISW cannot verify these speculations.[33] Putin likely used the constitutionally mandated ministerial resignations following his inauguration and subsequent nomination of new senior officials as a convenient moment to dismiss ineffective officials. Putin likely assessed that Shoigu's constitutionally mandated resignation, almost a year after deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion to remove Shoigu and Russian Chief of the Army General Staff Valery Gerasimov from power, was the appropriate time to remove Shoigu from the Russian MoD without appearing to give in to Prigozhin's demands.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful missile strikes against a Russian air defense base in occupied Crimea and successful drone strikes against Russian energy infrastructure in Russia. Russian opposition news outlet *Astra* reported, citing a source in the Crimean occupation Ministry of Emergency Services, that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian air defense base of the 3rd Radio Engineering Regiment (Russian Aerospace Forces' [VKS] radio engineering troops) on Mount Ai-Petri in occupied Crimea on May 13, likely with several Storm Shadow missiles.[34] *Astra* reported that the strike killed an unspecified number of Russian personnel and likely the commander of the 3rd Radio Engineering Regiment. Ukrainian outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported on May 13 that one of its sources in the Ukrainian military confirmed the Mount Ai-Petri strike.[35] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces shot down four Storm Shadow missiles and seven drones over Crimea.[36] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported on May 13 that its sources in Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) stated that the SBU conducted a drone strike against the Oskolneftesnabzheniye oil depot near Stary Oskol, Belgorod Oblast, and the Yeletskaya electrical substation in Lipetsk Oblast, which supplies traction substations to Russian Railways, the Stanovaya oil pumping station, and transit between Lipetsk, Oryol, and Bryansk oblasts' power systems.[37] Lipetsk Oblast Governor Igor Artamonov claimed that Russian forces suppressed drones in Lipetsk Oblast and stated that a fire occurred at an electrical substation, presumably due to one of the Ukrainian drones.[38]

***Breaking Defense* reported on May 13 that Estonia may be considering sending its troops to Ukrainian rear areas in order to free up Ukrainian troops for redeployment to more critical areas of the theater.[39]** National Security Advisor to the Estonian President, Madis Roll, told *Breaking Defense* that the Estonian government is "seriously" considering sending Estonian troops to western Ukraine to take over non-combat roles in the rear from Ukrainian troops, allowing Ukrainian forces to deploy to frontline areas. Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė noted on May 8 that the Lithuanian government has granted permission for Lithuanian troops to serve in similar non-combat rear area training roles in the future.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces continued to make tactically significant advances north and northeast of Kharkiv City on May 13 and currently appear to be prioritizing the rapid establishment of a "buffer zone" along the international border over setting conditions for deeper penetrations into northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces' relatively rapid rate of advances in Vovchansk and their reported destruction of several bridges across key waterways within the settlement suggest that Russian forces are prioritizing the creation of a "buffer zone" over a deeper penetration, as ISW previously assessed they would.
- Newly appointed Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu participated in his first Security Council meeting as secretary on May 13, amid continued reports that Russian President Vladimir Putin is focusing on mobilizing the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to support a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Putin's decision to remove Shoigu from the Russian MoD appears to have also opened the door for the departure of certain Shoigu affiliates from the MoD, likely one of the intended effects of Putin's recent cabinet reshuffles.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful missile strikes against a Russian air defense base in occupied Crimea and successful drone strikes against Russian energy infrastructure in Russia.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Lyptsi and Vovchansk in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- The Russian military may be intensifying efforts to recruit conscripts through the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF) as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 12, 2024

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

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

May 12, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on May 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin replaced Sergei Shoigu with Andrei Belousov as Russian Minister of Defense on May 12, moving Shoigu to the position of Security Council Secretary in place of Nikolai Patrushev. These high-level reshuffles following the Russian presidential election strongly suggest that Putin is taking significant steps towards mobilizing the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to support a protracted war in Ukraine and possibly prepare for a future confrontation with NATO. The Russian Federation Council posted a list of Putin's proposed cabinet ministers on May 12, which notably confirms that Putin has "proposed" Belousov as the new Minister of Defense (Putin's proposals are orders).^[1] Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told Kremlin newswire TASS that Shoigu, who has served as Russian defense minister since 2012 — will assume the position of Security Council Secretary and act as Putin's deputy on the Russian Military-Industrial Commission.^[2] Peskov also announced that Putin dismissed Patrushev from his former position as Security Council Secretary "due to [his] transfer to another job," which was not specified and that the Kremlin will announce his new role in the "near future."^[3] Peskov also noted that Army General Valery Gerasimov will remain Chief of the Russian General Staff, and a change in this position is not foreseen at this time.^[4] Gerasimov is also currently the overall theater commander for Russian forces in Ukraine.

Belousov's appointment to the position of Russian Defense Minister is a significant development in Putin's efforts to set full economic conditions for a protracted war. Belousov has no military experience and is an economist by trade — he served as Russian Minister of Economic Development from 2012–2013, following a career in economic analysis and forecasting between 1981 and 2006.^[5] His lack of military experience is not anomalous — Shoigu also lacked experience in uniform before he took over the Defense Ministry.^[6] Belousov then served as First Deputy Prime Minister from 2020 until his new 2024 appointment.^[7] Belousov is also a known advocate for greater government involvement in the economy.^[8] Peskov announced Belousov's appointment to state newswire TASS on May 12 and explained that "it is very important to fit the economy of the security bloc [domestic security power vertical] into the country's economy," suggesting that the Kremlin intends for Belousov to integrate and streamline the DIB and industries affiliated with Russia's security and defense forces with wider domestic economic policy.^[9] Several Russian insider sources similarly responded to Belousov's new position and claimed that it shows that Putin has serious concerns over corruption levels and misuse of funds within the Russian military, conflicts between the military and the Russian DIB, and the perceived inefficacy of the Russian MoD as a whole.^[10] An unnamed Russian federal official told Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* that Belousov will work in his new role to "competently organize work and logistics processes, ensure the necessary production and supplies, orient the economy towards the 'special military operation,' and squeeze the technological maximum out of the defense industry."^[11] A prominent Kremlin-awarded milblogger noted that Belousov's new role "means the beginning of a large-scale audit and restructuring of all financial models" in the Russian MoD.^[12]

Belousov's nearly decade-long tenure as an economic minister in the Russian federal government and his more recent involvement managing various domestic DIB innovation and drone projects, prepare him well to lead the struggling Russian MoD apparatus. The Russian MoD under Shoigu struggled with allegations of high-level corruption and bureaucratic inertia, facing constant scathing critiques from Russian military commentators.^[13] Belousov has a stronger reputation for being an effective technocrat, and insider sources have claimed that he has a positive relationship with Putin.^[14] Belousov met with Putin in November 2023 to discuss DIB projects and technological cooperation and has spoken to Putin about issues with Russia's domestic drone production.^[15] Belousov also more recently highlighted a draft state order for 4.4 billion-rubles (roughly \$48 million) for the production of drones until 2030, as well as plans to financially support drone producers and train drone developers and operators.^[16] The focus on maximizing the technological innovation and output of the Russian DIB, particularly in the drone sphere, is likely to be extremely valuable to the Kremlin's war effort — the Kremlin has recently had to reckon with a gap between Russian drone production and contemporary battlefield realities.^[17] Belousov personally announced in January 2023 that Russia had finalized the "Unmanned Aircraft Systems" project, which

provides 696 billion rubles (about \$7 billion) for the production of 32,000 drones per year until 2030.

[18] Putin likely intends Belousov to use his experience in a civilian government position to bridge federal economic policies with the Russian MoD agenda, thereby more fully mobilizing the Russian DIB at a larger and longer-term scale and integrating it with domestic economic policy. This effort sets conditions for a fuller economic mobilization, suggesting that the Kremlin continues to prepare for a protracted war in Ukraine.

Shoigu's replacement of Patrushev as Security Council Secretary is in line with Putin's general pattern of quietly sidelining high-level security officials by granting them peripheral roles

within the Russian security sphere rather than simply firing them. The Russian Security Council is an advisory body that also plays a role in executing security-related policies and developing Russian strategic culture, making Shoigu's appointment as Security Council Secretary and de facto demotion from the prestigious post of Russian Defense Minister less humiliating.[19] Putin has removed Shoigu from the direct MoD chain of command but granted him continued influence in the security space. Shoigu has remained an important and loyal subordinate, and sometimes a scapegoat, and Putin likely benefits from maintaining Shoigu's leadership and experience in some official capacity. Shoigu's removal also follows two high-profile incidents — the removal of his reported ally Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on corruption charges and Putin's meeting with Shoigu's political adversary and Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin to discuss DIB updates, which were likely leading indicators of the Kremlin's preparations to remove Shoigu from his long-held position.[20]

Putin has previously similarly sidelined his failed generals by appointing them to peripheral security and defense related positions outside of the direct chain of command, sometimes allowing them to redeem themselves and return to Putin's favor as ISW has assessed.[21] Putin's removal of Patrushev from the Security Council is noteworthy, however, since several Western and Russian reports that Patrushev is a close personal ally of Putin—the *Wall Street Journal* alleged in December 2023 that Patrushev was the individual responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.[22] WSJ reported that Patrushev's 2008 appointment as Security Council Secretary was largely a formality and that Patrushev serves as de facto head of all Russian security services, making him the second most powerful person in Russia.[23] WSJ also reported that Patrushev acts as a "hybrid intelligence official and diplomat" and routinely pays visits to world leaders on Putin's behalf. ISW cannot yet confirm what Patrushev's new role will be but considering Patrushev's reported personal importance to Putin's regime stability and Putin's longtime tendency to balance Russian *siloviki* (strongmen with political influence) such as Patrushev within the power vertical, Patrushev's next position will be an important reflection of Putin's intent. The Kremlin may establish a new role or office for Patrushev to lead, such as establishing a higher-ranking position to manage the *siloviki* faction.

Aside from Patrushev's dismissal, Putin largely reappointed the heads of core Russian security services, suggesting that he maintains a core cadre of loyal *siloviki*. Putin reappointed Vladimir Kolokoltsev as Minister of Internal Affairs, Sergei Naryshkin as Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Alexander Bortnikov as Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and Viktor Zolotov as Director of Rosgvardia.[24] ISW previously assessed that Russian security services and affiliated *siloviki*, particularly Bortnikov, were key constituencies for Putin's election to his fifth term, and Putin has relied heavily on the work of the aforementioned security agencies to maintain regime stability, particularly following the failed Wagner Group rebellion.[25] Kolokolstev has been instrumental in coordinating the Kremlin's migrant policy (which has been especially relevant in the aftermath of the March 22 IS attack on Crocus City Hall); Naryshkin has been an important player in establishing information conditions and propagating justifications for the war; Putin has personally praised Bortnikov and the FSB for protecting Russian sovereignty; and Zolotov has spearheaded efforts to absorb former Wagner Group fighters into Rosgvardia.[26] These *siloviki* form the backbone of Putin's core cabinet, and their reappointment suggests that Putin will continue to rely on, and empower them, into his next term.

Russian offensive efforts to seize Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City) are in large part a consequence of the tacit Western policy that Ukrainian forces cannot use Western-provided systems to strike legitimate military targets within Russia. Russian forces appear to be attempting to encircle Vovchansk as Russian forces approach city itself via Buhruvatka, Starytsya, and Izbytske to the west along the C-210817 road and via Vovchansky Khutory to the east along the O-210825 road. [27] The Russian seizure of any of these settlements would cut these Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Vovchansk and make the remaining GLOCs (T-2104 highway) increasingly crucial to the city's defense. Russian forces have also increasingly targeted bridges across nearby water features to isolate the Ukrainian defense of Vovchansk from other areas.[28] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets assessed that Vovchansk is the main Russian effort in the northern Kharkiv Oblast direction and that Russian forces intend to bypass Vovchansk itself from the southwest and south.[29] Mashovets noted that Vovchansk's proximity to the international border

affords Russian forces "many opportunities," including allowing Russian forces to conduct operations with limited forces and means to achieve a specific result; provides Russian forces with a "small shoulder of delivery" to allow stable control and fire support without moving their artillery; and allows for quick fuel and weapons deliveries to the frontline.

Russian forces are reaping the benefits of the West's long-term restriction on Ukraine using Western-provided weapons to strike legitimate military targets on Russian territory — territory that Russian forces now depend on to sustain their offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Western officials have prohibited Ukraine from using Western-supplied weapons to strike targets on Russian territory, and Ukrainian officials have repeatedly stated their adherence to this condition.[30] UK Foreign Minister David Cameron only recently greenlit Ukrainian forces to use UK-provided weapons to strike targets in Russian territory, but this is insufficient for Ukraine's interdiction needs in Russian territory and came too late to allow Ukrainian forces to inhibit Russia's ability to concentrate forces along the international border.[31] Ukrainian forces have previously used US-provided HIMARS to devastating effect, particularly in forcing Russian forces to withdraw from the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast in November 2022 and continue to use HIMARS and other US- and Western-provided weapons to strike Russian force concentrations in rear and deep rear areas in occupied Ukraine.[32] Ukrainian forces regularly conduct drone strikes against infrastructure and airfields in Russia, but these lack the same interdiction effects that Ukrainian forces now need to generate to undermine the Russian offensive operations.[33] Ukrainian forces would greatly benefit from being able to use advanced long-range weapons systems to disrupt Russian logistics nodes and routes that are currently supplying the Kharkiv offensive but must instead rely on their limited and depleted stock of indigenous weapons.

Kremlin information operations encouraging Western self-deterrence likely aimed to allow Russian forces to build up and launch offensive operations without the threat of Ukrainian strikes against military and logistics assets. Russian President Vladimir Putin, senior Kremlin officials, and pro-Kremlin mouthpieces have regularly threatened Western states and accused them of "provocations" for continuing to provide military assistance to Ukraine.[34] Kremlin mouthpieces have maintained this rhetorical line even after the passage of a \$61 billion dollar US military assistance package to Ukraine in late April, likely in support of an effort to prevent Ukrainian forces from using these weapons to degrade Russia's various ongoing offensive efforts.[35] The Kremlin will likely continue to leverage this information operation as part of its ongoing reflexive control campaign to inhibit Ukraine's ability to use all its available weapons to defend against the current Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast, forcing Ukraine to allocate other resources to a less effective defense and creating opportunities for Russian forces on other sectors of the front to exploit.[36]

Ukrainian forces continue to conduct repeat strikes on Russian oil and defense industrial infrastructure, prompting Russian milbloggers to complain about Russian forces' clear and continued inability to defend against these strikes. Ukrainian outlets *Ukrainska Pravda* and *RBK Ukraine* cited sources in Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) as stating that the GUR conducted strikes with Ukrainian-made drones against the Kaluganefteprodukt oil depot in Kaluga Oblast, the Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant in Lipetsk Oblast, and the Lukoil oil refinery in Volgograd Oblast overnight on May 11 to 12.[37] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces destroyed two drones over Lipetsk Oblast and one drone over Volgograd Oblast.[38] Volgograd Oblast Governor Andrey Bocharov claimed that a falling Ukrainian drone detonated and started a fire at the Volgograd oil refinery, and Lipetsk Oblast Governor Igor Artamonov claimed that Russian forces repelled a strike on infrastructure in the Lipetsk City industrial zone.[39] Russian opposition media published footage on May 12 of a fire at the Volgograd oil refinery.[40] ISW cannot independently verify the reported Ukrainian strikes against Kaluga and Lipetsk oblasts. Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Lukoil Volgograd oil refinery on the night of May 10 to 11 and on February 3, struck the Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant on the night of April 23 to 24 and February 23 to 24, and struck the Kaluganefteprodukt oil depot on April 28.[41]

A Russian millogger extensively complained about Russian forces' inability to repel Ukrainian strikes on Russian infrastructure, claiming that the Russian military command consistently underestimates Ukrainian capabilities and that Russian forces should learn from Ukraine's ability to adapt to Russian strike methods.[42] The millogger criticized the way Russian forces are trying to combat drone strikes with outdated Soviet-era weapons and without reconnaissance equipment. Another prominent, Kremlin-awarded millogger agreed with the first millogger, claiming that Russian forces lack an understanding of asymmetric warfare and that the Russian military command is slow to make changes.[43] The millogger also blamed the issue on Russian military commanders who submit dishonest reports to the senior Russian military command — a common complaint among Russian milbloggers.[44] The millogger claimed that Ukraine and the West are "more flexible, smarter, and more efficient" than Russian forces. The millogger oddly and preemptively noted that this statement

does not "discredit" the Russian military, which is a crime in Russia, but is instead an "adequate assessment" of the potential of the "enemy" that Russia is fighting.

Several German politicians from different political parties expressed support for using NATO air defense systems stationed in NATO member states to shoot down Russian drones over western Ukraine. German outlet *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) reported on May 11 that German Bundestag members Roderich Kiesewetter of the Christian Democrat Union Party, Agnieszka Brugger of the Green Party, and Marcus Faber of the Free Democratic Party expressed support for using NATO air defenses in countries bordering Ukraine, such as Poland and Romania, to intercept Russian drones over western Ukraine to allow Ukrainian air defenders to focus on protecting frontline areas.[45]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin replaced Sergei Shoigu with Andrei Belousov as Russian Minister of Defense on May 12, moving Shoigu to the position of Security Council Secretary in place of Nikolai Patrushev. These high-level reshuffles following the Russian presidential election strongly suggest that Putin is taking significant steps towards mobilizing the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB) to support a protracted war in Ukraine and possibly prepare for a future confrontation with NATO.
- Belousov's nearly decade-long tenure as an economic minister in the Russian federal government and his more recent involvement managing various domestic DIB innovation and drone projects, prepare him well to lead the struggling Russian MoD apparatus.
- Shoigu's replacement of Patrushev as Security Council Secretary is in line with Putin's general pattern of quietly sidelining high-level security officials by granting them peripheral roles within the Russian security sphere rather than simply firing them.
- Russian offensive efforts to seize Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City) are in large part a consequence of the tacit Western policy that Ukrainian forces cannot use Western-provided systems to strike legitimate military targets within Russia.
- Ukrainian forces continue to conduct repeat strikes on Russian oil and defense industrial infrastructure, prompting Russian milbloggers to complain about Russian forces' clear and continued inability to defend against these strikes.
- Several German politicians from different political parties expressed support for using NATO air defense systems stationed in NATO member states to shoot down Russian drones over western Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Lyptsi and Vovchansk in northern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin highlighted Russian forces' continued difficulty repelling Ukrainian drones on the frontline.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 11, 2024

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May 11, 2024, 8:20pm ET

Russian forces are conducting relatively limited offensive operations along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast and continued to make tactically significant gains in likely less defended areas. The reported sizes of the Russian elements committed to these limited operations and of the Russian force grouping deployed along the border in northeastern Ukraine indicate that Russian forces are not pursuing a large-scale operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City at this time. *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that Russian forces resumed offensive operations north of Lyptsi (north of Kharkiv City) on the morning of May 11 and focused on Hlyboke (immediately north of Lyptsi), where Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced to the outskirts of the settlement and later seized and cleared the settlement.

[1] NASA Fire Information for Resource Management (FIRMS) data captured on May 10 indicates that there has likely been heavy fighting near Hlyboke, and ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced up to the outskirts of the settlement.[2] Geolocated footage published on May 11 indicates that Russian forces have seized Morokhovets and Oliinykove (both northeast of Lypstsi), and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces seized these settlements.[3] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults west of Vovchansk (northeast of Kharkiv City) near Ohirtseve and Hatyshche, two settlements that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces seized as of May 11.[4] ISW assesses that Russian forces have

advanced at least to the outskirts of Ohirtseve and Hatyshche. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces also seized Strilecha, Pylna, and Borsivka (north to northwest of Lyptsi), claims that ISW assesses to be accurate, as well as Pletenivka (north of Vovchansk).[5] Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces seized Hoptivka and Kudiivka (both northwest of Lyptsi and southeast of Kozacha Lopan).[6] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced further towards Lukyantsi (northeast of Lyptsi), to the northern outskirts of Neskuchne (northeast of Lyptsi), and to the western outskirts of Staritsa and Izbytske (west of Vovchansk and east of Lyptsi).[7] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced from Hatyshche to the northwestern outskirts of Vovchansk, south from Pletenivka, and towards Tykhe (on Vovchansk's northeastern outskirts).[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces seized Tykhe and are currently trying to advance east of the settlement into Vovchansk.[9] ISW has not observed evidence that would support an assessment that these Russian claims correspond with Russian advances at this time.

Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn stated that Russian forces are trying to advance in areas that were already contested "grey zones," suggesting that Ukrainian forces did not maintain enduring positions in many of the small border settlements that Russian forces have seized or have reportedly seized.[10] It is unlikely that Ukrainian forces would have established serious strongholds and fortifications along a contested grey zone or enduring positions in small border settlements that Russian forces have long subjected to routine indirect fire. Russian forces will likely face more intense resistance when trying to advance near settlements further south of the border and into larger border settlements like Lyptsi and Vovchansk. The proximity of Kharkiv City to the border magnifies the significance of limited Russian tactical gains, however, as Russian forces do not have to advance much further to begin threatening Kharkiv City with routine shelling.[11]

Russian forces reportedly launched offensive operations along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast before they had completed bringing the Northern Grouping of Forces up to its reported planned end strength and have so far only committed a limited amount of combat power to offensive operations in the area. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on May 11 that Russian forces have committed up to two companies of the 7th Motorized Rifle Regiment (11th Army Corps [AC], Leningrad Military District [LMD]) and up to two battalions of the 18th Motorized Rifle Brigade (11th AC, LMD) to the ongoing operations in the Lyptsi and Vovchansk directions.[12] Ukrainian military observer Alexander Kovalenko stated on May 11 that elements of the 30th Motorized Rifle Regiment (72nd Motorized Rifle Division, 44th AC, LMD) and the 128th Motorized Rifle Brigade (44th AC, LMD) are also operating in the area.[13] Kovalenko stated that Russian forces have committed 2,000 personnel to the frontline along the border and have 1,500 to 2,000 personnel in immediate reserve.[14] Kovalenko stated that elements of the 44th AC are currently redeploying to Belgorod Oblast and that 3,750 additional Russian personnel from the 44th AC may arrive in the area within the next week.[15] Kovalenko stated that the Russian Northern Grouping of Forces has 30,000 to 35,000 personnel deployed along the entire border with Ukraine in Kursk, Bryansk, and Belgorod oblasts, a figure consistent with Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi's May 2 report that Russian forces had roughly 35,000 personnel deployed to the international border area.[16] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces intend to establish a grouping in the area that is between 50,000 and 75,000 personnel in size.[17] Ukrainian sources stated that Ukrainian forces have destroyed at least 20 Russian armored vehicles since Russian forces began offensive operations in the area on the morning of May 10, but Russian and Ukrainian sources continue to characterize Russian offensive operations along the border as consisting primarily of heavy infantry assaults.[18] **Russian forces will likely introduce reserves to intensify ongoing offensive operations in the area in the coming days, however, the Russian forces lack the necessary manpower required to attempt a large-scale offensive operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City according to all available reports.**

ISW continues to assess that the Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast likely aim to draw Ukrainian forces from other sectors of the front while allowing Russian forces to advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.[19] Russian forces are maintaining the tempo of their offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, near Chasiv Yar, and west of Avdiivka, and the Russian military command likely hopes that operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast could cause the Ukrainian military command to dedicate manpower and materiel to the defense north of Kharkiv City that it could otherwise dedicate to defending in these other directions. A Russian advance towards Kharkiv City that would allow Russian forces to conduct effective and routine indirect fire would give Russian forces the capability to inflict significant damage to Kharkiv City in order to prompt mass migration from the city and set conditions for a larger offensive operation at a later date.[20] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on May 10 that Russian forces are preparing to use long-range fire capabilities within the radius of Kharkiv City and that this indicates that the Russian military is considering a larger offensive operation against Kharkiv City.[21] Russian long-range fire may similarly intend to set conditions for a subsequent

offensive operation against Kharkiv City, and Kirby did not indicate that the White House believes that the Russian military is considering an immediate effort to seize Kharkiv City. **The seizure of Kharkiv City most certainly is a desired operational objective for Russian forces, but not one that the Russian military appears to be pursuing in the near term.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military command may be evaluating the risks, prospects, and timeline of offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast based on the assumption that Ukraine cannot and will not be able to liberate territory seized by Russian forces. Putin's and the Russian military command's calculus about the threat of Ukrainian territorial gains is likely shaping Russia's overall operational approach to seizing territory in Ukraine. The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) 2024 Annual Threat Assessment reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin "probably believes" that Russian forces have blunted Ukrainian efforts to retake significant territory and that US and Western support for Ukraine is "finite."^[22] Russia's intended timeline for its ongoing offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast remains unclear, but Russian forces may intend for their offensive operations in northern and northeastern Kharkiv Oblast to achieve their operational objectives long after summer 2024. The Russian military command may assume that Russian forces will be able to hold any limited gains they make in northern Kharkiv Oblast and other oblasts in perpetuity because they think that Ukrainian forces will be unable to launch successful counteroffensive efforts at any point in the future. Russian forces have made a series of tactically significant advances in Donetsk Oblast, particularly near Avdiivka, in recent months without Ukrainian counterattacks even momentarily pushing back Russian forces, and these recent unchallenged gains may be contributing to Putin's and the Russian military command's calculus.^[23] Putin may believe that Russian forces can continue to make opportunistic and unchallenged advances throughout the frontline over the next months, or even years, and ultimately force Ukraine to submit to total Russian subjugation. Ukrainian materiel constraints due to delays in Western security assistance have prevented Ukrainian forces from launching significant counterattacks against Russian offensive operations, but the arrival of US security assistance to the front at scale will likely allow Ukrainian forces to resume counterattacks that threaten Russian forces' ability to hold tactical gains.^[24]

The limited Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast suggest that the resumption of US security assistance has not changed Putin's calculus or that he launched the Kharkiv effort without reassessing the operation's fundamental assumptions about Ukrainian capabilities in light of the resumption of aid. Russian forces are currently attacking with a force grouping well below its reported intended end strength, a risky decision if Putin and the Russian military command believed that there was a threat for Ukrainian forces to roll back any tactical gains that this understrength force could make before Russian forces staffed it to end strength. Russian forces are currently advancing in several areas that do not provide immediate avenues of advance toward Kharkiv City or other immediate operationally significant objectives. Russian forces may be advancing in these areas because they believe that they can hold any seized ground indefinitely and use that ground to launch subsequent operations to more operationally significant goals. Russian forces may also believe that they can pursue gradual creeping advances across a wide swath of territory in northern and northeastern Kharkiv Oblast for an extended period of time without achieving relatively rapid operationally significant advances but in a way that would disadvantage any future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the area.

It is imperative for Ukrainian forces to disrupt any such Russian calculations as soon as possible through both limited and large-scale counteroffensive operations that liberate Russian-occupied territory as soon as conditions permit. ISW has routinely argued that Ukrainian forces should contest the theater-wide initiative as soon as possible because ceding the theater-wide initiative to Russia into 2025 affords Russian forces the ability to determine the timing, location, and intensity of Russian attacks and control the resources that Ukrainian forces expend during this protracted period. [25] Ukrainian forces will not have a chance to liberate territory if they remain on the defensive for the foreseeable future, and remaining entirely on the defensive will only encourage Putin to continue grinding offensive operations indefinitely seeking complete victory over time. ISW has repeatedly assessed that the consistent provision of key Western systems to Ukraine will play a critical role in Russia's prospects in 2024 and Ukraine's ability to conduct future counteroffensive operations and liberate Ukrainian territory from Russian occupation.^[26] The West must proactively and preemptively provide Ukrainian forces with the necessary equipment and weapons for their future counteroffensive operations if Ukrainian forces are to liberate significant swaths of occupied Ukraine and challenge Putin's belief that Ukraine is and will remain unable to do so.

The directions of Russian offensive operations in the international border area suggest that Russia may be attempting to create a "buffer zone" to protect Belgorod City, as Russian and Ukrainian officials have recently stated. Russian officials, including Russian Vladimir Putin, have recently called for the creation of a "buffer zone" to protect Russia's claimed and actual territories from

Ukrainian strikes.[27] Although this stated goal is actually unachievable as long as an independent Ukraine with any strike capabilities and will to fight remains, Kremlin officials have explicitly listed Kharkiv City as a part of a hypothesized limited demilitarized zone aimed at protecting Belgorod City. [28] Western and Ukrainian media reported on May 10 that Ukrainian military sources stated that Russian forces intend to establish a 10-kilometer deep buffer zone along the northern border in Kharkiv Oblast.[29] This objective likely is intended not only to push Ukrainian tube artillery out of range of Russian military logistics in Belgorod Oblast, but also to bring Russian tube artillery within striking distance of Kharkiv City. Russian forces are currently conducting offensive operations near Hoptivka (northwest of Lyptsi), and it is notable that Russian forces are also attempting to advance in areas that are separate from the area north of Lyptsi where Russian forces have already made tactically significant advances. Russian forces are also notably conducting offensive operations north and west of Vovchansk on both sides of the Siverskyi Donets River, which would pose a significant obstacle to Russian forces on the east side of the river should they attempt to advance southwestward to Kharkiv City. These various directions of Russian offensive operations further suggest that Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast are not aimed at an immediate large-scale offensive operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City. Russian forces may, however, be aiming to seize a wide swath of Ukrainian territory in the area immediately south of the border with Belgorod Oblast, likely including Vovchansk, to create a "buffer zone." Russian attempts to advance in an area that is relatively wide and not very deep along the border, especially in the area north of Hoptivka towards Kozacha Lopan, would further indicate that this is the Russian operational objective in the international border area.

Russian forces appear to be attempting to quickly isolate the battlespace east of the Siverskyi Donets River and seize Vovchansk, a direction of advance that Russian forces may believe could threaten the Ukrainian grouping defending in the Kupyansk direction. Geolocated footage published on May 11 shows a Russian strike destroying the Siverskyi Donets Dam bridge in Stary Saltiv (southwest of Vovchansk).[30] Footage published on May 11 purportedly shows Russian forces striking a bridge over the Vovcha River connecting Tykhe and Vovchanski Khutory (both west of Vovchansk).[31] Russian forces likely destroyed the bridges in an effort to isolate the Ukrainian forces operating on either side of the water features to prevent them from supporting Ukrainian forces defending against ongoing Russian attacks near Vovchansk. Russian attempts to destroy Ukrainian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) southwest and east of Vovchansk indicate that Russian forces will likely focus on seizing Vovchansk instead of attempting to bypass the settlement or expanding the front further east along the international border between Russia and Ukraine. Russian forces reportedly conducted at least 20 glide bomb strikes against Vovchansk on May 11 and are heavily focusing artillery, MLRS, and drone strikes on the settlement.[32] Russian forces may also intend to use offensive operations near Vovchansk to pressure the operational rear of Ukrainian forces defending against Russian attacks in the Kupyansk direction and draw away Ukrainian units defending in the Kupyansk area. A Russian foothold in Vovchansk does little to support a Russian effort to advance towards Kharkiv City, although Russian forces may imagine that a foothold in the settlement could allow Russian forces to launch offensive operations in the direction of Velykyi Burluk, a notable settlement in the rear of the Ukrainian grouping in the Kupyansk direction. Russian advances further south of Vovchansk would require long drives across open terrain, a capability that Russian forces have not shown in the past year and a half of fighting in Ukraine even during the period of most acute Ukrainian resource shortages.[33]

Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin reiterated a series of Kremlin narratives intended to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine and attempted to flatter Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military during an interview in honor of the 10th anniversary of the DNR's founding, likely in an attempt to curry favor in the Kremlin. Pushilin claimed during an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS on May 11 that Russia must seize Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Sumy, and a number of other unspecified cities during its invasion of Ukraine and "liberate" all of the "Russian people" who live in these supposedly "Russian" cities.[34] Pushilin strangely claimed that his list of cities encompasses more than "real historical Russian cities." Pushilin claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian forces to not conduct strikes against Ukraine's energy grid this past winter due to Putin's great concern for Ukrainian civilians but also claimed that Russian forces should intensify their strikes against bridges and transportation hubs in Ukraine.[35] Pushilin claimed that Putin is the "main curator" of Donbas and Novorossiya and is "immersed" in the details of everything happening in occupied Ukraine and that the pace of Russian forces operation to seize the remainder of Donetsk Oblast is "adequate" and is not "too fast or too slow."^[36]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against a Russian oil refinery in Volgograd Oblast on the night of May 10 to 11. Sources in Ukrainian special services told Ukrainian outlet *Suspiro* that Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted drone strikes against a Lukoil refinery in Volgograd Oblast and damaged the AVT-1 and AVT-6 oil processing facilities and control cables for the facility's air coolers.[37] Volgograd Oblast Governor Andrei

Bocharov claimed on May 11 that Russian forces intercepted a drone over Volgograd Oblast and that it did not damage any infrastructure.[38] Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) reportedly conducted a drone strike against the same oil refinery on February 3.[39]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin submitted proposals on the composition of the new Russian government to the State Duma on May 11.[40] Mishustin proposed that current Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev become a Deputy Prime Minister and that current Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit become the Minister of Transport.[41] Mishustin also proposed that current Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov leave his position as Minister of Industry and Trade and become First Deputy Prime Minister. Mishustin nominated current Kaliningrad Oblast Governor Anton Alikhanov to replace Manturov as Minister of Industry and Trade. Dmitry Patrushev is notably the son of Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, and this is the second recent case of nominations to high ranking positions for children of people in Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle after Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matvienko nominated Boris Kovalchuk – the son of Putin's "personal banker" Yuri Kovalchuk – as a candidate for the head of the Federation Council Accounts Chamber on May 10.[42]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are conducting relatively limited offensive operations along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast and continued to make tactically significant gains in likely less defended areas. The reported sizes of the Russian elements committed to these limited operations and of the Russian force grouping deployed along the border in northeastern Ukraine indicate that Russian forces are not pursuing a large-scale operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City at this time.
- Russian forces reportedly launched offensive operations along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast before they had completed bringing the Northern Grouping of Forces up to its reported planned end strength and have so far only committed a limited amount of combat power to offensive operations in the area.
- ISW continues to assess that the Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast likely aim to draw Ukrainian forces from other sectors of the front while allowing Russian forces to advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military command may be evaluating the risks, prospects, and timeline of offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast based on the assumption that Ukraine cannot and will not be able to liberate territory seized by Russian forces. Putin's and the Russian military command's calculus about the threat of Ukrainian territorial gains is likely shaping Russia's overall operational approach to seizing territory in Ukraine.
- The limited Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast suggest that the resumption of US security assistance has not changed Putin's calculus or that he launched the Kharkiv effort without reassessing the operation's fundamental assumptions about Ukrainian capabilities in light of the resumption of aid.
- The directions of Russian offensive operations in the international border area suggest that Russia may be attempting to create a "buffer zone" to protect Belgorod City, as Russian and Ukrainian officials have recently stated.
- Russian forces appear to be attempting to quickly isolate the battlespace east of the Siverskyi Donets River and seize Vovchansk, a direction of advance that Russian forces may believe could threaten the Ukrainian grouping defending in the Kupyansk direction.
- Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin reiterated a series of Kremlin narratives intended to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine and attempted to flatter Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military during an interview in honor of the 10th anniversary of the DNR's founding, likely in an attempt to curry favor in the Kremlin.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against a Russian oil refinery in Volgograd Oblast on the night of May 10 to 11.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin submitted proposals on the composition of the new Russian government to the State Duma on May 11.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast; near Svatove, Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City; in western Zaporizhia Oblast; and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to highlight frontline Russian units fighting in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 10, 2024

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May 10, 2024, 9:15pm ET

Russian forces began an offensive operation along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast on the morning of May 10 and made tactically significant gains. Russian forces are likely conducting the initial phase of an offensive operation north of Kharkiv City that has limited operational objectives but is meant to achieve the strategic effect of drawing Ukrainian manpower and materiel from other critical sectors of the front in eastern Ukraine. Russian forces have so far launched two limited efforts in the area, one north of Kharkiv City in the direction of Lyptsi and one northeast of Kharkiv City near Vovchansk. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian armored assault groups of an unspecified size attempted to break through Ukrainian defenses near Vovchansk early in the morning and that fighting continued in the area after Ukrainian forces repelled the Russian assaults.^[1] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces also began infantry-heavy assaults between Strilecha (north of Lyptsi) and Zelene (northeast of Lyptsi) on the night of May 9 to 10.^[2] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces significantly intensified airstrikes, shelling, and MLRS strikes against Ukrainian positions, logistics, and infrastructure ahead of and during Russian offensive operations in these areas.^[3]

Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov and Ukrainian outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that Russian forces seized Strilecha, Krasne, Pylna, and Borisivka (all north to northeast of Lyptsi), and Butusov reported that Russian forces have established a foothold in the area five kilometers deep and 10 kilometers wide.^[4] Geolocated footage confirms that Russian forces have seized Pylna and advanced south of the settlement, and Russian sources have also widely claimed that Russian forces seized Strilecha, Krasne, and Borisivka.^[5] NASA Fire Information for Resource Management (FIRMS) data from May 10 indicates that heavy fighting has likely occurred in and near these four settlements.^[6] ISW assesses with high confidence, based on credible Ukrainian reporting and the preponderance of evidence, that Russian forces have seized Strilecha, Krasne, and Borisivka, but has yet to observe geolocated confirmation of this assessment. Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces seized Zelene, Ohirtseve, and Hatyshche (both west of Vovchansk), although ISW has not observed confirmation of these claims.^[7] Reuters reported that a senior Ukrainian military source stated that Russian forces advanced at least one kilometer in depth near Vovchansk.^[8] ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced in the direction of Vovchansk but has not observed enough evidence to assess an approximate frontline trace in the immediate area. Ukrainian sources reported that fighting continued near Krasne, Morokhovets (northeast of Lyptsi), Oliynykove (northeast of Lyptsi), and Hatyshche later in the afternoon.^[9]

Russian forces will likely leverage their tactical foothold in northern Kharkiv Oblast in the coming days to intensify offensive operations and pursue the initial phase of an offensive effort likely intended to push back Ukrainian forces from the border with Belgorod Oblast and advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Russian forces have started "a new wave of offensive actions" in the Kharkiv direction, and Ukrainian officials have been warning about a Russian offensive effort in the direction of Kharkiv City in recent months.^[10] Available combat footage suggests that Russian forces committed relatively limited manpower and a limited number of armored vehicles to their initial assaults.^[11] Russian forces have been establishing the Northern Grouping of Forces along Ukraine's northern border with Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts and have reportedly concentrated between 35,000 and 50,000 personnel in the area.^[12] Russian and Ukrainian sources did not specify the Russian elements that launched the offensive operations along the border, but it is highly likely that Russian forces have reserves ready to commit to intensify their offensive operations north of Kharkiv City in the coming days. Western and Ukrainian media reported that Ukrainian military sources stated that Russian forces intend to establish a 10-kilometer buffer zone along the northern border in Kharkiv Oblast, a zone likely intended to push Ukrainian forces out of tube artillery range of Russian logistics in Belgorod Oblast and bring Russian forces within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.^[13] Russian forces are unlikely to deploy tube artillery right along the frontline, so Russian forces likely intend to advance closer to Kharkiv City than the 25-kilometer range of most Soviet tube artillery systems. Russian forces are currently approximately 30 kilometers from the outskirts of Kharkiv City, and a Russian advance to within 20 kilometers of the city would likely allow Russian forces to conduct routine indirect fire against Kharkiv City with tube artillery. Routine indirect fire, in combination with continued glide bomb and missile strikes, would likely be intended to set conditions for a larger offensive effort against Kharkiv City at a later date.

The limited efforts that Russian forces are currently conducting do not suggest that Russian forces are immediately pursuing a large-scale sweeping offensive operation to envelop, encircle, and seize Kharkiv City, however. Russian operations in the Vovchansk direction do not immediately support an advance towards Kharkiv City since Vovchansk is located on the eastern side of the Siverskyi Donets River and Pechenizkyi Reservoir. *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that Ukrainian

military sources are considering that Russian offensive actions near Vovchansk may be diversionary. [14] Russian offensive operations near Vovchansk may intend to draw defending Ukrainian units from the area north of Kharkiv City to the other side of the Siverskyi Donets River and Pechenizkyi Reservoir or may intend to draw Ukrainian elements currently defending against resumed Russian offensive operations in the Kupyansk area away from that line. Russian advances in the Vovchansk area could also allow Russian forces to pressure the operational rear of Ukrainian forces defending in the Kupyansk direction. The Russian effort in the Lyptsi direction could support a narrow frontal assault against Kharkiv City, although it is highly unlikely that the Russian military command, which has been improving its operational planning in recent months, would pursue such a vulnerable avenue of advance towards Kharkiv City.[15] Russian forces are likely conducting offensive operations in the Lyptsi area because it offers the most direct route to advance to within effective tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.

Russian offensive operations along the Kharkiv international border likely have the strategic objective of drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces to this axis to enable Russian advances in other areas of eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn stated that Russian forces are attempting to incite panic in Ukrainian forces to cause them to divert resources and manpower from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to Kharkiv Oblast. [16] Russian forces have sought to take advantage of opportunities to advance in multiple sectors of the frontline in eastern Ukraine due to Ukrainian manpower and materiel shortages in recent weeks, achieving tactical gains northwest and west of Avdiivka as well as intensifying efforts towards Chasiv Yar.[17] Resuming offensive efforts in northern Kharkiv Oblast and achieving even tactically significant gains could cause the Ukrainian military command to dedicate manpower and materiel to the defense north of Kharkiv City that it could otherwise dedicate to defending elsewhere. Ukrainian Commander in Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported on April 28 that Ukrainian forces deployed artillery and tank units to the "most threatened" areas in the Kharkiv direction, and the Ukrainian MoD reported on May 10 that Ukrainian forces have already deployed additional reserves to defend against the Russian offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast.[18] This Russian offensive effort likely aims to stretch Ukraine's limited resources and worsen Ukrainian manpower constraints by forcing Ukraine to respond to ongoing Russian offensive operations across a wider swath of territory in eastern Ukraine. The Russian military command likely hopes that this strategic effort to draw and fix Ukrainian forces in the Kharkiv direction will weaken the Ukrainian defense in aggregate and allow Russian forces to achieve a breakthrough in any area that becomes the most vulnerable. Russian forces will likely attempt to exploit this intended theater-wide effect to intensify efforts to expand the breach northwest of Avdiivka and push to seize Chasiv Yar, especially as Ukrainian forces continue to wait for US and other Western aid to reach the frontlines at scale.

ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will likely struggle to seize Kharkiv City should they aim to do so. A Russian effort to seize Kharkiv City would require long drives across open terrain on a scale that Russian forces have not conducted since the start of the full-scale invasion.[19] Some reported elements of the Russian Northern Grouping of Forces may not be highly combat-effective. Elements of the 6th Combined Arms Army (Leningrad Military District) are reportedly operating as part of the Russian Northern Grouping of Forces, but these forces failed to make significant tactical gains despite repeated mass infantry and mechanized assaults over a months-long offensive in the Kupyansk direction.[20] The Russian Northern Grouping of Forces likely also lacks the quantity of personnel required to conduct an operation as ambitious as the seizure of Kharkiv City successfully. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported in March 2024, citing a Kremlin source, that the Russian military assesses that it needs 300,000 additional personnel (roughly 60 percent of the approximately 510,000 personnel Russian forces currently have in Ukraine) in order to launch an operation to encircle Kharkiv City.[21] Ukrainian sources have indicated that Russian forces in the international border area are far below this quantity, however. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on May 2 that Russian forces have currently concentrated roughly 35,000 personnel in the international border area and plan to concentrate a total of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel in this area.[22] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on May 5 that the Russian military has gathered about 50,000 troops in the Northern Grouping of Forces in Kursk, Belgorod, and Bryansk oblasts, with 31,000 troops in Belgorod Oblast.[23] Russian forces have previously demonstrated an inability to conduct large-scale offensive operations in multiple directions simultaneously, and the Russian military does not appear to have established a "strategic reserve" on a scale that would be able to support two or more large-scale offensive operations in the near future.[24] A large-scale Russian effort to seize Kharkiv City would therefore likely require Russian forces to deprioritize other critical sectors of the front and redeploy a significant quantity of forces to the international border area, which Russian forces are highly unlikely to do given the Russian military's longtime objective of seizing the remainder of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

Russian forces likely decided to launch offensive operations along the international border area to take the best advantage of the relatively brief time left before Western aid arrives at the Ukrainian frontline at scale. Ukrainian officials have recently stated that Russian forces may plan to seize Kharkiv or Sumy cities in a Russian offensive effort in late May or early June 2024.[25] The Russian military command may have decided to begin offensive operations in the Kharkiv direction before this late May-June period in order to take advantage of the limited time window before Western military aid reaches Ukrainian frontline units in sufficient quantities to complicate Russian offensive capabilities. ISW has recently assessed that Russian forces are trying to take advantage of this closing window in order to pursue tactical gains throughout eastern Ukraine.[26]

Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk stated that the war in Ukraine will enter a critical phase in the next two months and commented on recent Russian advances around Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka.[27] Pavlyuk stated during an interview with the *Economist* published on May 10 that Russia is currently committing all its combat-ready materiel and troops to the frontline before substantial quantities of US military assistance reach frontline Ukrainian units. Pavlyuk reiterated Ukrainian assessments that Russia's summer offensive operations will likely focus on Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts and warned about the possibility of a large-scale Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts aimed at further stretching Ukraine's already taxed defensive lines.[28] Pavlyuk noted that he is working to stand up 10 new Ukrainian brigades ahead of the anticipated summer 2024 Russian offensive operation and noted that equipment, and not manpower, is the main bottleneck in Ukraine's defensive operations. Pavlyuk attributed recent Russian advances near Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka) to "insane" Russian pressure on Ukrainian positions, "overwhelming [Russian] air superiority," and a 20-to-one Russian artillery advantage in that area.[29] ISW has previously observed a report that Russian forces initially advanced near Ocheretyne when Russian forces exploited an alleged mistake during a tactical rotation of Ukrainian forces, a mistake that the Ukrainian brigade involved in the situation later denied having made, although ISW cannot confirm either report.[30] Russian forces may have broken through the gap left by Ukrainian forces rotating in and out of the defensive line by chance and were able to exploit the opportunity because of the advantageous location of their breakthrough and Russia's overwhelming air and artillery advantage in the area, as Pavlyuk highlighted. While ISW is unable to confirm whether Ukrainian forces did make a mistake during a rotation, tactical mistakes occur periodically on any battlefield, and the advantages Russian forces had resulting from Ukraine's manpower and materiel shortages made any mistake far more dangerous than it normally would be.

Pavlyuk argued during his interview that the possible future loss of Chasiv Yar will have no "decisive significance" for the Ukrainian war effort, which is consistent with ISW's running assessment that the Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would be operationally significant.[31] ISW uses the expression "operationally significant" to describe an advance that can alter the course of a campaign composed of multiple individual battles. ISW refers to advances that merely push the frontline back some distance without securing major objectives or significantly increasing the odds of securing major objectives as "tactically significant." The seizure of Chasiv Yar would shift the frontline further west and create a large and defensible Russian salient from which Russian forces could launch further offensive operations north, west, or south. A possible Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would not result in the immediate collapse of the Ukrainian eastern line but would change the configuration of the frontline to a degree that would set much more favorable conditions for future Russian offensive operations against Ukraine's belt of "fortress" cities, which runs from Slovyansk to Kostyantynivka and form the backbone of Ukraine's defense of Donbas.[32]

US President Joe Biden approved up to \$400 million worth of military assistance for Ukraine as part of the Presidential Drawdown Authority Fund on May 10.[33] The US Department of Defense reported that the assistance package will include: air defense missiles for Patriots and National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS); Stinger anti-aircraft missiles; equipment to integrate Western launchers, missiles, and radars with Ukrainian systems; HIMARS ammunition; 105mm and 155mm artillery rounds; Bradley infantry fighting vehicles; M113 armored personnel carriers; Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and At-4 anti-armor missiles; HARM missiles; and other equipment and weapons.[34]

Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike on the night of May 9 to 10 against an oil refinery in Kaluga Oblast that Ukrainian forces previously struck in March 2024. Ukrainian outlet *Suspiile* reported on May 10 that sources within Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that the GUR conducted a drone strike against an oil refinery in Kaluga Oblast and that a fire broke out at the facility.[35] Geolocated footage published on May 10 shows a fire at the Perviy Zavod Refinery in Dzerzhinsky Raion, Kaluga Oblast.[36] The Pervyi Zavod refinery is reportedly the largest petrochemical complex in Kaluga Oblast.[37] Kaluga Oblast Governor Vladislav Shapsha stated that a fire broke out overnight at an unspecified enterprise in Dzerzhinsky Raion following a

drone strike.[38] Ukrainian forces struck the Perviy Zavod oil refinery on the night of March 14 to 15. [39] Ukrainian forces conducted a second drone strike on an oil refinery in Ryazan Oblast on the night of April 30 to May 1 after first striking the facility in mid-March 2024.[40]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin is retaining his position in the Russian government for Russian President Vladimir Putin's new term of office, and there have been speculations but no confirmations of changes to Putin's cabinet. The Russian State Duma voted overwhelmingly in support of Mishustin's renomination as prime minister, and Putin signed the corresponding decree reappointing Mishustin on May 10.[41] Russian outlet *RBK*, citing three sources familiar with personnel consultations in the Kremlin, reported that Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov will retain his title as Deputy Prime Minister but will relinquish his post as Minister of Industry and Trade, and *RBK* reported that Kaliningrad Oblast Head Anton Alikhanov will take over this position.[42] Putin publicly embarrassed Manturov in January 2023, and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu heavily criticized Manturov on May 2, 2024, but *RBK*'s source stated that the new appointment is "logical and expected" as all the possible candidates for the Minister of Industry and Trade are "in one way or another, from Manturov's team."
[43] Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin stated that the Duma will consider appointments for deputy prime ministers and ministerial positions on May 14.[44]

Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matvienko announced on May 10 that she delivered a list of candidates to Putin for the head of the Federation Council Accounts Chamber, which notably includes Presidential Control Directorate Deputy Head Boris Kovalchuk.[45] Boris Kovalchuk is the son of Putin's "personal banker" Yuri Kovalchuk, who is often credited with being Putin's close confidant and influential ideologue, including reportedly being one of three Russians to convince Putin to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[46] Yuri Kovalchuk is also a close associate of Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergey Kiriyenko, whose own influence has expanded following the start of the full-scale invasion.[47] Putin only recently appointed Boris Kovalchuk to his post in the Presidential Control Directorate on March 15, before which Boris Kovalchuk headed the Russian energy company Inter RAO for 15 years.[48] The other two candidates for Federation Council Accounts Chamber head include Accounts Chamber Acting Head Galina Izotova, who has served in this position since the former head resigned in 2022 and served as deputy head since 2019, and Anatoly Artamonov, chairperson of the Federation Council Committee on Budget and Financial Markets.[49] Boris Kovalchuk is the only one of these three candidates to lack a doctorate in economics and extensive experience in the field.[50] Boris Kovalchuk's candidacy for a Federation Council post given his lack of experience and newness to the presidential administration is notable given Yuri Kovalchuk's closeness to Putin, indicating that Kovalchuk's favor with Putin may be increasing. Putin will consider Matvienko's list of candidates and choose one for the Federation Council to consider in the coming days.[51]

US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy John Plumb stated that US defense officials partnered with SpaceX to stop the Russian military's unauthorized use of Starlink internet terminals in frontline areas of Ukraine. Bloomberg reported on May 9 that Plumb warned that Russia will likely continue to look for ways to exploit Starlink and other commercial communications systems but stated that the US has found "good solutions" for Russian Starlink use in Ukraine.[52] Several Western media outlets reported in March 2024 that investigations indicated that Russian forces may be using Starlink terminals in Ukraine.[53]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces began an offensive operation along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast on the morning of May 10 and made tactically significant gains. Russian forces are likely conducting the initial phase of an offensive operation north of Kharkiv City that has limited operational objectives but is meant to achieve the strategic effect of drawing Ukrainian manpower and materiel from other critical sectors of the front in eastern Ukraine.
- Russian forces will likely leverage their tactical foothold in northern Kharkiv Oblast in the coming days to intensify offensive operations and pursue the initial phase of an offensive effort likely intended to push back Ukrainian forces from the border with Belgorod Oblast and advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.
- The limited efforts that Russian forces are currently conducting do not suggest that Russian forces are immediately pursuing a large-scale sweeping offensive operation to envelop, encircle, and seize Kharkiv City, however.
- Russian offensive operations along the Kharkiv international border likely have the strategic objective of drawing and fixing Ukrainian forces to this axis to enable Russian advances in other areas of eastern Ukraine.

- ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will likely struggle to seize Kharkiv City should they aim to do so.
- Russian forces likely decided to launch offensive operations along the international border area to take the best advantage of the relatively brief time left before Western aid arrives at the Ukrainian frontline at scale.
- Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk stated that the war in Ukraine will enter a critical phase in the next two months and commented on recent Russian advances around Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka.
- US President Joe Biden approved up to \$400 million worth of military assistance for Ukraine as part of the Presidential Drawdown Authority Fund on May 10.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike on the night of May 9 to 10 against an oil refinery in Kaluga Oblast that Ukrainian forces previously struck in March 2024.
- Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin is retaining his position in the Russian government for Russian President Vladimir Putin's new term of office, and there have been speculations but no confirmations of changes to Putin's cabinet.
- US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy John Plumb stated that US defense officials partnered with SpaceX to stop the Russian military's unauthorized use of Starlink internet terminals in frontline areas of Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Donetsk City and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian and Belarusian authorities continue to illegally deport Ukrainian citizens, including children, to Russia and Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 9, 2024

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

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

May 9, 2024, 7:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on May 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 Victory Day speech to relitigate his belief that the West is attempting to erase the Soviet Union's contributions to defeating Nazi Germany during the Great Patriotic War (Second World War), a grievance that is at the core of Russia's adversarial perceptions of the West. Putin claimed during the Victory Day parade, which is held to commemorate the Soviet Union's victory and sacrifices during the Second World War, that "they," referring to the West, are attempting to "distort" the truth about the Second World War and "demolish" the memory of Soviet heroism and sacrifice.^[1] Putin claimed that perceived Western efforts to rewrite the history of the Second World War and the West's supposed support of "Nazism" in Ukraine, another long-standing Kremlin narrative, are part of a wider Western effort to incite interethnic and interreligious conflict throughout the world. Putin claimed that while the West would like to forget the lessons of the Second World War, Russia remembers that the Soviet Union decided the "fate of humanity" during battles "from Murmansk to the Caucasus and Crimea." Putin similarly used his 2023 and 2022 Victory Day speeches to reiterate existing narratives about the West's war against Russia and absurdly to equate the threat of Nazi Germany with that of Ukraine.^[2] Putin's willingness to repeatedly re-emphasize imagined Western efforts to discount the Soviet Union's contribution in defeating Nazi Germany suggests that Putin wholeheartedly believes that this is a genuine threat to the Soviet Union's legacy, and by extension the modern Russian state.^[3] This belief is in line with Putin's repeated efforts to rewrite and rehabilitate the Soviet Union's aggression towards Poland, its brief alliance with Nazi Germany, and crimes committed against its own people before, during, and after the Second World War.^[4]

Putin simultaneously used his Victory Day speech to present a picture of Russia as a bastion in the fight against Nazism. Putin claimed that Russia has never belittled the contributions of the other Allied powers in the Second World War and highlighted the courage of Allied servicemen, resistance fighters, and the people of China who fought against Japan's aggression.^[5] Putin claimed that Russia will do everything possible to prevent a global conflict, but at the same time will not allow anyone to threaten the country. Putin framed Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine as a "difficult transitional period" that Russia must get through and as part of Russia's greater historical fight against Nazism.^[6] The Kremlin routinely invokes the mythos of the Second World War to generate domestic support for its invasion of Ukraine and frame its conquest of Ukraine as part of a wider existential conflict with the West.

[7] Putin's rhetorical efforts to frame Russia as both a victim of Nazi aggression and the leader of its imagined anti-Nazi coalition tread a thin line that Putin likely hopes will appeal to both his ultranationalist constituency and the wider Russian population.

Putin seized on a recent meeting with the commanders of several frontline Russian formations to portray himself as an informed and effective Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, aware of the intricacies of the frontline situation and involved in finding solutions to issues that plague Russian forces. Putin met with the commanders of the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet), 24th Spetsnaz Brigade (Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian General Staff [GRU]), and 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) on May 7, and the commanders made several requests of Putin based on their combat experience.[8] The Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) publicized the meeting on May 9, likely to capitalize on the emotions surrounding Victory Day. Putin responded to the 24th Spetsnaz Brigade commander's question about increasing Russia's domestic drone production and claimed that "modern means of armed struggle" are changing at a very high speed. Putin claimed that Russia must always be one step ahead of its enemies if it wants to be successful in combat but conceded that Russia does not always succeed in this because Russia is fighting against modernized, Western equipment in Ukraine, admitting that it is difficult for Russian servicemen to operate while Ukrainian drones are constantly flying overhead. Putin noted that increased and improved drone production is critical to the Russian war effort and stated that the Russian MoD and defense industry is working on the issue, but that it is not an easy task. Putin is likely engaging in such tactical-level details for reputational effect. Putin then interrupted the commander of the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade, who was attempting to ask about increasing domestic production of unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs), and claimed that he is aware that it was difficult for Russian forces to seize Berdychi (northwest of Avdiivka) but that Russian forces "finally got it." Putin appears to have seized on comments by both commanders to present himself as more in tune with the battlefield situation than his own commanders. Putin bragged about the seizure of a frontline settlement with a pre-war population of 267 as part of a Kremlin effort to oversell the seizure of tiny frontline settlements to the general Russian population who have no concept of where or how big these settlements are.

Putin also attempted to present the previously ordered expansion of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade into a division as his own extemporaneous problem-solving. The commander of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade asked Putin to consider reorganizing the brigade into several groupings due to the fact that the brigade is "overstaffed."^[9] The commander implausibly claimed that the brigade currently has over 11,000 troops (a brigade would normally have around 3,000 troops), to which Putin responded that the Russian military command will reorganize and expand the brigade into a division. Ukrainian forces have reportedly defeated and destroyed significant elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade in southern Ukraine several times during the war thus far, forcing the Russian military command to repeatedly reconstitute the formation.^[10] It is highly unlikely that the 810th is staffed by over 11,000 troops unless as part of a reformation into a division already underway, and Putin's seemingly spontaneous decision to reorganize the brigade into a division is likely part of the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) previously announced plan to reorganize seven motorized rifle brigades into motorized rifle divisions.^[11] Putin has previously attempted to present himself as an effective Supreme Commander-in-Chief by engaging in minute tactical undertakings, such as seemingly spontaneously granting Russian military personnel leave in the presence of Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov during a December 2023 meeting and during his December 2023 Direct Line.^[12] ISW assessed that the December 2023 interaction was likely staged in order to bolster Putin's reputation, and Putin's recent meeting with Russian commanders was likely also highly staged and publicized on May 9 to link Putin's involvement with tactical battlefield affairs to the reputations of Soviet military commanders during the Second World War.^[13]

Putin surrounded himself with a number of foreign officials at the Victory Day parade, likely in order to posture himself as an effective statesman capable of galvanizing an alternative coalition to the power structures of the collective West. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel, Guinea-Bissau President Umara Mokhtar Sissoco Embaló, and Laotian President Thongloun Sisoulith stood with Putin on the podium at the Victory Day parade.^[14] It is customary for Putin to invite foreign officials to Victory Day celebrations, although Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has decreased the number of willing participants. In 2023, for example, a number of heads of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) partners, including Lukashenko, Tokayev, Japarov, Rahmon, Berdimuhamedov, and Mirziyoyev, were present on the podium alongside Putin.^[15] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was notably absent after attending last year, as Pashinyan has recently engaged in a concerted effort to distance Armenia from the Russian sphere of influence.^[16] The presence of a tiny but relatively diverse set of heads of state from Central Asia, Southeast Asia, west Africa, and the Caribbean suggests that Putin is continuing to

cast himself as an effective diplomat at the helm of a coalition of Russia-friendly states that ideologically oppose, or do not see a place for themselves within, Western-led alliance systems and political-economic blocs.[17] Putin sees Russia at the center of his envisioned new "multipolar world" and is likely trying to align himself with foreign heads of state whom he sees as receptive to this vision for the international system.[18] Representatives from Iran, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were notably not on the podium alongside Putin, however, which may suggest that Putin desires to reach past the leading states Russia has explicitly affiliated itself with in order to strengthen the image of an internationally popular Russian-led multipolar world order.

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed that the Moldovan government is engaged in a Nazi-like "genocide" in Moldova — a notable inflection in Kremlin officials' rhetoric about Moldova that is likely meant set conditions for a Russian effort to secure control over Moldova and not just some of its regions. Zakharova gave a Victory Day interview to Kremlin newswire TASS in which she absurdly claimed that Moldovan President Maia Sandu and her administration are engaging in "eugenic" practices comparable to those of the Nazi Third Reich.[19] Zakharova focused heavily on the Moldovan government's policies towards Moldovan language, claiming that the Sandu government is replacing the Moldovan language with Romanian and that this constitutes "elements of genocide against an entire people." Zakharova claimed that Moldovan language, culture, and identity will remain after Sandu leaves office and that Sandu will leave "a dark spot in the history of Moldova," suggesting that the Kremlin expects a new administration that is unlike Sandu's Western-oriented government to come to power in the future. Zakharova notably did not lambast the Sandu government for its policies towards Russian speakers in Moldova as other Russian and pro-Kremlin Moldovan officials have done recently, focusing instead on the Moldovan language.[20] The Kremlin has repeatedly invoked its self-proclaimed need to protect Russia's "compatriots," particularly Russian speakers allegedly facing discrimination, to justify Russian aggression abroad, including in Ukraine and Moldova.[21] Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, have recently promoted the narrative that Russia is in an existential geopolitical conflict with an alleged modern Nazi movement that is purportedly prolific in the West. [22] ISW previously assessed that many people may not identify with Kremlin narratives about Russian "compatriots abroad" and that the Kremlin may have decided that claims of Western "neo-Nazism" may be more effective with a wider audience.[23] **Moldova's two pro-Russian regions, the autonomous region of Gagauzia and the breakaway republic of Transnistria, are home to large Russian speaking populations, and the Kremlin's shift from allegations about persecution of Russian speakers to that of Moldovan speakers indicates that the Kremlin is likely trying to justify future Russian aggression in all of Moldova.**

The leaders of the pro-Kremlin Moldovan Victory opposition electoral bloc attended the Victory Day parade in Moscow, further indicating that the Kremlin intends to use these actors to destabilize all of Moldova and attack Moldova's democracy and EU accession process. US-sanctioned Moldovan politician Ilan Shor, Governor of Gagauzia Yevgenia Gutsul, and US-sanctioned and close Shor affiliate Moldovan member of parliament Marina Tauber attended the May 9 Victory Day in Moscow reportedly at Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation.[24] Shor, Gutsul, and Tauber are the principal leaders of the recently created Moldovan Victory electoral bloc, which will reportedly run a candidate in the October 2024 Moldovan presidential election.[25] Shor's, Gutsul's, and Tauber's attendance of the Victory Day parade is a notable public demonstration of the importance of these three Moldovan actors — and consequently the Victory electoral bloc — to Kremlin efforts in Moldova. Although Gutsul has personally met with Putin and other Kremlin officials recently and Russian-Gagauzian bilateral ties have notably increased in recent months, the inclusion of Shor and Tauber in the Moscow celebrations further indicates that the Kremlin's efforts in Moldova are not limited to Gagauzia.[26] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is engaged in efforts to destabilize all of Moldova and prevent Moldova's EU accession and is likely trying to exploit Gagauzia's and Transnistria's Kremlin ties and opposition to the Moldovan federal authorities as part of these wider efforts.[27]

Russian forces have markedly increased the rate of ground attacks in eastern Ukraine over the past month, likely reflecting current battlefield conditions and the intent of the Russian military command to secure gains before the arrival of Western military aid to the frontlines. Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn stated on May 9 that the number of combat engagements increased significantly from 84 on May 8 to 146 on May 9 and noted that most of the fighting occurred in the area of responsibility of the Khortytsia Group (the area from Kharkiv Oblast down to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area).[28] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the rate of Russian attacks increased by 17 percent between March and April 2024 and that over 75 percent of reported ground attacks took place in the Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Marinka directions.[29] UK MoD noted that the number of Russian attacks near Chasiv Yar increased by 200 percent between March and April. Voloshyn suggested that the current intensification of Russian attacks is a result of the fact that the soil has dried out after the spring mud season, which

facilitates more rapid mechanized maneuver, and that Russian forces are trying to take advantage of Ukraine's relative weakness while it awaits the arrival of Western aid.[30] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will maintain the high rate of attacks across eastern Ukraine in order to make gains before the arrival of Western aid in Ukraine, which will likely stymie Russia forces' ability to maintain the high rate of attacks and tactical gains that they are currently able to pursue.[31] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky similarly stated on May 9 during a meeting with European Parliament Head Roberta Mestola that the arrival of Western aid to Ukrainian frontline units will allow Ukrainian forces to blunt Russia's initiative in eastern Ukraine.[32]

Russian border guards are withdrawing from much of Armenia as Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continues to face domestic backlash for decisions regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on May 9 that Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed during a meeting on May 8 to stop Russian border guard operations in a number of Armenian regions due to "changed conditions," likely referring to Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh.[33] Peskov noted that Russian border guards will remain stationed on the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Iranian international borders.[34] Meanwhile, thousands of protestors have completed a multi-day march to Yerevan, Armenia, where they are currently protesting in Yerevan's Republic Square against Pashinyan's decision to transfer control over four border villages in Tavush Province to Azerbaijan in the wake of Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh.[35] Armenian Apostolic Church Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, who serves as the Primate of the Tavush Diocese, has emerged as a leader of these protests and issued a public call on May 9 for Pashinyan to either resign within the hour or face a vote of no confidence in the parliament.[36] Galstanyan met with Armenian opposition parliamentarians after the deadline elapsed to discuss initiating a vote of no confidence to oust Pashinyan.[37] Armenia's constitution stipulates that at least a third of parliamentarians or the president must support a draft resolution of no confidence to bring a vote, and at least half of parliamentarians must then vote in favor of the final no confidence resolution.[38] The constitution also stipulates that the final vote of no confidence occur between 48 and 72 hours of the draft's initial submission. Pashinyan's ruling Civil Contract party holds roughly 54 percent of the seats in Armenian parliament, so it is unlikely that a vote of no confidence would oust Pashinyan without defectors from the Civil Contract party voting for the opposition.[39]

The Kremlin may seek to capitalize on opposition outrage in Armenia to punish Pashinyan for increasingly pulling away from Russia. Russian state media has closely followed the protests and is widely amplifying Galstanyan's calls for Pashinyan's resignation or a vote of no confidence.[40] A prominent, Kremlin-awarded Russian milblogger has tracked the protest march from Kirash, Tavush Province to Yerevan and expressed support for the protestors.[41] This milblogger and other Russian officials and pro-Kremlin voices have frequently spread information operations accusing Pashinyan of "weakness" and incompetence for ceding territory to Azerbaijan after Russia failed to prevent the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh.[42] Pro-Kremlin actors may amplify reports of discontent or perpetuate ongoing Kremlin information operations in the wake of Armenian opposition protests to further pressure Pashinyan into mending relations with Russia.

Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) conducted long-range drone strikes against Russian oil depots and refinery infrastructure in Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Bashkortostan on May 9. The Krasnodar Krai operational headquarters claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack an oil depot in Yurovka (near Anapa) with at least seven drones, and that Russian air defense suppressed six drones but at least one fell on the depot itself, causing a fire.[43] Some Russian sources reported that the strike damaged several oil tanks.[44] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that an "informed source" stated that this was an SBU operation targeting oil shipment points through which the Russian military supplies oil to troops in occupied Crimea.[45] Geolocated footage published on May 9 additionally shows a drone attack against the Gazprom Neftekhim Salavat oil refinery in Salavat, Republic of Bashkortostan.[46] The Republic of Bashkortostan's Ministry of Emergency Situations reported that the strike damaged the building housing a pumping station at the refinery.[47] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* stated that its SBU sources took responsibility for the drone strike and reported that it damaged a catalytic cracking unit, which is used to refine crude oil into gasoline and other petroleum products.[48] *Suspilne* noted that this is a "record" distance for a Ukrainian strike on Russia, as Salavat is 1,500 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. Ukraine recently conducted a long-range drone strike against the Republic of Tatarstan, which is 1,200 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, and the Bashkortostan strike therefore represents an inflection in Ukraine's long-range strike capability.[49]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin used his May 9 Victory Day speech to relitigate his belief that the West is attempting to erase the Soviet Union's contributions to defeating Nazi Germany during the Great Patriotic War (Second World War), a grievance that is at the core of Russia's adversarial perceptions of the West.
- Putin seized on a recent meeting with the commanders of several frontline Russian formations to portray himself as an informed and effective Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, aware of the intricacies of the frontline situation and involved in finding solutions to issues that plague Russian forces.
- Putin surrounded himself with a number of foreign officials at the Victory Day parade, likely in order to posture himself as an effective statesman capable of galvanizing an alternative coalition to the power structures of the collective West.
- Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed that the Moldovan government is engaged in a Nazi-like "genocide" in Moldova — a notable inflection in Kremlin officials' rhetoric about Moldova that is likely meant set conditions for a Russian effort to secure control over Moldova and not just some of its regions.
- The leaders of the pro-Kremlin Moldovan Victory opposition electoral bloc attended the Victory Day parade in Moscow, further indicating that the Kremlin intends to use these actors to destabilize all of Moldova and attack Moldova's democracy and EU accession process.
- Russian forces have markedly increased the rate of ground attacks in eastern Ukraine over the past month, likely reflecting current battlefield conditions and the intent of the Russian military command to secure gains before the arrival of Western military aid to the frontlines.
- Russian border guards are withdrawing from much of Armenia as Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan continues to face domestic backlash for decisions regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.
- The Kremlin may seek to capitalize on opposition outrage in Armenia to punish Pashinyan for increasingly pulling away from Russia.
- Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) conducted long-range drone strikes against Russian oil depots and refinery infrastructure in Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Bashkortostan on May 9.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continue to struggle with discipline in their ranks, with some Russian soldiers reportedly killing other members of their units.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 8, 2024

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

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

May 8, 2024, 7:00pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on May 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted large-scale missile and drone strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of May 7 to 8, continuing to exploit Ukraine's degraded air defense umbrella ahead of the arrival of US and Western security assistance at scale. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk reported on May 8 that Russian forces launched 21 Shahed-136/131 drones and 55 missiles, including 45 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles, four Kalibr sea-launched cruise missiles, two Iskander-M ballistic missiles, an Iskander-K ballistic missile, two Kh-59/69 cruise missiles, and a Kh-47 "Kinzhal" aeroballistic missile.^[1] Oleshchuk reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted 33 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles, all four Kalibr cruise missiles, both Kh-59/69 cruise missiles, and 20 Shaheds.^[2] Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko reported that Russian forces struck electricity generation and transmission facilities in Poltava, Kirovohrad, Zaporizhia, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Vinnytsia oblasts.^[3] Ukraine's largest private energy operator DTEK reported that Russian forces attacked three unspecified thermal power plants (TPPs) in Ukraine and seriously damaged unspecified equipment.^[4] Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrenergo spokesperson Maria Tsaturyan stated that regional energy authorities will implement shutdowns evenly across all oblasts in Ukraine due to energy shortages and warned that the Ukrenergo control center will issue a command for emergency shutdowns throughout Ukraine if consumption continues to grow in the evening.^[5] Ukrainian state railway operator Ukrzaliznytsia reported that Russian forces also targeted railway infrastructure in Kherson Oblast, forcing railway administrators to reduce train travel along the Kyiv-Kherson and Kyiv-Mykolaiv routes.^[6] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)

claimed that it targeted Ukrainian energy facilities and defense industrial enterprises in order to reduce Ukraine's ability to produce military materiel and transfer Western materiel to the frontline.[7]

This is the fifth large scale Russian missile and drone strike targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure since March 22, 2024, as the Russian military has attempted to exploit degraded Ukrainian air defense capabilities in spring 2024 to collapse Ukraine's energy grid and constrain Ukraine's defense industrial capacity.[8] Russian forces will likely continue to conduct mass strikes to cause long-term damage to Ukrainian energy infrastructure as degraded Ukrainian air defense capabilities persist until the arrival of US-provided air defense missiles and other Western air defense assets at scale.[9] Russian forces have also intensified strikes against Ukrainian transportation infrastructure in recent weeks in an apparent effort to disrupt Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) and constrain the flow of expected US security assistance to the frontline.[10] Russian forces have continued to heavily target Ukrainian energy facilities in limited larger missile and drone strike series, however, suggesting that Russia is either prioritizing the effort to collapse the energy grid over interdiction efforts or must use a larger number of missiles to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses near energy facilities and cause significant damage to these facilities.

Recent satellite imagery of depleted Russian military vehicle and weapon storage facilities further indicates that Russia is currently sustaining its war effort largely by pulling from storage rather than by manufacturing new vehicles and certain weapons at scale. Newsweek reported on May 8 that a social media source tracking Russian military depots stated that satellite imagery indicates that Russia's vehicle stores have significantly decreased from pre-war levels by nearly 32 percent from 15,152 in 2021 to 10,389 as of May 2024.[11] The military depot tracker noted that Russia has pulled most from its stores of MT-LB multipurpose armored fighting vehicles (AFVs), which are down from 2,527 prewar to 922 remaining; BMD airborne amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), which are down from 637 prewar to 244 remaining; and BTR-50 armored personnel carriers (APCs), down from 125 prewar to 52 remaining. The military depot tracker noted that Russia no longer has newer model BTR-60s, 70s, and 80s in storage and that only 2,605 remain — likely referring to vehicles currently fielded — from its prewar stocks of 3,313. The military depot tracker noted that Russia is currently fielding 1,000–2,000 of its remaining MT-LBs in Ukraine. Another open-source account on X (formerly Twitter) cited satellite imagery dated May 27, 2020 and March 26, 2024 and concluded that Russia has pulled roughly 60 percent of its artillery systems at an unspecified towed artillery storage base, reportedly one of Russia's largest.[12] The source reported that about half of the remaining artillery systems at this base are likely unusable due to degradation while in storage and because many of the remaining systems are Second World War era artillery systems incompatible with modern ammunition.[13]

Russia is relying on vast Soviet-era stores of vehicles and other equipment to sustain operations and losses in Ukraine at a level far higher than the current Russian DIB could support, nor will Russia be able to mobilize its DIB to replenish these stores for many years. The British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank reported on February 12 that Russia is likely able to sustain its current rate of vehicle losses (over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles annually) for at least two or three years by mainly reactivating vehicles from storage.[14] The IISS also estimated that Russia has lost over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles in 2023 and close to 8,000 armored fighting vehicles since February 2022, and that Russia likely reactivated at least 1,180 main battle tanks and about 2,470 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers pulled from storage in 2023.[15] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on February 4 that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) can produce 250–300 new and modernized tanks per year and repair an additional 250–300 tanks per year.[16] Russia will likely struggle to adequately supply its units with materiel in the long term without transferring the Russian economy to a wartime footing — a move that Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to avoid thus far.[17]

The Georgian State Security Service (SUS) is employing standard Kremlin information operations against Georgians protesting Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" bill following the lead of Georgian Dream party founder and former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. The SUS claimed on May 8 that "certain groups of people" funded by foreign countries, party leaders, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are trying to organize provocations at protests against the "foreign agents" law.[18] The SUS claimed that Georgian citizens living abroad, particularly those fighting in Ukraine, are planning to conduct acts of violence against Georgian law enforcement and block and burn government buildings. The SUS further claimed that the alleged provocateurs are attempting to cause riots and chaos to cause "Maidanization" and that these methods have been used to organize "color revolutions." The SUS' references to Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution in 2014, which drove out Ukraine's Russia-friendly president Viktor Yanukovych, and its reference to color revolutions — attempts at democratization in post-Soviet countries — mirror boilerplate Russian rhetoric attempting to blame the West for inciting and directing perceived anti-Russian protests to frame domestic dissent and calls for democratization as illegitimate.

[19] The SUS made similar claims in September 2023 and alleged that former Georgian officials, Ukrainian military intelligence officials of Georgian descent, and Georgians fighting with Ukrainian forces in Ukraine were plotting a violent coup.[20] Ivanishvili recently reiterated a series of standard anti-Western and pseudohistorical Kremlin narratives during his first public speech since announcing his return to Georgian politics.[21] Ivanishvili's and the SUS' intensified use of established Kremlin information operations and increasing rhetorical alignment with Russia against the West indicate that Georgian Dream actors likely intend to purposefully derail long-term Georgian efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration, which plays into continued Russian hybrid operations to divide, destabilize, and weaken Georgia.[22]

Armenia's efforts to distance itself from Russia are increasingly forcing the Kremlin to acknowledge issues in the bilateral relationship. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met in Moscow on May 8 following a meeting of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).[23] Putin claimed that Russian-Armenian bilateral relations are "developing successfully," but noted that there are "questions" regarding security in the South Caucasus that the two will discuss privately. Pashinyan stated that "questions have accumulated that need to be discussed" since the two met in December 2023. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that there are "problematic issues" in the bilateral relationship in response to a question about how difficult the meeting would be but claimed that both Putin and Pashinyan are willing to discuss these issues. [24] Peskov claimed that Russia is "rather optimistic" about the future of the bilateral relationship. Peskov and Putin have previously publicly attempted to downplay tension in Russian–Armenian relations, although Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has made several frank assessments of the deteriorating relationship and issued public threats against Armenia in recent months.[25] Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Ani Badalyan told *Radar Armenia* on May 7 that Armenia will not contribute to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) budget in 2024.[26] An unnamed source within the CSTO told Kremlin newsire *TASS* that the CSTO is aware of Armenia's decision but noted that Armenia remains a member of the CSTO.[27] Armenia's decision to stop financing CSTO activities is the latest in a series of decisions to pivot away from Russian-led political and security organizations, including continuing to make Armenia's involvement in the CSTO increasingly nominal, over the past eight months.[28]

Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė stated that the Lithuanian government has granted permission for Lithuania to send troops to Ukraine for training missions in the future.

[29] Šimonytė stated during an interview with the *Financial Times* (FT) published on May 8 that Ukraine has not requested Lithuanian troops and noted that Russia would likely see the deployment of Lithuanian troops to Ukraine as a provocation. Šimonytė stated that if Europe only considered Russia's response to manpower and materiel assistance to Ukraine, Europe would not send anything and stated that "every second week you hear that somebody will be nuked [by Russia]." French President Emmanuel Macron called on Europe to build a strategic concept of "credible European defense" during a speech on April 25 and has previously urged the West to not "rule out" the possibility of sending Western troops to Ukraine in the future.[30]

Reports indicate that there is an available open-source tool that allows people to search by specific coordinates for Telegram users who have enabled a certain location-sharing setting. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on May 8 that this tool allows people to input coordinates to discover all Telegram users who have enabled the "find people nearby" setting located within 50–100 meters of the coordinates.[31] *Meduza* noted that the "find people nearby" setting usually only allows users to find other Telegram users within 50–100 meters of their current location. Users can enable or disable this location-sharing setting in the "contacts" settings of the application.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted large-scale missile and drone strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of May 7 to 8, continuing to exploit Ukraine's degraded air defense umbrella ahead of the arrival of US and Western security assistance at scale.
- Recent satellite imagery of depleted Russian military vehicle and weapons storage facilities further indicates that Russia is currently sustaining its war effort largely by pulling from storage rather than by manufacturing new vehicles and certain weapons at scale.
- Russia is relying on vast Soviet-era stores of vehicles and other equipment to sustain operations and losses in Ukraine at a level far higher than the current Russian DIB could support, nor will Russia be able to mobilize its DIB to replenish these stores for many years.
- The Georgian State Security Service (SUS) is employing standard Kremlin information operations against Georgians protesting Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" bill

following the lead of Georgian Dream party founder and former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.

- Armenia's efforts to distance itself from Russia are increasingly forcing the Kremlin to acknowledge issues in the bilateral relationship.
- Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė stated that the Lithuanian government has granted permission for Lithuania to send troops to Ukraine for training missions in the future.
- Reports indicate that there is an available open-source tool that allows people to search by specific coordinates for Telegram users who have enabled a certain location-sharing setting.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Svatove, Kreminna, and Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu continues to highlight Russian formations involved in Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 7, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 7, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin began his fifth term as Russian President on May 7 and stressed Russia's need for unchallenged autocratic rule while indirectly calling for victory in Ukraine.^[1] Putin thanked Russian citizens, the residents of Russia's "historical lands," participants in the "special military operation," and those who have "defended the right to be together with the motherland," and called on Russia to unite for victory. Putin did not specify what this Russian victory entails and only vaguely referenced Russia's "serious challenges." Putin has long justified his effort to destroy Ukrainian statehood by claiming that Russia is fighting for "historic lands" in Ukraine and coming to the aid of "compatriots abroad" who desire to reunite with Russia.^[2] Putin likely intended to acknowledge the war without setting heightened expectations for Russian prospects in Ukraine with his vague call for victory. Putin more heavily suggested that Russia "needs" strong autocratic rule, claiming that the Russia state and socio-political system must be strong and must resist any challenges and threats in order to ensure the development, unity, and independence of Russia. Putin added that his ability to fulfill his duties as president depends on Russian unity and cohesion and warned Russians to remember historical lessons "about the tragic price of internal turmoil and upheaval." Putin has routinely invoked historical parallels to justify his own increasingly autocratic rule by suggesting that autocracy is a Russian tradition and has regularly argued that without unchallenged autocracy Russia would lose its sovereignty.^[3] Putin notably alluded in October 2022 to the Pugachev Rebellion that challenged Catherine the Great's authority in the mid-1770s to warn deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin about challenging the Kremlin, a warning that did not prevent Prigozhin from launching his own failed rebellion in June 2023.^[4] Putin had observed in 2022 that the Pugachev Rebellion occurred because the "weakening of the central power" caused someone to claim that he was the tsar. Putin's inauguration speech was otherwise filled with tired, boilerplate rhetoric and vague calls for national triumph, and his focus on internal stability indicates that Putin likely sought to emphasize to the Russian public that his fifth term as president will continue to be increasingly autocratic.

Russian ultranationalists lauded the start of Putin's fifth term as a historic event and explicitly approved of the autocratic tradition in which Putin is casting himself, with one of them hailing him as "imperator," the formal title of the Russian tsars since the time of Peter the Great. Russian ultranationalists claimed that Putin's fifth term would be a new stage for Russia and expressed hope that Putin would make meaningful changes to government officials and military commanders.^[5] Several ultranationalist Russian milbloggers attended the inauguration, including Alexander "Sasha" Kots, who is on the Kremlin Human Rights Council, and Kremlin-affiliated WarGonzo Telegram channel founder Semyon Pegov.^[6] The WarGonzo channel marked the inauguration by describing Putin as Russia's *imperator*, the Russian literal translation of emperor, and notably the official title of the Russian tsars from 1721 to 1917.^[7] WarGonzo dubbed Putin's fifth his "imperial term" and asserted that the presidential term is only presidential in law but not in character.^[8] Many Russian ultranationalists have long embraced Putin's autocratic character, and the unabashed praise for Putin as emperor from a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger suggests that the Kremlin is likely coordinating with co-opted milbloggers to justify the Kremlin's increasing autocracy.

Russian ultranationalists also expressed hope that Putin will continue to deepen an anti-Western ideology that the Kremlin has been heavily developing since the start of the full-scale

invasion. WarGonzo claimed that Putin carried out a "coup d'etat" against a "globalist" Russian elite who have ruled Russia since Boris Yeltsin's presidency following the collapse of the Soviet Union. [9] WarGonzo claimed that Putin had given Russian elites a choice during the past two years of the war in Ukraine to cut ties with other "globalists and oligarchs" and support Russia's current path, and implied that Putin would soon begin to disempower the elites who chose poorly by continuing the war in Ukraine and pursuing a new domestic political course.[10] WarGonzo's calls to cut ties with "globalists" likely refers to permanently severing economic ties between the West and Russia, and WarGonzo's focus on breaking with the precedents set during Yeltsin's presidency likely includes both the enrichment of Russia's oligarchs as well as Russia's attempted democratization and involvement in Western multilateral bodies.[11] WarGonzo's claims and hopes are reflective of an increasingly widespread and entrenched anti-Western ideological viewpoint in Russia, one that Putin will likely continue to foster in his fifth term. Russian opposition outlet Meduza recently reported that a source close to the Russian Presidential Administration claimed that Putin is focused on conservatism, removing all dissenters, achieving victory in the war in Ukraine, and "turning to the East." [12] The Kremlin is currently attempting to forge a multilateral partnership with the People's Republic of China (PRC), Iran, and North Korea. This will likely intensify the Kremlin's use of anti-Western ideology to justify this effort.[13] The Kremlin has been attempting to establish a more coherent ideology for the war in Ukraine and Russia's expansionist future, and anti-Western sentiment appears to be one of the most consistent ideological narratives the Kremlin has pursued and will likely be a main element of whatever ideology the Kremlin establishes.[14]

The current Russian cabinet of ministers and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin formally resigned on May 7 as constitutionally mandated, and the ministers who return to service and the ones whom Putin replaces will indicate who has Putin's favor and signal his political priorities for his fifth term.[15] The Russian Constitution requires that the current cabinet of ministers, including the prime minister, resign upon the inauguration of the elected Russian head of state, and stipulates that the new president has two weeks to nominate a new prime minister following cabinet resignations.[16] Mishustin and all cabinet ministers accordingly resigned their powers to Putin on May 7, changing all minister titles to "acting" in the interim.[17] Incumbent ministers and new candidates must submit their applications for Putin's review before May 15.[18]

The resignation of the Russian government is standard political practice, but the ministers whom Putin decides to re-appoint, or those he decides to let go and replace, will signal exactly whom Putin trusts, and what political tasks he hopes they will accomplish. Putin can use this opportunity to build an even more consolidated cadre of political appointees, who will help guide Russian domestic and foreign policy in line with Putin's objectives. Russian opposition outlet Meduza reported on May 6 that certain elites and Kremlin officials are already vying for positions within the new cabinet, potentially in a premature bid to secure high-ranking positions in the event that Putin leaves power at the end of his new term.[19] Putin is likely to re-appoint several trusted high-ranking cabinet members, such as Mishustin and acting First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko.

Belarus has announced a surprise nuclear readiness inspection likely as part of the Kremlin's re-intensified reflexive control campaign targeting Western decision-making. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ordered on May 7 that Belarusian and Russian forces participate in a joint inspection of the non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapon carriers, forces, and means under the Union State framework.[20] Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin stated that a battery of Iskander missile launchers and a squadron of Su-25s will be on standby for the inspection. [21] Lukashenko reiterated standard rhetoric regarding Belarusian doctrine on the deterrent use of nuclear weapons and his desire to avoid entering the war against Ukraine.[22] Lukashenko's announcement comes a day after the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced preparations for non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons exercises to "practice the preparation and use" of tactical nuclear weapons, and is likely meant to bolster the Kremlin's effort to coerce the West into self-deterring from providing additional military assistance to Ukraine.[23] ISW continues to assess that neither Russia nor Belarus seeks nuclear escalation and that their use of nuclear weapons remains unlikely.[24] The US Department of Defense (DoD) reported on May 6 that it has not observed a change in the disposition of Russia's strategic nuclear forces despite Russia's "irresponsible rhetoric."
[25]

Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) reported on May 7 that it exposed a network of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) operatives who were planning to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and other high-ranking Ukrainian intelligence and military officials.[26] The SBU stated that the exposed agents included two colonels of Ukraine's Office of State Security (State Guard) who were operating as part of the FSB's Fifth Service.[27] The FSB's Fifth Service originates from the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB)'s Fifth Service, which conducted counterintelligence and espionage operations in non-Russian Soviet states and now essentially functions as a foreign espionage branch of the FSB.[28] The SBU noted that the FSB

recruited the agents out of Ukraine's State Guard before the 2022 full-scale invasion.[29] Both agents are facing life imprisonment on charges of treason.

The Russian Prosecutor General's Office declared US non-governmental organization (NGO) Freedom House an "undesirable organization" on May 7, likely as part of an ongoing effort to consolidate control over the domestic information space and further deprive Russians of access to civil society organizations and independent assessments of Russian civil and political rights. The Russian Prosecutor General's Office justified Freedom House's designation as an "undesirable organization" by claiming that Freedom House had previously supported Western assistance to Ukraine to "defeat Russia" and Western efforts to use frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine.[30] The Russian Prosecutor General's Office also blamed Freedom House for providing legal and financial support to "pro-Western" Russian activists and Russian activists opposing Russian "traditional values." Freedom House publishes annual "Global Freedom Scores" that rate access to political rights and civil liberties in 210 countries and territories using qualitative analytical methodologies, and ranked Russia "16/100 Not Free" in 2022 and further downgraded the rating to "13/100 Not Free" in 2023.[31] Freedom House also supports civil society and democratization in Europe and Eurasia through partnering with local NGOs and activist organizations.[32] The Kremlin has been increasing its control over the Russian information space by depriving Western and independent Russian journalists and civil society organizations of the ability to operate in Russia. [33] The Kremlin notably blocked access to the website of French organization Reporters Without Borders on April 21, which scores countries according to a Freedom Index, similar to the one created by Freedom House, and had also scored Russia as having decreasing civil and political rights in recent years.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin began his fifth term as Russian President on May 7 and stressed Russia's need for unchallenged autocratic rule while indirectly calling for victory in Ukraine.
- Russian ultranationalists lauded the start of Putin's fifth term as a historic event and explicitly approved of the autocratic tradition in which Putin is casting himself, with one of them hailing him as "imperator," the formal title of the Russian tsars since the time of Peter the Great. Russian ultranationalists also expressed hope that Putin will continue to deepen an anti-Western ideology that the Kremlin has been heavily developing since the start of the full-scale invasion.
- The current Russian cabinet of ministers and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin formally resigned on May 7 as constitutionally mandated, and the ministers who return to service and the ones whom Putin replaces will indicate who has Putin's favor and signal his political priorities for his fifth term
- Belarus has announced a surprise nuclear readiness inspection likely as part of the Kremlin's re-intensified reflexive control campaign targeting Western decision-making.
- Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) reported on May 7 that it exposed a network of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) operatives who were planning to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and other high-ranking Ukrainian intelligence and military officials
- The Russian Prosecutor General's Office declared US non-governmental organization (NGO) Freedom House an "undesirable organization" on May 7, likely as part of an ongoing effort to consolidate control over the domestic information space and further deprive Russians of access to civil society organizations and independent assessments of Russian civil and political rights.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian occupation officials continue efforts to forcibly recruit Ukrainian civilians into the Russian military in occupied Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is working with occupation administrators to strengthen Russia's control over the child welfare system in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 6, 2024

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

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

May 6, 2024, 7:15pm ET

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

The Kremlin appears to be re-intensifying a reflexive control campaign targeting Western decision-making using nuclear threats and diplomatic manipulation. Reflexive control is a key element of Russia's hybrid warfare toolkit — it is a tactic that relies on shaping an adversary with targeted rhetoric and information operations in such a way that the adversary voluntarily takes actions that are advantageous to Russia.^[1] Soviet mathematician Vladimir Lefebvre defined reflexive control as “the process of transferring the reasons of making a decision” to an adversary via “provocations, intrigues, disguises, creation of false objects, and lies of any type.”^[2] Russia has frequently used nuclear saber-rattling throughout the course of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine to cause the West (Russia's self-defined adversary) to stop providing military support for Ukraine, and this nuclear saber-rattling has become a frequently used form of Russian reflexive control.^[3]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on May 6 that Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the Russian General Staff to prepare to conduct non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons exercises to “practice the preparation and use” of tactical nuclear weapons.^[4] The Russian MoD stated that these exercises will involve missile formations of Russia's Southern Military District (SMD) as well as Russian aviation and naval forces. The Russian MoD and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) both notably claimed that Russia will conduct nuclear exercises in response to “provocative statements and threats” made by Western officials against Russia.^[5] The Russian MFA accused the US of deploying ground-based intermediate and short-range missiles “in various regions around the world,” which the Russian MFA claimed allows Russia to reciprocate in kind.^[6] The Russian MFA also claimed that it will consider the arrival of F-16s to Ukraine as a provocation because Russia will consider F-16s carriers of nuclear weapons, a boilerplate threat that Russian officials have been making since Western states first committed to sending F-16s to Ukraine in summer 2023.^[7] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev accused US, French, and British officials of considering sending their troops to Ukraine and claimed that this justifies Russia testing its tactical nuclear weapons.^[8] Medvedev also directly threatened a “world catastrophe” as a result of Western involvement in Ukraine and warned of Russian strikes against Washington, Paris, and London.

Russian officials, particularly Medvedev, are critical elements of Russia's efforts to use nuclear rhetoric as a form of reflexive control, as ISW has frequently reported.^[9] Russian officials consistently time nuclear readiness exercises and vague threats of nuclear retaliation with important Western policy decisions regarding the war in Ukraine to force Western decision-makers to self-deter and temper their support for Ukraine. The current apparent resurgence of nuclear rhetoric, this time in the form of planned tactical nuclear weapons exercises, coincides with the imminent arrival of Western weapons in Ukraine. Russian officials are likely using the nuclear weapons information operation to discourage Ukraine's Western partners from providing additional military support and to scare Western decision-makers out of allowing Ukrainian forces to use Western-provided systems to attack legitimate military targets in Russia. Russian troops engage in routine nuclear exercises as part of this wider nuclear rhetoric information operation, but ISW continues to assess that Russia is highly unlikely to use a tactical nuclear weapon on the battlefield in Ukraine or anywhere else.^[10]

The Russian MFA also summoned the British and French ambassadors to Russia as part of the wider ongoing reflexive control campaign aimed at discouraging Western governments from supporting Ukraine.^[11] The Russian MFA claimed that it summoned British Ambassador to Russia Nigel Casey in connection with recent statements by British Foreign Minister David Cameron asserting that Ukraine has the right to strike military targets inside of Russia.^[12] The Russian MFA accused Cameron of “escalating” the conflict by stating that Ukraine has the right to strike within Russia and warned that Russia can respond by striking “any British military facilities and equipment on the territory of Ukraine and beyond its borders.”^[13] Russian MFA Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova and Kremlin newswire TASS also reported that Russia summoned the French Ambassador to Russia due to French leadership's “belligerent statements and the growing involvement of France in the conflict in Ukraine,” in response to French President Emmanuel Macron's recent calls for expanded Western security assistance to Ukraine.^[14] Russia likely summoned these ambassadors to discourage France and the UK, and by extension the rest of the West, from providing further support for Ukraine.

Russian elites and Kremlin officials are reportedly vying for influential positions in the Russian government ahead of the Russian presidential inauguration on May 7 to prematurely secure powerful roles in the event that Russian President Vladimir Putin leaves power around the end of his new term. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on May 6 that its sources in the Kremlin claimed that the Russian elites began actively speculating about who would join the new Russian government after Putin's inauguration and noted that some elites are “tense” hoping for promotions and worrying about demotions.^[15] Another source close to the Russian government told *Meduza* that

Kremlin officials and Russian elites are currently trying to occupy the “highest possible position” in case Putin’s upcoming six-year presidential term is his last due to his age. ISW has not observed any indications that Putin intends to leave power after the conclusion of his upcoming presidential term. Putin’s possible efforts to position elites to succeed him and elites’ efforts to position themselves within the government are likely therefore premature. One source claimed that Russian elites are speculating that Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin or Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko could become the next Russian Prime Minister, while other sources expressed doubt that current Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin would resign. A source close to the Russian Federal Assembly told *Meduza* that Russian Duma deputies are already prepared to re-approve Mishustin as Prime Minister. Two sources close to the Russian Presidential Administration and government stated that Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev and Kemerovo Oblast Governor Sergei Tsivilev want new positions in the Russian government and suggested that Trutnev could head an unspecified government ministry and Trutnev could take a leading job in the Presidential Administration. *Meduza*’s sources close to the Kremlin stated that they have no information regarding Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu’s potential resignation in the wake of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov’s April 24 arrest and claimed that Shoigu “still has the opportunity to work on his job, at least until the completion of this phase of the [war in Ukraine].” Position changes among Russian elites are unlikely to have major effects on in Russia’s domestic and international decision-making and policy planning, however. A source close to the Russian Presidential Administration claimed that Putin is focused on conservatism, removing all dissenters, victory in the war in Ukraine, and “turning to the East,” likely referencing deepening Russian relations with China, Iran, and North Korea. Putin appears to be attempting to create ideological homogeneity among the Russian elite, which is consistent with ISW’s continued assessment that Putin values personal loyalty (and, by extension, the sharing of his worldview) over professional achievement.[16]

A Russian insider source, who has routinely been accurate about past Russian military command changes, claimed that the Russian military command appointed the commanders and chiefs of staff of the newly formed Leningrad and Moscow military districts (LMD and MMD). The insider source claimed that Russian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Alexander Lapin became the commander of the LMD, echoing claims from a Russian regional outlet from March 31.[17] The insider source claimed that the former commander of the 36th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (Eastern Military District), Lieutenant General Valery Solodchuk, became the LMD Chief of Staff.[18] The insider source claimed that Solodchuk commanded an unspecified Russian group of forces responsible for the Russian state border in February 2024, during which he “quickly found a common language” with Lapin, resulting in Solodchuk’s appointment to LMD Chief of Staff. Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Colonel General Sergei Kuzovlev reportedly became the commander of the Moscow Military District (MMD). Lieutenant General Mikhail Zusko, who commanded the 58th CAA (SMD) in 2022, reportedly became the MMD Chief of Staff.[19] ISW cannot confirm the insider source’s claims but notes that the source has been highly accurate about past military command changes.[20]

The Kremlin continues tightening the restrictions on individuals it designates as “foreign agents,” restricting their ability to serve in government roles, likely in a disguised purge of officials who do not adequately align with the Kremlin. The Russian State Duma unanimously passed a bill in its second and third readings on May 6 that prohibits individuals designated as “foreign agents” from running in Russian elections for or serving at any level of government.[21] The bill stipulates that any government officials who are also designated as foreign agents have 180 days to somehow remove themselves from the list of foreign agents before Russian authorities strip the officials of their office.[22] The bill also prohibits foreign agents from serving as election observers or election proxies — individuals appointed to campaign on behalf of high-level candidates.[23] The bill notably prevents the Russian authorities from designating election candidates as foreign agents during the course of the election.[24] It is unclear how many incumbent Russian officials this bill will affect. Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin stated that foreign agents can participate in Russian elections after authorities remove the foreign agent designation.[25] The Kremlin has recently been cracking down on foreign agents and expanding the legally prosecutable definition of extremism — both labels that deprive Russians of certain rights and increasingly portray Russians who gain these designations for expressing anti-war sentiment as directly opposing the Kremlin itself.[26] The Kremlin may be pushing this bill through now to coincide with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s May 8 inauguration and subsequent new cabinet.[27]

Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a successful maritime drone strike against a Russian patrol boat in occupied Crimea on May 6, and Ukrainian forces are reportedly adapting their maritime drones to combat Russian defensive measures. The GUR published footage on May 6 of a GUR Magura V5 maritime drone striking a Russian Project 12150 Mangust-class patrol boat in Vuzka Bay near occupied Chornomorske, Crimea.[28] The GUR stated

that the destroyed Mangust-class patrol boat was likely worth \$3 million. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that elements of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) destroyed five Ukrainian maritime drones near the northwestern Crimean coast and published footage purportedly of a Russian helicopter striking one of the drones.[29] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces had adapted the drones to defend against Russian strikes, particularly from helicopters, with heat-seeking missiles and to break through containment booms.[30] Several prominent Russian milbloggers expressed anger that the Russian military bureaucracy is causing Russian forces to respond too slowly to Ukrainian maritime drone adaptations.[31]

Russia may be switching sides in the Sudanese civil war to support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in pursuit of a Red Sea naval base for Russia, which would align Iranian and Russian Sudanese policy and create opportunities for increased Iranian-Russian cooperation in Sudan and the broader Red Sea area. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative for the Russian President in Africa and the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov met with SAF head Abdel Fattah al Burhan and several other Sudanese officials during a two-day visit to Sudan on April 28 and 29.[32] Bogdanov stated that his visit could lead to increased cooperation and expressed support for "the existing legitimacy in the country represented by the [SAF-backed] Sovereign Council."[33] France-based Sudanese news outlet *Sudan Tribune* reported that Russia offered "unrestricted qualitative military aid" during the meetings and also enquired about its longstanding but unimplemented agreement to establish a naval base in Port Sudan.[34]

Bogdanov's discussions indicate that the Kremlin is willing to risk the gold it had been getting from supporting the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which are fighting a civil war against the SAF, to advance its longstanding Red Sea basing ambitions. The Wagner Group had been arming and training the RSF since the outbreak of the civil war in April 2023 due to preexisting ties owing to the RSF's control of Sudan's gold mines.[35] However, the civil war has halted some Wagner-linked gold operations, and it is unclear if this support has continued to the same extent after the death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.[36] US officials and an independent report from non-profit groups claimed that Wagner smuggled out an estimated 32.7 tons of gold worth \$1.9 billion during the first year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[37]

Russia has pursued a Red Sea port since 2008 to protect its economic interests in the area and improve its military posture by increasing its ability to challenge the West in the broader region, including in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean.[38] Russian President Vladimir Putin had previously made an agreement with Sudan's longtime dictator Omar al Bashir in 2017 for a Red Sea base capable of stationing 300 Russian servicemembers and four ships in exchange for various kinds of military and regime security support.[39] The Kremlin subsequently supported both the RSF and SAF after Bashir's ouster in 2019 to pursue an implementation of the deal.[40] RSF Commander General Hemedti led these negotiations after the RSF and SAF overthrew Sudan's civilian-led transitional government in 2021, but the civil war that broke out between the RSF and the SAF once again put the deal on hold.[41] The SAF controls Sudan's coast, making it the key gatekeeper for any naval base.[42]

Russia backing the SAF would greatly benefit Iran by aligning Iranian and Russian policy and strategy in the region, which would advance Iran's own aims of securing a Red Sea base in Sudan. Iran strengthened its bilateral relations with the SAF throughout 2023 and started sending drones to the SAF in late 2023 and early 2024.[43] The *Wall Street Journal* reported in March 2024 that Iran unsuccessfully attempted to use these ties and promises of a helicopter-carrier ship to secure a permanent naval base in Port Sudan.[44] Iran seeks a Red Sea naval base for reasons similar to Russia's—to project power further westward. Iran would use a Red Sea base to support out-of-area naval operations and attacks on international shipping. This power projection includes threatening Red Sea shipping traffic and creating opportunities to launch attacks into Israel with systems fired from surface combatants.

The Kremlin may also align its Sudan policy with Iran to lighten its own military commitments. Russian insider sources reported in mid-April that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) was redeploying Russian soldiers from unspecified MOD-affiliated Africa Corps units to the Ukrainian border.[45] These demands from the Ukraine war compound ongoing capacity issues stemming from Africa Corps' recruitment struggles.[46] Russia aligning with Iran would enable the Kremlin to coordinate aid with Iran and potentially free the resources and soldiers that it had devoted to supporting the RSF. [47] Bogdanov met with Iranian Deputy PM Ali Bagheri Kani two days before leaving for Sudan when they discussed "the importance of bilateral ties and regional issues," indicating they are already coordinating on the issue.[48]

The Kremlin is additionally pursuing secondary objectives, including sidelining Ukrainian and US influence in Sudan, through its outreach to the SAF. The *Sudan Tribune* reported that

Bogdanov enquired about Sudanese military cooperation with Ukraine during his visit.[49] Ukraine has provided military support to the SAF as one of its many initiatives to boost support in Africa as many African countries have been ambivalent about or supportive of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

[50] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Ukraine sent nearly 100 Ukrainian special forces soldiers to Sudan at Burhan's request in August 2023 that have supported the SAF through occasional combat, drone support, training, and supplies provision.[51] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) claimed on April 17 that the Kremlin planned to launch an information operation accusing Ukrainian forces of illegally using Western weapons in Sudan to discredit Ukraine and undermine Western support for Ukraine.[52]

Russia's backing of the SAF also risks undermining impending US-backed peace talks.[53] The US has been urging a resumption of peace talks after US-Saudi efforts failed throughout 2023.[54] Other foreign intervention contributed to these failures by emboldening actors to take hardline negotiating stances.[55]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin appears to be re-intensifying a reflexive control campaign targeting Western decision-making using nuclear threats and diplomatic manipulation.
- Russian elites and Kremlin officials are reportedly vying for influential positions in the Russian government ahead of the Russian presidential inauguration on May 7 to prematurely secure powerful roles in the event that Russian President Vladimir Putin leaves power around the end of his new term.
- A Russian insider source, who has routinely been accurate about past Russian military command changes, claimed that the Russian military command appointed the commanders and chiefs of staff of the newly formed Leningrad and Moscow military districts (LMD and MMD).
- The Kremlin continues tightening the restrictions on individuals it designates as "foreign agents," restricting their ability to serve in government roles, likely in a disguised purge of officials who do not adequately align with the Kremlin.
- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a successful maritime drone strike against a Russian patrol boat in occupied Crimea on May 6, and Ukrainian forces are reportedly adapting their maritime drones to combat Russian defensive measures.
- Russia may be switching sides in the Sudanese civil war to support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in pursuit of a Red Sea naval base for Russia, which would align Iranian and Russian Sudanese policy and create opportunities for increased Iranian-Russian cooperation in Sudan and the broader Red Sea area.
- Russia has pursued a Red Sea port since 2008 to protect its economic interests in the area and improve its military posture by increasing its ability to challenge the West in the broader region, including in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean.
- Russia backing the SAF would greatly benefit Iran by aligning Iranian and Russian policy and strategy in the region, which would advance Iran's own aims of securing a Red Sea base in Sudan.
- The Kremlin is additionally pursuing secondary objectives, including sidelining Ukrainian and US influence in Sudan, through its outreach to the SAF.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances northwest of Svatove, near Avdiivka, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian Zaporizhia Oblast Head Ivan Fedorov stated that Russian authorities have created the infrastructure necessary to conscript Ukrainians in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast and plan to conscript more than 150,000 Ukrainians into the Russian army in an unspecified time period.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 5, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

May 5, 2024, 6:50pm ET

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

The Russian military reportedly redeployed a battalion of the 76th Airborne (VDV) Division to Kursk Oblast as part of a larger ongoing Russian effort to gather an operationally significant

force for a possible future Russian offensive operation against northeastern Ukraine and Kharkiv City. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on May 5 that the Russian military has gathered roughly 50,000 personnel in Belgorod, Kursk, and Bryansk oblasts as part of its Northern Grouping of Forces.[1] Mashovets stated that the Russian military has concentrated over 31,000 troops in Belgorod Oblast; over 10,000 troops in Kursk Oblast; and over 8,000 troops in Bryansk Oblast.[2] Mashovets noted that an unspecified VDV battalion is part of the Russian grouping in Kursk Oblast, and a Russian milblogger, who has an avowed bias against the VDV and “Dnepri” Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, claimed on May 5 that the Russian 104th VDV Regiment’s (76th VDV Division) 3rd VDV battalion is currently in Kursk Oblast.[3] Elements of the 104th Regiment were previously operating in Zaporizhia Oblast as of February and March 2024, suggesting that elements of the 104th Regiment recently redeployed from southern Ukraine to Russia’s border with northeastern Ukraine.[4] ISW recently observed unconfirmed reports that the Russian military is redeploying elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions from Zaporizhia Oblast to various new directions, including eastern Ukraine, but has not observed visual confirmation that elements of the 104th VDV Regiment are operating in Kursk Oblast.[5][6]

The Russian military is reportedly preparing and forming the Northern Grouping of Forces from elements of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) to primarily operate in the Belgorod-Kharkiv operational direction. Mashovets noted that Russian forces are continuing to transfer newly formed military units of the Russian 44th Army Corps [AC] (LMD) to the Northern Grouping of Forces. Mashovets stated that the Russian military transferred manpower and equipment of the Russian 30th Motorized Rifle Regiment (72nd Motorized Rifle Division, 44th AC, LMD) and the 128th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade to the Northern Grouping of Forces as of May 3.[7] Mashovets stated that the Russian military is pretending to unload troops and equipment redeploying to the Northern Grouping of Forces at railway stations in isolated areas of Kursk Oblast, only to then have Russian forces march to their deployment points in Belgorod Oblast. Mashovets noted that elements of the 30th Motorized Rifle Regiment first redeployed to the Kursk Railway Station but then deployed further to Belgorod Oblast, to possibly head to staging areas near Kharkiv Oblast. Mashovets also observed that Russian forces recently intensified air, drone, and missile strikes against northeastern Ukrainian border regions such as Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv oblasts. Mashovets echoed ISW’s assessment that the Russian Northern Grouping of Forces would likely be unable to conduct a successful offensive operation to seize Kharkiv City and suggested that elements of the Russian 11th AC, 44th AC, and 6th CAA (all LMD) may attempt to conduct limited offensive actions or cross border raids into Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts in the future.[8] Ukrainian officials have increasingly warned about the threat of a possible future Russian offensive operation to seize Kharkiv City.[9] ISW continues to assess that the Russian military lacks the forces necessary to seize the city but that Russian offensive operations against Kharkiv or Sumy cities would draw and fix Ukrainian forces from other, more critical parts of the frontline.[10]

US officials continue to signal their support for new Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2025, although ISW continues to assess that Ukraine should contest the theater-wide initiative as soon as possible because ceding the theater-wide initiative to Russia for the entirety of 2024 will present Russia with several benefits. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on May 5 that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that Ukraine will look to conduct a counteroffensive operation to recapture Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory in 2025 after using US military assistance to blunt further Russian advances in 2024.[11] Sullivan stated that he expects Russian forces to continue making marginal advances for an unspecified time and noted that US military assistance will not “instantly flip the switch” on the battlefield situation in Ukraine. Sullivan stated that US military assistance will empower Ukrainian forces to “hold the line” and withstand Russian assaults throughout the rest of 2024. ISW continues to assess that it will likely take several additional weeks for Western weapons and ammunition to arrive to frontline Ukrainian units and begin to have tangible battlefield impacts and that the arrival of US military aid to Ukraine will likely allow Ukrainian forces to stabilize the frontline and seize the initiative.[12]

FT reported in January 2024 that US officials advocated for Ukraine to conduct a more “conservative” “active defense” in 2024 and prepare for a counteroffensive in 2025.[13] ISW has previously argued at length that a Ukrainian “active defense” into 2025 would cede the theater-wide initiative to Russian forces for over a year, allowing the Russian command to shape preferable conditions by determining the timing, location, and intensity, of Russian attacks, and in by doing so control the resources that Ukrainian forces expend over this protracted period.[14] A Russian milblogger positively responded to FT’s May 5 report and stated that Russian forces can simply conduct glide bomb air strikes against Ukrainian positions for the remainder of 2024 if Ukrainian forces are not going to launch a counteroffensive operation that pressures Russian forces this year.[15] Tactically significant Russian advances northwest of Avdiivka and the potential threat of a Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv Oblast are directly linked to Russian forces’ ability to indiscriminately conduct glide bomb strikes along the frontline, constrained and degraded Ukrainian defensive operations, and Russia’s

control over the theater-wide initiative. Ukrainian forces will of course have to receive and integrate US military assistance to frontline units, stabilize the frontline, defend against the predicted summer Russian offensive effort, prevent operationally significant Russian advances, and address their ongoing manpower challenges before they will be able to contest the theater-wide initiative and conduct a counteroffensive operation later in 2024 or 2025.[16] Ukraine's ability to liberate its territory and conduct counteroffensive operations rests on a number of unmade decisions in the West, Russia, and Ukraine and any external efforts to impose a timeline on Ukrainian counteroffensive operations ignore the reality of the battlefield situation.

European intelligence agencies reportedly warned their governments that Russia is planning to conduct “violent acts of sabotage” across Europe as part of a “more aggressive and concerted effort” against the West. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on May 5, citing unspecified European intelligence officials, that Russia has been actively preparing “covert bombings, arson attacks, and damage to infrastructure” in Europe using its own forces and proxies.[17] German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) Thomas Haldenwang stated that the BfV assesses that there is a “significantly increased” risk of Russian state-controlled acts of sabotage on European territory. An unspecified senior European government official stated that NATO-member security services’ information sharing indicated coordinated Russian sabotage efforts “at scale.” NATO recently reported that it is “deeply concerned” about intensifying Russian hybrid operations on NATO member territory and that these operations constitute a threat to the alliance’s security.[18] FT reported that German authorities recently arrested two individuals on charges of allegedly planning to attack German military and logistics sites for Russia and that the United Kingdom (UK) accused two individuals of working for Russia after they were charged with setting fire to a warehouse containing aid for Ukraine.[19] ISW also observed recent reports that the Kremlin is pursuing hybrid operations against NATO member states using GPS jamming and sabotage on military logistics.[20] Russian milbloggers have widely celebrated incidents of sabotage in Western countries, most recently celebrating the factory fire at German arms company Diehl in Berlin, Germany, even though German officials have not speculated on the causes of the fire.[21]

The Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) seized on the Orthodox Easter holiday on May 5 to further its efforts to garner domestic support for the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine. ROC MP Head Patriarch Kirill delivered an Easter message in which he stated that Russia is going through “difficult” and “fateful” trials and labeled Russian lands as “sacred.”[22] Patriarch Kirill called on people to pray for Russian authorities and the Russian military and expressed hope that God would bring about an end to the “internecine” war in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who attended the service, thanked Patriarch Kirill for his “fruitful collaboration” during the “current difficult period.”[23] Putin claimed that the ROC MP and “other Christian denominations” are preserving Russian heritage and societal values.[24] Russian independent outlet *Mozhem Obyasnit (We Can Explain)* reported that Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-run television network Zvezda broadcasted the service and deleted any comments from viewers with calls for peace.[25] Russian authorities have systematically repressed religious freedom in Russia as a matter of state policy and have persecuted certain Christian denominations within Russia.[26] Russian authorities are also systematically persecuting the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Protestants, Roman Catholics, and other non-ROC faiths in occupied Ukraine.[27] The ROC MP has consistently supported the war in Ukraine, and the ROC MP leadership has reportedly defrocked several clergy members who refused to promote Kremlin-introduced prayers supporting Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[28] The ROC MP has also recently cast Russia’s war in Ukraine as an existential “holy war” and approved an ideological policy document tying several Kremlin ideological narratives together in an apparent effort to form a wider nationalist ideology around the war in Ukraine and Russia’s expansionist future.[29]

Kremlin officials also used the Orthodox Easter holiday to spread narratives that the West indirectly threatens Russian Orthodoxy in post-Soviet states, particularly in the Baltics, likely as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to set information conditions to justify future Russian aggression abroad. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ambassador-at-Large Gennady Askaldovich published an article in the Kremlin outlet *Izvestiya* on May 5 in which he alleged that the US and its allies use religion as a foreign policy tool to influence other states.[30] Askaldovich claimed that some churches with “American patrons” politicize religion and falsely accused the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople of allegedly splitting Orthodoxy in Ukraine and trying to displace the ROC from Eastern Europe and former Soviet states. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople granted autocephaly (independence) to the OCU from the Kremlin-controlled Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) in 2019.[31] Askaldovich accused the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople of trying to take over small Orthodox autocephalous churches, including churches in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military reportedly redeployed a battalion of the 76th Airborne (VDV) Division to Kursk Oblast as part of a larger ongoing Russian effort to gather an operationally significant force for a possible future Russian offensive operation against northeastern Ukraine and Kharkiv City.
- The Russian military is reportedly preparing and forming the Northern Grouping of Forces from elements of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) to primarily operate in the Belgorod-Kharkiv operational direction.
- US officials continue to signal their support for new Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2025, although ISW continues to assess that Ukraine should contest the theater-wide initiative as soon as possible because ceding the theater-wide initiative to Russia for the entirety of 2024 will present Russia with several benefits.
- European intelligence agencies reportedly warned their governments that Russia is planning to conduct “violent acts of sabotage” across Europe as part of a “more aggressive and concerted effort” against the West.
- The Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) seized on the Orthodox Easter holiday on May 5 to further its efforts to garner domestic support for the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Kupyansk and Robotyne.
- Bureaucratic issues continue to constrain frontline Russian units’ ability to conduct strikes on Ukrainian targets.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 4, 2024

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

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

May 4, 2024, 9 pm ET

Russian forces made a notable tactical advance northwest of Avdiivka near Arkhanhelske on the night of May 3 to 4, likely following a Ukrainian decision to withdraw from the area on May 3. A Russian milblogger posted footage on May 4 reportedly of elements of the Russian “Lavina” Battalion of the 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People’s Republic [DNR] Army Corps) raising a flag in Arkhanhelske, and ISW geolocated this footage to northern Arkhanhelske.

[1] Additional geolocated footage published on May 4 indicates that Russian forces advanced in the eastern outskirts of Arkhanhelske.[2] ISW assesses that the Russian seizure of Arkhanhelske also indicates that Russian forces likely control Keramik and Novokalynove (both southeast of Arkhanhelske). Geolocated footage published on May 3 shows Ukrainian forces withdrawing from northern Arkhanhelske, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced in the settlement overnight on May 3 to 4 following the Ukrainian withdrawal.[3] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted offensive operations to seize Arkhanhelske in several stages, with Russian forces advancing from Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka and southwest of Arkhanhelske) a week ago and Russian forces from Keramik (east of Ocheretyne) seizing the settlement on May 3.[4] Ukrainian forces may have decided to trade space for time as they wait for the arrival of US aid to the frontline at scale in the coming weeks – an appropriate decision for an under-resourced force at risk of being outflanked.[5] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are likely trying to take advantage of the limited time window before the arrival of Western military aid deliveries by intensifying offensive operations and that Russian forces may make further tactical advances in this area in the near future.[6]

Russian forces appear to be choosing to exploit the tactical situation northwest of Avdiivka – a sound military undertaking – but their ultimate objective in this frontline sector remains unclear. Russian forces appear to be choosing to exploit the area where Russian forces are most likely to make tactical gains in the near future, but it is unclear if they will continue to drive north toward Toretsk or return to their previous focus on Pokrovsk to the northwest.[7] Russian forces have already committed roughly a division’s worth of combat power (comprised mainly of four Central Military District [CMD] brigades) to the frontline northwest of Avdiivka and were reportedly continuing to introduce additional forces in this general area.[8] Ukrainian sources have recently reported that Russia committed elements of the 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army, CMD) to the Novobakhmutivka area (south of Ocheretyne).[9] Russian forces were likely to continue to push northwest of Avdiivka as long as there were opportunities to exploit the tactical situation in the area.

The Kremlin continues efforts to portray its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine as something other than what it is while continuing to assert the jurisdiction of Russian federal

law over sovereign states. Russian state media reported on May 4 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) placed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk, and former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Russia's wanted list and opened criminal cases against the three Ukrainian leaders.[10] Russian state media noted that the Russian MVD did not specify Zelensky's, Pavlyuk's, or Poroshenko's crimes nor the alleged crimes of the previous Ukrainian officials that Russia placed on its wanted list, including Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov and Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) Head Vasyl Malyuk. One Russian milblogger expressed hope that the warrant for Zelensky's arrest will prevent Zelensky from visiting countries with an extradition treaty with Russia.[11] The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) called the arrest warrants an act of Russian propaganda.[12] Ukrainian officials have recently warned that the Kremlin is intensifying an existing information operation called "Maidan 3" aimed at creating doubt about the legitimacy of Zelensky's presidency among Ukrainians and that "Maidan 3" will likely peak around late May 2024.[13] The Kremlin's decision to place Zelensky, Pavlyuk, and Poroshenko on Russia's wanted list is likely part of Russia's "Maidan 3" information operation and of the Kremlin's wider efforts to discredit the current and previous pro-Western Ukrainian governments that followed Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 as well as to isolate Ukraine diplomatically.[14]

The Kremlin's decision to place Ukrainian officials on Russia's wanted list is also an aspect of its continued efforts to assert the jurisdiction of Russian federal laws in sovereign European and post-Soviet countries where Russia has no legal jurisdiction. The Russian MVD has previously placed multiple officials from NATO member countries – including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – on Russia's wanted list for allegedly breaking a variety of Russian federal laws within NATO member countries.[15] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's efforts to assert the jurisdiction of Russia's efforts to set informational conditions justifying possible future Russian aggression against NATO states.[16]

Russian law enforcement conducted a search on May 4 of supporters of imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former officer Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov) in Tula Oblast, possibly in an attempt to set information conditions to ban the movement in Russia. Russian law enforcement officials, including the Federal Security Service (FSB) officials, reportedly conducted a search of the Russian Strelkov (Girkin) Movement (RDS) branch in Tula Oblast on May 4.[17] The RDS reported that Russian law enforcement officials searched the RDS Tula Oblast branch for members of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), who were recently found guilty by a local court of inscribing a "Freedom for Strelkov" slogan on a waste heap in Novomoskovsk, Tula Oblast on April 29.[18] A Russian Telegram channel, which published insider information from law enforcement agencies, reported that Russian law enforcement officials searched at least three RDS members and detained RDS member Alexander Omelchenko. Russian law enforcement officials later released Omelchenko but confiscated his phone. The RDS implied that Russian law enforcement officials are deliberately trying to discredit and ban the movement by claiming that the RDS is affiliated with RDK, which the Russian government has designated as a terrorist organization in Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin notably recently met with Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin on May 2, but it is unclear if these two events are related.[19]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces made a notable tactical advance northwest of Avdiivka near Arkhanhelske on the night of May 3 to 4, likely following a Ukrainian decision to withdraw from the area on May 3.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to portray its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine as something other than what it is while continuing to assert the jurisdiction of Russian federal law over sovereign states.
- The Russian law enforcement conducted a search on May 4 of supporters of imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former officer Igor Girkin (aka Strelkov) in Tula Oblast, possibly in an attempt to set information conditions to ban the movement in Russia.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Avdiivka and Donetsk City and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- The Kremlin is continuing its ongoing campaign to centralize control over Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) irregular forces by co-opting DNR commanders and officials.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 3, 2024

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

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

May 3, 2024, 9:05pm ET

Ukrainian officials continue to highlight that Russia's main goal for 2024 remains the seizure of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as Russian forces plan for their Summer 2024 offensive operation.

Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk reiterated during an interview with *The Times* published on May 3 that Russia's offensive goals in 2024 are to seize all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and that Russian forces may attempt to seize the rest of Zaporizhia Oblast in 2024 if they seize Donbas.^[1] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated in an interview with *The Economist* published on May 2 that Russian forces will likely continue pursuing their longtime goal of reaching the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts over the summer as other Ukrainian officials have recently noted.^[2] Pavlyuk reiterated that Russian forces have a plan to seize Kharkiv or Sumy cities but noted that it is unclear how serious this plan is or whether Russian forces will be capable of capturing one or both of the cities.^[3] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces would struggle to seize Kharkiv City but that a Russian offensive operation in the area would likely draw and fix Ukrainian forces from other areas of the frontline.^[4] Pavlyuk stated that Ukrainian forces are doing everything possible to stop Russian efforts to seize Chasiv Yar but noted that Russian forces have an estimated 10-to-1 artillery advantage over Ukrainian forces and "total air superiority," likely referring to Russian forces' ability to indiscriminately conduct glide bomb strikes in the area.^[5] Skibitskyi stated on May 2 that Russian forces will not imminently seize Chasiv Yar although it is "probably a matter of time" before the settlement falls, which is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces may take Chasiv Yar but are unlikely to do so immediately.^[6]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine is also paying increased attention to the Pokrovsk (Avdiivka) direction, where Russian forces have recently made tactically significant advances and are "pressing" on Ukrainian positions.^[7] Zelensky warned that Russian forces are preparing to expand their offensive operations in Ukraine, likely referring to the anticipated Summer 2024 Russian offensive operation, and that Ukraine is facing a "new stage" of the war.^[8] Pavlyuk expressed hope that US and European military assistance will arrive in frontline areas in the near future and help blunt Russian assaults this summer and contest the theater-wide initiative in the future.^[9]

The first deliveries of resumed US military assistance reportedly arrived in Ukraine earlier this week, although it will likely take several additional weeks before Western weapons and ammunition arrive in frontline areas at scale. *The New York Times* reported on May 3 that the first installment of US military assistance comprised of anti-armor rockets, missiles, and 155-mm artillery shells arrived in Ukraine on April 28, four days after US President Joe Biden signed a bill providing roughly \$60 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, and that a second installment of unspecified aid arrived on April 29.^[10] *The New York Times*, citing an unnamed Spanish official, reported that Spanish missiles for Patriot air defense systems recently arrived in Poland and will arrive at the frontline in Ukraine "soon." *The New York Times* reported that Germany's newly pledged Patriot air defense system is not expected to arrive in Ukraine until late June at the earliest but that the Patriot's arrival could coincide with the arrival of the first F-16 fighter jets.^[11] Unnamed officials told *The New York Times* that it could take several months for a substantial number of Western weapons and equipment to arrive in Ukraine, however.^[12] A senior US official, citing a confidential US military assessment, stated that Russia likely will continue to make marginal gains in the east and southeast in the leadup to the May 9 Victory Day holiday but that Russian forces likely do not have enough manpower concentrated in unspecified frontline areas to conduct an immediate large-scale offensive effort. The US military assessment concluded that the Ukrainian frontline will not collapse in the near term despite severe Ukrainian ammunition shortages. The US military assessment is consistent with ISW's ongoing assessment that Russian forces will likely attempt to build on tactical gains to pursue operationally significant gains in key sectors, such as near Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka, in the weeks before US military assistance arrives to frontline Ukrainian units at scale but that these Russian gains will not portend a collapse of the Ukrainian defense.^[13]

Ukrainian officials indicated that Russian forces in Ukraine have not significantly increased in size in recent months but that the Russian military continues to improve its fighting qualities overall despite suffering widespread degradation, especially among elite units since the start of the war. Pavlyuk stated that roughly 510,000 to 515,000 Russian personnel are currently deployed in occupied Ukraine.^[14] Ukrainian officials reported in January 2024 that Russian forces had roughly 462,000 personnel deployed in Ukraine and noted that this was the entire land component of the Russian military at the time.^[15] Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed in December 2023 that there were 617,000 Russian personnel in the "combat zone," likely referring to all Russian military personnel in the zone of the "special military operation," which includes areas within Russia bordering Ukraine.^[16] These figures likely encompass combat personnel and other military personnel who perform support functions and do not represent the immediate combat power that Russian forces have and can commit to offensive operations in Ukraine. Putin previously signed a decree in December

2023 claiming that the Russian military has a total of 2.039 million personnel, 1.32 million of whom are combat personnel, suggesting a roughly 60 to 40 ratio between Russian combat and non-combat personnel on average.[17] The specific breakdown between Russian combat and non-combat personnel in Ukraine is unclear. The overall marginal increase in the size of the Russian deployment to occupied Ukraine between January and April 2024 indicates that Russian forces have likely committed the majority of recently generated forces to ongoing offensive operations instead of efforts to establish strategic-level reserves.[18]

Skibitskyi stated that the current Russian military is unrecognizable from the force that launched the full-scale invasion in February 2022.[19] Skibitskyi noted that Russia's once-elite airborne (VDV) and naval infantry elements have been completely degraded and that Russia will not be able to reconstitute them to their former combat capabilities for at least a decade.[20] Russian forces have heavily degraded relatively elite units by employing them in attritional ground assaults and counterattacks regardless of their designated functions and elite capabilities.[21] Degradation and the Russian military command's decision to commit all forces along the frontline to more or less similar operations have transformed all Russian units in Ukraine regardless of their formal designations into motorized rifle units — mechanized infantry responsible for conducting combined arms ground assaults. Skibitskyi acknowledged that the Russian military is improving in some respects, however, and stated that the Russian military is now operating as a "single body, with a clear plan, under a single command."[22] The Russian military has demonstrated an uneven propensity for operational, tactical, and technological innovation and learning, particularly with operational planning.[23] The Russian military is now entirely comprised of less-elite *de facto* motorized rifle units, but these units continue to innovate and adapt to fighting in Ukraine while relying on materiel and manpower advantages to increasingly pressure Ukrainian forces and exploit Ukrainian vulnerabilities.[24]

Ukrainian officials indicated that the Russian military will likely maintain its current personnel replacement rate and will not generate the significant number of available personnel needed to establish strategic-level reserves for larger-scale offensive operations in 2024. Pavlyuk stated on May 2 that Russia intends to "mobilize" about 100,000 more personnel for use in offensive operations this June and July and 300,000 more personnel by the end of 2024.[25] Pavlyuk is likely referring to ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts and efforts to recruit contract service personnel and is likely not referencing another call-up of reservists similar to Russia's September 2022 partial mobilization. Skibitskyi stated that Russia is also "generating a division of reserves," likely between 15,000 and 20,000 personnel, in central Russia to use in Russia's anticipated Summer 2024 offensive. The "division of reserves" that Skibitskyi is referring to is likely included in Pavlyuk's figure of 100,000 personnel that Russia intends to generate for use in June or July. Pavlyuk stated that Russian forces suffer about 25,000 to 30,000 killed and wounded personnel per month, indicating that Russian forces intend to generally maintain the current number of forces fighting in Ukraine in 2024 and are unlikely to generate significantly more available personnel. ISW has observed recent reports that the Russian military has intensified crypto-mobilization efforts, which are likely intended to maintain replacement rates during intensified offensive operations this spring and expected offensive operations this summer.[26] ISW continues to assess that Russia will struggle to form strategic-level reserves while sustaining the current replacement rate or an increased replacement rate during intensified offensive operations.[27] The Kremlin would likely have to conduct another wave of partial mobilization to generate the manpower required to both sustain the tempo of current Russian offensive operations and successfully form strategic-level reserves in the near term. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin will rely on crypto-mobilization efforts and remains unlikely to conduct another unpopular wave of partial mobilization.[28]

Pavlyuk stated that neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces will be able to achieve victory in Ukraine solely through attritional warfare – a consistent throughline that Ukrainian officials and military analysts have emphasized in recent months.[29] Pavlyuk stated that the Russian military command does not care about high losses in Ukraine and that Ukraine will only be able to win the war through technological superiority and the international isolation of Russia. Former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi notably assessed in a November 1 essay that military parity resulted in the onset of a positional front in Ukraine and that neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces would be able to break through this positional front without achieving a technological advantage over the other.[30] The rough parity in forces and means has since degraded with the delay of US military assistance to Ukraine, but Russian forces are still unable to make operational-level gains in the near term. Pavlyuk stated on May 3 that Russian forces have advantages over Ukrainian forces in artillery and aviation but suggested that Ukrainian forces can obtain a technological advantage over Russian forces using drones.[31] Pavlyuk stated that drones have enabled both Russian and Ukrainian forces to conduct aerial reconnaissance up to 30 kilometers behind the front line and that neither force can concentrate forces within 30 kilometers of the front for an offensive effort. Pavlyuk noted that drones have forced both Russian and Ukrainian forces to operate in smaller infantry groups to avoid the enemy's reconnaissance fire complex (RFC) and noted that Ukrainian forces have moved

away from moving in battalion- or company-sized groups. Pavlyuk's statements are consistent with ISW's recent observations and forecasts about Russian forces' offensive prospects, and Russian forces seem content to make grinding, attritional gains at the tactical level in the near term despite the disproportionately limited benefit these gains offer to Russia at such a high cost.[32]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu issued a notably candid assessment of recent Russian advances in Ukraine and refrained from sweeping claims about the success of the Russian war effort, possibly in an attempt to temper domestic expectations about Russia's near future successes in Ukraine ahead of the summer 2024 Russian offensive operation. Shoigu claimed during a conference call with Russian military leadership that Russian forces have seized 547 square kilometers of territory in Ukraine since January 1, 2024.[33] ISW has observed evidence confirming that Russian forces have seized approximately 516 square kilometers in 2024 as of April 29, and Shoigu's claim is notably more realistic than previous claims that surpassed ISW's assessed Russian advances by roughly 100 square kilometers.[34] Shoigu also reiterated the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) previous claims that Russian forces have seized Novobakhmutivka, Semenivka, and Berdychi and ongoing Kremlin information operations aimed at overestimating Ukrainian manpower and equipment losses.[35] Shoigu claimed that Russian forces are continuing to break into Ukrainian strongholds along the entire frontline and are forcing Ukrainian forces to retreat from their positions in unspecified areas. Shoigu previously used a similar conference call in December 2023 to downplay Russian operations in Ukraine as an "active defense," likely in an effort to temper expectations about Russia's forces' months-long operation to seize Avdiivka. [36] Shoigu may hope to similarly temper domestic expectations about Russian forces anticipated Summer 2024 offensive operation, particularly since Russian forces will be facing better-equipped Ukrainian forces than the Russian military command likely previously expected.

A Russian insider source, who has routinely been accurate about past Russian military command changes, claimed on May 2 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has replaced several high-level Russian commanders in recent months. The insider source claimed that the Russian MoD recently replaced Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Colonel General Sergei Kuzmenko with Lieutenant General Alexander Sanchik and Southern Military District [SMD] Commander Colonel General Sergei Kuzovlev with Colonel General Gennady Anashkin in late March 2024.[37] The insider source claimed that former Western Military District (WMD) Commander Colonel General Yevgeny Nikiforov dropped out of an ongoing competition for the commander of the newly reformed Moscow Military District (MMD) and is now the Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces. [38] The insider source did not offer claims about the command of the newly reformed Leningrad Military District [LMD], which is reportedly under the command of former Russian Ground Forces Chief of Staff Colonel General Alexander Lapin, or about the "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces, which is under the command of Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplyansky.[39] The insider source claimed that the Russian MoD also appointed Lieutenant General Alexei Podivilov to SMD Chief of Staff and that the role of EMD Chief of Staff is currently vacant.[40] The insider source claimed that the Russian MoD has made no changes to the command of the Central Military District [CMD], which Colonel General Andrey Mordvichev has commanded since January 2023 with Lieutenant General Denis Lyamin as his chief of staff since October 2023.[41] Russia's military district commanders have all recently commanded a corresponding "grouping of forces" in Ukraine, and it is highly likely that the new commanders also assumed responsibility of their military district's respective grouping of forces.[42] ISW cannot confirm the insider source's claims but notes that the source has been highly accurate about past military command changes.[43]

The Russian military has increasingly highlighted Mordvichev in recent months and credited him with the capture of Avdiivka in mid-February 2024.[44] The Kremlin has decided to heavily obscure the status of current military district commanders in recent months, and Mordvichev's public prominence and the lack of changes within the CMD at a time of reported widespread changes suggests that Mordvichev has the favor of his superiors and/or the Kremlin. The Russian military command has attempted to establish the Central Grouping of Forces (comprised almost entirely of CMD elements) as an operational maneuver force west of Avdiivka, and elements of four CMD brigades are currently attempting to exploit a tactical penetration northwest of Avdiivka.[45] The Russian military command may also believe that command changes may be too disruptive to what it views as an offensive operation in the Avdiivka area that could achieve tactically or even operationally significant gains.

The Kremlin has made previous command changes following the culmination of Ukrainian and Russian operational efforts and in preparation for previous offensive operations, notably publicly confirming the identities of all four military district commanders ahead of its failed Winter-Spring 2023 offensive effort in eastern Ukraine.[46] The Kremlin may have decided to change the leadership of the military districts in preparation for its expected summer offensive effort, which is forecasted to begin in late May or in June.[47] Anashkin's reported appointment to SMD commander in late March 2024 notably aligns with the intensification of the Southern Grouping of Forces' effort to seize Chasiv Yar,

and Anashkin may have assumed command of the SMD (and likely the Southern Grouping of Forces) to specifically oversee the effort to seize Chasiv Yar and possible subsequent offensive operations in the direction of Kostyantynivka.[48] Russian President Vladimir Putin may currently seek to reduce Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's power by balancing him with rivals, and these reported recent command changes may play into factional balancing efforts as previous command changes have.[49] Command changes do not necessarily have immediate battlefield and operational effects, however, and it will likely take some time before new commanders prove their abilities one way or another, should reports of these changes prove accurate.

NATO stated on May 2 that it is “deeply concerned” about intensifying Russian hybrid operations on NATO member territory and that these operations constitute a threat to Allied security. NATO stated that it is concerned about recent malign activities including those resulting in recent investigations and charges in Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom (UK).[50] NATO reported that these malign activities are part of intensifying Russian hybrid activities including “sabotage, acts of violence, cyber and electronic interference, disinformation campaigns” that Russia conducts directly and through proxies. NATO stated that it will continue to boost its resilience, counter hybrid threats, and ensure that member states are prepared to deter and defend against such attacks. The Norwegian Police Security Service reported on May 2 that it discovered an unspecified number of Russian intelligence agents operating in Vestland County who may have been preparing to sabotage critical infrastructure.[51] The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned the Russian Charge d’Affaires in Germany on May 3 over reports that Russian hackers under the Russian General Staff’s Main Directorate’s (GRU) control conducted cyberattacks against Germany’s Social Democratic Party as well as German logistics, defense, aerospace, and information technology (IT) companies in 2023.[52] ISW also observed recent reports that the Kremlin is pursuing hybrid operations against NATO member states using GPS jamming and sabotaging military logistics.[53]

UK Foreign Minister David Cameron announced the United Kingdom’s intent to provide long-term support for Ukraine and stated that Ukrainian forces can conduct long-range strikes within Russia with UK-provided weapons. Cameron visited Kyiv on May 2 and 3 and stated that Ukraine has a right to self-defense by striking military targets inside Russia “just as Russia is striking inside Ukraine” and that the UK has no issue if Ukraine chooses to use UK-provided weapons to conduct these strikes.[54] ISW has not yet observed Ukraine conduct strikes against military or industrial targets inside Russia using Western-provided weapons. Cameron announced that the UK intends to provide three billion pounds (about \$3.7 billion) of annual military assistance to Ukraine “for as long as is necessary.”[55] Cameron also met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal about assistance to Ukraine and began negotiations for a new agreement on a century-long UK-Ukraine relationship to build strong security, trade, scientific, technological, educational, and cultural relationships.[56]

Kremlin officials reacted to Cameron’s statement about Ukrainian strikes on May 3 with boilerplate rhetoric accusing the UK of “provocations” against Russia. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the Kremlin views Cameron’s statement as a “direct escalation.”[57] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the West of openly encouraging “Ukrainian crimes” of striking Russian territory and threatened a “crushing blow of retaliation” against Western states if Ukraine strikes the Kerch Strait Bridge (which is notably in occupied Crimea, not Russian territory).[58] Russian ultranationalist milblogger largely parroted the Russian officials’ outrage, with one milblogger calling the statement a *casus belli*.[59] Russia is extraordinarily unlikely to initiate an open war with NATO, which Russia would certainly lose at this time because Ukraine uses Western-provided weapons to strike legitimate targets in Russia. Russian officials have levied this rhetoric for months in an effort to coerce the West into self-deterrence from providing Ukraine with the weapons it needs to defend against the Russian invasion and striking legitimate Russian military targets both in occupied Ukraine and in Russia.[60] Cameron’s May 3 statement permitting the use of UK weapons in long-range strikes against Russian territory as well as the recent US decision to provide long-range ATACMS to Ukraine both directly counter this Russian effort.

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to downplay recent tension in Tajik-Russian relations in a May 3 phone call with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon discussing Russian government crackdowns against Central Asian migrants living in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack. The Kremlin stated that Putin and Rahmon “exchanged views” about cooperation to fight terrorist threats and issues regarding migration.[61] The Kremlin reported that both leaders blamed “certain forces, including those from Tajikistan” for attempting to “artificially escalate” the situation regarding labor migrants’ entry into Russia, but expressed confidence that Tajikistan and Russia could jointly suppress these efforts and maintain their “time-tested fraternal relations.” The Tajik readout of the phone conversation notably did not include such accusations.[62] Putin and Rahmon both agreed to improve ministerial and departmental

coordination regarding migration and to fight terrorism and extremism.[63] Putin's call with Rahmon was likely an attempt to downplay and control recent public complaints from senior Tajik officials regarding the treatment of Tajik citizens living in Russia and mass detentions of Tajik citizens entering Russia at airports and border checkpoints.[64]

The Uzbek Foreign Labor Migration Agency's office in Russia claimed on May 3 that Russian law enforcement did not detain Uzbek citizens at Vnukovo, Sheremetyevo, Domodedovo airports in Moscow or at border crossings in Orenburg, Samara, and Saratov oblasts as some Telegram channels claimed.[65] Human rights and migrant rights activist Valentina Chupik told Russian opposition news outlet *Agentstvo* on May 2 that starting on May 24 Russian airports detained about 4,500 migrants at Russian airports and refused a similar number from entering Russia at land border crossings. Chupik stated that about half of the detainees were Uzbek citizens while Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens each made up a quarter of the detainees.[66] Remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan appear to be declining and consist of a smaller portion of Uzbekistan's yearly GDP in comparison to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. [67]

Reuters reported on May 2 that Russian military personnel are operating at a military base currently hosting US forces in Niger.[68] A senior US defense official told *Reuters* that Russian forces are using a separate hangar from US forces at Airbase 101 near the Diori Hamani International Airport in Niamey, Niger. The official told *Reuters* that the situation is "not great" but is manageable in the short term. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated during a press conference that Russian forces are in a separate compound and do not have access to US forces or equipment and that he currently does not see a significant issue in terms of US force protection.[69] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov did not confirm or deny reports that Russian forces are present at the base but stated that Russia is "developing ties" with various African countries.[70] The American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project (CTP) reported on April 12 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps arrived in Niger and assessed that the Africa Corps' arrival will challenge US efforts to remain in Niger in the immediate term and create long-term opportunities for the Kremlin to create conventional and irregular threats that strategically pressure Europe.[71]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials continue to highlight that Russia's main goal for 2024 remains the seizure of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as Russian forces plan for their summer 2024 offensive operation.
- The first deliveries of resumed US military assistance reportedly arrived in Ukraine earlier this week, although it will likely take several additional weeks before Western weapons and ammunition arrive to frontline areas at scale.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that Russian forces in Ukraine have not significantly increased in size in recent months but that the Russian military continues to improve its fighting qualities overall despite suffering widespread degradation, especially among elite units since the start of the war.
- Ukrainian officials indicated that the Russian military will likely maintain its current personnel replacement rate and will not generate the significant number of available personnel needed to establish strategic-level reserves for larger-scale offensive operations in 2024.
- Pavlyuk stated that neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces will be able to achieve victory in Ukraine solely through attritional warfare – a consistent throughline that Ukrainian officials and military analysts have emphasized in recent months.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu issued a notably candid assessment of recent Russian advances in Ukraine and refrained from sweeping claims about the success of the Russian war effort, possibly in an attempt to temper domestic expectations about Russia's near future successes in Ukraine ahead of the summer 2024 Russian offensive operation.
- A Russian insider source, who has routinely been accurate about past Russian military command changes, claimed on May 2 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has replaced several high-level Russian commanders in recent months.
- NATO stated on May 2 that it is "deeply concerned" about intensifying Russian hybrid operations on NATO member territory and that these operations constitute a threat to Allied security.
- UK Foreign Minister David Cameron announced the United Kingdom's intent to provide long-term support for Ukraine and stated that Ukrainian forces can conduct long-range strikes within Russia with UK-provided weapons.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Kupyansk, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.

- Rostec General Director Sergei Chemezov announced that Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec is increasing its production of all variants of guided glide bombs during a May 3 meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.
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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 2, 2024

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May 2, 2024, 8pm ET

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

Ukrainian intelligence officials identified three Russian efforts to destabilize Ukraine and achieve victory, and both Ukrainian and US intelligence officials issued assessments about the battlefield situation that are consistent with prior ISW forecasts that Russian forces may take Chasiv Yar but are very unlikely to seize major Ukrainian cities. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated in an interview with the *Economist* published on May 2 that the first effort to destabilize Ukraine is comprised of military operations that aim to take advantage of Ukraine's ongoing materiel and manpower shortages. [1] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces knew that April and May 2024 would be difficult months for the Ukrainian military as existing supplies dwindled and as Ukraine waits for sufficient quantities of fresh US military assistance to filter to the frontline.[2] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces will likely continue pursuing their longtime goal of completely seizing Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and that the Russian command wants to achieve a battlefield victory before the May 9 Victory Day holiday or Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing in mid-May.[3] Skibitskyi stated that Ukraine is currently focusing on Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast, where ISW assesses that Russian forces have the best opportunity to achieve operationally-significant gains, and that while it is "probably a matter of time" before Chasiv Yar falls, Russian forces will not seize the town "today or tomorrow.[4] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces have achieved only tactical successes near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast following a recent tactical penetration northwest of the city, and ISW has noted that Russian forces remain far from any operationally-significant objective in the area and are unlikely to pose such a threat here in the near-term.[5]

Skibitskyi assessed that Russian forces will likely begin an offensive effort towards Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts at the end of May or start of June 2024 but that Russian forces will not be able to take Kharkiv or Sumy cities. Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces have currently concentrated roughly 35,000 personnel in the international border area and plan to concentrate a total of 50,000 to 70,000 personnel for this effort, presumably before the start of the offensive operation.[6] Skibitskyi stated that this grouping will be insufficient for achieving anything beyond localized gains, consistent with ISW's assessments that Russian forces would likely struggle to take Kharkiv City but that Russian offensive operations in the area would draw and fix Ukrainian forces from other parts of the frontline.[7] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on April 28 that Ukrainian forces are monitoring the increased number of Russian forces regrouping in the Kharkiv direction, likely referring to Belgorod Oblast, and that Ukrainian forces have reinforced defensive positions in the "most threatened" areas with additional artillery and tank units.[8]

US Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines stated to US Senate Armed Services Committee on Global Threats on May 2 that Russian President Vladimir Putin believes that domestic and international trends are in his favor and views his personal staying power, the state of Russia's economy, and Russian rearmament efforts as advantageous compared to the current challenges facing Ukraine.[9] Haines stated that Russian forces are capable of achieving tactical breakthroughs, particularly in Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts, although she did not specify any operational direction.[10] Haines stated that Putin is portraying Russia as revitalizing its defense industrial base (DIB) and portraying Russia's artillery ammunition and missile production as increasing while Western production struggles to meet Ukraine's needs. Haines stated that Putin's "increasingly aggressive tactics," such as strikes against Ukrainian energy and critical infrastructure, intend to signal to Ukrainians that continuing to fight will only increase the damage to Ukraine with no clear path to victory. Haines stated that Russian forces are also striking Ukrainian military logistics to interdict supplies to the front, slow defense production, and further pressure Ukraine to consider pathways out of the war, such as through negotiations, even though the Kremlin has shown no willingness to make any concessions in good-faith negotiations.

Skibitskyi noted that the Kremlin views information operations as a second line of effort to defeat Ukraine and that current Russian information operations heavily focus on undermining Ukrainian mobilization efforts and the legitimacy of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

[11] Kremlin-affiliated former Ukrainian MP Viktor Medvedchuk notably supported the Kremlin's informational efforts to delegitimize Zelensky on May 2 and falsely claimed that Zelensky will not be a legitimate president starting on May 21.[12] Ukraine would have held its presidential election on March 31 and would have begun a new presidential term on May 20 if Russia had not illegally invaded Ukraine.[13] Ukraine's constitution permits postponing elections and allows a sitting president to continue to serve after the designated end of his term under martial law, and Zelensky's decision not to hold elections given Ukraine's ongoing existential defensive war is fully in accord with the Ukrainian constitution.[14] Ukrainian officials have warned that Russian actors intend to intensify an existing information operation called "Maidan 3" in May 2024 to spread doubts about Zelensky's legitimacy as president, specifically among Ukrainian military personnel.[15] Medvedchuk is a key ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and was rumored to be a candidate for the head of the Russian-controlled Ukrainian government that the Kremlin sought to establish following the envisioned quick regime change in Ukraine in 2022.[16] Several prominent Russian milbloggers dismissed Medvedchuk as an irrelevant information actor for failing to properly organize a pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine, however.[17] Ukrainian officials have warned that "Maidan 3" will peak around late May 2024, and former Ukrainian officials who have sided with the Kremlin, like Medvedchuk, may become increasingly involved with this information operation in the coming weeks to try to foment further internal Ukrainian division.[18]

Skibitskyi stressed that Russia's third line of effort to achieve victory in Ukraine is an ongoing campaign to diplomatically isolate Ukraine.[19] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated in an interview with *Foreign Policy* published on May 1 that Russia believes that it still can litigate Ukraine's future on the battlefield and urged the West to pursue a strategy that impresses upon Russia an understanding that Ukraine is a part of the West.[20] Delays in US security assistance have placed heavy constraints on Ukrainian forces along the frontline, and Kuleba noted that a window before the arrival of critically needed air defense assets and artillery ammunition from the US will allow Russian forces to cause further damage through drone and missile strikes and pursue tactical gains on the front.[21] The Kremlin has routinely engaged in rhetorical efforts to prompt the West into self-deterring from providing military and other support to Ukraine over fears of escalation, and the Kremlin has previously intensified offensive operations alongside debates in the West about support for Ukraine to strengthen Western defeatism.[22] The Kremlin may have expected delays in US and Western security assistance to persist, and the recent passage of the US supplemental aid bill may prompt the Kremlin to recalibrate its efforts to compel the West into self-deterrence. Kuleba also noted that Russia inherited relationships with many non-Western states from the Soviet Union and is better positioned than Ukraine to engage these countries.[23] The Kremlin has increasingly cast Russia as the leader of the "world majority," a group of countries including post-Soviet and non-Western states that Russia intends to rally to oppose the West, and Russian officials may seek to intensify this line of outreach as Ukraine seeks to involve post-Soviet and non-Western states in the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland in June 2024.[24]

Skibitskyi stated that he does not see a way for Ukraine to win solely on the battlefield and that the Ukrainian liberation of all occupied territory would not necessarily end the war.[25] Skibitskyi stated that wars like the one in Ukraine only end with treaties and that both Russia and Ukraine are competing for the most favorable position ahead of potential talks that could begin as early as the second half of 2025.[26] Kuleba added that the only way to compel Russia to consider meaningful negotiations is through military operations or the creation of a coalition of countries with the same values and approach to a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine.[27] Russian efforts to diplomatically isolate Ukraine aim to constrain critical provisions of consistent and timely security assistance to the Ukrainian military and degrade Ukraine's ability to form a bloc of partners that can support Zelensky's peace formula.

The US Department of State (DoS) announced on May 1 that it has determined that Russian forces are violating the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory. The US DoS stated that it made a determination under the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 (CBW Act) that Russian forces have used chloropicrin and riot control agents (RCAs) against Ukrainian forces in Ukraine in violation of the CWC. [28] Chloropicrin is a pesticide and lung damaging agent, and Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russian forces are increasingly equipping grenades with chloropicrin.[29] Russian forces have reportedly extensively used chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile (CS) gas, a type of RCA, in grenades dropped from drones on Ukrainian positions throughout the frontline.[30] The US DoS noted that Russian forces likely use chemical weapons in an effort to dislodge Ukrainian forces from fortified positions and achieve tactical gains.[31] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov denied the US DoS determination and claimed on May 2 that Russia is abiding by its obligations to the CWC.[32] ISW

previously observed the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade acknowledge in a now-deleted post that elements of the brigade deliberately used K-51 grenades with CS gas on Ukrainian positions near Krynyk in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast in December 2023.[33] The US DoS also announced sanctions against the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) Radiological, Chemical, and Biological (RCB) Defense Forces; the state-owned Scientific Research Institute of Applied Acoustics; and the MoD's 48th Central Scientific and Research Institute as well as four Russian companies for their involvement in the development and use of chemical weapons.[34]

Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report on May 2 in which it confirmed that Russian forces have executed at least 15 surrendering Ukrainian soldiers since December 2023.

[35] HRW reported that combat footage shows that Russian forces likely executed an additional six surrendering Ukrainian soldiers since December 2023.[36] HRW noted that in one case Russian commanders explicitly ordered Russian forces to execute Ukrainian soldiers instead of letting them surrender.[37] 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 Conflict.[38]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Tula Oblast Governor and known Wagner Group-affiliate Alexei Dyumin on May 2, further indicating that Putin may be seeking to reduce Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's power by balancing him with rivals. Dyumin notably briefed Putin about Tula Oblast's contributions to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the presidential estate in Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow Oblast.[39] Dyumin focused on three topics: support and housing for participants of Russian military personnel fighting in Ukraine, improvements to the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and improving the medical system in Tula Oblast. Dyumin claimed that the Tula Oblast administration is cooperating with the Russian MoD to fully equip Russian military units with necessary materiel identified by the local commanders. Dyumin also boasted that Tula Oblast opened one of the first training centers for drone operators in cooperation with the Russian MoD to support the Russian MoD and other security agencies' interests. Dyumin emphasized the Tula Oblast administration's commitment to producing weapons and supporting Russia's industrial base (DIB). Dyumin welcomed Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry Denis Manturov's proposal for the federal government to assist with the construction of additional DIB enterprises and bragged about Russia's increasing DIB production capabilities. Dyumin's brief appeared to be an attempt to win Putin's favor following Dyumin's notable fall from Putin's grace during Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny in late June 2023.[40] Dyumin repeatedly sided with Prigozhin throughout 2022 and 2023 reportedly in an attempt to facilitate firings within the Russian MoD and possibly hoping to replace Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu himself.[41]

Putin likely deliberately publicized his meeting with Dyumin following the high-profile arrest of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24 and before the presidential inauguration on May 7, possibly to punish the Shoigu-led MoD for failing to accomplish the Kremlin's military goals. The Putin-Dyumin meeting generated a significant amount of discourse within the Russian information space, with numerous milbloggers and political commentators pointing out that the meeting occurred between Ivanov's arrest and the expected government reshuffle following the inauguration.[42] Russian insider sources speculated that the Kremlin may appoint Dyumin to a new role involving the Russian DIB, such as deputy chairman of the Russian Military Industrial Commission.[43] These speculations may be the result of Dyumin's hyperfocus on DIB and mention of Manturov during his meeting with Putin. Russian insider sources also interpreted Shoigu's May 1 statement that Russia needs to increase the volume and quality of weapons and military equipment to "maintain the required pace of the offensive" during the meeting at the Joint Headquarters of the "Special Military Operation" on the night of May 1 as a direct attack on certain Russian political figures.[44] (Prigozhin similarly justified Wagner Group's slow and bloody advance in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast in winter 2023 with claims of ammunition shortages that he colorfully blamed on Shoigu.) One political commentator claimed that Shoigu is trying to shift the blame for his military and DIB failures onto Manturov and the CEO of Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, Sergei Chemezov. Another Russian insider source similarly claimed on May 1 that Shoigu heavily criticized Manturov, Rostec, and Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev in response to Ivanov's arrest.[45] Shoigu reportedly had a particularly close relationship with Ivanov and that Ivanov's arrest alongside the sudden reemergence to prominence of Dyumin may indicate that the Kremlin is dissatisfied with Shoigu's performance.[46] One Russian source, however, assessed that Shoigu's dismissal is unlikely in 2024.[47]

The Putin-Dyumin meeting suggests that Putin is likely the responsible decision-maker behind Ivanov's arrest. ISW has routinely observed that Putin regularly rotates officials and military commanders in and out of favor in hopes of incentivizing different factions to strive to accomplish his objectives.[48] ISW has also observed that Putin routinely marks a shift in his favor by offering high-profile meetings with members of the opposing faction or dismissing military commanders. Putin, for

example, humiliated Dyumin in August 2023 by reportedly cancelling their one-on-one meeting and ordering him to publicly escort Shoigu at an event.[49] ISW assessed that this gesture signified a notable victory for Shoigu's circle within the Russian MoD and marked the confirmation of Dyumin's fall from Putin's favor.[50] Russian officials also arrested and dismissed some officials and commanders following Prigozhin's mutiny in summer 2023.[51]

Putin awarded the rank of lieutenant general to several Russian commanders on May 2. Putin promoted deputy commander of the Eastern Grouping of Forces (deployed in western Donetsk Oblast and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) Oleg Luchansky, the commander of the 68th Army Corps (Eastern Military District [EMD]) Vitaly Podlesny, and head of the Russian General Staff's Operational Training Department Fanil Sarvarov to lieutenant general.[52]

Recent Russian government crackdowns against Central Asian migrants living in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack appear to be straining Kyrgyz-Russian relations in addition to Tajik-Russian relations. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) warned Kyrgyz citizens on May 2 to temporarily refrain from visiting Russia while Russia continues to conduct increased security measures and enhance border control measures.[53] The Kyrgyz MFA additionally stated that Russia did not inform Kyrgyzstan about recent mass refusals of Kyrgyz citizens entering Russia. The Russian MFA has not responded to the Kyrgyz MFA's statement at the time of this publication. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed in an April 30 phone call with Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin that Russia has not taken measures against specific ethnicities and religious minorities, which Muhriddin called false.[54] ISW has observed increased crackdowns targeting Russian indigenous and migrant Muslim communities, especially Central Asian migrants, following the Crocus City Hall attack and continues to assess that Russia has no intention of scaling back crackdowns.[55]

The Georgian parliament passed Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" law in its second reading on May 1 amid continued protests against the law in Tbilisi.[56] Russian opposition news outlets widely reported that the 83 of 150 Georgian parliament members voted for the bill – the same number of members who supported the bill in its first reading on April 17 since the Georgian opposition refused to participate in both votes.[57] The Georgian parliament is expected to vote on May 17 on the third and final reading of the bill, after which the bill will go to the Georgian president for the final signature.[58] Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili has stated her intent to veto the bill, but the BBC noted that the ruling Georgian Dream party has sufficient numbers to overrule that veto.[59] The bill, which was first proposed by the Georgian Dream party in 2023 and quickly withdrawn due to large protests, would require non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets that receive foreign funding amounting to over 20 percent of their annual income to register with the government.[60] The bill resembles Russia's foreign agent law, which the Kremlin has used to crack down against independent media and opposition organizations, consolidate control over the domestic information space, and eliminate domestic objections to the Kremlin.[61] Georgian opposition figures and Western officials have expressed concern that the Georgian government could also utilize the bill to target and justify domestic repression and that its passage blocks Georgia's path to joining the European Union (EU).[62] US Ambassador to Georgia Robin Dunnigan stated on May 2 that senior Georgian leaders recently rejected a US invitation to discuss the US–Georgian "strategic partnership and any concerns with US assistance."[63] Former Georgian Prime Minister and founder of the Georgian Dream party Bidzina Ivanishvili recently reiterated a series of standard anti-Western and pseudohistorical Kremlin narratives during his first public speech since announcing his return Ivanishvili's decision to rhetorically align with Russia against the West indicates that Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream party likely intend to purposefully derail long-term Georgian efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration, which plays into continued Russian hybrid operations to divide, destabilize, and weaken Georgia.[64]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian intelligence officials identified three Russian efforts to destabilize Ukraine and achieve victory, and both Ukrainian and US intelligence officials issued assessments about the battlefield situation that are consistent with prior ISW forecasts that Russian forces may take Chasiv Yar but are very unlikely to seize major Ukrainian cities.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi assessed that Russian forces will likely begin an offensive effort towards Kharkiv and Sumy oblasts at the end of May or start of June 2024 but that Russian forces will not be able to take Kharkiv or Sumy cities.
- Skibitskyi noted that the Kremlin views information operations as a second line of effort to defeat Ukraine and that current Russian information operations heavily focus on undermining Ukrainian mobilization efforts and the legitimacy of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

- Skibitskyi stressed that Russia's third line of effort to achieve victory in Ukraine is an ongoing campaign to diplomatically isolate Ukraine.
- The US Department of State (DoS) announced on May 1 that it has determined that Russian forces are violating the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Tula Oblast Governor and known Wagner Group-affiliate Alexei Dyumin on May 2, further indicating that Putin may be seeking to reduce Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's power by balancing him with rivals.
- Putin likely deliberately publicized his meeting with Dyumin following the high-profile arrest of Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24 and before the presidential inauguration on May 7, possibly to punish the Shoigu-led MoD for failing to accomplish the Kremlin's military goals.
- The Putin-Dyumin meeting suggests that Putin is likely the responsible decision-maker behind Ivanov's arrest.
- Recent Russian government crackdowns against Central Asian migrants living in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack appear to be straining Kyrgyz-Russian relations in addition to Tajik-Russian relations.
- The Georgian parliament passed Georgia's Russian-style "foreign agents" law in its second reading on May 1 amid continued protests against the law in Tbilisi.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances west of Avdiivka.
- The Russian military may have recruited numerous prisoners with convictions for serious crimes in fall of 2023.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 1, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

May 1, 2024, 7:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on May 1. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian military is reportedly redeploying elements of the 76th and 7th airborne (VDV) divisions from Zaporizhia Oblast in the direction of eastern Ukraine, likely to reinforce and intensify ongoing offensive operations. Select Russian and Ukrainian sources claimed that elements of the Russian 76th and 7th airborne (VDV) divisions that have been deployed to the Robotyne area in western Zaporizhia Oblast since the height of the Ukrainian summer 2023 counteroffensive are redeploying to new directions, but disagreed on the units redeploying and the areas to which these elements are redeploying.[1] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on May 1 that the Russian military command recently decided to redeploy at least a battalion of the 76th VDV Division from the Orikhiv direction (western Zaporizhia Oblast) to the general Luhansk Oblast frontline or the Kramatorsk direction (the Bakhmut direction).[2] A Russian milblogger, who has an avowed bias against VDV and "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, claimed on April 29 that the Russian military command decided to redeploy elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions from the "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces (deployed in east [left] bank Kherson Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast) to other unspecified directions.[3] The milblogger later claimed on May 1 that the Russian command decided to transfer elements of the 76th VDV division to relieve elements of the 104th VDV Division near the limited Ukrainian tactical bridgehead in Krynyk, Kherson Oblast.[4] The milblogger has not yet offered any updates on the claimed redeployment of elements of the 7th VDV division. **ISW has not yet observed confirmation that elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions have redeployed to other directions, though these Russian and Ukrainian reports are significant and any VDV redeployments from Zaporizhia Oblast towards eastern Ukraine warrant closer study in the coming days.**

Russian forces notably redeployed elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions from the Lyman and Kherson directions to the Robotyne area in mid-summer 2023, and this successful redeployment reinforced Russia's defense at a critical time to prevent Ukrainian forces from breaching the Russian defense in the area.[5] These redeployed elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions conducted counterattacks that demonstrated that the 76th and 7th VDV divisions were relatively more combat effective than other Russian forces at the time, and these Russian elements have likely reconstituted to some degree during low-intensity Russian offensive operations in the Robotyne area since fall 2023. Russian forces have seized most of Robotyne in recent weeks, and the Russian military

command may have decided that the likely combat effective elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions would be more useful elsewhere.[6]

The Russian military may seek to redeploy elements of the 76th or 7th VDV division or both to eastern Ukraine to support Russia's offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and to capitalize on the current window of vulnerability before American military aid begins reaching the frontline at scale. Russian forces are currently attempting to exploit a tactical penetration northwest of Avdiivka to achieve a wider breach in the area and are intensifying offensive operations to seize the operationally significant town of Chasiv Yar.[7] The Russian military command may intend to introduce elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions as significant reinforcements to either of these efforts in pursuit of operationally significant gains before the arrival of US security assistance allows Ukrainian forces to slow Russian advances and stabilize the frontline.[8] Russian forces in the Avdiivka direction have currently established a relatively cohesive grouping of forces comprised mainly of elements of the Central Military District (CMD) and the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) 1st Army Corps (AC), though these forces are likely attrited from conducting intense offensive operations over the past several months, and elements of the 76th and 7th VDV could serve as an exploitation force to press on with attacks in the area.[9] Russian forces have established a less cohesive grouping of forces in the Bakhmut direction that is notably comprised of elements of several VDV divisions and brigades, and redeployments of elements of the 76th and 7th to this area could reinforce the ongoing offensive operation to seize Chasiv Yar.[10] The Russian military command could deploy elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions to the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line where Russian forces have resumed offensive operations along the entire line, but Russian forces appear to be attempting to consolidate this entire sector under the responsibility of the Moscow Military District (MMD), and redeployments of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions may not be as useful in this effort relative to more intensive operations currently underway in Donetsk Oblast.[11] Any redeployment of these elements would offer Russian forces the opportunity to intensify offensive operations and place Ukrainian forces under increasing pressure regardless of the location. ISW offers no assessment of which area is the most likely area where VDV forces may redeploy, if they redeploy at all. ISW will continue to monitor reports about the possible redeployment of elements of the 76th and 7th VDV divisions as it poses a significant risk to Ukraine's ability to slow ongoing Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in the coming weeks ahead of the arrival of US security assistance.

Ukrainian forces struck an oil refinery in Ryazan Oblast for the second time in less than a month on the night of April 30 to May 1. Ukrainian outlets *Suspilne* and *RBK-Ukraine* reported that sources in Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that the GUR conducted a drone strike on the Rosneft oil refinery in Ryazan City.[12] Ukrainian and Russian sources posted footage of a fire at the refinery.[13] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces shot down one drone over Ryazan Oblast.[14] Ryazan Oblast governor Pavel Malkov acknowledged that a drone struck Ryazan Oblast, however, but did not specify any damage. [15] Ukrainian forces first struck the Ryazan oil refinery on the night of March 12 to 13.[16] Ukrainian strikes within Russia are reportedly forcing Russian forces to take additional defensive measures. [17] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces have begun to withdraw up to 43 operational-tactical and army aircraft from forward air bases, likely out of fear of Ukrainian drone and long-range high-precision strikes.[18] Mashovets stated that the total number of Russian aircraft deployed at frontline air bases has decreased from 303–305 aircraft to 280–283 aircraft.

Russian state-run news outlets appear to be amplifying anti-Western rhetoric from former Georgian Prime Minister and founder of the Georgian Dream party Bidzina Ivanishvili and are negatively portraying Georgians protesting against Georgia's "foreign agents" bill, likely in an attempt to destabilize and divide Georgia. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Georgian service *Radio Tavisupleba* reported on May 1 that Russian state-run news outlets *Rossiya-1*, *NTV*, and *Channel One (Perviy Kanal)* are amplifying anti-Western rhetoric from Ivanishvili's April 29 speech.[19] ISW previously reported that Ivanishvili reiterated a series of standard anti-Western and pseudohistorical Kremlin narratives during his first public speech since announcing his return to Georgian public politics in December 2023.[20] *Radio Tavisupleba* reported that Russian state media framed the protestors as "aggressive" and "radicals" who attacked Georgian law enforcement while celebrating Ivanishvili's criticisms of the West.[21] Kremlin newswire *TASS* similarly seized on allegations of violence and "mass arrests" and claimed that protestors "provoked" Georgian security forces.[22] Russian state media's focus on Ivanishvili's statements and their negative portrayal of protestors is likely part of ongoing efforts to destabilize, divide, and weaken domestic Georgian politics. The Kremlin has routinely attempted to portray Ukraine's and other post-Soviet countries' politics as chaotic in an attempt to destabilize target states and make them more susceptible to Russian influence or outright attack.[23]

The United Nations (UN) and Western organizations continue to demonstrate how North Korea and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are directly and indirectly helping Russia's war effort. Reuters reported on April 29 that the UN North Korean sanctions monitoring panel issued a report to the UN Security Council (UNSC) confirming that Russian forces used a North Korean Hwasong-11 ballistic missile in a strike on Kharkiv City on January 2, 2024.[24] The panel reportedly noted that Russia's use of North Korean missiles violated the 2006 UN arms embargo on North Korea. Russia vetoed an annual UNSC resolution extending the monitoring panel on March 28, and the panel's mandate expired on April 30.[25] The *Economist* reported on April 29 that the PRC is providing Russia with semiconductors, navigation equipment, jet parts, ball bearings, computer numerical controlled tools, and other dual-use equipment supporting Russian arms production. [26] The *Economist*, citing data from the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS), reported that Russia often imports goods through a complex system of shell companies, many of which can be traced back to the PRC. The *Economist* noted that Russian imports of goods from the PRC appeared to surge following Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with PRC President Xi Jinping in Moscow in March 2023. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on May 1 that Russian imports of dual-use items from the PRC have helped Russia significantly increase its defense industrial production and that 70 percent of Russia's machine tools and 90 percent of its microelectronics come from the PRC.[27] ISW previously reported about the recent uptick in public meetings between Russian, PRC, North Korean, Iranian, and Belarussian officials that underscores these countries' deepening mutual partnership aimed at confronting the West.[28]

Russian insider sources speculated that the criminal investigation into Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov may also implicate another deputy defense minister, Rustam Tsalikov. A Russian insider source claimed on April 26 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) summoned Tsalikov for questioning, and later claimed on April 27 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may force Tsalikov into retirement and that authorities may bring criminal charges against Tsalikov in relation to Ivanov's bribery case, for which Ivanov was arrested on April 24.[29] The insider source claimed that Tsalikov is the third highest-ranking member of the Russian MoD only behind Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and that Tsalikov is a close ally of Shoigu like Ivanov. The UK MoD published a corroborating report on May 1 citing unspecified Russian sources.[30] ISW is unable to confirm the Russian claims, however. The Russian MoD has not commented on reports of an investigation involving Tsalikov and notably featured Tsalikov visiting a Russian drone production enterprise on its Telegram channel on April 30. [31]

Bloomberg reported that four sanctioned Russian oil tankers have changed their names and are sailing under new flags.[32] Bloomberg reported on April 30 that tankers from Sovcomflot, Russia's state-owned oil tanker company, renamed four of its sanctioned vessels: the *NS Columbus* to the *Kemerovo*, the *NS Bravo* to the *Belgorod*, the *NS Captain* to the *Kaliningrad*, and the *NS Creation* to the *Krasnoyarsk*. Bloomberg reported that these ships are now flying Russian flags after previously sailing with Gabonese flags. The US Treasury Department sanctioned Sovcomflot and 14 of its vessels in February 2024, and Bloomberg reported that it is common for sanctioned vessels to change their names to distance themselves from international sanctions even though each ship has a permanent identification number that remains the same despite a name change. It is unclear why these ships changed their names and flags to highlight their connection with Russia, and this decision seems counterproductive if these vessels hope to distance themselves from international sanctions against Russia.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military is reportedly redeploying elements of the 76th and 7th airborne (VDV) divisions from Zaporizhia Oblast in the direction of eastern Ukraine, likely to reinforce and intensify ongoing offensive operations.
- The Russian military may seek to redeploy elements of the 76th or 7th VDV division or both to eastern Ukraine to support Russia's offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and to capitalize on the current window of vulnerability before American military aid begins reaching the frontline at scale.
- Ukrainian forces struck an oil refinery in Ryazan Oblast for the second time in less than a month on the night of April 30 to May 1.
- Russian state-run news outlets appear to be amplifying anti-Western rhetoric from former Georgian Prime Minister and founder of the Georgian Dream party Bidzina Ivanishvili and are negatively portraying Georgians protesting against Georgia's "foreign agents" bill, likely in an attempt to destabilize and divide Georgia.

- The United Nations (UN) and Western organizations continue to demonstrate how North Korea and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are directly and indirectly helping Russia's war effort.
- Russian insider sources speculated that the criminal investigation into Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov may also implicate another deputy defense minister, Rustam Tsalikov.
- Bloomberg reported that four sanctioned Russian oil tankers have changed their names and are sailing under new flags.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian authorities continue recruiting convicted criminals to fight in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 30, 2024

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

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

April 30, 2024, 7:10pm ET

Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances in the Avdiivka area on April 30 for the first time in several days, while Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces conducted several more attacks in the Bakhmut-Chasiv Yar direction than near Avdiivka. The Ukrainian General Staff's morning and evening reports on April 30 stated that Ukrainian forces repelled a total of 47 Russian attacks in the Avdiivka direction and 57 Russian attacks in the Bakhmut direction throughout the day, notably a much higher number of attacks in the Chasiv Yar direction than Ukrainian sources have recently reported out on.[1] One day's worth of reporting is not sufficient to establish a pattern, but it may suggest that Russian forces are somewhat slowing down the rate of attacks around Avdiivka while re-committing to offensive pushes around Chasiv Yar, as ISW recently forecasted they would.[2] Russian forces have focused on building on tactical success near Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka) and Novokalynove (north of Avdiivka) since around April 20, but the rate of confirmed advances appears to have slowed as of April 30. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced 2.7 kilometers wide and 1.52 kilometers deep north of Novokalynove; in southern Keramik (north of Avdiivka); and in an area up to 1.75 kilometers wide and 1.15 kilometers deep northwest of Ocheretyne in the direction of Novooleksandrivka.[3] Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces advanced west of Semenivka and Berdychi (both northwest of Avdiivka). [4] ISW has not observed visual evidence of any of these claims. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces operating near Ocheretyne are 13 kilometers from the T-0504 (Pokrovsk-Kostyantynivka) highway, which is consistent with ISW's assessed Russian advances in the area. [5] Fighting also continued northwest of Avdiivka near Arkhangelske, Sokil, and Solovyove west of Avdiivka near Umanske, and southwest of Avdiivka near Netaylove.[6] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps [DNR AC]) and 35th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) are operating near Novokalynove and Keramik; elements of the 30th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd CAA, CMD) are attacking toward Novooleksandrivka; elements of the 27th Motorized Rifle Division (2nd CAA) are operating near Solovyove, Berdychi, and Semenivka; elements of the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st CAA) are operating near Berdychi; and elements of the 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st DNR AC) are operating west of Orlivka.[7]

Russian forces may decide to push from their salient north of Avdiivka towards the Toretsk area to complement Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, which would likely require Russian forces to conduct a tactical pause to concentrate forces for such a drive. Mashovets stated that Russian forces may focus their efforts on the Stara Mykolaivka-Sukha Balka line (north of the Ochertyne-Keramik line and southwest of Toretsk) instead of northwest of Ocheretyne as Russian forces are already struggling to defend the flanks of their salient near Ocheretyne.[8] ISW recently assessed that Russian forces may decide to advance north from their tactical penetration near Ocheretyne along the H-20 (Donetsk City-Kostyantynivka) highway to pressure Ukrainian forces defending in the Toretsk area and possibly threaten the operational rear of the Ukrainian defense in and west of Chasiv Yar.[9] Chasiv Yar is an operationally significant objective as it would provide Russian forces with a staging ground to launch offensive operations against Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka, which form the fortress belt of four major cities in Donetsk City. Russian forces would likely require a longer pause to reinforce existing units and redeploy additional forces to the Ocheretyne area should they choose to attempt to advance northward to the Toretsk area, however. Mashovets stated that the Russian Central Grouping of Forces (currently responsible for the Avdiivka

area) has created a tactical reserve of three small infantry regiments in the Avdiivka direction, and ISW previously assessed that Russian forces have been establishing operational- and strategic-level reserves likely to support an anticipated spring-summer offensive effort.[10]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a short-range MGM-140 ATACMS strike against targets in occupied Crimea on the night of April 29 to 30. Crimean occupation administration head Sergei Aksyonov claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted an ATACMS strike against Simferopol and that Russian forces downed the missiles.[11] Aksyonov claimed that undetonated cluster munitions scattered in the area after air defenses downed the missiles but did not specify if the strike caused any damage. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces launched between 12 and 15 ATACMS missiles targeting Simferopol and the Dzhankoi airfield but claimed that Russian air defenses downed all the missiles.[12] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses destroyed six ATACMS missiles in an unspecified area, likely referring to occupied Crimea.[13] Russia opposition outlet *Astra* reported that Ukrainian missiles, presumably ATACMS missiles, struck facilities of the Russian 31st Air Defense Division in Chornomorsk and Saky raions and the Dzhankoi airfield, causing a fire and wounding several Russian servicemen. [14] Ukrainian officials have not responded to the reported strike, and ISW cannot independently verify Russian claims about the strike.

Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin expressed outrage over Russian authorities' treatment of Central Asian migrants, particularly Tajik citizens, indicating that increased Russian efforts to control migrants living in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack are continuing to strain Tajik-Russian relations. Muhriddin stated in an April 30 phone call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Russian authorities are violating Tajik citizens' rights and freedoms in Russia and noted that such treatment of Tajik citizens in Russia does not comply with the Tajik-Russian Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Relations and Allied Cooperation treaties.[15] Muhriddin called Lavrov's claim that Russia has not taken measures against specific ethnicities or religious minorities following the Crocus City Hall attack false and stated that Russian authorities have had an "exclusively" negative reaction to Tajik citizens. ISW observed increased crackdowns against Russian indigenous and migrant Muslim communities after the Crocus City Hall attack, including crackdowns against Tajik migrants.[16] The *BBC News Russian Service* reported on March 27 that Russian authorities have initiated a significantly increased number of criminal cases for migration law violations since the Crocus attack, particularly against Tajik citizens. [17] The Russian MFA claimed that Lavrov explained to Muhriddin that Russian authorities are temporarily increasing checks on foreigners attempting to enter Russia in an effort to prevent terrorism following the Crocus City Hall attack.[18] The Russian MFA notably did not report Muhriddin's criticisms of Russian authorities' treatment of Tajik citizens in Russia, indicating that Russia is likely attempting to downplay the current rift in Tajik-Russian relations but has no intention of scaling back crackdowns.

Former Georgian Prime Minister and founder of the Georgian Dream political party Bidzina Ivanishvili reiterated a series of standard Kremlin information operations during his first public speech since announcing his return to Georgian public politics in December 2023. Ivanishvili claimed during a Georgina Dream rally in support of Georgia's "foreign agents" bill on April 29 that Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) orchestrated Georgia's pro-democracy and pro-Western 2003 Rose Revolution and installed pro-Western governments that held office between 2004 to 2012.[19] Ivanishvili claimed that Western influence and control over Georgia resulted in the persecution of innocent Georgians and that the West ordered and directed all the policies of pro-Western Georgian governments.[20] Ivanishvili claimed that he attempted to free Georgia from Western control during his time as prime minister and returned to politics in order to finish this work. Ivanishvili accused the "global war party," which he characterized as unspecified Western actors that have a decisive influence over NATO and the European Union (EU), as only seeing Georgia and Ukraine as "cannon fodder" against Russia and forced Georgia and Ukraine into confrontations with Russia in 2008, 2014, and 2022. The "foreign agents" bill, which the Georgian Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee recently approved in its second reading amid continued protests against the bill, will require NGOs that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources to register as "an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power."[21] The Kremlin made similar baseless claims that the West controls Ukraine and orchestrated "color revolutions" in several post-Soviet countries in an effort to delegitimize pro-Western governments in post-Soviet countries and question the sovereignty of those countries.[22] The Kremlin also routinely accuses the West of using Ukraine as a "proxy" in what the Kremlin views as its long-term, existential confrontation with the West and NATO.[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances in the Avdiivka area on April 30 for the first time in several days, while Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces conducted several more attacks in the Bakhmut-Chasiv Yar direction than near Avdiivka.
- Russian forces may decide to push from their salient north of Avdiivka towards the Toretsk area to complement Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, which would likely require Russian forces to conduct a tactical pause to concentrate forces for such a drive.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a short-range MGM-140 ATACMS strike against targets in occupied Crimea on the night of April 29 to 30.
- Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin expressed outrage over Russian authorities' treatment of Central Asian migrants, particularly Tajik citizens, indicating that increased Russian efforts to control migrants living in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack are continuing to strain Tajik-Russian relations.
- Former Georgian Prime Minister and founder of the Georgian Dream political party Bidzina Ivanishvili reiterated a series of standard Kremlin information operations during his first public speech since announcing his return to Georgian public politics in December 2023.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Chasiv Yar, and Robotyne.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on April 30 that Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov and First Deputy Defense Minister Ruslan Tsalikov inspected a drone testing ground in an unspecified area of occupied Ukraine.
- An investigation by Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* implicates Kremlin-appointed Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova and her sister in the deportation of special needs Ukrainian adults to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 29, 2024

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

April 29, 2024, 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 12:30pm ET on April 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces secured additional marginal tactical gains northwest and southwest of Avdiivka as of April 29, but have not made significant advances in the Avdiivka direction over the last 24 hours. Geolocated footage published on April 28 and 29 indicates that Russian forces advanced in western and northeastern Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka), along the rail line to the northwestern outskirts of Ocheretyne, and in Netaylove (southwest of Avdiivka).^[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also advanced northwest of Ocheretyne towards Novoleksandrivka in an area 1.2 kilometers wide and 1.7 kilometers deep.^[2] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced 400–450 meters west of the C051801 (Orlivka-Netaylove) highway between Netaylove and Umanske (west of Avdiivka).^[3] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claimed Russian advances, however. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officially stated that Russian forces seized Semenivka (west of Avdiivka) following Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi's April 28 statement that Ukrainian forces withdrew from the settlement.^[4] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are conducting clearing operations in Berdychi (west of Avdiivka), and Ocheretyne, Novokalyнове, and Keramik (both northwest of Avdiivka and east of Ocheretyne).^[5] Fighting also continued northwest of Avdiivka near Kalynove, Arkhanhelske, Novobakhmutivka, Solovyove, Sokil, Novopokrovskie, and Novoselivka Persha; and west of Avdiivka near Orlivka and Umanske.^[6]

Russian forces have the opportunity to choose among multiple tactical directions for future offensive drives near Avdiivka, but it remains unclear where they will focus their efforts in the near future. Russian milbloggers speculated about which objectives Russian forces may pursue northwest of Avdiivka but offered no clear consensus. Several prominent milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are conducting offensive operations near Keramik to advance towards Arkhanhelske but are also trying to advance west from the Ocheretyne area towards Sokil and southwest towards the Novoprokowske-Novoselivka Persha line.^[7] ISW continues to assess that the continued Russian stabilization of their salient northwest of Avdiivka presents the Russian command with a choice of either continuing to push west towards its reported operational objective in Pokrovsk or trying to drive northwards to conduct possible complementary offensive operations with the Russian effort around Chasiv Yar.^[8]

Investigations by both Ukrainian news agencies and Russian opposition outlets suggest that Russia is denying the legal guardians of forcibly deported and adopted Ukrainian children the ability to repatriate these children, further undermining the Kremlin's claims that the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is a necessary humanitarian endeavor. BBC Panorama and Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* published investigations in November 2023 that detailed how "A Just Russia" Party leader Sergey Mironov and his wife Inna Varlamova deported a ten-month girl and a two-year old boy from an orphanage in Kherson Oblast in fall 2022.^[9] Mironov and Varlamova adopted the girl and changed her name, surname, and birthplace on her new Russian birth certificate, and the whereabouts of the boy remain unknown. Ukrainian outlet TSN posted an investigation on April 28, 2024, that further details the circumstances of Mironov's adoption of the girl and includes footage of Mironov and his wife attending a baptism for the child.^[10] TSN alleged that Mironov and Varlamova brought both the girl and the boy to Moscow Oblast, but that the boy was ill and that Mironov and Varlamova abandoned him, which is why his whereabouts remain unknown.^[11] TSN also reported that the Ukrainian Ombudsman's Office found that the girl, who is now nearly three years old, actually has a legal guardian and a younger sister living in Greece and noted that the girls' guardian is asking for her return.^[12] Russian opposition outlet *TV Dozhd* similarly reported on April 27 that a Russian woman adopted a deported six-year-old boy from occupied Donetsk Oblast and changed his name and surname, which made it harder for journalists and the boy's family to find him.^[13] *TV Dozhd* noted that the boy's sixteen-year-old sister attempted to find him and gain custody through the Russian court system, which denied her right to guardianship.^[14]

The practice of changing the names and birthplaces of deported Ukrainian children and adopting them into Russian families is likely intended to erase the paper-trail of the circumstances of their deportations and their true identities to make it more challenging for the Ukrainian government or their guardians to find or repatriate them. Russian authorities, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova, frequently try to justify the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children on humanitarian grounds and cloak what is ultimately part of a genocidal enterprise to destroy Ukrainian identity in the guise of rescuing orphaned Ukrainian children.^[15] Reports that some of these children have legal guardians who are asking for their return undermines the Russian effort to claim that the deportation of Ukrainian children is a humanitarian necessity and highlights the fact that Russian authorities seem intent on covering their tracks to make deported children harder to find and return to Ukraine.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated during an unexpected visit to Kyiv on April 29 that Ukraine's Western allies must provide long-term, predictable military assistance to Ukraine and signal to the Kremlin that Russia cannot "wait out" Western support for Ukraine.

^[16] Stoltenberg stated during a press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that serious delays in Western military support have resulted in serious battlefield consequences. Stoltenberg noted that Ukrainian forces have been "outgunned" and have downed fewer Russian missiles over the last several months due to materiel shortages and that Russian forces are currently advancing in several areas of the frontline due to manpower and material shortages. Stoltenberg stated that he expects Ukraine's Western allies to soon announce additional unspecified military assistance commitments and stressed that NATO member states need to make "major," multi-year financial commitments to support Ukraine and emphasize to Moscow that Russia cannot win by "wait[ing] out" Western support for Ukraine. Zelensky noted during the press conference that NATO and Ukraine continue to work towards further interoperability of their forces, and Stoltenberg expressed confidence in Ukraine's eventual accession to NATO.^[17]

The consistent provision of key Western systems to Ukraine will play a critical role in Russia's prospects in 2024 and beyond, as well as in Ukraine's ability to contest the theater-wide initiative, conduct future counteroffensive operations, and liberate Ukrainian territory from Russian occupation.^[18] US and European failures to sustain the timely provision of critical systems to Ukraine will not only continue to constrain Ukraine's ability to plan and wage offensive and defensive operations, but also signal weakness and hesitancy in Western support for Ukraine to the Kremlin. These signals in turn

strengthen the Kremlin's belief that it can "wait out" Western support for Ukraine and achieve its objectives of destroying Ukrainian statehood and subjugating the Ukrainian people after the West abandons Ukraine thereby encouraging Putin to persist in his aggression. Recent Kremlin information operations targeting the West have specifically emphasized the idea that Russia can and will outlast Western military assistance to Ukraine and Ukraine's will and ability to defend itself.[19]

The Kremlin is pursuing a hybrid campaign directly targeting NATO states, including using GPS jamming and sabotaging military logistics in NATO members' territory. *Financial Times* (FT) reported on April 29 that Baltic ministers are warning that Russia is behind recent cases of GPS jamming that have interfered with commercial navigation signals and forced two Finnair flights to turn back in the middle of flights from Helsinki to Tartu in the past week.[20] FT estimated that GPS jamming has affected "tens of thousands" of civilian flights in recent months. UK outlet the *Sun* also reported on April 23 that suspected Russian GPS jamming impacted over three thousand UK civilian flights over the Baltic region, and British officials also believe that Russia jammed the satellite signal of a Royal Air Force jet that was transporting British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps back to the UK from Poland in March.[21] Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsakhna told FT that Estonia considers recent GPS jamming instances "part of Russia's hostile activities" and a "hybrid attack." [22] FT noted that there are three suspected sources — Russian electronic warfare (EW) assets in Kaliningrad; another source in Russia causing GPS disturbances in Estonia and Finland; and a third source that is active farther north and impacting the northern parts of Norway and Finland.[23] An open-source intelligence account focusing on GPS jamming in the Baltic region assessed that the GPS jammer affecting the Estonian flights is in Russia roughly halfway between St. Petersburg and Narva, Estonia. [24] ISW has observed widespread GPS disruptions across Poland and the Baltics since late December 2023.[25]

Russian investigative outlet *The Insider* published a report on April 29 detailing how agents of the Russian General Staff's Main Directorate (GRU) established a long-term presence in the Czech Republic and Greece to help agents of notorious GRU Unit 29155 — which previously conducted high-level assassination attempts with nerve agents and is reportedly responsible for nonlethal energy or acoustic attacks against US diplomatic, military, and intelligence personnel — conduct sabotage operations in European NATO states.[26] *The Insider* reported that two agents with Russian citizenship in particular helped GRU Unit 29155 facilitate attacks against ammunition depots in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, including destroying 150 tons of ammunition and killing two people in the Czech Republic in 2014, by providing intelligence about weapons shipments and a safehouse for GRU agents.[27] *The Insider* also implicated the two Russian agents in helping facilitate GRU Unit 29155's first assassination attempt against the head of the Bulgarian arms company EMCO, Emilian Gebrev, who provided ammunition to Ukraine in 2014. *The Insider* reported that Unit 29155 also attempted to poison Gebrev in 2015 after the first assassination attempt failed but did not implicate the other Russian agents in facilitating the second attack.[28]

The Kremlin has been waging this hybrid campaign to destabilize NATO for the past decade through these various assassination attempts, logistics sabotage, and allegedly acoustic and energy attacks against government personnel.[29] The recent GPS jamming incidents indicate that the Kremlin likely intends to continue this campaign.

Telegram recently temporarily blocked chatbots meant to facilitate civilian reports on Russian military activity to official Ukrainian channels, including some channels run by Ukrainian security services. Telegram blocked the bots of Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR), Security Service (SBU), and Ministry of Digital Development as well as chatbots associated with the Ukrainian channel *Crimean Wind* and the Freedom of Russia Legion on August 27 and 28.[30] Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security reported on April 29 that Telegram had restored a number of channels' chatbots, including those belonging to the GUR and SBU.[31] *Reuters* reported that a Telegram spokesperson stated that Telegram had "temporarily disabled" the bots due to a "false positive" but had since reinstated them.[32] Telegram chatbots allow Telegram users to submit comments or questions to the administrators of certain Telegram channels, and Ukrainian authorities have used these chatbots to allow Ukrainians to submit questions or tips about Russia's war effort directly to the appropriate Ukrainian agencies.[33] Telegram founder Pavel Durov stated on April 24 that Telegram bans accounts and bots that collect information for military intelligence purposes and that Apple had sent Telegram requests to make unspecified changes to the platform for Telegram users using Ukrainian SIM cards.[34] Russian milbloggers initially expressed enthusiasm after reports emerged about Telegram banning the Ukrainian bots, and some later criticized Telegram for reversing the decision.[35] The Kremlin has previously pressured Telegram to censor certain content, including after the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, but the Kremlin's possible role in the recent bot bans is unclear at this time.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces secured additional marginal tactical gains northwest and southwest of Avdiivka as of April 29, but have not made significant advances in the Avdiivka direction over the last 24 hours.
- Russian forces have the opportunity to choose among multiple tactical directions for future offensive drives near Avdiivka, but it remains unclear where they will focus their efforts in the near future.
- Investigations by both Ukrainian news agencies and Russian opposition outlets suggest that Russia is denying the legal guardians of forcibly deported and adopted Ukrainian children the ability to repatriate these children, further undermining the Kremlin's claims that the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is a necessary humanitarian endeavor.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated during an unexpected visit to Kyiv on April 29 that Ukraine's Western allies must provide long-term, predictable military assistance to Ukraine and signal to the Kremlin that Russia cannot "wait out" Western support for Ukraine.
- The Kremlin is pursuing a hybrid campaign directly targeting NATO states, including using GPS jamming and sabotaging military logistics in NATO members' territory.
- Telegram recently temporarily blocked chatbots meant to facilitate civilian reports on Russian military activity to official Ukrainian channels, including some channels run by Ukrainian security services.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian officials continue to report that Russian authorities are coercing Ukrainians in occupied Ukraine to join the Russian military.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 28, 2024

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 28, 2024

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

April 28, 2024, 7:20pm ET

Recent Russian gains northwest of Avdiivka have prompted Ukrainian forces to withdraw from other limited tactical positions along the frontline west of Avdiivka, although these withdrawals have yet to facilitate rapid Russian tactical gains. Russian forces remain unlikely to achieve a deeper operationally significant penetration in the area in the near term. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported on April 28 that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Berdychi (northwest of Avdiivka) and Semenivka (west of Avdiivka) to positions further west in order to preserve Ukrainian personnel.^[1] Syrskyi acknowledged that Russian forces are making tactical advances northwest of Avdiivka, and Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces have deployed up to four brigades to their tactical penetration in the Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka) area.^[2] Russian forces have committed roughly a reinforced division's worth of combat power (comprised mainly of four Central Military District [CMD] brigades) to the frontline northwest of Avdiivka to stabilize a small salient in the area and pursue a wider penetration of the Ukrainian defense along the frontline west of Avdiivka.^[3] Russian forces have not made relatively rapid tactical gains west of Ocheretyne, Solovyove (northwest of Avdiivka), Berdychi, and Semenivka following Ukrainian withdrawals from limited tactical positions in the area, however, suggesting that Ukrainian forces maintain positions and capabilities in the area that are slowing further westward Russian advances for the moment. Russian forces will likely continue to make tactical gains in the Avdiivka direction in the coming weeks, and Ukrainian commanders may decide to conduct additional withdrawals if Russian forces threaten other Ukrainian tactical positions in the area.^[4] The next line of defensible settlements in the area is some distance from the Ukrainian defensive line that Russian forces have been attacking since the seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February 2024, although Ukrainian forces may be able to use defensible windbreaks in fields immediately west of the current frontline to slow future Russian attacks.^[5] The complete Ukrainian withdrawal to reportedly fortified positions further west of Avdiivka would likely allow Russian forces to make relatively rapid advances through these fields, although the advances would likely be rapid only if Ukrainian forces do not try to hold positions in the fields.

Syrskyi added that Ukrainian forces are committing elements of brigades that have undergone rest and reconstitution to stabilize the situation in the Avdiivka direction.^[6] The arrival of reconstituted Ukrainian reinforcements will likely allow Ukrainian forces to slow Russian tactical gains and possibly stabilize the front. Ukrainian forces have struggled with under-resourcing and are facing a reported one-to-three manpower disadvantage northwest of Avdiivka, but have nonetheless prevented more than a division's worth of Russian combat power from making the types of advances that these force

and materiel disparities should in principle have allowed Russian forces to achieve.[7] The arrival of Ukrainian reinforcements and additional materiel will force the Russian command to either accept that a near-term wider or deeper penetration is unlikely or commit additional reserves to the area to continue pursuing tactical gains. Russian forces currently have opportunities to achieve operationally significant gains near Chasiv Yar and are preparing reserves to support a large-scale offensive effort expected this summer.[8] The immediate commitment of additional Russian reserves to an opportunistic tactical penetration in the Avdiivka area, where Russian forces are far away from operationally significant objectives, may consume manpower that otherwise could support operationally significant gains in the Chasiv Yar area or that were intended for use in summer 2024. [9] Russian forces will likely have to replenish and reinforce attacking units and decrease the tempo of offensive operations west of Avdiivka if they do not commit additional reserves, which would likely constrain Russia's ability to make additional rapid tactical advances in the area.[10]

The continued Russian stabilization of their salient northwest of Avdiivka presents the Russian command with a choice of continuing to push west towards its reported operational objective in Pokrovsk or trying to drive northwards to conduct possible complementary offensive operations with the Russian effort around Chasiv Yar. Ukrainian officials have previously identified Pokrovsk as the Russian operational objective in the Avdiivka direction, and Syrskyi reiterated this assessment on April 28.[11] Russian forces could alternatively decide to advance north from their tactical penetration in the Ocheretyne area along the H-20 (Donetsk City-Kostyantynivka) highway to pressure Ukrainian forces defending in the Toretsk area and possibly the operational rear of the Ukrainian defense in and west of Chasiv Yar. Russian forces have long aimed to seize four major cities that form a fortress belt in Donetsk Oblast (Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, and Kostyantynivka), and Chasiv Yar is operationally significant because it would provide Russian forces with a staging ground to launch offensive operations against Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka.[12] The Russian military command could decide that advances north along the H-20 highway would allow Russian forces to conduct subsequent complementary offensive operations from the east and south against the southern edge of the Ukrainian fortress belt in Donetsk Oblast. The Russian tactical penetration northwest of Avdiivka is roughly 20km southwest of Toretsk, roughly 18km south of Oleksandro-Kalynove (the next major settlement south of Kostyantynivka), and roughly 28km south of Kostyantynivka. This distance is notably not greater than the distance to Pokrovsk, which is roughly 30km west of the Russian salient northwest of Avdiivka. A drive up along the H-20 would be a serious undertaking and would not be rapid. The Russian command may decide to continue pushing west towards Pokrovsk because there may be greater opportunities for tactical gains in the area west of Avdiivka than towards the north, however, and because of the Russian preoccupation with reaching the western borders of Donetsk Oblast.

Syrskyi also noted that the threat of a possible future Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City is causing Ukraine to allocate additional forces and equipment to defending the city, although ISW continues to assess that the Russian military lacks the forces necessary to seize the city. Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces are monitoring the increased number of Russian forces regrouping in the Kharkiv direction, likely referring to Belgorod Oblast, and that Ukrainian forces have reinforced defensive positions in the "most threatened" areas with additional artillery and tank units.[13] Syrskyi's statement provides no indication about the imminence of the possible Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City about which Ukrainian officials have recently warned. [14] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets recently stated that Russian forces are regrouping elements of the 11th Army Corps (AC) and 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (both Leningrad Military District [LMD]) from the Kupyansk direction into Russia's newly-formed Northern Grouping of Forces and that the Northern Grouping's best-equipped elements are concentrated in the Belgorod Oblast direction.[15] Elements of the 6th CAA have previously had exclusive responsibility for offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk, particularly near Synkivka.[16] Syrskyi noted that Ukrainian forces have recently improved their positions near Synkivka (northeast of Kupyansk) and a Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces retreated a short distance from Synkivka due to manpower shortages in the area, suggesting that Russian forces have likely pulled at least some elements of the 6th CAA from the area.[17]

ISW has not observed reports of elements of the 6th CAA operating in the Kupyansk direction since late March, and Russian forces are not conducting active offensive operations in the areas where elements of the 6th CAA were previously attacking.[18] Elements of the Russian 6th CAA were previously involved in offensive operations near Synkivka that began in October 2023 and continued throughout the winter and early spring 2024.[19] Likely elements of the 6th CAA's 25th and 138th motorized rifle brigades conducted several company-sized mechanized assaults near Synkivka in December 2023, which resulted in significant armored vehicle losses and no tactically significant advances.[20] The brigades' inability to seize Synkivka despite repeated mass infantry and mechanized assaults over a months-long offensive effort calls into question their combat effectiveness and the combat effectiveness of the 6th CAA and Northern Grouping of Forces more broadly. ISW

continues to assess that a potential future Russian offensive to seize Kharkiv City would be an extremely ambitious undertaking that would pose significant challenges to Russian forces, particularly since Russian forces will be facing better-equipped Ukrainian forces following the arrival of US military assistance.[21] Russian forces would not have to seize Kharkiv City to reap the benefits of drawing Ukrainian manpower and equipment away from other critical areas of the frontline, however. The Russian military appears to be learning from past operational planning mistakes and may intend for the threat of a Russian offensive on Kharkiv City to stretch Ukrainian forces across a wider frontline in eastern Ukraine ahead of the start of the Russian summer offensive effort.[22]

The Ukrainian 47th Mechanized Brigade denied a recent report that Ukrainian forces had pulled US-provided M1A1 Abrams tanks from the frontline. The *Associated Press* (AP) reported on April 26, citing two unspecified US military officials, that Ukraine has removed Abrams tanks from the frontline partly because Russia's widespread drone usage has made it too difficult for Ukrainian forces to operate Abrams without Russian forces detecting and striking Abrams with drones.[23] The Ukrainian 47th Mechanized Brigade denied the report, stating that Abrams perform well on the battlefield and that the 47th Mechanized Brigade would not "hide [a tank] from the enemy that makes the enemy hide themselves" or leave Ukrainian infantry without fire support.[24] ISW does not report on the specific Ukrainian tactical deployment or use of its own or Western-provided weapons systems apart from what US or Ukrainian officials say.

Recent Russian efforts to increase control over migrants in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack appear to be straining relations between Russia and Tajikistan. The Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) warned Tajik citizens on April 27 to temporarily refrain from traveling to Russia on all modes of transportation "unless absolutely necessary."[25] Tajik news outlet *Asia-Plus* reported on April 25 that Russian authorities had stopped almost 200 cars with Tajik license plates from entering Russia at a checkpoint on the Russian-Kazakh border as of April 22. [26] Russian authorities reportedly questioned Tajik citizens and looked through the contents of their phones but allowed children under 14 and people over 60 to enter Russia without questioning. The Tajik MFA reported on April 28 that Russian authorities detained almost 1,000 Tajik citizens at Vnukovo Airport in Moscow and dozens of Tajik citizens in Zhukovsky, Domodedovo, and Sheremetyevo airports in Moscow and held them in poor sanitary conditions.[27] The Tajik MFA stated that Russian authorities allowed 322 Tajik citizens to enter Russia and added 306 others to an "expulsion list." Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on April 27 that Russian authorities are taking measures to resolve issues at border checkpoints but defended temporary "thorough checks" of foreign citizens as "intensified measures to prevent terrorism."^[28] Tajikistan's Deputy Minister of Labor, Migration, and Employment Shakhnoza Nodiri stated on March 30 that Tajikistan observed an outflow of Tajik migrants from Russia following the Crocus attack and that many Tajik migrants are calling the Tajik government stating that they want to leave Russia out of fear and panic.^[29] Russian authorities increased crackdowns against Central Asian migrants entering and living in Russia, particularly Tajiks, after the Crocus City Hall attack since the majority of people arrested in connection with the attack were Tajik citizens.^[30]

Russian authorities arrested several Russian journalists working for Western publications in Russia within the past several days, likely as part of an ongoing effort to limit Western and independent Russian media's ability to reliably report on Russia. Western and Russian opposition media widely reported that Russian authorities recently arrested Sergei Karelkin, who previously worked with the *Associated Press* (AP) and *Deutsche Welle*, and Konstantin Gabov, who previously worked with *Reuters*, on charges of working with an "extremist organization" for their previous work with the Anti-Corruption Fund founded by deceased Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny.^[31] A Russian court also recently placed *Forbes Russia* journalist Sergei Mingazov under house arrest for spreading false information about the Russian military by reposting news articles about the Russian military's massacres in Bucha on his Telegram channel.^[32] Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* reported on April 26 that Russian courts have charged more people with "participating" in "undesirable" Russian opposition and foreign media organizations so far in 2024 than were charged with such crimes in 2022 or 2023.^[33] ISW has recently reported on the Kremlin's effort to increasingly use the vague "extremism" legal definition to increasingly prosecute anti-war sentiment, and the arrests of Karelkin and Gabov in particular demonstrate one such application of this expansion.^[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Recent Russian gains northwest of Avdiivka have prompted Ukrainian forces to withdraw from other limited tactical positions along the frontline west of Avdiivka, although these withdrawals have yet to facilitate rapid Russian tactical gains. Russian forces remain unlikely to achieve a deeper operationally significant penetration in the area in the near term.

- The continued Russian stabilization of their salient northwest of Avdiivka presents the Russian command with a choice of continuing to push west towards its reported operational objective in Pokrovsk or trying to drive northwards to conduct possible complementary offensive operations with the Russian effort around Chasiv Yar.
- Syrskyi also noted that the threat of a possible future Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City is causing Ukraine to allocate additional forces and equipment to defending the city, although ISW continues to assess that the Russian military lacks the forces necessary to seize the city.
- The Ukrainian 47th Mechanized Brigade denied a recent report that Ukrainian forces had pulled US-provided M1A1 Abrams tanks from the frontline.
- Recent Russian efforts to increase control over migrants in and entering Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack appear to be straining relations between Russia and Tajikistan.
- Russian authorities arrested several Russian journalists working for Western publications in Russia within the past several days, likely as part of an ongoing effort to limit Western and independent Russian media's ability to reliably report on Russia.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Svatove.
- The United Kingdom's (UK) Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Leo Docherty, stated on April 27 that the UK assesses that Russian forces have suffered 450,000 killed and wounded personnel since the start of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 27, 2024

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

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

April 27, 2024, 8:10pm ET

Russian forces will likely make significant tactical gains in the coming weeks as Ukraine waits for US security assistance to arrive at the front but remain unlikely to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses. Politico reported on April 26 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told US Speaker of the House Mike Johnson in December 2023 that Ukrainian forces would be able to "hold out" until March or April 2024 without additional US security assistance, a period through which Ukrainian forces are now passing without the arrival of US military aid.^[1] The arrival of US aid in the coming weeks will allow the Ukrainian forces to address their current materiel constraints and blunt ongoing Russian offensive operations, and Russian forces appear to be intensifying efforts to destabilize Ukrainian defenses and gain ground ahead of the arrival of the American security assistance.^[2] Two Ukrainian intelligence officers reportedly told the *Financial Times* that Russian forces aim to use ongoing offensive operations and missile strikes against Ukraine to prepare the battlefield for an expected large-scale Russian offensive operation in late May or in June.^[3] The *Financial Times* reported that a Western official stated that Russian forces may make further "tactical breakthroughs" in the coming weeks but will not "overrun" Ukraine.^[4] Russian forces have opportunities to make significant tactical gains in the Avdiivka area and pursue an operationally significant objective with the seizure of Chasiv Yar; but, neither of these efforts is likely to develop into an operationally significant penetration in the near term, let alone cause the collapse of the Ukrainian defensive line in Donetsk Oblast.^[5]

Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces will likely be able to prevent operationally significant Russian advances during Russia's expected summer offensive effort, although Russian forces will nevertheless leverage select advantages and adaptations to pose a significant threat to Ukraine this summer. Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have previously prevented Russian forces from making even tactical gains during previous large-scale offensive efforts in Ukraine, and it is unlikely that Russian forces will conduct an offensive operation this summer that is significantly larger and more intense than their previous offensive efforts.^[6] The *Financial Times* reported that a Western official stated that the Russian military is still an ineffective army characterized by old equipment and poorly trained soldiers and asserted that Russian forces have not improved since starting the invasion in February 2022.^[7] Judging Russian military effectiveness on the absolute quality of Russian forces ignores how Russian forces are leveraging their temporary relative advantages over Ukraine to place Ukrainian forces under increasing stress. The Russian military is facing constraints on the amount of modern and effective equipment that it can and will be able to deploy in Ukraine, and the overall combat effectiveness of Russian formations and units continues to decline as they suffer degradation in Ukraine.^[8] Russian forces are in part relying on their quantitative advantages in equipment and manpower to place consistent and increasing pressure on Ukrainian forces, however, and the Russian military is accepting losses that Ukrainian forces could not sustain.^[9] The Russian focus on mass, regardless of quality, has supported tactical Russian gains, especially as delays in Western security

assistance have degraded Ukraine's qualitative advantages over Russian forces, and Russian forces will likely use mass to achieve tactical advances against even well-provisioned Ukrainian forces this summer.[10]

Russian reliance on mass is not the only adaptation that Russian forces have made in Ukraine, however, as the Russian military has demonstrated an uneven propensity for operational, tactical, and technological innovation and learning.[11] The Russian military command appears to be learning from past operational planning mistakes in Ukraine and will likely conduct a summer offensive operation that aims to stretch and overwhelm Ukrainian forces across a larger frontline in eastern Ukraine.

[12] Russian forces have also significantly changed tactical aviation operations in Ukraine with their mass use of glide bombs, allowing fixed-wing aircraft to more safely conduct strikes from further in the rear.[13] These glide bomb strikes will continue to play a critically important role in supporting Russian ground operations this summer despite the likely improved air defense capabilities that Ukrainian forces will be able to leverage against Russian aircraft as additional Western air defense materiel arrives.[14] Russian forces continue to deploy technological innovations throughout the front at scale to support offensive pushes and appear to be timing the deployment of these innovations to exploit Ukrainian vulnerabilities and make gains before Ukrainian forces subsequently adapt to the Russian innovations.[15] Russian forces may intend to leverage new technological or tactical innovations precisely at the beginning of their summer offensive effort to offset the stronger capabilities that Ukrainian forces will possess following the arrival of US security assistance. Russian forces still suffer from widespread tactical failures, however, and Ukrainian forces will still be able to exploit those failures as long as the Russian military command continues to struggle with internalizing and disseminating adaptations at the tactical level.[16] Ukraine will be able to neutralize many of the materiel constraints it currently faces in the coming weeks and is taking steps to alleviate its manpower challenges in the coming months, but Russia will continue to pursue its own advantages as Ukrainian capabilities improve. **Ukraine is very likely to stabilize the frontlines in the coming months and may be able to begin limited counteroffensive operations in late 2024 or early 2025.**

Russian forces are continuing to exploit a tactical penetration north and northwest of Avdiivka and recently made additional confirmed advances in the area. Geolocated footage published on April 27 shows that Russian forces advanced to northern Novokalynove (north of Avdiivka), and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces completely seized the settlement on April 27.

[17] Some milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces advanced into Keramik (directly northwest of Novokalynove), although ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of Russian forces in Keramik.

[18] Geolocated footage published on April 27 also shows that Russian forces advanced in western Ocheretyne, in southwestern Solovyove, and to a treeline south of Novobakhmutivka (all northwest of Avdiivka).[19] Milbloggers claimed that Russian forces captured the entirety of Solovyove, which is consistent with available geolocated footage of Russian forces in the southwestern part of the settlement.[20] Several Russian sources also claimed that fierce fighting continued in western Berdychi (northwest of Avdiivka) and that Russian forces were pushing Ukrainian forces further west of the settlement.[21]

Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn reiterated reports on April 27 that Russian forces introduced additional reserves from the 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) to the Novobakhmutivka-Ocheretyne line to break through Ukrainian defenses, and that Ukrainian forces are responding by committing additional reserve forces and resources to the area.[22] The Ukrainian Center for Defense Strategies similarly noted on April 26 that Russian forces have committed two motorized rifle brigades and one motorized rifle regiment directly to the tactical penetration in the Ocheretyne area, which has created a threefold advantage in Russian forces and assets over Ukrainian forces and assets.[23] The Ukrainian General Staff reported continued fighting north of Avdiivka near Arkhanhelske and Keramik; northwest of Avdiivka near Semenivka and Ocheretyne; west of Avdiivka near Umanske; and southwest of Avdiivka near Netaylove.[24] Elements of the 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps [DNR AC]) reportedly seized Novokalynove and are now operating near Keramik; elements of the 35th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st CAA, CMD) are operating near Arkhanhelske; elements of the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st CAA, CMD) are operating in and near Berdychi; elements of the 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st DNR AC) are operating near Semenivka; and elements of the 9th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st DNR AC) are operating in the Pervomaiske-Netaylove area southwest of Avdiivka.[25]

The tempo of Russian offensive operations is currently higher in the Avdiivka direction than near Chasiv Yar, as Russian forces focus on exploiting a tactical situation that is unfavorable to Ukrainian troops northwest of Avdiivka. Russian forces are likely to intensify offensive operations near Chasiv Yar in the coming weeks, however, as Chasiv Yar provides Russian forces with the opportunity for more operationally significant advances. Russian forces have

recently committed roughly a division's worth of combat power northwest of Avdiivka, which has lent them a roughly threefold advantage over Ukraine's available combat power in the same area, by unofficial Ukrainian estimates.[26] Russian forces have committed roughly doctrinal end strength and relatively doctrinally-consistent formations to an area where Ukrainian forces have struggled with under-resourcing, which has allowed Russian forces to achieve tactical gains in areas north and northwest of Avdiivka over the course of recent weeks. Russian offensives in the Chasiv Yar direction, by contrast, have significantly slowed over the past week — a Russian milblogger noted on April 27 that the frontline has remained without significant changes and that the tempo of Russian operations has decreased.[27] ISW has frequently assessed that Russian forces have struggled to conduct simultaneous large-scale offensive operations throughout the war but have more recently been able to conduct shorter alternating offensive operations in offensive "pulses," as has been the case in the Lyman, Chasiv Yar, and Avdiivka directions for most of 2024 thus far.[28] Russian forces are likely leaning into attacks northwest of Avdiivka in order to build on the recent tactical success they have achieved, while Russian forces committed in the Chasiv Yar direction are likely temporarily pulling back from offensives to rest and reconstitute. Russian forces will likely soon increase the pace of offensives near Chasiv Yar once again, and this offensive pressure has the potential to become significant.[29] If Russian forces are able to intensify attacks and seize Chasiv Yar, they would be able to use Chasiv Yar as a staging point for subsequent offensive operations against Ukraine's critical fortress belt cities of Kostyantynivka, and Druzhkivka.[30] Russian forces will need to replenish and reinforce the units that are currently attacking around Avdiivka, and the process of replenishment and reinforcement is likely to blunt the overall intensity of their attacks and inhibit their ability to reach their wider operational objective — Pokrovsk and the Donetsk Oblast administrative border — rapidly as long as Ukrainian forces receive necessary reinforcements and supplies.

Russian forces conducted large-scale cruise and ballistic missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of April 26 to 27 and have likely resumed sea based Kalibr cruise missile strikes after a long pause. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk reported on April 27 that Russian forces launched 34 missiles: nine Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from Saratov Oblast; nine Kh-59/69 cruise missiles from Belgorod Oblast and the Sea of Azov; two S-300 missiles from Belgorod Oblast; two Iskander-K ballistic missiles, four Kh-47 Kinzhal ballistic missiles from Ryazan and Tambov oblasts; and eight Kalibr cruise missiles from the Black Sea.[31] Oleshchuk stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed 21 total missiles: six Kh-101/555s, eight Kh59/69s, one Iskander-K, and six Kalibrs. Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko and Ukraine's largest private energy operator DTEK reported that unspecified Russian missiles struck Ukrainian energy infrastructure facilities in Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts and "seriously" damaged four unspecified thermal power plants (TPPs).[32]

This is notably the first large-scale Russian strike package since late December 2023 that did not include Shahed drones. Russian forces also notably launched Kalibr missiles as part of the strike package after conducting only a handful of individual Kalibr strikes in recent months. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that this strike series was only the third confirmed use of Kalibr missiles in over six months and that Russian forces launched them from two Kilo-class submarines for fear of losing surface ships to Ukrainian strikes.[33] Pletenchuk stated that the two submarines are based in Novorossiysk, indicating that the Russian military has sufficiently improved the infrastructure at the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) port in Novorossiysk to load Kalibrs.[34] Ukrainian and United Kingdom (UK) military officials reported in February and March 2024 that the BSF naval base in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea was the only BSF base with the infrastructure to load these missiles onto Kalibr carriers.[35] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on April 18 that Russian forces had likely improved the infrastructure at the Novorossiysk port to accommodate the redeployment of the majority of BSF assets away from its main base in occupied Sevastopol and reported that Russian forces had loaded an unspecified Russian Grigorovich-class guided missile frigate with cruise missiles at the Novorossiysk port.[36] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported in April 2024 that Russia had accumulated at least 260 Kalibr missiles and aimed to produce an additional 30 in April.[37] Russian forces will likely continue conducting Kalibr strikes from submarines based in Novorossiysk by leveraging the stockpile and the new missile-loading infrastructure in Novorossiysk. However, increased BSF surface vessel sorties will make them more vulnerable to Ukrainian strikes.

Ukrainian forces successfully conducted drone strikes against a Russian airfield and oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai on the night of April 26 to 27. Unspecified sources told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* that Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) and the Ukrainian military successfully conducted drone strikes against the Kushchyovskaya airfield while "dozens" of Russian military aircraft, radar systems, and electronic warfare (EW) systems were stationed there, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of damaged equipment at the airfield.[38] Geolocated footage published on April 27 shows the aftermath of the Ukrainian strike at the Kushchyovskaya airfield and

purportedly shows damaged glide bomb kits.[39] Russian milbloggers widely criticized the Russian military for failing to protect the airfield after multiple successful Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian airfields in occupied Ukraine and Russia.[40] *Suspilne*'s sources stated that Ukrainian drones struck the Ikskiy and Slavyansk oil refineries, damaging their distillation columns and causing fires.

[41] Krasnodar Krai Governor Veniamin Kondratov stated that Ukrainian drones attempted to strike oil refineries and infrastructure facilities in Slavyanskiy, Siverskiy, and Kushchuvskiy raions but that the strikes did not cause "serious" damage.[42] Slavyansk Oil Refinery Security Director Eduard Trudnev stated that 10 drones struck the refinery, causing it to partially stop functioning, and noted that there could be additional unseen damage.[43] The Ukrainian SBU, Special Forces (SSO), and Unmanned Systems Forces previously struck the Slavyansk Oil Refinery on the night of March 16 to 17.[44] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 66 Ukrainian drones over Krasnodar Krai on the night of April 26 to 27.[45]

The Russian federal government continues efforts to codify increased control over migrant communities living in Russia. The Russian State Duma introduced a bill on April 27 that "proposes a number of innovations that will help modernize Russian legislation and resolve certain issues of ensuring national security in the field of migration."[46] The proposed bill also includes provisions to introduce a deportation regime for migrants who "have no grounds" to be in Russia, including those who commit certain crimes.[47] The proposed bill will also prevent foreigners who are subject to the deportation regime from purchasing real estate, opening bank accounts, or getting married.[48] The deportation bill will allow the Russian federal government to define whichever foreign individuals or communities it chooses as subject to deportation—a move that will likely allow the government to extend more oppressive control over migrant communities and cater to Russian ultranationalists who have frequently called for such harsh policies.[49] The Russian Ministry of Education and Science similarly announced on April 27 that the 12 Russian universities that are authorized to conduct Russian-language certification exams have terminated their contracts with commercial partners, meaning that only the universities and state and municipal organizations can administer Russian language certification testing.[50] This development will significantly complicate the process of obtaining Russian language certification for migrants, which will likely limit their access to certain jobs or even social services and provide the Russian government with greater control over migrant communities. The Russian government appears to be selectively empowering some migrant communities as it further disenfranchises others, however. A joint project run by Russian state media source *RT* and the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) called "Not One on One" sends requests to the MVD to help foreigners obtain Russian citizenship in certain limited cases.[51] The *RT* project reported that it sent a request to the MVD regarding the citizenship of a migrant from Kyrgyzstan who fled Kyrgyzstan for Russia after being convicted for fighting for Russian forces in Ukraine.[52] Russian authorities have increased crackdowns against Central Asian migrants living in Russia, particularly after the wake of the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, and the *RT* project emphasizes the fact that the Russian government is interested in selectively protecting some migrants from Central Asian communities as long as they are ideologically useful in the context of the Russian war effort.

The Kremlin is likely setting conditions to intensify its hybrid operations against Moldova. Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia Yevgenia Gutsul told Kremlin newswire *TASS* on April 26 that Moldovan law enforcement officials detained her and three of her advisors for several hours when the group arrived at the Chisinau airport after a series of recent meetings in Russia and Turkey.[53] Gutsul claimed that Moldovan law enforcement inspected her luggage and detained her for an hour before releasing her, and one of Gutsul's advisors told *TASS* that Moldovan authorities interrogated the three advisors for an additional two hours.[54] It is unclear if Moldovan authorities formally detained Gutsul and her advisors. *TASS* reported that a group of 100 people gathered outside the airport to welcome Gutsul and chanted "Victory" when Gutsul exited the airport, likely referring to Gutsul's position as the newly formed pro-Russian Moldovan Victory electoral bloc's executive secretary.[55] Gutsul claimed that Moldovan authorities are making every effort to humiliate her and other pro-Russian Moldovans and framed Moldovan authorities' recent confiscation of over one million dollars from Kremlin-linked Moldovan opposition politicians as a "biased" effort to humiliate innocent Moldovans.[56] Gutsul and other pro-Kremlin actors will likely continue to seize on short-term detentions and legitimate efforts by the Moldovan government to defend itself against Russian hybrid operations to justify further Russian aggression towards Moldova.

The Moldovan government is also taking steps to address known Russian information operations aimed at Gagauzia. The Moldovan Audiovisual Council announced on April 26 that it fined two regional and local television (TV) stations in Gagauzia, "TV-Gagauzia" and "ATV," 100,000 Moldovan lei (\$5,627) for spreading disinformation, hate speech, and not ensuring "information security" with their broadcasts.[57] The Audiovisual Council determined that the TV stations provided a platform for public figures to spread symbols and messages intended to "fortify a divergence" between Gagauzia's connection to Moldova and its alleged proximity to the *Russkyi Mir* (Russian World). The

Audiovisual Council reported that the TV stations amplified narratives justifying Gagauzia's theoretical future secession from Moldova, accusing Moldova of losing its sovereignty and traditional family values, and equating Moldova's future accession to the European Union (EU) or NATO with "war." ISW has extensively reported on the Kremlin's use of its Russian World framework — an intentionally vague ideological and geographic idea that includes any former territory of the Kyivan Rus, the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation and the inhabitants of those territories - to justify Russian aggression under the guise of "protecting" Russian "compatriots abroad" in Russia's "historical territories."^[58] Russian President Vladimir Putin noted during his annual New Year's address on December 31, 2023, and has since reiterated that 2024 is the "Year of the Family" for Russia and has since pursued domestic policies aimed at strengthening Russia's "traditional family values."^[59] The Gagauzian TV stations' efforts to equate the EU and NATO with "war" are also in line with the Kremlin's informational efforts to justify Russia's ongoing military reforms and invasion of Ukraine as a response to inherently escalatory actions by NATO and the EU and in preparation for the Kremlin's envisioned long-term existential conflict with the West.^[60] The Kremlin will likely continue to disseminate known narratives in Moldovan society through a variety of means and may intend to use the newly-formed Victory electoral bloc to amplify its narratives.

Russian peacekeeping forces conducted another undisclosed training exercise in the Russian-backed Moldovan breakaway republic of Transnistria, likely aimed at creating unease in Moldovan society and increased tension in the already fraught relationship between Chisinau and Tiraspol. The Moldovan Bureau of Reintegration reported on April 23 that Russian peacekeeping forces violated the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Joint Control Commission (JCC) protocols by conducting training exercises to "repel attacks on the positions of peacekeeping forces" near four settlements in Transnistria on April 23 without coordinating with Moldovan authorities.^[61] Moldovan authorities called the incident a "provocation" and a violation of the founding acts of the peacekeeping mission and stated that the incident would be discussed at the next JCC meeting. Transnistrian Foreign Minister Vitaly Ignatiev claimed on April 25 that the peacekeeping exercises were "justified" and "necessary" to ensure the combat readiness of Russian peacekeeping units.^[62] Moldovan authorities previously urged the JCC to conduct an investigation into Russian peacekeepers' use of undisclosed drones and weapons during a December 2023 training exercise, another violation of JCC protocols.^[63] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely engaged in hybrid operations in Moldova and intends to use pro-Russian actors in Gagauzia and Transnistria to destabilize and degrade Moldovan democracy and ultimately prevent Moldova's accession to the EU.^[64]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces will likely make significant tactical gains in the coming weeks as Ukraine waits for US security assistance to arrive at the front but remains unlikely to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses.
- Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces will likely be able to prevent operationally significant Russian advances during Russia's expected summer offensive effort, although Russian forces will nevertheless leverage select advantages and adaptations to pose a significant threat to Ukraine this summer.
- The tempo of Russian offensive operations is currently higher in the Avdiivka direction than near Chasiv Yar, as Russian forces focus on exploiting a tactical situation that is unfavorable to Ukrainian troops northwest of Avdiivka. Russian forces are likely to intensify offensive operations near Chasiv Yar in the coming weeks, however, as Chasiv Yar provides Russian forces with the opportunity for more operationally significant advances.
- Russian forces conducted large-scale cruise and ballistic missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of April 26 to 27 and have likely resumed sea based Kalibr cruise missile strikes after a long pause.
- Ukrainian forces successfully conducted drone strikes against a Russian airfield and oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai on the night of April 26 to 27.
- The Russian federal government continues efforts to codify increased control over migrant communities living in Russia.
- The Kremlin is likely setting conditions to intensify its hybrid operations against Moldova.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances north of Avdiivka and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian federal subjects continue to sponsor Russian military formations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 26, 2024

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

April 26, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Western media continues to report that select US officials have resumed discussing the idea of “freezing the lines” where they are because the latest package of US military assistance to Ukraine may not be enough for Ukraine to regain all its territory.^[1] Supporters of the current package have not claimed that it would by itself allow Ukraine to liberate all occupied territory, and the discussion of possible end states of the war is very premature as President Joe Biden signed the bill authorizing the new package only two days ago. US military assistance is currently en route to Ukraine and will take several weeks to arrive to frontline units and have tangible battlefield impacts.^[2] Ukrainian forces will first have to leverage the incoming US aid to stabilize the frontlines and stop ongoing Russian advances, particularly in the Avdiivka and Chasiv Yar directions, in the coming weeks. The scale and intensity of the forecasted Summer 2024 Russian offensive operation that will likely begin in June also remains unclear, and the Russian military command may be actively assessing and revising plans for its summer offensive effort to account for facing better-equipped Ukrainian forces.^[3] Ukrainian forces will have to defend against the Russian summer offensive effort and prevent Russian forces from making operationally significant advances over the summer months before Ukrainian forces will be in a position to contest the theater-wide initiative and conduct a counteroffensive operation later in 2024 or 2025. Ukrainian forces must also address their ongoing manpower challenges through training new personnel, equipping new units, and reconstituting old units. The exact timeline for these efforts, which will likely play a significant role in determining the timeline for Ukraine’s future counteroffensive operations, is unclear.^[4] ISW continues to assess that sufficient and consistent Western aid will be critical for future Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts, although the US and the West will likely need to be responsive as the Ukrainian military command determines the scope and focus of such operations and relays Ukraine’s needs to Western partners in the weeks and months preceding future counteroffensive operations.^[5] Ukraine’s ability to regain all of its territory in the long term rests on numerous future decisions in the West, in the Kremlin, and in Kyiv, and any discussions that treat the prospects of Ukrainian victory or defeat as predetermined outcomes ignore how all involved parties could dynamically alter the course of the war in Ukraine.

Public meetings between officials from Russia, Belarus, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Iran, and North Korea have surged in recent days, with at least 10 high-level bilateral meetings between April 22 and 26, underscoring the deepening multilateral partnership these states are constructing to confront the West. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting of defense ministers in Astana, Kazakhstan on April 26. [6] Shoigu met with PRC Minister of National Defense Dong Jun on the sidelines of the meeting and highlighted the “unprecedented” level of Russo-Sino relations.^[7] Shoigu also met with Iranian Defense Minister Mohammed Reza Ashtiani and stated that Russia is prepared to expand Russo-Iranian military and military-technical cooperation.^[8] Dong and Ashtiani held a bilateral meeting and called for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation, including in the defense and military spheres.^[9] Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin also met with Dong and Ashtiani at the SCO meeting on April 26.^[10] The April 26 SCO meeting marked Iran’s first SCO meeting as a member state since joining the organization in July 2023.^[11]

The SCO meetings are only the latest in a series of bilateral meetings between Russia, Belarus, the PRC, Iran, and North Korea. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative to the Russian President for Middle East and African Countries Mikhail Bogdanov met with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri Kani in Moscow on April 26.^[12] Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with PRC Communist Party Politburo member Chen Wenqing on April 23 in St. Petersburg and discussed strengthening cooperation between Russian and PRC intelligence services.^[13] Patrushev also met with Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian in St. Petersburg on April 24, and they signed a memorandum of understanding between the two countries’ security councils.^[14] A North Korean delegation led by Minister for External Economic Relations Yun Jong Ho traveled to Iran on April 23.^[15] Head of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) Department of International Military Cooperation Major General Valery Revenko met with Iranian Deputy Minister of Defense and rector of the Malek Ashtar University of Technology Mehdi Jafari on April 22 in Minsk.^[16] Although the details and results of these various bilateral meetings are unclear, the overt increase in their number and frequency is

notable and demonstrates the group's increased eagerness to publicly display its military and political cooperation in its competition and confrontation against the West.

PRC officials claimed that NATO bears responsibility for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine amid meetings between PRC officials and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on April 26. Blinken met with PRC President Xi Jinping and stated that the PRC's support for the Russian defense industry is enabling Russia's war effort and undermining European and transatlantic security. [17] Blinken noted that the PRC is supplying Russia's defense industry with machine tools, microelectronics, nitrocellulose (an intermediary good used in producing gunpowder and explosives), and other dual-use items and warned that the US is prepared to act if the PRC continues to support the Russian defense industry.[18] ISW has recently observed reports that Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) continues to rely heavily on Chinese-produced machine tool components and electronics. [19] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Wang Wenbin stated, likely in response to Blinken, that Russia imports more than 60 percent of weapons components and dual-use items from the US and other Western countries.[20] Wang added that NATO bears "unshirkable" responsibility for the "Ukraine crisis" and that the PRC continues to promote peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. [21] Wang's statement is noticeably stronger than previous PRC statements about Russia's invasion of Ukraine that have portrayed the PRC as an objective and impartial mediator for future peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, and Kremlin newswire TASS framed Wang's statements as placing "direct responsibility" for Russia's invasion of Ukraine on NATO.[22] The Kremlin will likely seize on stronger PRC rhetoric about the war in Ukraine to frame the PRC as supporting Russia's objectives in Ukraine, as it has previously attempted to do.[23]

Ukraine's Western partners continue to provide Ukraine with immediate and longer-term military assistance, particularly for Ukraine's air defenses. The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced on April 26 a new package of military assistance to Ukraine worth \$6 billion as part of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USA).[24] The package includes Patriot air defense munitions, National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) munitions, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) munitions, artillery ammunition, and equipment to integrate Ukrainian and Western air defense systems. The US DoD stated that the announcement marks the beginning of the "contracting process," and the timeline of the production and delivery of these weapons is unclear at this time. Spanish outlet *El País* reported on April 26 that Spain will send a "limited" number of Patriot missiles to Ukraine.[25] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on April 26 at the Ramstein format meeting that Ukraine needs long-range weapons and air defense systems and reported that Russian forces have used more than 9,000 guided glide bombs against Ukraine since the start of 2024.[26] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin observed that the Patriot is not a silver bullet and that many factors will determine the course of the fighting.[27] No single weapons system is a silver bullet, to be sure, but the Patriot is one of the very few air defense systems able to engage Russian ballistic missiles and also to hit Russian fighter-bombers outside the range of Russian glide bombs. ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's degraded air defense capabilities have allowed Russian aviation to heavily degrade Ukrainian defenses along the front with glide bomb strikes.[28] Zelensky stated that although Russian forces have seized the battlefield initiative in the past six months, Ukrainian forces will still be able to "not only stabilize the front but also advance." [29]

The Ukrainian military has reportedly pulled US-provided M1A1 Abrams tanks from the frontline in part because of the widespread threat of Russian drones and other strikes. The Associated Press (AP) reported on April 26, citing two unspecified US military officials, that Ukraine has removed Abrams tanks from the frontline partly because Russia's widespread drone usage has made it too difficult for Ukrainian forces to operate Abrams without Russian forces detecting and striking Abrams with drones.[30] Ukrainian drone operators recently told the Washington Post that the number of drones that both Russian and Ukrainian forces use has made the battlefield "almost transparent" given that up to 100 Russian and Ukrainian reconnaissance and attack drones can operate simultaneously within a 10-kilometer radius.[31] Any armored vehicles that Russian or Ukrainian forces may field on the frontline are visible to each other's reconnaissance drones, so Ukrainian forces are likely prioritizing efforts to protect the limited number of Abrams tanks they currently possess. Any armored vehicles on the battlefield without active protection and counter-drone systems are highly vulnerable to enemy drone, artillery, and anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) strikes. The Russian government has hyper-fixated on Russia's ability to destroy Western-made weapon systems to posture Russian military equipment as superior to Western designs. Russia will soon open an exhibition of captured Western equipment in Moscow and has given military and monetary awards to Russian soldiers who destroyed Western armored vehicles.[32]

Russian authorities continue efforts to expand the definition of prosecutable anti-war sentiment to portray Russians who oppose the war in Ukraine as opposing Russia itself. The Russian Ministry of Justice appealed to the Russian Supreme Court on April 26 to recognize the alleged "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" and its "structural divisions" as an extremist organization,

which would allow Russian authorities to prosecute Russians for belonging, supporting, financing, or spreading the ideology of this movement.[33] Russian opposition media outlets largely responded to the appeal by noting that no such organization exists, and Russian authorities have previously designated other non-existent organizations meant to encompass broader "social movements" as "extremist." [34] The Russian Ministry of Justice described the "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" as an "international social movement [aiming] to destroy the multinational unity and territorial integrity of Russia," indicating that Russian authorities likely intend to use this new extremist designation to further prosecute anti-war sentiment among Russians and within occupied Ukraine, particularly movements opposing Russia's occupation of Ukraine and movements within ethnic minority communities advocating for better treatment of Russian military personnel and mobilized personnel from these communities.[35] The "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" extremist designation also sets informational conditions to further paint Russians who oppose the war or Russian imperialism as actually opposing the Kremlin and Russia itself.

Key Takeaways:

- Western media continues to report that select US officials have resumed discussing the idea of "freezing the lines" where they are because the latest package of US military assistance to Ukraine may not be enough for Ukraine to regain all its territory. Supporters of the current package have not claimed that it would by itself allow Ukraine to liberate all occupied territory, and the discussion of possible end states of the war is very premature as President Joe Biden signed the bill authorizing the new package only two days ago.
- Public meetings between officials from Russia, Belarus, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Iran, and North Korea have surged in recent days, with at least 10 high-level bilateral meetings between April 22 and 26, underscoring the deepening multilateral partnership these states are constructing to confront the West.
- PRC officials claimed that NATO bears responsibility for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine amid meetings between PRC officials and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on April 26.
- Ukraine's Western partners continue to provide Ukraine with immediate and longer-term military assistance, particularly for Ukraine's air defenses.
- The Ukrainian military has reportedly pulled US-provided M1A1 Abrams tanks from the frontline in part because of the widespread threat of Russian drones and other strikes.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to expand the definition of prosecutable anti-war sentiment to portray Russians who oppose the war in Ukraine as opposing Russia itself.
- Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance northwest of Avdiivka, and Ukrainian forces made a confirmed advance in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, although this advance was likely not recent.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tatar-Bashkort service Idel Realii reported on April 26 that Samara Oblast is forming a new "Baty" volunteer motorized rifle battalion.
- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued a joint statement on behalf of 45 member states stating that Russia has arbitrarily detained thousands of Ukrainian civilians in occupied Ukraine and subjected them to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 25, 2024

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

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

April 25, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on April 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces are stabilizing their small salient northwest of Avdiivka and may make further tactical gains that could cause Ukrainian forces to withdraw from other tactical positions along the frontline west of Avdiivka to a more defensible line. Geolocated footage published on April 25 indicates that Russian forces advanced into central Solovyove (northwest of Avdiivka) from Novobakhmutivka after likely seizing all of Novobakhmutivka on the night of April 24 to 25.[1] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces seized all of Solovyove on April 25 and advanced up to two kilometers in depth in eastern Novokalynove (northwest of Avdiivka) on the night of April 24 to 25. [2] Russian sources claimed that elements of the 15th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) and the Arbat Spetsnaz Battalion made the advances in

Novobakhmutivka and Solovyove.[3] Russian forces have committed roughly a reinforced division's worth of combat power (comprised mainly of four CMD brigades) to the frontline northwest of Avdiivka and appear to be attempting to widen their penetration of the Ukrainian defense in the area following significant advances into Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka) as of April 18.[4] These recent Russian gains northwest of Avdiivka have been relatively quick but still relatively marginal, with Russian forces advancing at most roughly five kilometers in depth since April 18. Russian forces continue offensive operations throughout the frontline west of Avdiivka but have so far only achieved gradual marginal gains west and southwest of Avdiivka.[5]

The recent Russian advances in Novobakhmutivka and Solovyove widen the salient Russian forces are advancing along northwest of Avdiivka and afford Russian forces a more stable position from which to pursue a wider penetration. This salient is roughly two kilometers in width at its widest section, however, and would still be vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks should Ukrainian forces stabilize the tactical situation in the area. Ocheretyne notably sits on a junction between the Ukrainian defensive line that Russian forces have been attacking since their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February 2024 and a subsequent defensive line further west, which Russian sources have identified as a more heavily fortified line.[6] Russian forces could further stabilize their salient northwest of Avdiivka and advance further west of Ocheretyne, making positions along the Berdychi-Semenivka-Umanske line increasingly difficult for Ukrainian forces to hold. The Ukrainian command could decide to withdraw Ukrainian forces further west if it deems Russian tactical gains in the area to be too threatening to current Ukrainian positions. Ukrainian forces withdrew from Avdiivka to relatively poorly prepared defensive positions immediately west of Avdiivka following the Russian seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February and proceeded to slow Russian advances.[7] Positions further west would likely afford Ukrainian forces similar or better opportunities to blunt Russian advances, and Russian forces would likely have to maintain a relatively high tempo of offensive operations to place these subsequent Ukrainian defensive positions under immediate pressure. Russian forces will likely have to replenish and reinforce attacking units northwest of Avdiivka and will likely not be able to maintain the tempo of offensive operations required to rapidly advance west of the Berdychi-Semenivka-Umanske line. **Russian forces will likely continue to make tactical gains northwest of Avdiivka, but these gains are unlikely to develop into an operationally significant penetration, let alone cause the collapse of the Ukrainian defense west of Avdiivka.**

Russian offensive operations west of Avdiivka aim to exploit opportunities for tactical gains while the Russian offensive operation to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances. Russian forces in the Avdiivka area remain roughly 30 kilometers from their reported operational objective of Pokrovsk and roughly 17 kilometers from relatively large villages east of Pokrovsk.[8] Even if Russian tactical gains do cause Ukrainian forces to withdraw to positions further west, the current Russian gains northwest of Avdiivka are unlikely to become operationally significant advances in the near term. Russian pressure on Chasiv Yar is more significant. Russian forces currently on the eastern outskirts of Chasiv Yar have been intensifying efforts to seize the city since March 2024.[9] The offensive effort to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances as the seizure of the town would likely allow Russian forces to launch subsequent offensive operations against cities that form a significant Ukrainian defensive belt in Donetsk Oblast.[10] Russian forces do pose a credible threat of seizing Chasiv Yar, although they may not be able to do so rapidly. [11] Russian forces are likely attempting to seize as much territory as possible before the arrival of US security assistance significantly improves Ukrainian defensive capabilities in the coming weeks, and the Russian military command may be intensifying offensive operations northwest of Avdiivka because the area provides greater opportunities for making more rapid tactical gains despite the relative operational insignificance of those gains.

US officials are reportedly worried that the latest package of US military aid to Ukraine may not be enough for Ukraine to regain all of its territory. US military assistance is only part of what Ukraine currently needs, moreover; but Ukraine is itself working to address other war fighting requirements — primarily manpower challenges and the expansion of its defense industrial base (DIB). Politico reported on April 25 that three US officials believe that the recent provision of US aid may not be enough for Ukraine to restore its territorial integrity due to changes in the situation on the battlefield in the past few months.[12] One US official reportedly stated that the "immediate goal" of the US aid package is to stop Ukrainian losses and help Ukraine "regain momentum" on the battlefield, after which the goal will be to help Ukraine regain its territory. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated on April 24 that it is "certainly possible" that Russian forces could make further tactical advances in the coming weeks but that the US will be able to provide Ukraine "with what it needs through 2024." [13] The commander of the Ukrainian 93rd Mechanized Brigade, Colonel Pavlo Palisa, stated on April 25, however, that Ukraine's manpower problems are "much more important than ammunition." [14] Palisa stated that one Ukrainian soldier is currently having to perform the tasks of three to four soldiers and that Russian forces outnumber Ukrainian forces by about five to seven times

in the Bakhmut direction. Palisa stated that Russian forces are taking advantage of this numerical superiority by conducting attacks that result in personnel and equipment losses, which Ukrainian forces cannot afford to do.

ISW previously assessed that Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian offensive operations and eventually challenge the theater-wide initiative heavily depends on both the US provision of military aid and on Ukraine's efforts to restore and reconstitute existing units and create new ones.[15] US military assistance is currently en route to Ukraine, and Ukraine has recently taken steps to address its manpower issues.[16] Ukraine is also dramatically expanding its defense industrial capacity to develop the ability over time to satisfy its military requirements with significantly reduced foreign military assistance.[17] Russian forces are likely trying to take advantage of the limited period of time before US aid appears on the battlefield by intensifying offensive operations on certain sectors of the front in order to make tactical gains in the coming weeks.[18] Russian forces are unlikely, however, to translate these tactical advances into operationally significant gains before this window closes.[19] The timeline for Ukraine's resolution of its manpower challenges is less clear. Ukraine has recently taken steps to increase significantly the pool of manpower conscripted into the army and will need time to induct and train new conscripts. The Ukrainian command has been taking steps to get more manpower to front line units already on a limited scale, as ISW has previously reported.[20] The arrival of new ammunition and equipment will likely help blunt ongoing Russian offensives, but the timeline for the incorporation of new manpower will likely play a larger role in determining the timeline for future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.

Russian forces are reportedly fielding drones adapted to be more resilient against Ukrainian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities on critical sectors of the frontline, likely in an attempt to leverage new technological capabilities to exploit a limited window before US security assistance arrives in Ukraine. *Ukrainska Pravda* reported on April 15 that its sources in the Ukrainian General Staff stated that the number of Russian drones in "hot" sectors of the frontline has "at least doubled" in the past three months.[21] The Ukrainian General Staff sources reported that Russian forces are using modernized drones that operate on frequencies between 700 to 1,000 MHz, which are difficult for Ukrainian EW to jam because Ukrainian EW systems are chiefly designed to jam Russian drones operating on frequencies around 900 MHz. The sources stated that Ukraine is developing a unified system to collect information about Russian drone adaptations in order to quickly adapt Ukrainian electronic warfare systems to counter the Russian drones. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces are attempting to adapt their drone technology and tactics along the frontline as part of an offense-defense arms race to mitigate Ukrainian technological adaptations designed to offset Russian material advantages.[22] The Russian military likely chose to deploy drones operating on a frequency more difficult for Ukrainian EW to jam to support continued ground operations in critical sectors of the frontline to further exploit Ukrainian materiel shortages. The Russian military may have assessed that Ukrainian forces would eventually adapt their EW systems to jam drones at a larger frequency range and employed them now to support ongoing offensive operations as Ukrainian forces wait for US security assistance to arrive. The pattern of one side seizing on a fleeting technological advantage to support immediate ground operations while it lasts will likely become a characteristic of this kind of conflict.

A prominent Kremlin-awarded Russian milblogger channel announced that it opened a "media school" in the Balkans, likely supporting Kremlin efforts to expand its reach in the international information space. The *Rybar* Telegram channel claimed on April 25 that it opened the "Rybar Media School" in the Balkans and that a *Rybar* team spent the past week in Serbia and the territory of Republika Srpska (the Serbian political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina).[23] *Rybar* claimed that its team taught students, journalists, politicians, and academics how to create and run Telegram channels, organize these channels into networks, distribute "correct" content, and fight "misinformation." *Rybar* claimed that founder Mikhail Zvinchuk gave lectures, adopted 10 "bright and promising" projects, and reached agreements to hold regular in-person masterclasses with authors of unspecified Russian Telegram channels. *Rybar* previously gave a masterclass on the importance of Telegram and other social media to press heads and communications personnel at Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec likely in an effort to normalize the war without involving the Kremlin.[24] *Rybar*'s public expansion to international media influence operations is notable, particularly as the Kremlin seeks to expand its influence over the Russian information space and coopt more Russian milbloggers like it has with *Rybar*.[25] Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik in St. Petersburg on April 23 and discussed increasing interstate cooperation and the situation in the Balkans and Europe.[26]

French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized the importance of Europe's self-sufficiency for its defense and sovereignty during an April 25 speech.[27] Macron stated that Russia has "no inhibitions" and "no limits" and threatens Europe's ability to ensure its security.[28] Macron called on Europe to build a strategic concept of "credible European defense" and develop its defense industry to

build its sovereignty and autonomy.[29] Macron stated that European countries should give preference to European suppliers when buying military equipment and supported proposals for an EU loan program to finance preferential buying. Macron also supported increasing Europe's cybersecurity and cyber defense capacities, closer defense ties with the UK, and the creation of a European academy to train high-ranking military personnel.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are stabilizing their small salient northwest of Avdiivka and may make further tactical gains that could cause Ukrainian forces to withdraw from other tactical positions along the frontline west of Avdiivka to a more defensible line.
- Russian offensive operations west of Avdiivka aim to exploit opportunities for tactical gains while the Russian offensive operation to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances.
- US officials are reportedly worried that the latest package of US military aid to Ukraine may not be enough for Ukraine to regain all of its territory. US military assistance is only part of what Ukraine currently needs, moreover; but Ukraine is itself working to address other war fighting requirements — primarily manpower challenges and the expansion of its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian forces are reportedly fielding drones adapted to be more resilient against Ukrainian electronic warfare (EW) capabilities on critical sectors of the frontline, likely in an attempt to leverage new technological capabilities to exploit a limited window before US security assistance arrives in Ukraine.
- A prominent Kremlin-awarded Russian milblogger channel announced that it opened a “media school” in the Balkans, likely supporting Kremlin efforts to expand its reach in the international information space.
- French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized the importance of Europe’s self-sufficiency for its defense and sovereignty during an April 25 speech.
- Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances near Siversk, and Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin justified Russia’s ongoing efforts to nationalize Russian enterprises, including defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises on April 25.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 24, 2024

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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 24, 2024

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

April 24, 2024, 8:45pm ET

US President Joe Biden announced on April 24 that the US will begin sending military equipment to Ukraine “a few hours” after signing a bill that will provide roughly \$60 billion of assistance to Ukraine. Biden signed the Ukraine supplemental appropriations bill on April 24 after the US Senate passed the bill on the evening of April 23 and the US House passed the bill on April 20, and Biden emphasized the need to deliver military assistance to Ukraine as quickly as possible.[1] The Pentagon announced that the first tranche of US military assistance from this bill is worth \$1 billion and includes: RIM-7 and AIM-9M air defense missiles; Stinger anti-aircraft missiles; HIMARS ammunition; 60mm mortar rounds; 105mm and 155mm artillery shells; Bradley infantry fighting vehicles; High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs or Humvees); Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs); Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; precision aerial munitions; and other equipment and transport vehicles. [2] Russian forces have recently intensified offensive operations east of Chasiv Yar and northwest of Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast in an effort to take advantage of the limited window before US security assistance arrives in Ukraine.[3] The bill’s relatively quick passage through the US Senate has eliminated a potential source of delay, however, and US security assistance may arrive at the frontline in Ukraine within the next few weeks ahead of Russian expectations. The battlefield situation will continue to degrade until Ukrainian forces can receive and use enough military equipment at scale, however, and Ukrainian forces may still struggle to defend against Russian efforts near Chasiv Yar and northwest of Avdiivka in the near term.[4]

The United States reportedly provided an unspecified number of long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine in March 2024, some of which Ukraine has already used to strike Russian targets in deep rear areas. Western media reported that senior US officials stated that the United States secretly shipped an unspecified number of ATACMS with a range of roughly 300 kilometers to Ukraine in March 2024.[5] A senior US official reportedly stated that Ukrainian forces have since conducted strikes with the ATACMS missiles against a Russian military base in occupied Crimea and an unspecified target east of occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.[6] Geolocated footage published on April 23 shows Ukrainian forces striking several radar systems for a Russian S-300 air defense system southeast of occupied Volnovakha (northeast of Berdyansk).[7] Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko stated that Ukrainian forces struck Russian positions 10 times in Babakh-Tarama (immediately east of Berdyansk) on the night of April 23 to 24.[8] It is unclear if either of these strikes is the strike to which the US official was referring, and Ukrainian military officials have yet to confirm a Ukrainian strike near Berdyansk. Ukrainian forces appear to have used ATACMS missiles in a strike against a Russian military airfield in occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea on the night of April 16 to 17 that reportedly destroyed or critically damaged four S-400 air defense launchers, three radar stations, an air defense equipment control point, and a Murom-M airspace surveillance system.[9] US officials told Western media that the United States will include additional long-range ATACMS missiles as part of the announced \$1 billion tranche of security assistance for Ukraine.[10]

The arrival of long-range ATACMS missiles in sufficient quantities will allow Ukrainian forces to degrade Russian logistics and threaten Russian airfields in deep rear areas, although months of delay may have provided the Russian military time to offset the potential operational impacts that ATACMS will afford Ukraine. Ukraine used US-provided ATACMS long-range missiles to strike Russian targets in occupied Ukraine for the first time on October 17, 2023, targeting Russian airfields in occupied Berdyansk and Luhansk City.[11] Ukrainian forces likely aimed to disrupt Russian aviation support for localized Russian offensive efforts at the time but were not provided with enough ATACMS to conduct a sustained interdiction effort against Russian aviation assets at scale. [12] Cluster-munition-armed versions of the ATACMS missiles allow Ukrainian forces to conduct more efficient strikes against airfields that can more widely destroy Russian aircraft and other assets than individual missile strikes on individual aircraft.[13] These strikes may prompt Russian forces to relocate aircraft further away from the frontline, although this would likely be much more significant for Russian rotary-wing aircraft than for most Russian fixed-wing aircraft that have much longer ranges. [14] Russian forces used rotary-wing aircraft to significant effect when repelling Ukrainian mechanized assaults during Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast but have since employed far fewer rotary-wing aircraft in support of ongoing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. [15] Russian forces are currently heavily using fixed-wing aircraft to conduct glide bomb strikes throughout the frontline, and the withdrawal of these aircraft to airfields further away from the front would likely only have marginal impacts on the loitering time Russian pilots have to conduct glide bomb strikes.[16]

The arrival of ATACMS long-range missiles could also pose a significant threat to Russian ammunition depots in rear areas and may force the Russian command to choose between fortifying existing depots and further dispersing depots throughout occupied Ukraine.[17] Russian forces may already have adapted to the potential new Ukrainian strike capabilities following the use of ATACMS in October 2023, although it remains unclear if Russian forces sufficiently hardened ammunition depots or widely dispersed depots.[18] The arrival of HIMARS in Ukraine in June 2022 allowed Ukrainian forces to conduct an operationally significant interdiction campaign in support of counteroffensive operations in Kherson and Kharkiv oblasts and forced the Russian command to extend Russian logistics along longer ground lines of communications (GLOCs), which ultimately complicated the Russian provision of ammunition and supplies.[19] If the Russian command began efforts to offset the impacts of ATACMS in October 2023, then Ukrainian ATACMS strikes in spring and summer 2024 may present fewer challenges to Russian logistics in Ukraine. Long-range ATACMS will, nonetheless, allow Ukrainian forces to threaten a wider set of Russian targets in deep rear areas, and Ukrainian forces can use the ATACMS to cause more substantial damage to Russian logistics facilities and critical bridges along key Russian GLOCs. **Ukrainian strikes against Russian logistics or Russian aviation assets in deep rear areas will likely be operationally significant, however, only if Ukrainian forces successfully coordinate them with ground operations to exploit the degraded Russian capabilities resulting from the strikes.**

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian energy and industrial facilities in Smolensk and Lipetsk oblasts on the night of April 23 to 24. Unspecified sources told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* on April 24 that Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) successfully conducted drone strikes against oil depots in Yartsevo and Razdorovo, Smolensk Oblast. [20] Smolensk Oblast Governor Vasily Anokhin stated that the drone strikes caused fires at fuel and energy facilities in two raions in Smolensk Oblast.[21] Geolocated footage published on April 24 shows fire and smoke at oil depots near Razdorovo and Yartsevo.[22] Lipetsk Oblast Governor Igor

Artamonov claimed that a drone fell in an industrial zone in Lipetsk Oblast on the night of April 23 to 24.[23] Russian opposition outlet *Astra* reported that two drones struck the Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant in Lipetsk City, damaging part of a building and forcing the plant to shut down two oxygen units. [24] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted Ukrainian drones in Kursk, Belgorod, Voronezh, and Smolensk oblasts on the night of April 23 to 24.[25]

Russian authorities arrested Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24 on charges of accepting bribes, although other Russian sources reported that Ivanov is suspected of treason. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on April 23 that Russian authorities detained Ivanov and are investigating whether he accepted bribes, and the Moscow Basmanny Court formally arrested Ivanov on April 24 for the bribery charge.[26] Ivanov has been responsible for property management, troop quartering, housing, and medical support for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) since 2016, and the Basmanny Court stated that Ivanov accepted bribes while conducting contract and subcontract work for the Russian MoD.[27] Russian authorities also arrested Ivanov's alleged business partner Sergei Borodin for complicity in Ivanov's corruption.[28] Ivanov's lawyer stated that the defense will appeal Ivanov's arrest.[29] Russian media reported that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) has been collecting case materials on Ivanov's corruption for at least a month and possibly up to five years.[30] The FSB stated that FSB military counterintelligence is involved in the investigation into Ivanov, and Russian opposition sources noted that is not typical for the military counterintelligence department to handle corruption issues.[31]

Russian opposition media outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* reported that two sources close to the FSB stated that Russian authorities suspect Ivanov of treason, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the FSB to detain Ivanov under the guise of bribery after convincing the FSB that Ivanov had committed treason.[32] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to *Vazhnye Istorii*'s reporting, claiming that he knows nothing about whether Ivanov is charged with treason and calling for an end to speculation about Ivanov's arrest.[33] Russian sources have yet to specify what Ivanov's suspected treason may be connected to. Ukrainian media reported that sources in Ukrainian intelligence stated that the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a cyber infiltration of MoD networks in March 2024 and obtained official documents and confidential information about Ivanov, prompting Russian authorities to start an investigation into Ivanov.[34] The GUR sources reportedly noted that the Kremlin was already aware of Ivanov's corruption but did not elaborate on what the reported documents about Ivanov detailed.[35] ISW has yet to observe evidence confirming the allegations of treason.

Ivanov's arrest prompted Russian information space speculation about a new round of personnel changes in the Russian military and claims that the arrest is part of Kremlin factional conflicts. Russian insider sources claimed that Ivanov was a supporter of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and that his arrest is likely part of an effort to diminish the power and influence that Shoigu has cemented over the MoD since the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023.[36] Russian insider sources differed on which faction is trying to undermine Shoigu's position, however, with one claiming that First Deputy of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev targeted Ivanov because Ivanov had tried to fire Alekseyev and another Russian insider source claiming that a faction associated with Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitri Medvedev aims to disempower Shoigu.[37] A Russian insider source claimed that Russian oligarch Gennady Timchenko was Ivanov's patron and that Timchenko routinely defended Ivanov to Putin.[38] A prominent Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ivanov is part of a Kremlin faction that has been lobbying for a "soft exit" from the war in Ukraine.[39] ISW has not observed a preponderance of Russian claims suggesting that Ivanov's arrest is associated with a specific factional dispute, however. Russian sources labeled Ivanov's arrest the first of many expected personnel changes, specifically for Russian deputy defense ministers.[40] A Russian milblogger called the arrest the start of a "purge" within Russian military departments.[41] ISW has not observed indications that the Russian military has begun large-scale dismissals or detentions of Russian military personnel, however.

Russian ultranationalist milbloggers largely celebrated Ivanov's arrest and used it as an opportunity to publicly criticize the Russian MoD. Russian milbloggers largely called for Russian courts to bring Ivanov to justice for his crimes and lamented the Russian MoD's failures throughout the war, describing the arrest of an MoD official as long overdue.[42] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger tempered the other milbloggers' celebrations, asking how much has meaningfully changed since the Russian MoD replaced many other officials throughout the war, including cycling some defense and military officials between posts rather than firing them outright.[43] Other milbloggers noted that Ivanov's arrest brings much-desired justice even if nothing changes and that Ivanov's arrest presents an opportunity for the MoD to clean the "Augean stables" of their filth and corruption.[44] One milblogger even called for Russian authorities to send Ivanov to fight in the "forests of Lyman" - referring to the highly attritional, infantry-led Russian assaults in forest areas west and south of

Kreminna.[45] Russian milbloggers have not directly criticized the Russian MoD or officials by name with such vitriol or magnitude since before the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023 and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in August 2023.[46] The public nature of Ivanov's arrest and charges appears to have opened the floodgates of broader Russian milblogger criticism of the Russian MoD, though it is unclear to what degree the milblogger community will sustain these complaints or return to its norm of self-censorship.

The Kremlin explicitly threatened Armenia if Armenia does not resume active engagement in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and resume its pro-Kremlin alignment. Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan announced on April 23 that he would not participate in the International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues in St. Petersburg on April 24 and 25.[47] Grigoryan's refusal to participate in a Russian-led multilateral meeting is likely part of a continuing Armenian effort to distance Armenia from political and security relations with Russia by freezing its participation in the CSTO and refusing to participate in multilateral political and security engagements.[48] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held a Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) board meeting on April 23 to discuss promoting Russian interests in the South Caucasus, in which he claimed that the West is attempting to strategically defeat Russia by destabilizing "other parts of the post-Soviet space, including the South Caucasus."^[49] Lavrov blamed the West for allegedly attempting to undermine and destroy Russian security and economic relations with countries in the South Caucasus. Lavrov is likely attempting to portray Armenian efforts to deepen relations with the West as a deliberate hostile Western effort against Russia to set information conditions to justify any potential future Russian efforts to coerce or force Armenia to resume its pro-Russian alignment. The Russian MFA also explicitly threatened Armenia by claiming that the West is attempting to "drag the South Caucasus into a geopolitical confrontation" between Russia and the West and warning that Armenia could "go down the wrong path," following Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's April 5 meeting with senior EU and US officials.^[50] CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov (a Kazakh official) also directly threatened Armenia if it did not resume active engagement in the CSTO. Tasmagambetov stated in an interview published on April 24 that the CSTO is aware of NATO's activity in the South Caucasus and that the CSTO Secretariat's analysts indicate that the balance of power in the South Caucasus may change if Armenia leaves the CSTO.^[51] Tasmagambetov stated that he hopes that the likelihood of a "confrontation" between the CSTO and Armenia is "no more than hypothetical" but that such a confrontation would require all parties to consider their resources and capabilities. Lavrov's and Tasmagambetov's threats against Armenia were made around the April 24 Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day indicating that Russia likely intended to tie a tragedy in Armenian history with Armenia's efforts to distance itself from Russia.

Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova deliberately misrepresented recent Qatari-mediated negotiations between Russia and Ukraine as the first face-to-face negotiations on the return of Ukrainian children forcibly removed and deported by Russia, likely in an effort to minimize Russia's responsibility for the coordinated removal and deportation of Ukrainian children. Lvova-Belova posted deliberately misleading photos and claimed on April 24 that Qatari officials mediated face-to-face negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Doha and that the Russian delegation agreed to return 29 forcibly deported Ukrainian children from Russia to Ukraine.^[52] Lvova-Belova claimed that previous statements that Russian authorities have forcibly deported thousands of Ukrainian children are "nothing more than a myth" and that Qatar is a witness to the truth, the latest talking point in Lvova-Belova's efforts to downplay and censor information about Russia's illegal removal of Ukrainian children within Russian-controlled territory.^[53] Lvova-Belova stated in an October 2023 report that Russia has "accepted" over 700,000 Ukrainian children since February 24, 2022, and the Ukrainian government has confirmed the deportation and/or displacement of 19,546 Ukrainian children as of January 2024, however.^[54] Ukrainian Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets explicitly denied Lvova-Belova's claim about face-to-face negotiations and stated that there were "no direct negotiations" between the Russian and Ukrainian delegations on April 24.^[55] Lubinets clarified that Qatari officials mediate all discussions and act as intermediaries for all negotiations on the return of Ukrainian children from Russia. Lubinets stated that the Ukrainian delegation met with Qatari International Cooperation Minister Lolwah Rashid Al-Khater to discuss the return of Ukrainian children, civilians, and prisoners of war (POWs) from Russia on April 24 and will meet with the Qatari delegation again on April 25. ISW has extensively reported on Russia's forced deportation and removal of Ukrainian citizens, including children, and continues to assess that Russia is attempting to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, ethnicity, and identity, including through activities that appear to violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.^[56]

Moldovan authorities filed a criminal case against Yevgenia Gutsul, the Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, for campaign finance violations as Moldovan officials continue to warn about Russia's threat to Moldova. Moldovan media reported on April 24 that the Moldovan Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office completed its

criminal investigation into Gutsul's connections with the Shor Party, a political party that sanctioned pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor founded and financed, and filed a criminal case against Gutsul on two counts of knowingly accepting financial support from an organized criminal group. [57] The Moldovan Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office determined that Gutsul knowingly transported unaccounted funds from an organized criminal group likely based in Russia to Moldova and used those funds to support the Shor Party's activities in Moldova while Gutsul worked as a secretary for the Shor Party from 2019 to 2022. The Moldovan Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office also charged Gutsul with knowingly organizing and paying anti-government protesters over 42.5 million Moldovan lei (\$2.39 million) in illicit funds in October and November 2022. Gutsul denied the Moldovan government's allegations and claimed that the Moldovan government fabricated the case against her. [58] The new pro-Russian Moldovan Victory electoral bloc, which is also affiliated with Shor, responded to the case and demanded that the Moldovan government end its "groundless" and politically-motivated prosecution of Gutsul.[59] The Victory electoral bloc threatened that "provocations" by the Moldovan government could "destabilize the situation in Gagauzia." Pro-Kremlin actors may seize on and spin the legitimate criminal charges against Gutsul to justify Russian intervention and aggression in Moldova as necessary to protect Russia's "compatriots abroad."

Moldovan Foreign Minister Mihai Popșoi stated during an interview with *Bloomberg* published on April 23 that Moldova is a "petri dish" of Russian hybrid warfare and election meddling.[60] Popșoi stated that Russia is using a range of covert and informational tactics to destabilize Moldova, including smuggling money into Moldova to bribe voters and protestors, creating deep fake videos of Moldovan politicians, and conducting cyberattacks against Moldovan infrastructure. Russia reportedly conducted a significant cyberattack against the Moldovan postal service and temporarily disrupted postal services in February 2024, and Moldovan authorities notably confiscated over one million dollars from Kremlin-linked Moldovan opposition politicians at the Chisinau airport on the night of April 22 to 23.[61] Popșoi, citing Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, noted that Russia is conducting daily rhetorical attacks against Moldova and Moldovan officials and that Moldovan officials are monitoring the possibility of a future Russian military threat to Moldova. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely engaged in hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldovan society, degrading Moldova's democracy, and preventing Moldovan's accession to the EU.[62]

Key Takeaways:

- US President Joe Biden announced on April 24 that the US will begin sending military equipment to Ukraine "a few hours" after signing a bill that will provide roughly \$60 billion of assistance to Ukraine.
- The United States reportedly provided an unspecified number of long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine in March 2024, some of which Ukraine has already used to strike Russian targets in deep rear areas.
- The arrival of long-range ATACMS missiles in sufficient quantities will allow Ukrainian forces to degrade Russian logistics and threaten Russian airfields in deep rear areas, although months of delay may have provided the Russian military time to offset the potential operational impacts that ATACMS will afford Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against Russian energy and industrial facilities in Smolensk and Lipetsk oblasts on the night of April 23 to 24.
- Russian authorities arrested Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov on April 24 on charges of accepting bribes, although other Russian sources reported that Ivanov is suspected of treason.
- Ivanov's arrest prompted Russian information space speculation about a new round of personnel changes in the Russian military and claims that the arrest is part of Kremlin factional conflicts.
- Russian ultranationalist milbloggers largely celebrated Ivanov's arrest and used it as an opportunity to publicly criticize the Russian MoD.
- The Kremlin explicitly threatened Armenia if Armenia does not resume active engagement in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and resume its pro-Kremlin alignment.
- Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova deliberately misrepresented recent Qatari-mediated negotiations between Russia and Ukraine as the first face-to-face negotiations on the return of Ukrainian children forcibly removed and deported by Russia, likely in an effort to minimize Russia's responsibility for the coordinated removal and deportation of Ukrainian children.
- Moldovan authorities filed a criminal case against Yevgenia Gutsul, the Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, for campaign finance violations as Moldovan officials continue to warn about Russia's threat to Moldova.
- Russian forces recently marginally advanced near Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and Robotyne.

- Russian State Duma Committee on Information Policy Head Alexander Khinshtein stated on April 24 that unspecified Russian officials will soon submit a draft law to the State Duma that would ban the extradition of foreigners who have fought in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine if the foreigners face prosecution for their military service in their home countries.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 23, 2024

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April 23, 2024, 6:20pm ET

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu highlighted ongoing Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and announced Russia's intent to intensify its strike campaign to disrupt Ukrainian logistics. Shoigu addressed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) collegium on April 23 and focused on the recently claimed Russian seizure of Bohdanivka (northeast of Chasiv Yar), Pervomaiske (southwest of Avdiivka), and Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City).^[1] ISW has not observed visual confirmation that Russian forces have seized all of these settlements yet, however. Shoigu also focused on claimed Russian gains northwest of Avdiivka near Berdychi and west of Donetsk City near Horhiivka.^[2] Russian forces have yet to make significant tactical gains near Chasiv Yar after advancing up to the eastern outskirts of the settlement in early April 2024 but have recently made significant tactical gains northwest of Avdiivka and marginal advances southwest of Donetsk City.^[3] Shoigu is likely trying to broadly depict the various ongoing Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine as equally successful despite mixed and limited tactical Russian success in these directions.^[4] Russian forces will likely intensify ongoing offensive operations in the coming weeks to exploit Ukrainian materiel constraints ahead of the expected arrival of US security assistance.^[5] Shoigu's focus on Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, west of Avdiivka, and west and southwest of Donetsk City further indicates that Russian forces will likely intensify assaults in these areas, where Russian forces are currently prioritizing broader offensive operations, instead of elsewhere along the front.

Shoigu also announced that Russian forces will intensify strikes against Ukrainian logistics centers and storage facilities for Western-provided weapons.^[6] Russian forces have heavily targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure during missile and drone strikes through March and April 2024, exploiting already degraded Ukrainian air defense capabilities in an effort to collapse Ukraine's energy grid and cause long-term damage to Ukrainian war waging capabilities and public morale.^[7] Russian forces will likely intensify drone and missile strikes in the coming weeks to maximize damage to Ukrainian infrastructure and defense industrial base capacity before the expected arrival of US security assistance begins to alleviate Ukraine's critical shortage of air defense missiles.^[8] Shoigu's focus on striking Ukrainian logistics suggests that Russian forces may shift their target set to hit Ukrainian transportation infrastructure, logistics, and military storage facilities. Russian forces heavily targeted Ukrainian transportation infrastructure in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on April 19, and Russian forces may intend to replicate and expand these strikes in the coming weeks to interdict Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs).^[9] The Russian military command may hope that a coordinated interdiction effort will constrain Ukraine's ability to sufficiently distribute manpower and materiel to critical sectors of the front and delay the improved capabilities that the arrival of US security assistance will afford Ukrainian forces.^[10]

Shoigu also discussed ongoing Russian military reforms during his April 23 MoD collegium address, cloaking ongoing expansion efforts in an information operation meant to falsely frame all Russian military activity as inherently defensive and responsive to supposed NATO aggression.^[11] Shoigu claimed that Russian forces would continue efforts to improve their composition and structure "in proportion to the threat" posed by the United States and its allies — echoing a standard Kremlin information operation that frames the West as a constant aggressor and Russia as a passive victim trying to defend itself against external attacks. Shoigu went on to discuss the Russian military's ongoing efforts to stand up the Moscow and Leningrad military districts (MMD and LMD) and accused Sweden of increasing tensions on Russia's northwestern and western flanks through its accession to NATO. Shoigu also reported that the 44th Army Corps (AC) has formed within the LMD (potentially naming the AC that Russian forces have been forming in the Republic of Karelia on the border with Finland, which borders the LMD's new area of responsibility) and confirmed that Russia is expanding three unspecified motorized rifle brigades into motorized rifle divisions.^[12] Kremlin officials have frequently claimed that Finland's NATO accession forced Russia to create the LMD on Finnish borders, and Shoigu's suggestion that routine NATO defensive exercises and responses to Russian aggression in Ukraine necessitate the sort of long-term Russian military buildup

that Russia is currently undertaking are both continuations of the longstanding Kremlin narrative that Russia is an innocent victim of aggressive NATO expansion.[13] Ongoing Russian military reforms and expansion are likely meant to prepare Russia for a potential future conventional confrontation with NATO, but the Russian attempt to justify the reforms as inherently passive and reactionary is an information operation that likely aims to force NATO states to self-deter from increasing their own defensive capabilities.[14]

Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian traveled to St. Petersburg on April 23 to attend the 12th Russian International Security Summit.[15] The Iranian Embassy in Moscow announced that Ahmadian will meet with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev while at the summit.[16] Ahmadian met with Iraqi National Security Adviser, Qasem Araji, on the sidelines of the summit on April 23, where Araji emphasized the importance of expelling United States and international coalition forces from Iraq. The two also discussed the March 2023 security agreement between Iran and Iraq that requires Iraqi authorities to disarm and relocate members of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups away from Iran's borders. Ahmadian will also meet with his Brazilian, Chinese, Indian, Russian, and South African counterparts at the summit. High-level meetings between Iranian and Russian defense officials such as Ahmadian and Patrushev help both sides align their national security and defense strategies and bolster Russia's informational reputation as the leader of a coalition of like-minded states that counterbalance the West.

The Chechen Republic appears to be trying to align itself more closely with Iran over the backdrop of intensifying bilateral security cooperation between Russia and Iran. Russian State Duma Deputy and head of the Chechen Rosgvardia branch Adam Delimkhanov stated on April 22 that he met with Iranian Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Akbar Ahmadian during a visit to Iran on Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's orders.[17] Delimkhanov reported that he and Ahmadian discussed security issues in Central Asia and the Middle East and the prospects of Russo-Iranian cooperation in countering national security threats to both states. Iran is pursuing its own interests in the North Caucasus, especially Muslim-majority regions, and is likely interested in strengthening bonds with Chechen officials to expand its influence in the region. Representatives of Iranian airline Mahan Air met with Chechen Prime Minister Muslim Huchiev in December 2023 to discuss the prospect of opening regular flights between Chechnya and Iran to strengthen trade, economic, and cultural ties between the two.[18]

United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced the UK's largest ever package of military assistance to Ukraine valued at 500 million pounds (around \$662 million) on April 23. [19] Sunak announced on April 23 that the UK will provide over 400 vehicles, 4 million rounds of small arms ammunition, 60 boats, air defense equipment, and Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine. Sunak also stated that the UK will increase its military spending to 2.5 percent of its GDP by 2030, with spending gradually increasing to 87 billion pounds (about \$108 billion) in the next six years.[20] Sunak stated that the increased defense spending will put the UK "on a war footing" as the UK is facing an "axis of authoritarian states with different values...like Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China."[21]

Moldovan authorities confiscated over one million dollars from Kremlin-linked Moldovan opposition politicians at the Chisinau airport on the night of April 22 to 23, and the opposition politicians likely intended to use to bribe protestors and voters. Moldovan law enforcement officers conducted over 150 searches mostly at the Chisinau airport and in some personal homes after receiving a tip that opposition politicians who were returning from the April 21 meeting of Moldovan opposition politicians in Moscow, which resulted in the creation of the pro-Russian Moldovan Victory electoral bloc, were smuggling money into Moldova.[22] Moldovan authorities reported that they confiscated about 62,000 rubles (about \$660), 3,000 euros (about \$3,200), and over \$1.1 million during the searches. The Moldovan General Police Inspectorate Chief Viorel Cernauteau stated on April 23 that the money was meant to finance Moldovan political parties led by affiliates of US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor. Unspecified actors reportedly used "couriers" to transport the money from Russia to Moldova and promised them compensation ranging from 300 to 500 euros (about \$320-520). Cernauteau noted that the "couriers" carried under 9,000 euros (about \$9,600) of cash to avoid customs laws which require people to declare amounts over 10,000 euros (about \$10,700). Shor reportedly paid demonstrators to protest Moldovan President Maia Sandu in 2022, and Moldovan authorities are investigating the Shor Party for bribing voters during the 2023 Gagauzia gubernatorial election.[23] Moldovan authorities have also detained members of Moldovan parliament who reportedly took bribes from Shor affiliates.[24] ISW previously assessed that the creation of the Victory electoral bloc would allow the Kremlin to focus on a unified political effort as part of its efforts to destabilize Moldovan society, attack Moldova's democratic government, and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU).[25]

Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor is blocking 150 virtual private network (VPN) services in Russia, another step in the Kremlin's efforts to further censor and control the Russian

information space. Roskomnadzor Department for Control and Supervision Head Yevgeny Zeitsev announced during a speech at the Safer Internet Forum in Moscow on April 23 that Roskomnadzor is currently blocking 150 popular VPN services and that Roskomnadzor began restricting access to websites and social media posts that advertised VPNs on March 1, when a federal ban on advertising ways to bypass Roskomnadzor's restrictions came into effect.[26] Zeitsev stated that Roskomnadzor has blocked roughly 700 sites that advertised VPNs since March 1 and 200,000 sites accused of spreading false information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine since February 2022. The Russian government has previously attempted to downplay its efforts to block VPNs, although the Kremlin appears increasingly unwilling to tolerate VPN usage that allows Russians to bypass censorship efforts amid ongoing efforts to further consolidate control over the Russian information space.[27]

Ukrainian drone strikes and recent flooding in Russia have reportedly brought weekly Russian oil refining to an 11-month low, although the decrease in refining output has so far been marginal.[28] Bloomberg reported on April 22 that as of mid-April 2024 Russia processed 5.22 million barrels of crude oil per day, 10,000 fewer barrels than the average in early April.[29] Russia has reportedly processed 1.23 million barrels of crude oil per day since January at refineries that Ukrainian forces previously struck with drones, a 280,000-barrel-per-day decrease from before Ukrainian forces started targeting Russian oil refineries in late January 2024.[30] Ukrainian drone strikes reportedly shut down 14 percent of Russia's overall oil refining capacity as of April 2.[31] Flooding in Orenburg Oblast forced the Orsk oil refinery to go offline on April 7, but Reuters reported that the Orsk refinery resumed full operations on April 23.[32] Decreased Russian refining capacity likely forced Russia to import gasoline from Kazakhstan and Belarus in early April to address shortages and attempt to prevent domestic gasoline prices from rising, although there are no indications that constraints on Russian gasoline production are significant to international market values.[33] Russian officials have noted that a reduction in primary oil refining in 2024 will likely lead to increases in Russian crude oil exports since Russia would not be able to refine as much as it usually does.[34] Future Ukrainian drone strikes may disable and disrupt more of Russia's refining capacity and inflict critical constraints on Russian refining that begin to substantially impact Russia's production of distillate products. Ukrainian drone strikes have yet to significantly impact Russian refining production or the domestic Russian or international supply of crude oil and distillate products, however.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu highlighted ongoing Russian offensive operations near Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and announced Russia's intent to intensify its strike campaign to disrupt Ukrainian logistics.
- Shoigu also discussed ongoing Russian military reforms during his April 23 MoD collegium address, cloaking ongoing expansion efforts in an information operation meant to falsely frame all Russian military activity as inherently defensive and responsive to supposed NATO aggression.
- Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian traveled to St. Petersburg on April 23 to attend the 12th Russian International Security Summit.
- The Chechen Republic appears to be trying to align itself more closely with Iran over the backdrop of intensifying bilateral security cooperation between Russia and Iran.
- United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced the UK's largest ever package of military assistance to Ukraine valued at 500 million pounds (around \$662 million) on April 23.
- Moldovan authorities confiscated over one million dollars from Kremlin-linked Moldovan opposition politicians at the Chisinau airport on the night of April 22 to 23, and the opposition politicians likely intended to use to bribe protestors and voters.
- Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor is blocking 150 virtual private network (VPN) services in Russia, another step in the Kremlin's efforts to further censor and control the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian drone strikes and recent flooding in Russia have reportedly brought weekly Russian oil refining to an 11-month low, although the decrease in refining output has so far been marginal.
- Ukrainian forces recently advanced near Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut) and Russian forces recently advanced near Donetsk City.
- Prominent Russian milbloggers continue to complain about the ineffectiveness of Russian drones on the battlefield.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 22, 2024

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

April 22, 2024, 9:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on April 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin is conducting a concerted air and information operation to destroy Kharkiv City, convince Ukrainians to flee, and internally displace millions of Ukrainians ahead of a possible future Russian offensive operation against the city or elsewhere in Ukraine. Kharkiv Oblast Head Oleh Synehubov and the Kharkiv Oblast Prosecutor's Office reported that Russian forces struck a TV tower in Kharkiv City possibly with a Kh-59 cruise missile on the afternoon of April 22 and that the strike disrupted TV signals in the area.^[1] Ukrainian and Russian media and Russian milbloggers widely amplified footage and images of the damaged TV tower, which broke in half and partially collapsed as a result of the strike.^[2] Russian state media and milbloggers attempted to justify the strike by claiming that Ukrainian forces installed unspecified air defense communication and coordination equipment on the tower.^[3] Russian milbloggers praised the accuracy of the Russian strike and insinuated that Russian forces had tried and failed to down the Kharkiv City TV tower and other TV towers in Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts several times, including in March 2022.^[4] Russian forces notably struck a TV tower in Kyiv City on March 1, 2022, shortly after Russian forces launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[5] Kremlin may intend to invoke the memory of the March 2022 Kyiv City strike and the early weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to create panic among Ukrainians during another challenging moment of the war.

Kremlin mouthpieces are seizing on concerns about a future Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City to conduct a likely coordinated information operation in an effort to create outsized panic among Ukrainians. ISW assesses that the likelihood of a successful Russian ground offensive against Kharkiv is very low if Ukraine receives renewed US military aid rapidly. The Ukrainian Center for Combatting Disinformation warned as early as February 2024 that Russian Telegram channels are spreading claims that Ukrainian officials were fleeing Kharkiv City, and Russian sources claimed in early April that there is a "mass exodus" of civilians from Kharkiv City.^[6] The Ukrainian Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security recently identified a Russian information operation claiming that Ukrainian officials prevented civilians from leaving Kharkiv City and noted that Russian forces are seizing on concern about a possible Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City to sow panic and a feeling of "impending, inevitable catastrophe" in Ukraine.^[7] Russian state TV propagandist Vladimir Solovyov claimed on March 28 that Russian forces should destroy Kharkiv City "quarter by quarter" and suggested offering Ukrainian civilians 48 hours to leave the city, presumably before being killed in Russia's destruction of the city.^[8] Russian neo-nationalist publication *Tsargrad* amplified claims from several unspecified military sources on April 16 that a Russian offensive operation to capture Kharkiv City is inevitable and that the situation in Kharkiv City will become "worse than Bakhmut and Avdiivka."^[9] *Tsargrad* claimed that there is "no doubt" that Russian forces will seize Kharkiv City but that "blockade tactics," such as "cutting off electricity, gas, and water" for civilians, are the most reasonable way for Russian forces to seize the city and avoid large-scale losses. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russia's April 22 strikes against Kharkiv City are an indication that Ukrainian civilians should leave Kharkiv City "while they still can" and that it does not make sense for civilians to hide in and protect their apartments if Ukrainian forces are "hiding in the basement," implying that Russian forces may deliberately target residential infrastructure.^[10] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainians should abandon Kharkiv City before their "neighbors" kill them, likely referring to Russian forces.^[11] **Ukrainian officials have previously discussed the possibility that Russian forces might launch a ground operation against Kharkiv city later this summer, and ISW continues to assess that the Russians lack the forces necessary to seize the city as long as Ukrainian forces defending it are adequately supplied, as they will be if the US restarts military assistance soon.**

Russia is intensifying strike and information operations against Ukrainians in Kharkiv City to exploit ongoing constraints on Ukrainian air defenses and heightened tensions in Ukraine in the likely relatively brief window before the anticipated arrival of US military assistance to frontline areas. Ukrainian officials have recently warned about a possible future Russian offensive operation to seize Kharkiv City, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signaled Russia's interest for such an operation on April 19, claiming that Kharkiv City "plays an important role" in Russian President Vladimir Putin's idea of establishing a demilitarized "sanitary zone" in Ukraine to supposedly protect Russian border settlements from Ukrainian strikes.^[12] Russia's envisioned "sanitary zone" could represent a range of on-the-ground conditions from the seizure of Kharkiv City and the surrounding areas to the creation of an uninhabitable, razed "no man's land" that neither side controls. ISW previously assessed that a Russian offensive operation aimed at seizing Kharkiv City would be an

extremely ambitious undertaking that would pose significant challenges to Russian forces and that the Russian military command will likely have to reconsider its objectives for its forecasted summer 2024 offensive effort to account for better equipped and manned Ukrainian forces.[13] The Russian military command may attempt to destroy Kharkiv City with air, missile, and drone strikes and prompt a large-scale internal displacement of Ukrainian civilians if the Russian military determines that it cannot successfully seize the city with ground operations. Continued timely US and Western military assistance, particularly the provision of air defense systems and missiles, will be critical to Ukraine's defense of Kharkiv City.

Russian forces appear to be aiming to make a wide penetration of Ukrainian lines northwest of Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, but their ability to do so will likely be blunted by the arrival of US and other Western aid to the frontline. Russian forces have committed roughly a reinforced division's worth of combat power (comprised mainly of four Central Military District [CMD] brigades) to the Berdychi-Novokalynove line northwest of Avdiivka.[14] These forces are pursuing three mutually reinforcing drives — pushing westward of Berdychi; pushing into and westward of Ocheretyne along the O0544 (Keramik-Myrhorod) road; and pushing northwards towards Novokalynove — which are all likely aimed at supporting the Russian operational-level goal of reaching the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundary via Pokrovsk (west of the Avdiivka area). Russian offensive operations in these three areas north and northwest of Avdiivka have succeeded in creating three small salients along a frontline that is about seven kilometers long, but each of these three salients is currently too narrow in isolation to serve as meaningful launch points for further ground offensives that would accomplish a broad encirclement of the general area west of Avdiivka. The force composition, density, and general battlefield geometry of this area suggest that Russian forces currently hope to combine the pushes from all three salients to create a wider breach along the Berdychi-Novokalynove line, predominantly using forces of the CMD.

Russian forces do not have an indefinite timeframe in which to pursue this wider breach, however. European military aid will soon start arriving in Ukraine's arsenal along with renewed US military aid should the US Senate pass the supplemental appropriations bill.[15] European Union (EU) High Commissioner Josep Borrell stated on April 22 that the first deliveries of artillery ammunition sourced through the Czech-led initiative for Ukraine will arrive in country by the end of May to beginning of June.[16] Ukraine's ability to even the ratio of artillery fires in comparison to Russian forces on the battlefield will be essential to Ukraine's ability to deprive Russian forces of the initiative and slow the rate of ongoing Russian advances in areas of the front such as the Avdiivka direction. Russian forces are similarly intensifying the rate of tactical-level gains elsewhere in the theater, namely in the Lyman direction and west and southwest of Donetsk City, to consolidate gains as rapidly as possible. The Russian military command is likely aware of the closing window before more Western aid arrives and is trying to secure offensive gains before the window closes. Russian forces are likely to continue to make tactical gains along the Berdychi-Novokalynove line and elsewhere in theater in the coming weeks as they intensify offensive operations in anticipation of the arrival of Western aid. However, the currently closing window of low Ukrainian resources will likely inhibit Russian forces from being able to translate tactical advances into operationally significant gains for the most part, though some are possible; and Ukraine's receipt of Western aid will likely position Ukrainian forces to receive the upcoming offensives for which Russian forces are preparing.[17]

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on April 22 that Finland is taking concrete steps to protect itself against Russian hybrid operations weaponizing Russian-manufactured migrant crises on the Russian-Finnish border.[18] WSJ noted that the Finnish government believes that Russia has sent waves of migrants to the Finnish border as part of a wider hybrid operation meant to intimidate Finland and test its security services following Finland's accession into NATO. WSJ reported that in addition to the manufactured migrant crisis in late 2023, Russia has also escalated cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns against Finland. Finnish diplomat and former Finnish Ambassador to Russia Heikki Talvitie told WSJ that recent Russian hybrid efforts against Finland have fundamentally changed the Finland–Russia relationship and that it is now “existential.” The Kremlin explicitly threatened Finland on April 6 and accused Finland of pursuing a “destructive course” in its relationship with Russia in order to undermine Finnish sovereign decision-making and NATO accession.[19] ISW has consistently assessed that such Russian statements against NATO states are meant to force NATO leaders into self-deterring against taking concrete actions to protect themselves against Russian hybrid efforts.[20]

The Kremlin appears to be highlighting its relationship with Azerbaijan while downplaying deteriorating Russian–Armenia relations following Russia's failure to prevent Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met in Moscow on April 22 to discuss “very sensitive” regional security questions. [21] Putin stated that relations between the two countries are at a high level and are continuing to develop. Putin stated that Russian–Azerbaijani trade is increasing and highlighted that Russia has

invested \$6 billion in the Azerbaijani economy. Aliyev called Russia a “fundamental country” in ensuring the security of the Caucasus region. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on April 22 that Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will likely meet in person soon — a repetition of Peskov’s similarly vague statement on April 10.[22] Peskov also claimed that Russian peacekeepers, whom the November 2020 Russian-brokered Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire stipulated would remain in the area until 2025, withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh because the “geopolitical realities” in the region changed “after Armenia recognized Azerbaijan’s 1991 borders” and there were no more functions for the peacekeepers to perform.[23] Secretary General of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Imangali Tasmagambetov stated that relations between the CSTO and Armenia are “not going through the best period,” but that Armenia’s activities in the CSTO are continuing.[24] Tasmagambetov stated that Armenia and the CSTO are working on unspecified issues in a “working manner.” Pashinyan previously stated that Armenia would leave the CSTO if the CSTO fails to meet certain Armenian expectations.[25]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin is conducting a concerted air and information operation to destroy Kharkiv City, convince Ukrainians to flee, and internally displace millions of Ukrainians ahead of a possible future Russian offensive operation against the city or elsewhere in Ukraine.
- Kremlin mouthpieces are seizing on concerns about a future Russian offensive operation against Kharkiv City to conduct a likely coordinated information operation in an effort to create outsized panic among Ukrainians. ISW assesses that the likelihood of a successful Russian ground offensive against Kharkiv is very low if Ukraine receives renewed US military aid rapidly.
- Russia is intensifying strike and information operations against Ukrainians in Kharkiv City to exploit ongoing constraints on Ukrainian air defenses and heightened tensions in Ukraine in the likely relatively brief window before the anticipated arrival of US military assistance to frontline areas.
- Russian forces appear to be aiming to make a wide penetration of Ukrainian lines northwest of Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, but their ability to do so will likely be blunted by the arrival of US and other Western aid to the frontline.
- The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 22 that Finland is taking concrete steps to protect itself against Russian hybrid operations weaponizing Russian-manufactured migrant crises on the Russian-Finnish border.
- The Kremlin appears to be highlighting its relationship with Azerbaijan while downplaying deteriorating Russian-Armenia relations following Russia’s failure to prevent Armenia’s loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Chasiv Yar, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- The Russian state “Sudoplatov” volunteer drone initiative is reportedly equipping Russian military personnel operating in the Bakhmut direction with cheap and defective first-person view (FPV) drones.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 21, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird

April 21, 2024, 8:15 pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on April 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

US Senate Intelligence Committee Chairperson Senator Mark Warner reported on April 21 that US provisions of military aid to Ukraine, including long-range ATACMS missiles, will be in transit to Ukraine “by the end of the week” if the Senate passes the supplemental appropriations bill on April 23 and US President Joe Biden signs it by April 24.[1] Warner stated in an interview with CBS News on April 21 that the US presidential administration has been prepared to provide long-range ATACMS to Ukraine, as specified in the bill, for the past several months. [2] Warner emphasized the extensive battlefield impact that Ukrainian forces have achieved using US-provided military assistance, stating that Ukrainian forces have been able to destroy “87 percent of Russian pre-existing ground forces” (potentially in reference to Russia’s pre-full-scale invasion professional force), 67 percent of Russian tanks, and 32 percent of Russian armored personnel carriers (APCs) for the past two years with less than 3 percent of the US defense budget and military aid from the US and Europe. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated on April 20 that the National Security Supplemental that provides support to Ukraine, Israel, and the Indo-Pacific allows about \$50

billion to flow into the US defense industrial base (DIB) and will create jobs in over 30 US states.

[3] Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder stated on April 20 that the US Department of Defense (DoD) is considering sending “several additional advisors to augment the Office of Defense Cooperation (OCD)” to the US Embassy in Kyiv.[4] *Politico* reported on April 20 citing an unidentified individual familiar with the matter that the US advisors in Kyiv will help Ukrainian officials plan to sustain US equipment provided to Ukraine and help US embassy officials in Kyiv coordinate new weapons shipments after the supplemental appropriations bill becomes law, likely as part of an effort to alleviate DoD personnel limitations in documenting certain aid.[5]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on April 21 that the swift delivery of US military aid to Ukraine could allow Ukrainian forces to stabilize the frontline and seize the initiative.

[6] Zelensky stated during an interview with *NBC News* that US military support gives Ukraine a chance at victory but warned that Ukrainian battlefield progress will depend on how fast military aid arrives on the frontlines. Zelensky noted that delays in the delivery of military assistance have already contributed to Ukrainian materiel and personnel losses in “several directions.” Zelensky stated that the Ukrainian military is especially anticipating the deliveries of air defense and long-range weapon systems since Ukrainian forces currently lack significant long-range capabilities to prevent Ukrainian casualties on the frontlines. ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian forces may suffer additional setbacks in the coming weeks while waiting for US security assistance that will allow Ukraine to stabilize the front, but they will likely be able to blunt the current Russian offensive assuming the resumed US assistance arrives promptly.[7] Russian forces will likely intensify ongoing offensive operations and missile and drone strikes in the coming weeks in order to exploit the closing window of Ukrainian materiel constraints.[8]

Ukrainian forces struck and damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s (BSF) *Kommuna* submarine support ship – the world’s oldest active-duty naval vessel – in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on April 21.[9] Geolocated footage published on April 21 shows fire and a smoke plume in Sevastopol Bay, and Russian sources claimed that Russian air defenses intercepted a Ukrainian anti-ship missile in the area.[10] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenichuk confirmed that a Ukrainian strike damaged the *Kommuna* and that while Ukrainian forces are still clarifying the degree of damage, the *Kommuna* is clearly incapable of operating.[11] Pletenichuk noted that the *Kommuna* is over 111 years old and that Russian forces modernized it in 2016 to perform deep sea work, including raising submarines and sunken cargo. Pletenichuk stated that the *Kommuna* is the only rescue vessel of its class in the BSF. Pletenichuk reported that the *Kommuna* previously performed rescue operations in the area of the sunken Russian missile cruiser *Moskva* and large landing ship *Tsezar Kunikov* and that Russian forces would be unable to perform similar rescue and retrieval operations without the *Kommuna*. Open-source intelligence analyst HI Sutton noted that the *Kommuna* provides the Russian Navy with “valuable capabilities” and that the ship has frequently participated in sea trials and can conduct seabed warfare. [12] Another maritime intelligence analyst suggested that the strike may limit the BSF’s submarine operations and disrupt Russian submarine Kalibr missile launching operations.[13]

US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor created the new pro-Russian Moldovan Victory electoral bloc on April 21, which plans to run a candidate in the October 20 Moldovan presidential election. Shor led a meeting of Moldovan opposition politicians in Moscow on April 21 and announced that the Shor Party, Revival Party, Chance Party, Alternative Forces of the Salvation of Moldova Party, and the Victoria Party will form the Victory electoral bloc.[14] Shor stated that he will act as the chairperson of the bloc’s executive committee.[15] Yevgenia Gutsul, the governor of Gagauzia, a pro-Russian autonomous region of Moldova, will act as the bloc’s executive secretary.[16] Marina Tauber, a US-sanctioned Moldovan member of parliament and close Shor affiliate, will act as the secretary of the executive committee.[17] Shor stated that the bloc aims to improve Moldova’s relations with Russia and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and advocate against Moldova’s accession into the European Union (EU).[18] The bloc reportedly intends to run a candidate in the October 2024 Moldovan presidential elections and will announce their candidate soon.[19] Shor, Gutsul, and Tauber notably do not meet the minimum age requirement to run for president in Moldova.[20]

The Victory electoral bloc will likely allow the Kremlin to focus on a unified political effort in Moldova instead of maintaining relations with multiple pro-Russian Moldovan actors and parties, as it has done recently.[21] The electoral bloc is likely intended to create the impression of widespread support in Moldova for pro-Russian policies and Shor himself, who continues to be the major conduit of Kremlin influence in Moldovan politics even though he lives in exile in Israel. Most of the parties that make up the new Victory electoral bloc are already extensively affiliated with Shor and do not possess widespread influence in the Moldovan political sphere. The Chance Party, previously known as the Ours Party, joined Shor’s “Chance. Duties. Realization.” (S.O.R.) electoral bloc in June 2023 after Moldovan authorities banned the Shor Party.[22] Moldovan authorities barred the Chance

Party from participating in local elections in November 2023, however.[23] The Alternative Forces of the Salvation of Moldova Party registered as a political party in March 2022 and later joined the S.O.R. electoral bloc in June 2023 but does not currently hold any seats in parliament.[24] The Victoria Party is a new party having only registered in late December 2023, and its head, Vadim Groza, was formerly a member of the Socialist Party and is the current mayor of Soldanesti (a city in northeastern Moldova).[25] The Revival Party is likely the most influential of the parties that make up the new Victory electoral bloc, but it currently only holds four seats in Moldova's 101-seat parliament.[26] The Revival Party was largely defunct until two Moldovan politicians left the Socialist Party to join the Revival Party in May 2023 after meeting with Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Head Leonid Slutsky in Russia in March 2023 and with Shor in Israel in May 2023.[27] The Revival Party orchestrated a large-scale protest in Chisinau in February 2024 that called for Moldovan President Maia Sandu to step down.[28] The Moldovan Constitutional Court recently reversed a ruling that banned politicians who were previously members of the Shor Party from running in Moldovan elections, and ISW assessed at the time that the Kremlin would likely more directly exploit and promote Shor Party affiliates before the upcoming Moldovan presidential election.[29] The Kremlin is likely engaged in hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldovan society, attacking Moldova's democratic government, and preventing Moldova's accession to the EU, as ISW has extensively reported.[30]

The Russian and Chinese navies signed a memorandum of understanding and cooperation on April 21 amid recent reports of China's increased support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Alexander Moiseev signed a memorandum of understanding and cooperation with Chinese Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Hu Zhongming regarding naval search and rescue operations during Moiseev's visit to China.[31] Moiseev and Hu also discussed Russian and Chinese naval cooperation, and Moiseev will participate in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao on April 22-23, where he will meet with China's and other unspecified countries' senior navy officials.[32] Moiseev's visit to China notably precedes US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's travel to China from April 24 through April 26.[33]

The Kremlin blocked domestic access to the website of the French non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF), depriving Russians of access to independent assessments of Russian freedom of speech and press. Independent Russian non-governmental organization Roskomsvoboda reported on April 21 that the RSF website was blocked in Russia alongside other resources that publish information about Russia's war in Ukraine.[34] Roskomsvoboda noted that the official Russian register of blocked sites did not include the federal agency responsible or the official reason for blocking RSF and assessed that the Russian Prosecutor General's Office was the likely responsible party.[35] RSF publishes an annual "Freedom Index," in which it scores and ranks 180 countries based on a quantitative analysis of abuses against media and qualitative analyses of journalists' answers to a survey that gauges five contextual indicators: political, economic, and sociopolitical contexts, legal framework, and safety. The Freedom Index ranked Russia between 148 and 150 out of 180 between 2015 and 2020 before sharply downgrading to 155 in 2022 and 164 in 2023 due to the 2022 censorship laws criminalizing "fake" or "discrediting" information about the Russian military, ongoing disinformation campaigns, and declaring almost all independent media organizations as "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations" since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[36] The Kremlin has been slowly increasing its physical and informational control over the Russian information space, including by arresting journalists and other opposition voices, implementing laws depriving certain media organizations and figures of their income, and forcing international telecommunications operators to comply with Russian data laws.[37] Blocking the RSF's site now deprives Russian citizens of a resource to evaluate the impact of such measures on freedom of speech and press in Russia.

Key Takeaways:

- US Senate Intelligence Committee Chairperson Senator Mark Warner reported on April 21 that US provisions of military aid to Ukraine, including long-range ATACMS missiles, will be in transit to Ukraine "by the end of the week" if the Senate passes the supplemental appropriations bill on April 23 and US President Joe Biden signs it by April 24.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on April 21 that the swift delivery of US military aid to Ukraine could allow Ukrainian forces to stabilize the frontline and seize the initiative.
- Ukrainian forces struck and damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet's (BSF) *Kommuna* submarine support ship – the world's oldest active-duty naval vessel – in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on April 21.
- US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor created the new pro-Russian Moldovan Victory electoral bloc on April 21, which plans to run a candidate in the

October 20 Moldovan presidential election.

- The Victory electoral bloc will likely allow the Kremlin to focus on a unified political effort in Moldova instead of maintaining relations with multiple pro-Russian Moldovan actors and parties, as it has done recently.
- The Russian and Chinese navies signed a memorandum of understanding and cooperation on April 21 amid recent reports of China's increased support for Russia's war in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin blocked domestic access to the website of the French non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF), depriving Russians of access to independent assessments of Russian freedom of speech and press.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Kreminna and Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian forces have increased their use of small, lightweight, off-road vehicles along the frontline.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 20, 2024

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

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

April 20, 2024, 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 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 April 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The US House of Representatives passed a supplemental appropriations bill on April 20 providing for roughly \$60 billion of assistance to Ukraine.^[1] The bill must now be passed by the Senate and signed by the president before aid can begin to flow. These requirements and the logistics of transporting US materiel to the frontline in Ukraine will likely mean that new US assistance will not begin to affect the situation on the front line for several weeks. The frontline situation will therefore likely continue to deteriorate in that time, particularly if Russian forces increase their attacks to take advantage of the limited window before the arrival of new US aid. Ukrainian forces may suffer additional setbacks in the coming weeks while waiting for US security assistance that will allow Ukraine to stabilize the front, but they will likely be able to blunt the current Russian offensive assuming the resumed US assistance arrives promptly. The US Senate will reportedly vote on the bill sometime in the coming week.^[2] Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder stated on April 19 that the Pentagon's robust logistics system will allow the United States to move security assistance within a matter of "days" and that he believes that the United States will be able to "rush the security assistance in volumes" that the United States believes Ukraine will need to be successful.^[3] US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander reportedly told US lawmakers that the Pentagon would begin moving ammunition, artillery shells, and air defense assets quickly once Congress approves the aid.^[4] US media reported that US officials stated that the US Department of Defense (DoD) has been assembling the first tranche of resumed US security assistance for Ukraine ahead of the vote in the US House of Representatives but noted that the Biden administration has yet to make a final decision on how large the first tranche of aid will be or what it will include.^[5] US officials reportedly stated that the United States will be able to "almost immediately" send certain munitions to Ukraine from US storage facilities in Europe, particularly critically needed 155mm artillery shells and air defense missiles.^[6] The US officials noted that other security assistance will likely take weeks to arrive in Ukraine depending on where it is currently stored.^[7] Ukraine has systematically improved its military logistics operations in recent months, but this new system has not yet accommodated a sudden and large influx of materiel, and no system would be able to immediately distribute large quantities of materiel throughout the frontline.^[8]

Ukrainian forces will therefore likely continue to face ongoing shortages of artillery ammunition and air defense interceptors in the coming weeks and the corresponding constraints that these shortages are placing on Ukraine's ability to conduct effective defensive operations.[9] Ukrainian artillery shortages are letting Russian mechanized forces make marginal tactical gains, and Ukraine's degraded air defense capabilities are permitting Russian aviation to heavily degrade Ukrainian defenses along the front with glide bomb strikes.[10] Russian forces could continue to leverage these operational advantages in the coming weeks to make further tactical gains and destabilize the Ukrainian defensive line in hopes of achieving operationally significant advances. ISW continues to assess that material shortages are forcing Ukraine to conserve ammunition and prioritize limited resources to critical sectors of the front, increasing the risk of a Russian breakthrough in other less well-provisioned sectors and making the overall frontline more fragile than the current relatively slow rate of Russian advances suggests.[11] The threat of an operationally significant Russian advance in the coming weeks remains, although the Ukrainian command may have more latitude to take short-term risks with dwindling supplies to prevent such an advance once it knows that more materiel will be arriving soon.

Russian forces will likely intensify ongoing offensive operations and missile and drone strikes in the coming weeks in order to exploit the closing window of Ukrainian materiel constraints. Russian forces have maintained and, in some areas, intensified ongoing offensive operations, likely to exploit abnormally dry spring ground conditions and persisting Ukrainian materiel shortages before the arrival of promised Western security assistance.[12] Russian forces have also sought to exploit Ukraine's degraded air defense capabilities in an effort to collapse the Ukrainian energy grid and cause long-term damage to Ukraine's infrastructure and defense industrial capacity. [13] The now expected arrival of US security assistance has likely emphasized these considerations for Russian forces, and the Russian military command will likely intensify offensive operations and missile and drone strikes to pursue operationally significant effects that will certainly become harder to achieve against well-provisioned Ukrainian forces. Russian forces have only achieved tactical gains during the past six months of worsening Ukrainian constraints and remain unlikely to achieve a breakthrough that would collapse the frontline.[14] Russian forces may still be able to make operationally significant advances in the coming weeks and may prioritize sectors of the front where the Ukrainian defense appears relatively unstable, particularly west of Avdiivka, or areas of the front where Russian forces are within reach of an operationally significant objective, such as near Chasiv Yar.[15]

Russian forces may hope that continued and possibly intensified missile and drone strikes will be able to collapse the Ukrainian energy grid and force Ukraine to contend with a humanitarian crisis alongside its ongoing defensive operations. Russian forces could also shift their target set to strike Ukrainian transportation infrastructure to constrain Ukraine's ability to sufficiently distribute manpower and materiel to critical sectors of the front. Russian forces heavily targeted Ukrainian transportation infrastructure in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on April 19, and Russian forces may intend to expand these strikes in the coming weeks to interdict Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs). [16] Russian forces will likely also decide to exploit poor Ukrainian air defense coverage along the front and intensify glide bomb strikes in the coming weeks in hopes of causing widespread damage to Ukrainian defensive positions before it becomes riskier for Russian aircraft to conduct these strikes amid an improved Ukrainian air defense umbrella.

Ukraine will likely be in a significantly improved operational position by June 2024 regardless of delays in the arrival of US security assistance to the frontline, and the Russian military command will likely consider significant changes to the large-scale offensive operation that it is expected to launch in June, although it may still proceed as planned. Ukrainian forces will likely leverage sufficient US security assistance to blunt Russian offensive operations in June 2024, which Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov recently highlighted as the likely month that Russian forces will launch their expected large-scale summer offensive effort.[17] The Russian military has likely been assessing that Ukrainian forces would be unable to defend against current and future Russian offensive operations due to delays in or the permanent end of US military assistance. This assumption was likely an integral part of Russia's operational planning for this summer.[18] Russian forces have been establishing operational- and strategic-level reserves to support their expected summer offensive effort, but likely have been doing so based on the assumption that even badly-trained and poorly-equipped Russian forces could make advances against Ukrainian forces that lack essential artillery and air defense munitions.[19] Ukraine is also addressing its own manpower challenges and will likely continue to conduct rotations to rest and replenish degraded units, although it will take time for these efforts to generate large-scale effects. [20]

Ukrainian officials have previously indicated that Russian forces will likely continue to conduct offensive operations this summer focused on seizing the remainder of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts but may also launch an offensive operation to seize Kharkiv City.[21] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei

Lavrov notably signaled on April 19 Russia's intent to seize Kharkiv City.[22] The Russian military command may have envisioned that simultaneous offensive efforts towards Kharkiv City and along the current frontline in eastern Ukraine would stretch and overwhelm poorly-provisioned and undermanned Ukrainian forces and allow Russian forces to achieve a major breakthrough in at least one sector of the frontline. The Ukrainian forces with improving materiel and manpower supplies that will likely hold the frontline in June 2024 will undermine this operational intent of simultaneous Russian offensive operations across a wider front. The Russian military command will likely have to consider if the intended areas and objectives of its summer offensive effort are now feasible and if the current means that Russian forces have been concentrating and preparing are sufficient to conduct planned offensive operations considering the expected resumption of US security assistance to Ukraine. ISW offers no forecast of the decisions the Russians will make at this time.

The likely resumption of US security assistance to Ukraine is a critical turning point in the war in Ukraine, but the Kremlin, the West, and Ukraine still have additional decisions to make that will determine the character and outcome of the fighting. The Kremlin still retains the ability to further mobilize its economy and population to support its campaign to destroy Ukrainian statehood and identity and may determine to pursue domestically unpopular decisions should it deem them necessary. Ukraine still faces persisting force generation, sustainment, and defense industrial challenges that will heavily affect the capabilities that it can bring to bear. The United States and its Western allies must provide Ukraine with regular and consistent aid and deliver new critical systems to Ukrainian forces in a timely and effective manner for Western security assistance to have operationally significant effects. ISW has been considering a very wide forecast cone from the most advantageous to the most dangerous possible outcomes in recent months due to the uncertainty about the resumption of US aid to Ukraine.[23] ISW will likely be narrowing the forecast cone in the coming months as the impacts of Western security assistance become clearer in Ukraine and as the Kremlin decides how to respond.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against several energy infrastructure facilities and a fuel storage facility within Russia on the night of April 19 to

20. Ukrainian media reported that sources in Ukraine's Security Service (SBU), Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR), and Special Operations Forces (SSO) stated that the SBU, GUR, and SSO jointly launched dozens of drones against Moscow, Belgorod, Bryansk, Kursk, Tula, Smolensk, Ryazan, and Kaluga oblasts, and struck at least three electrical substations and a fuel storage facility. [24] Ukrainian media reported that the SBU, GUR, and SSO targeted Russian energy facilities that support Russian defense industrial facilities.[25] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses destroyed and intercepted 50 Ukrainian drones over the same eight oblasts. [26] Bryansk Oblast Governor Alexander Bogomaz claimed that a drone crashed at an energy facility in Bryansk Oblast and caused a fire.[27] Kaluga Oblast Governor Vladislav Shapsha claimed that a drone strike slightly damaged energy infrastructure in Maloyaroslavetsky Raion, Kaluga Oblast. [28] Smolensk Oblast Governor Vasily Anokhin claimed that falling drone debris caused a container of fuel to catch fire in Kardymovsky Raion, Smolensk Oblast.[29] Geolocated footage published on April 20 shows a fire at a fuel storage facility in Kardymovo, Smolensk Oblast.[30] A Russian milblogger claimed that a fire started after an explosion in Stary Oskol, Belgorod Oblast.[31] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes against Russian energy facilities are a necessary component of Ukraine's campaign to use asymmetric means to degrade industries that supply and support the Russian military.[32]

The Kremlin appears to be censoring demands for an investigation into the reported murder of a former Donetsk People Republic (DNR) serviceman amid a wider trend of the Kremlin coopting or otherwise censoring DNR-affiliated voices within the Russian information space. Russian sources recently claimed that Russian propagandist, former DNR serviceman, and US national Russell Bonner Bentley III disappeared in Donetsk City on April 8.[33] Russian sources alleged that elements of the Russian 5th Tank Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Eastern Military District [EMD]) detained and interrogated Bentley under the impression that Bentley was a Ukrainian spy due to his foreign accent and later killed Bentley.[34] Veteran Russian propagandist and *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan announced Bentley's death on April 19.[35] Deputy Head of the DNR Main Directorate of Rosgvardia, Commander of the DNR's special rapid response and riot police (OMON and SOBR), and former DNR Security Minister Alexander Khodakovsky called for an investigation into Bentley's reported kidnapping and murder and "exemplary punishment" for the perpetrators in a post on April 19, which Khodakovsky later removed reportedly due to pressure from Russian officials.[36] The DNR "Vostok" Battalion, which Khodakovsky previously commanded, claimed that Russian officials likely forced Khodakovsky to remove the post and that Khodakovsky complied with the demand in accordance with the unspecified "rules" of having a government position despite his personal relationship with Bentley.[37] Khodakovsky claimed on April 20 that being a government official and "a person" often creates competing priorities between his personal and professional loyalties, and insinuated that he agreed to remove his social media post to keep his

government position.[38] Khodakovsky insinuated that censorship was necessary during the war and claimed that unspecified actors could pursue justice for Bentley after Russia won in Ukraine. Another DNR-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed on April 19 that unspecified actors are threatening to file charges against the milblogger for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces (a charge that could result in 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) after the milblogger demanded an official investigation into Bentley's kidnapping and murder.[39]

Russian efforts to cover up Bentley's death are the latest in what appears to be a concerted Kremlin effort to censor or coopt DNR officials and DNR/Luhansk People's Republic (LNR)-affiliated voices within the Russian information space. The Russian Investigative Committee arrested former Russian officer and agent ultranationalist Igor Girkin (Strelkov), a prominent DNR commander in 2014, on charges of discrediting the Russian Armed Forces on July 21, 2023.[40] Russian authorities also arrested milblogger and former DNR serviceman Andrei Kurshin who reportedly ran the "Moscow Calling" Telegram channel in August 2023, and Russian milblogger and sergeant in the 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd LNR Army Corps) Andrei Morozov reportedly committed suicide after refusing the Russian military command's orders to censor his reporting about high Russian casualty rates around Avdiivka in February 2024.[41] The Kremlin may be targeting DNR and LNR-affiliated voices within the Russian information space due to concerns that groups within the DNR and LNR, which have been fighting Ukrainian forces since 2014, are becoming disillusioned as the war drags on. Girkin, Kurshin, and Morozov were all vocal critics of the Russian military command, and Khodakovsky had previously disagreed with the Russian military command and ongoing Kremlin censorship efforts. All four, however, are and were firm supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[42] It is unclear how or if Kremlin officials will respond to Bentley's death or how the targeting of DNR officials and affiliated voices will impact the Kremlin's relationships with its proxies in occupied Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- The US House of Representatives passed a supplemental appropriations bill on April 20 providing for roughly \$60 billion of assistance to Ukraine. The bill must now be passed by the Senate and signed by the president before aid can begin to flow.
- These requirements and the logistics of transporting US materiel to the frontline in Ukraine will likely mean that new US assistance will not begin to affect the situation on the front line for several weeks. The frontline situation will therefore likely continue to deteriorate in that time, particularly if Russian forces increase their attacks to take advantage of the limited window before the arrival of new US aid.
- Ukrainian forces may suffer additional setbacks in the coming weeks while waiting for US security assistance that will allow Ukraine to stabilize the front, but they will likely be able to blunt the current Russian offensive assuming the resumed US assistance arrives promptly.
- Russian forces will likely intensify ongoing offensive operations and missile and drone strikes in the coming weeks in order to exploit the closing window of Ukrainian materiel constraints.
- Ukraine will likely be in a significantly improved operational position by June 2024 regardless of delays in the arrival of US security assistance to the frontline, and the Russian military command will likely consider significant changes to the large-scale offensive operation that it is expected to launch in June, although it may still proceed as planned.
- The likely resumption of US security assistance to Ukraine is a critical turning point in the war in Ukraine, but the Kremlin, the West, and Ukraine still have additional decisions to make that will determine the character and outcome of the fighting.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against several energy infrastructure facilities and a fuel storage facility within Russia on the night of April 19 to 20.
- The Kremlin appears to be censoring demands for an investigation into the reported murder of a former Donetsk People Republic (DNR) serviceman amid a wider trend of the Kremlin coopting or otherwise censoring DNR-affiliated voices within the Russian information space.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut) and northwest of Avdiivka, and Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances south of Kremenna.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Russian forces are using US-made 203mm artillery ammunition that Russia may have received from Iran.

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

Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

April 19, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signaled Russia's intent to seize Kharkiv City in a future significant Russian offensive operation, the first senior Kremlin official to outright identify the city as a possible Russian operational objective following recent Ukrainian warnings that Russian forces may attempt to seize the city starting in Summer 2024. Lavrov stated during a radio interview with several prominent Russian state propagandists on April 19 that Kharkiv City "plays an important role" in Russian President Vladimir Putin's idea of establishing a demilitarized "sanitary zone" in Ukraine to protect Russian border settlements from Ukrainian strikes. [1] Lavrov stated that Putin has very clearly stated that Russian forces must push the frontline far enough into Ukraine – which Lavrov explicitly defines as into Kharkiv Oblast – to place Russian settlements outside of the Ukrainian strike range. This requirement is a very vague definition that could include the entirety of Ukrainian territory as long as an independent Ukrainian state exists and is willing to defend itself. Lavrov stated in response to a question about where Russian forces will go after creating a "sanitary zone" that Russian authorities are "completely convinced" of the need to continue Russia's war against Ukraine. Lavrov responded in seeming agreement to a comment from one of the interviewers, who suggested that Lavrov's earlier remarks meant that Russian forces will have to continue to attack further into Ukraine after creating the "sanitary zone" to protect the settlements that would then be within the zone and Ukrainian strike range. Lavrov's remarks suggest that the Kremlin will likely use the idea of a constantly shifting demilitarized "sanitary zone" to justify Russian offensive operations further and further into Ukraine.

Prominent Russian propagandist and state television host Olga Skabeyeva framed Russia's drone and missile strikes against Kharkiv Oblast as part of Russia's efforts to create the "sanitary zone" during a speech on April 19, suggesting that additional prominent Kremlin mouthpieces are also laying the informational groundwork to justify ongoing Russian strikes and a future offensive operation against Kharkiv City under the pretext of defending Russian citizens.[2] Ukrainian officials, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, have recently identified the threat of a possible Russian summer offensive operation aimed at seizing Kharkiv City.[3] ISW continues to assess that a Russian offensive operation to seize Kharkiv City would be an extremely ambitious undertaking that would pose significant challenges to both the Russian forces responsible for the effort and to the wider Russian campaign in Ukraine.[4] ISW also assesses that US military assistance is vital to Ukraine's ability to defend against any summer Russian offensive operation, including against Kharkiv City.[5]

Ukrainian officials announced that Ukrainian forces downed a Russian aircraft as it conducted missile strikes against Ukraine for the first time overnight on April 18 to 19, demonstrating a capability that may constrain how Russia conducts its strike campaign against Ukraine. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk announced on April 19 that Ukrainian forces downed a Russian Tu-22M3 strategic bomber that had launched Kh-22 cruise missiles against Ukraine.[6] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Ukrainian forces shot down the Tu-22M3 at a distance of 300 kilometers from Ukraine with the same means that Ukraine used to down two Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft.[7] Ukrainian outlet RBK-Ukraine reported that Ukrainian security sources stated that Ukrainian forces used S-200 air defense systems to down the Tu-22M3.[8] The GUR reported that the Tu-22M3 crashed in Stavropol Krai, where footage shows the plane losing altitude and crashing.[9] GUR Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that the downing of the Tu-22M3 compelled another Russian Tu-22M3 to turn around and noted that it is "practically impossible" for Russia to manufacture new Tu-22M3 bombers. [10] Russian forces reportedly had roughly 60 Tu-22 strategic bombers as of 2023.[11] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) acknowledged the plane crash but attributed it to a technical malfunction rather than Ukrainian forces, and Russian milbloggers largely coalesced around the MoD's narrative. [12] Stavropol Krai officials reported that the crash killed one Russian pilot and inflicted non-life-threatening injuries on two others and that a fourth crewmember remains missing.[13]

Ukrainian air defense capabilities remain limited and degraded, however, allowing Russian aircraft to operate freely without threat on certain critical areas of the front. Russian milbloggers have recently amplified multiple pieces of video footage, including on April 19, showing Russian Su-25 and Su-34 aircraft operating at low altitudes near Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast and striking Ukrainian positions to support Russian advances in the area, and Russian milbloggers have praised Russian aircraft for enabling relatively quick Russian advances in the area since at least late March 2024. [14] The ability of Russian aircraft to operate over 100 kilometers deep in Ukrainian airspace near the frontline without sustaining significant losses indicates that Ukrainian air defenses in the area are currently insufficient to deter or deny Russian aircraft from operating on the front line. The Ukrainian capability to conduct long-range strikes to down Russian strategic aircraft conducting combat

operations may temporarily constrain Russian aviation operations as the previous downing of tactical aircraft has achieved.[15] This Ukrainian strike capability, however, is unable to compensate for Ukraine's critical air defense shortages across the theater. Ukrainian forces still must husband materiel and prioritize allocating its limited air defense assets to some areas of the theater over others at great expense, allowing Russian aviation to support more consistent and rapid gains on the ground, including near Chasiv Yar.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed that Ukraine requires Western provisions of artillery ammunition, air defense materiel, long-range artillery and missile systems, and fighter aircraft as Ukrainian constraints continue due to delays in US military assistance.[16] Zelensky addressed the Ukraine-NATO Council on April 19 and reiterated that Ukraine needs a minimum of seven additional Patriot air defense systems to defend against Russia's ongoing missile and drone strike campaign and called on Western countries to fulfill their promise to deliver one million artillery shells to Ukraine.[17] Zelensky added that long-range missiles and artillery systems are crucially needed to improve Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities and that Ukraine requires a sufficient number of fighter aircraft to contend with Russian aviation.[18] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that several unspecified NATO members made unspecified commitments during the Ukraine-NATO Council meeting to provide additional air defense, artillery, deep precision strike, and drone materiel to Ukraine.[19]

Ukrainian artillery shortages are allowing Russian mechanized forces to make marginal tactical gains, and Ukraine's degraded air defense capabilities are permitting Russian aviation to heavily degrade Ukrainian defenses along the front through glide bomb strikes.[20] Ukrainian officials have highlighted promised F-16 fighter aircraft as a crucial element of a combined air defense system that can intercept more Russian missile and drone strikes and constrain Russian tactical aviation operations. [21] Ukrainian forces have previously leveraged NATO 155mm artillery systems and ammunition capable of striking targets at longer ranges than Soviet equipment to conduct superior counterbattery fire, and more effective long-range artillery systems would support sustained effective Ukrainian counterbattery operations.[22] Ukrainian forces have previously conducted several successful interdiction efforts against Russian forces with Western-provided missile systems and have indicated that they are prepared to resume more regular interdiction efforts should Ukraine receive sufficient provisions of long-range missiles.[23] ISW assesses that continued US delays in security assistance to Ukraine are limiting Ukraine's ability to conduct effective defensive operations while offering Russian forces increasing flexibility to conduct offensive operations — a dynamic that can lead to compounding and non-linear opportunities for Russian forces to make operationally significant gains in the future. [24]

Pro-Russian Moldovan actors continue to set conditions to justify possible future Russian aggression in Moldova as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov compared Moldova to Ukraine and Armenia. The People's Assembly of Gagauzia, the pro-Russian autonomous region in Moldova, appealed to the Moldovan Parliament on April 19 to grant the Russian language the special legal status of a language of interethnic communication in Moldova.[25] Kremlin-affiliated Governor of Gagauzia Yevgenia Gutsul claimed in a statement to Kremlin newswire TASS that the Moldovan government is "Russophobic" and will resist this initiative.[26] The Gagauzian appeal is likely part of Kremlin efforts to set information conditions to blame Moldova for discriminating against Russian speakers and justify future Russian aggression in Moldova as necessary to protect Russia's "compatriots abroad." Lavrov claimed during a radio interview with Russian state media on April 19 that the West made Moldovan President Maia Sandu "openly drag Moldova into NATO, either directly or through unification with Romania" and that the West did the same with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.[27] Lavrov criticized both Moldova's and Armenia's moves towards the West and urged them to rethink their decisions by claiming that the West will force its citizens to fight in a possible future war against Russia. Russian officials have recently claimed that the West is "dragging" the South Caucasus region into a "geopolitical confrontation" between Russia and the West and explicitly threatened Armenia over Armenian outreach to the West.[28] Lavrov's comparison of the Moldovan government to both the Armenian and Ukrainian governments is likely a tacit threat. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely trying to destabilize Moldovan society, attack Moldova's democratic government, and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signaled Russia's intent to seize Kharkiv City in a future significant Russian offensive operation, the first senior Kremlin official to outright identify the city as a possible Russian operational objective following recent Ukrainian warnings that Russian forces may attempt to seize the city starting in Summer 2024.**

- Ukrainian officials announced that Ukrainian forces downed a Russian aircraft as it conducted missile strikes against Ukraine for the first time overnight on April 18 to 19, demonstrating a capability that may constrain how Russia conducts its strike campaign against Ukraine.
- Ukrainian air defense capabilities remain limited and degraded, however, allowing Russian aircraft to operate freely without threat on certain critical areas of the front.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed that Ukraine requires Western provisions of artillery ammunition, air defense materiel, long-range artillery and missile systems, and fighter aircraft as Ukrainian constraints continue due to delays in US military assistance.
- Pro-Russian Moldovan actors continue to set conditions to justify possible future Russian aggression in Moldova as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov compared Moldova to Ukraine and Armenia.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to expand the newly reformed Leningrad Military District (LMD) in preparation for an anticipated future large-scale conventional conflict with NATO.
- Russian officials continue to forcibly deport and Russify Ukrainian children as Ukrainian authorities work to return deported children to Ukrainian-controlled territory.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 18, 2024

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

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

April 18, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on April 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov specified that Russian offensive effort that Ukrainian officials have been forecasting will likely begin in June 2024. Budanov stated in an April 17 article in the *Washington Post* that Russia will launch a “big” offensive in June 2024 with the aim of seizing all of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.^[1] Budanov also stated that Russian forces will try to make battlefield gains throughout 2024 as part of efforts to influence Western decision-making. Budanov had previously forecasted that a future major Russian offensive would begin in late May or early June 2024, and it is notable that Budanov has now narrowed his forecast to June and identified the likely aim of the Russian offensive. Previous major Russian offensive efforts have similarly aimed to seize the remainder of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.^[2] Ukrainian officials, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, have recently warned about the threat of a potential future Russian ground offensive operation targeting Kharkiv City.^[3] Ukrainian officials have repeatedly warned that US security assistance is vital to Ukraine’s ability to defend against possible future Russian offensive operations in summer 2024.^[4] ISW continues to assess that current Ukrainian artillery and air defense shortages resulting from the lack of US security assistance are allowing Russian forces to make marginal tactical advances and that future Russian assaults may be able to achieve more significant gains should the US continue to withhold assistance to Ukraine.^[5] Ukrainian forces have, however, previously demonstrated their ability to repel Russian assaults and inflict significant personnel and equipment losses on Russian forces when adequately provisioned.^[6]

Budanov also stated on April 17 that Ukraine plans to counter future Russian offensive operations by continuing strikes against Russian military targets within Russia. Budanov stated in his interview with the *Washington Post* that the GUR plans to strike Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and critical military targets, such as airfields and command and control posts, in response to Russia’s forecasted summer 2024 offensive.^[7] Budanov stated that these strikes are intended to show that Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot “protect the [Russian] population from the war.” ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes against targets within Russia are an appropriate component of Ukraine’s campaign to degrade industries that support the Russian war effort and military capabilities deployed in the Russian rear.^[8] Recent Ukrainian strikes that have targeted Russian military infrastructure within Russia, threatened Russian oil refining and exports, and increased pressure on Russia’s air defense umbrella have demonstrated that Ukraine can achieve some

asymmetrical impacts through strikes with limited numbers of mostly domestically produced weapons.
[9]

Russian forces reportedly continue to intensify crypto-mobilization efforts ahead of the expected Russian summer 2024 offensive operation but will likely struggle to establish effective operational- and strategic-level reserves rapidly. Bloomberg reported on April 18 that three sources familiar with the Kremlin's force-generation discussions stated that the Kremlin is intensifying crypto-mobilization efforts in order to avoid conducting another partial mobilization call-up of reservists.[10] Ruslan Pukhov, the head of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies and a member of a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) civilian advisory board, claimed that current Russian crypto-mobilization efforts are generating roughly 30,000 new personnel each month and that the Russian military could recruit 300,000 total personnel in 2024.[11] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported on January 15 that Russia recruits around 30,000 personnel per month, and Pukhov's claim about 300,000 total recruits matches Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's April 3 warning that Russia is preparing to "mobilize" an additional 300,000 personnel on June 1.[12] Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on March 22 that high-ranking sources in the Russian MoD, presidential administration, and regional governments similarly stated that Russia may intend to generate an additional 300,000 personnel within an unspecified time frame.[13] Bloomberg noted that Russian regional one-time payments for signing a contract have increased by 40 percent to an average of 470,000 rubles (\$4,992), and a Russian insider source claimed that some Russian authorities are offering one million rubles (\$10,622) for people to sign military contracts.[14] Russian officials are reportedly concerned about decreasing recruitment rates and may intend to make economic incentives a cornerstone of crypto-mobilization efforts in spring and summer 2024.[15] The Russian MoD claimed on April 3 that more than 100,000 Russians had signed military service contracts since the start of 2024, but intensified Russian crypto-mobilization efforts are highly unlikely to generate an additional 200,000 personnel ahead of the expected Russian offensive effort in summer 2024.[16]

The Russian military has been generating forces at rates equal to its losses in Ukraine in recent months, and intensified monthly recruitment rates are unlikely to generate a considerable surplus of manpower for Russian operational- and strategic-level reserves.[17] Russian forces have maintained and even intensified offensive operations this spring, and these offensive operations will continue to consume a significant amount of manpower that could otherwise be used to form reserves as long as Russian forces sustain their current offensive tempo.[18] Russian forces are therefore unlikely to establish extensive reserves ahead of their expected summer 2024 offensive effort. The limited remaining time for Russian forces to prepare for the expected summer offensive effort will likely mean that any additional manpower added to reserves in the coming months will be poorly trained and less combat effective. The Russian insider source bemoaned poor Russian training capacity and claimed that some Russian volunteer formations are abandoning ranks altogether for new personnel due to the lack of proper training.[19] ISW continues to assess that planned Russian operational- and strategic-level reserves are unlikely to be ready to act as a first-echelon penetration force or as a second-echelon exploitation force capable of conducting large-scale assaults in 2024 if Ukrainian forces have the wherewithal to resist them.[20] Russian forces are more likely to use these reserves as they have previously done — as immediately available manpower pools for restaffing and reinforcing committed units conducting grinding, infantry-heavy assaults with occasional limited mechanized assaults.[21]

Ukrainian officials clarified that the Ukrainian strike on a Russian military airfield in occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea overnight on April 16 to 17 caused significant damage to Russian air defense equipment. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on April 17 that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful strike against the Russian airfield in Dzhankoi.[22] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on April 18 that the strike destroyed or critically damaged four S-400 air defense launchers, three radar stations, an air defense equipment control point, and a Murom-M airspace surveillance system.[23]

Russian milbloggers seized on a violent crime committed by a migrant in Moscow on April 18 to reiterate calls for further restrictions in Russian migration policies. Russian news outlet *Mash* reported on April 18 that an Azeri migrant killed a Russian man in Moscow and fled the scene.[24] Russian milbloggers largely responded to the murder by calling on Russian authorities to further restrict Russia's migration policies and extend punishments for crimes committed by migrants.[25] Russian milbloggers warned that if the Russian government fails to respond to violence committed by migrants, Russians will be forced to "take matters into their own hands." [26] Kremlin newswire *TASS* notably avoided framing the crime as an ethnic issue until Russian authorities publicly identified the suspect as a migrant from Azerbaijan.[27] Russian ultranationalists intensified their calls for revised and further restricted migration legislation following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, and several Russian officials, including Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin, have recently contradicted Russian

President Vladimir Putin's apparent efforts to quell anti-migrant sentiments among Putin's ultranationalist constituency.[28] Putin's competing efforts of placating ultranationalist anti-migrant demands and maintaining Russia's war effort and economic viability will likely continue to generate inconsistencies and contradictions within the Kremlin's migration policy and rhetoric.

The Russian government may be responding to Russian ultranationalist' demands for stricter migrant policies in a limited fashion. Russian news outlet *RBK* reported on April 18 that the Russian Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) is considering implementing an oral Russian language exam for migrant workers and increasing the minimum Russian language, history, and law exam score for foreigners interested in a Russian residence permit or Russian citizenship. [29] Rosobrnadzor stated that migrants are currently allowed into Russia without taking an oral language exam. Russian Education and Science Minister Valery Falkov announced that only one Russian state university per federal subject will be allowed to administer Russian language, history, and law exams to migrants as of May 1, 2024 in an effort to "strengthen control over the quality of the exam." [30] The Kremlin may be willing to introduce these limited measures in hopes of appeasing Russian ultranationalist demands, but ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is unlikely to implement any anti-migrant measures that could significantly hinder Russia's ongoing force generation efforts or worsen Russia's labor shortages.[31]

German authorities detained two individuals suspected of aiding Russia in its ongoing efforts to sabotage NATO member states' military infrastructure and logistics. German outlet *Der Spiegel* reported on April 18 that German authorities arrested two suspects in Bayreuth, Bavaria for allegedly planning sabotage operations in Germany on behalf of Russian security services. [32] German investigators reportedly found that the suspects agreed to conduct arson and plant explosives at German military infrastructure facilities, weapons factories, and industrial sites, with a focus on routes used to transport military goods, in order to undermine German military assistance to Ukraine. The investigation also reportedly found that one of the suspects conducted reconnaissance for Russian intelligence services of US military facilities in Germany, including an area where the US military trains Ukrainian soldiers in Bavaria. *Der Spiegel* reported that one of the suspects previously served in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia between 2014 and 2016. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock summoned the Russian ambassador to Germany on April 18 in response to the arrests. [33] The Russian Embassy in Germany denied the allegations, claiming that German authorities presented "no evidence" about the suspects' connections with Russian security services and that the arrests were an "outright provocation." The Russian embassy also used the incident to further multiple Kremlin narratives against the West aimed at deterring Western military assistance to Ukraine. ISW has observed reports of Russian efforts to degrade NATO member states' transport logistics since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including through cyber-attacks against Czech, Latvia, Lithuanian, Romanian, and Estonian railway companies. [34]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov specified that Russian offensive effort that Ukrainian officials have been forecasting will likely begin in June 2024.
- Budanov also stated on April 17 that Ukraine plans to counter future Russian offensive operations by continuing strikes against Russian military targets within Russia.
- Russian forces reportedly continue to intensify crypto-mobilization efforts ahead of the expected Russian summer 2024 offensive operation but will likely struggle to establish effective operational- and strategic-level reserves rapidly.
- Ukrainian officials clarified that the Ukrainian strike on a Russian military airfield in occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea overnight on April 16 to 17 caused significant damage to Russian air defense equipment.
- Russian milbloggers seized on a violent crime committed by a migrant in Moscow on April 18 to reiterate calls for further restrictions in Russian migration policies.
- German authorities detained two individuals suspected of aiding Russia in its ongoing efforts to sabotage NATO member states' military infrastructure and logistics.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) "Schemes" investigative project*, citing Ukrainian intelligence, reported on April 17 that Russia's defense industry is using US- and Japanese-made components in the navigation and communication systems of Russian Sukhoi fixed wing aircraft.

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

April 17, 2024, 5:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on April 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces struck a Russian military airfield in occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea, overnight on April 16 to 17. Geolocated footage posted on April 16 shows explosions at the airfield in Dzhankoi, where the Russian 39th Separate Helicopter Regiment (27th Composite Aviation Division, 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army, Southern Military District) is based.^[1] The Atesh Crimean partisan movement reported that its agents confirmed that the strike destroyed a S-400 missile system at the airfield, and severely damaged several other unspecified vehicles.^[2] Ukrainian sources posted an image reportedly showing three destroyed S-400 launchers following the strike.^[3] Russian forces have deployed Mi-8, Mi-25M, Mi-28, and Ka-52 helicopters to the Dzhankoi Air Base, although ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of damage to any helicopters as a result of the April 16 strike.^[4] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces used around 12 MGM-140 ATACMS missiles to strike the airfield.^[5] ISW cannot independently confirm at this time the type of ordinance Ukrainian forces used in this strike, nor the extent of damage the strike caused. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk noted, however, that the military airfield and affiliated aviation assets are legitimate military targets, tacitly acknowledging the strike.^[6] Russian combat and transport helicopters have provided Russian forces with distinct offensive and defensive battlefield advantages, particularly in southern Ukraine, and are legitimate military targets.^[7] Ukrainian forces have previously conducted ATACMS strikes against Russian military helicopters at airbases in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast and Luhansk City, Luhansk Oblast in 2023.^[8]

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly targeted Russian aviation assets in the Republic of Mordovia, the Republic of Tatarstan, and Samara Oblast on April 17. GUR sources told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* on April 17 that GUR agents targeted a S9B6 "Container" over-the-horizon radar station at the base of the 590th Separate Radio Engineering Unit in Kovylkino, Mordovia, but did not specify how the GUR conducted the strike or whether the strike successfully damaged the radar station.^[9] The "Container" radar station reportedly has a 3,000-kilometer detection range and 100-kilometer detection height and is over 680 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.^[10] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defense destroyed a Ukrainian drone over Mordovia, which if accurate, could explain the lack of footage showing the aftermath of a strike in Kovylkino.^[11] Ukrainian special services sources additionally told Ukrainian outlet *RBK-Ukraine* on April 17 that the GUR also targeted the Gorbunov aviation plant in Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan.^[12] Geolocated footage shows that Russian air defense likely downed at least one Ukrainian drone near the Shahed-136/131 drone production plant near Yelabuga, Tatarstan.^[13] The GUR also cryptically stated on April 17 that unspecified actors destroyed a Russian Mi-8 helicopter at the Kryaz airfield in Samara Oblast and posted footage of a fire at the airfield, suggesting that the GUR may have also been responsible for a strike in Samara Oblast.^[14] Ukrainian strikes against Russian aviation assets in occupied Crimea, as well as within Russia, appear to represent a fairly coordinated and wide-reaching series of strikes specifically targeting Russian aviation, air defense, and radar detection capabilities.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov officially confirmed on April 17 that Russian peacekeeping forces began their anticipated withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh, as Russian sources largely blamed Armenian leadership for Azerbaijan's seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh amid Armenia's continued efforts to distance itself from political and security relations with Russia.^[15] The Azerbaijani Presidential Administration's Foreign Policy Department Head, Hikmet Hajiyev, stated on April 17 that senior Russian and Azerbaijani leadership decided to prematurely withdraw Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh.^[16] The November 2020 Russian-brokered ceasefire that ended a month and a half of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas stipulated that Russia would deploy peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh until 2025.^[17] Russia previously deployed 1,960 Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh including elements of the 15th Motorized Rifle Peacekeeping Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]), 31st Air Assault (VDV) Brigade, and 45th Spetsnaz Brigade.^[18] Footage published on April 17 purportedly shows a column of Russian armored vehicles leaving Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russian sources did not specify its destination.^[19] The limited amount of manpower and materiel that Russian forces are moving out of Nagorno-Karabakh will not substantially affect Russian combat operations in Ukraine, should the Russian military decide to

deploy these forces to Ukraine. Russian milbloggers largely responded to the announcement of Russian peacekeepers' withdrawal by defending Russian forces for their failure to support Armenia during the fall 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and by blaming Armenian leadership for perceived weakness.[20] A Russian milblogger claimed that Armenian leadership's and the *de facto* Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh authority's failure to respond militarily to the fall 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis demonstrates that Armenians deserve "to be deprived of their homeland." [21] The milblogger further claimed that the current withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the region will allow Azerbaijan to control all Armenian domestic and foreign affairs. Russian milbloggers' criticism of Armenian leadership is consistent with ongoing Russian criticism of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's efforts to limit security cooperation with Russia.[22]

The Georgian parliament approved a bill in its first reading similar to Russia's "foreign agents" law on April 17, which Russian state media seized on to further Kremlin efforts to amplify reports of political discord in Western and former Soviet states. The bill will require non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources to register as "an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power." [23] Pro-Western Georgian President Salome Zurabichvili responded to the vote and stated that she will veto the bill, calling the bill a "Russian strategy of destabilization." [24] The European Union (EU) also responded to the bill, stating that it could negatively impact Georgia's EU accession and is not in line with the EU's norms and core values. [25] Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, a member of the ruling Georgian Dream party, claimed that Georgia will adopt the bill despite Western criticism, however. [26] Kremlin newswire TASS reported extensively on the developments regarding the bill and ongoing protests against the bill. [27] The Georgian parliament passed a similar bill in 2023 but later withdrew the bill from further consideration following widespread public protests. [28] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov continued to deny Russian involvement in the bill's creation and passage, and Peskov and Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitri Medvedev insinuated that the West is somehow involved in the protests against the bill. [29] The Kremlin has routinely attempted to portray Ukraine's and other post-Soviet countries' politics as chaotic in an attempt to destabilize target states and make them more susceptible to Russian influence or outright attack. [30]

US President Joe Biden warned that Russia and its partners pose an increasing threat to NATO and stressed that US security assistance to Ukraine can address the Russian threat. Biden stated in an op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 17 that Russia is intensifying its war against Ukraine with military and non-lethal materiel support from China, Iran, and North Korea. [31] Biden called for the US House of Representatives to urgently pass security assistance for Ukraine as Ukrainian forces continue to face ammunition shortages and the prospect of losing more territory. [32] Biden stated that if Russia achieves its objective to subjugate and subsume Ukraine then Russian forces will move closer to NATO. [33] Biden stressed that support for Ukraine can stop Russia from encroaching on America's NATO allies and prevent US involvement in a hypothetical future conventional war between Russia and NATO. [34] ISW assesses that a Russian victory in Ukraine would have devastating consequences for the defense of NATO, whereas a Ukrainian victory would make a successful Russian attack on Poland or the Baltic States harder and riskier for Russia. [35]

The US House of Representatives filed a supplemental appropriations bill on April 17 that would provide roughly \$60 billion of assistance to Ukraine, and will reportedly vote on the measure on April 20. [36] The supplemental appropriations bill largely resembles a previous supplemental bill passed by the US Senate and would offer Ukraine \$48.3 billion in security assistance: \$23.2 billion for replenishing weapons and equipment from the US Department of Defense (DoD) inventory; \$13.8 billion for the purchase of weapons and munitions for Ukraine from US manufacturers; and \$11.3 billion for continued US support to Ukraine through ongoing US military operations in the region. [37] The overwhelming majority of the proposed assistance for Ukraine, if passed, would go to American companies and US and allied militaries. [38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces struck a Russian military airfield in occupied Dzhankoi, Crimea, overnight on April 16 to 17.
- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly targeted Russian aviation assets in the Republic of Mordovia, the Republic of Tatarstan, and Samara Oblast on April 17.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov officially confirmed on April 17 that Russian peacekeeping forces began their anticipated withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh, as Russian sources largely blamed Armenian leadership for Azerbaijan's seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh amid Armenia's continued efforts to distance itself from political and security relations with Russia.

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- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- The Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is preparing a special training course for ROC clergy deployed to combat zones in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 16, 2024

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

April 16, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized that continued shortages in air defense systems and artillery are preventing Ukraine from effectively defending itself against Russian strikes and ground assaults. Zelensky stated in an interview with *PBS News Hour*, which aired on April 15, that Ukrainian forces continue to lack enough air defense systems to protect Ukraine's critical infrastructure. Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces were only able to destroy the first seven of the 11 Russian missiles launched against the Trypilska Thermal Power Plant (TPP) on April 11 before running out of air defense missiles, allowing the remaining four missiles to destroy the plant.^[1] Zelensky also expressed frustration with the differential US response to strikes against Ukraine and Israel and stated that the United States and the West are continuing to limit military aid out of the false belief that such self-restraint will prevent further Russian aggression.^[2] Zelensky reported that Ukrainian forces currently suffer from a 1-to-10 artillery shell disadvantage and that this artillery ammunition disadvantage allows Russian forces to push Ukrainian forces back each day. ISW continues to assess that continued US delays in security assistance to Ukraine limit Ukrainian forces' ability to conduct effective defensive operations while giving Russian forces flexibility in conducting offensive operations — a dynamic that can lead to compounding and non-linear opportunities for Russian forces to make operationally significant gains in the future.^[3] Russia and Ukraine are engaged in a constant air domain offense-defense innovation-adaptation race, in which Russia continues to adjust the timing, scale, composition, and targets of its strike packages to attempt to penetrate Ukraine's air defense umbrella. Significant delays in US military assistance have already created shortages in Ukraine's air defense missile stockpiles and hinder Ukraine's ability to adapt to evolving Russian strike packages. Limited air defense systems and interceptors have forced Ukraine to make difficult decisions to allocate air defense systems between rear and frontline areas leaving frontline troops largely exposed to Russian air attack, and only the United States can rapidly provide air defense systems to Ukraine at the scale necessary to significantly improve Ukraine's air defense capabilities.^[4]

Zelensky signed a new mobilization law on April 16, codifying a difficult but critical decision in Ukraine's efforts to stabilize its force generation apparatus and adequately prepare the Ukrainian fighting force both defensively and offensively.^[5] The new mobilization law, which the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted on April 11, lowers the Ukrainian draft age from 27 to 25 years of age, cancels the status of "limited suitability" for military service, and requires citizens living abroad to register for military service in Ukraine. Ukrainian military officials have emphasized the exigency of a new Ukrainian mobilization law to address Ukraine's manpower shortages that, together with the shortages of Western aid, are making Ukrainian defense on critical areas of the front extremely difficult.^[6] Ukraine's ability to defend throughout the theater and eventually contest Russia's battlefield initiative is contingent on Ukraine's ability to restore existing units and create new units, as well as on the provision of US military assistance to existing and new units.

Russian forces in eastern Ukraine are using smaller groups to conduct assaults and are reportedly suffering from morale issues, but Russian attacks are unlikely to culminate in the near term despite these challenges because of Ukrainian materiel shortages. Spokesperson of the Ukrainian National Guard Colonel Ruslan Muzychuk stated that Russian forces in eastern Ukraine have not recently used large units to conduct assaults but are instead using groups split into two detachments reinforced with armored vehicles to conduct ground attacks.^[7] Muzychuk stated that Russian forces are also using small vehicles without protection to approach Ukrainian positions quickly and set conditions for a subsequent Russian infantry group to secure these positions. Muzychuk

reported that Ukrainian drones destroyed about 70 percent of Russian armored vehicles last week, although it is unclear if Muzychuk is claiming that Ukrainian drones actually destroyed armored vehicles or temporarily rendered them *hors de combat*.^[8] The press officer for the Ukrainian 26th Artillery Brigade, Oleh Kalashnikov stated that Russian forces in the Bakhmut direction are not conducting battalion-sized ground attacks because Ukrainian drones immediately detect them and that Russian forces are instead using company-sized groups at most.^[9] Kalashnikov stated that Russian forces in the Bakhmut direction are suffering from low morale and are also using barrier troops to prevent Russian soldiers from retreating. Russian forces previously used mass infantry-led frontal assaults in their seizure of Bakhmut and in the beginning of the Russian effort to seize Avdiivka, but Russian forces appear to have shifted to using smaller infantry groups recently to conduct ground attacks.^[10] Russian sources have also recently indicated that Russian forces suffered from exhaustion and lacked rotations but had to continue to fight on new lines west of Avdiivka following Russia's seizure of Avdiivka.^[11] ISW has previously (and not always accurately) assessed how low Russian morale and exhaustion affected the prospects of Russian offensive operations, but Ukraine's current material shortages may make it difficult for Ukrainian forces to defend against Russian forces — even those that are exhausted and unmotivated.^[12] ISW continues to assess that Russia's opportunities to exploit Ukrainian vulnerabilities will widen as Ukrainian materiel shortages persist.^[13]

A Russian Storm-Z instructor argued that Russian forces should capitalize on Ukrainian disadvantages brought on by materiel shortages to increase Russian guided glide bomb strikes to support Russian ground operations. The instructor claimed on April 15 that Ukrainian forces are unable to defend against Russian guided glide bomb strikes, which had caused significant damage to Ukrainian manpower, equipment, and other materiel.^[14] The instructor claimed that Russian forces "linked" guided glide bomb strikes to Russian ground assaults on Avdiivka and more recently on Umanske (west of Avdiivka) to ensure Russian tactical advances. The instructor stated that Russian forces are conducting guided glide bomb strikes "situationally" and "episodically," not systematically, and highlighted how Russian forces conducted guided glide bomb strikes near Terny in the Lyman direction but have not made significant advances in this area for months. The instructor claimed that Russian forces are currently "testing" Russian aviation near Chasiv Yar and may be able to turn local tactical successes into operational-level effects. The instructor claimed that Ukraine's decreased air defense systems and man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) are allowing Russian reconnaissance drones to operate significantly further forward and called on Russian forces to optimize their use of multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to conduct counterbattery strikes and isolate the battlefield. ISW observed that sparse and inconsistent Ukrainian air defense coverage along the front resulting from shortages in Ukrainian air defense systems and missiles has facilitated Russia's intensification of guided and unguided glide bomb strikes, which Russian forces used to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in February 2024 and which Russian forces are using again during their current offensive operations near Chasiv Yar.^[15]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to show support for Iranian aggression against Israel during a March 16 call with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Putin expressed hope that Israel and Iran would "show reasonable restraint" and not allow a "new round of confrontation," effectively preemptively blaming Israel for any response to the massive but unsuccessful Iranian missile and drone strike.^[16] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reported that Raisi told Putin that Iran was "forced" to take "retaliatory measures" against Israel in response to the April 1 Israeli strike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus.^[17] The Russian MFA claimed that Raisi stated that Iran's response was "limited in nature," despite the fact that Iran launched about 170 Shahed drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles — a large-scale strike package very likely intending to cause significant damage.^[18] The Russian MFA also claimed that Raisi expressed Iran's disinterest in further escalation in the region. The Russian MFA's portrayal of Raisi's claims notably diverges from IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency*'s claim that Raisi stated that Iran will respond to any Israeli action that harms Iranian interests "more fiercely, widely, and painfully" than before.^[19] Putin and the Russian government will likely continue to amplify information operations designed to justify Iran's April 13 strikes against Israel and continue to rhetorically support Iran against Israel to the international community.

People's Republic of China (PRC) President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on April 16 and proposed prerequisites for the end to the war in Ukraine in a manner that suggests that Xi is continuing to posture himself as a neutral mediator in the war despite increasing reports of China's support for the Russian war effort. During a meeting with Scholz in Beijing, Xi proposed four tenets to "restore peace" in Ukraine — prioritizing peace and stability and "refrain from seeking selfish gain," "avoid adding fuel to the fire," creating the conditions for peace, and reducing the negative impact on the global economy and stability of global industry supply chains.^[20] Xi's language is fairly neutral and does not explicitly come down on one side or the other, which is generally consistent with Xi's reticence to make the Sino-Russian partnership as deep as Putin desires, partially in order to maintain

access to Western markets.[21] Xi and other Chinese officials have additionally refrained from calling the war in Ukraine a war. Various NATO and US officials have recently warned that China is helping to “prop up” the Russian defense industrial base and support Russia via microelectronics, optics, machine tools, and missile propellant deliveries.[22] Xi’s generally vague signaling to Scholz vis a vis Ukraine over the backdrop of reportedly intensifying Chinese support for Russia is therefore more likely an attempt to maintain China’s access to European markets by garnering goodwill with Germany than to show actual interest in facilitating an end to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) recently destroyed a Russian Nebo-U long-range radar station in Bryansk Oblast.[23] SBU sources told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* on April 16 that the Nebo-U station allowed Russian forces to surveil up to 700 kilometers into Ukrainian airspace, detect Ukrainian weapons, and support Russian bombers in targeting Ukrainian force concentrations.[24] The SBU also previously destroyed a Nebo-U station in Belgorod Oblast and recently targeted a Kasta-2E modern radar system near occupied Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast.[25]

The Kremlin continues to centralize authority over Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov’s “Akhmat” Spetsnaz forces via the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on April 16 appointing Commander of the Akhmat Spetsnaz Apty Alaudinov as the Deputy Head of the Main Directorate for Military-Political Work at the Russian MoD.[26] The Russian MoD’s Main Directorate for Military-Political Work is a department responsible for supporting “military-patriotic work” at the Russian Armed Forces such as ensuring that Russian forces subscribe to Russia’s political ideology.[27] Kadyrov stated that Alaudinov was relieved of his responsibilities as the Deputy Commander of the 2nd Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Army Corps but will continue to command Akhmat Spetsnaz forces.[28] Alaudinov’s appointment notably took place on the 15th year anniversary of the Kremlin declaring victory in Chechnya on April 16, 2009, under Kadyrov’s pro-Kremlin rule.[29] The appointment also follows Kadyrov’s recent announcement that 3,000 former Wagner Group personnel would join Akhmat Spetsnaz after Alaudinov reached an agreement with Wagner leadership on April 5.[30]

Putin is likely pursuing two objectives with Alaudinov’s appointment: establishing safeguards to ensure that Chechen leadership remains loyal to the Kremlin as Kadyrov continues to grow his forces and advancing the Kremlin’s ongoing force formalization efforts under the Russian MoD. Kadyrov has been steadily growing his forces since the start of the full-scale invasion and had used Russia’s reliance on Chechen forces to blackmail the Kremlin into ordering high-profile military command changes within the Russian MoD alongside deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.[31] Alaudinov’s appointment into the Russian MoD, therefore, ensures that Kadyrov and Alaudinov can no longer exercise the same level of freedom to make similar demands as they did in late 2022 and early 2023. The Kremlin enforced similar measures to coopt the Russian milblogger community by appointing several milbloggers into Kremlin-led initiatives, effectively buying their loyalty.[32] One Russian political blogger observed that Alaudinov’s appointment formally ensures that Akhmat Spetsnaz is now officially part of the Russian MoD.[33] The observation is consistent with the Kremlin’s recent progress in subordinating irregular forces fighting in Ukraine, such as Kadyrov’s units, to the Russian MoD.

Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor is considering banning TikTok in Russia. The Russian Association of Professional Users of Social Networks and Messengers (APPSIM) recently appealed to Roskomnadzor to block TikTok, and Roskomnadzor announced on April 16 that it will consider the appeal until May 8.[34] TikTok banned Russian users from posting new content on the platform in March 2022 due to the “security implications” of Russia’s new law against spreading false information about the Russian military.[35] Russian TikTok users have since only been able to view videos from before 2022 but can bypass these restrictions in various ways including by using foreign SIM cards or VPNs.[36] The APPSIM called for Roskomnadzor to investigate if TikTok has adhered to Russian personal data laws, which require all companies that collect personal data on Russian citizens to use databases located on Russian territory.[37] APPSIM’s appeal to Roskomnadzor reportedly stated that TikTok announced its readiness to localize the data of Russian citizens in 2019 but that TikTok had not publicly reported if it had done this or not.[38] APPSIM claimed that blocking TikTok will increase audiences on Russian social media networks, such as VKontakte, which will boost the “professional community’s” number of subscribers on domestic platforms.[39] A Russian court fined Google 15 million rubles (about \$159,000) in November 2023 for repeatedly refusing to localize the personal data of Russian users in Russia, and it is unclear if Roskomnadzor would ban TikTok for the same offense for which it simply fined Google.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emphasized that continued shortages in air defense systems and artillery are preventing Ukraine from effectively defending itself against Russian strikes and ground assaults.

- Zelensky signed a new mobilization law on April 16, codifying a difficult but critical decision in Ukraine's efforts to stabilize its force generation apparatus and adequately prepare the Ukrainian fighting force both defensively and offensively.
- Russian forces in eastern Ukraine are using smaller groups to conduct assaults and are reportedly suffering from morale issues, but Russian attacks are unlikely to culminate in the near term despite these challenges because of Ukrainian materiel shortages.
- A Russian Storm-Z instructor argued that Russian forces should capitalize on Ukrainian disadvantages brought on by materiel shortages to increase Russian guided glide bomb strikes to support Russian ground operations.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to show support for Iranian aggression against Israel during a March 16 call with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.
- People's Republic of China (PRC) President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on April 16 and proposed prerequisites for the end to the war in Ukraine in a manner that suggests that Xi is continuing to posture himself as a neutral mediator in the war despite increasing reports of China's support for the Russian war effort.
- Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) recently destroyed a Russian Nebo-U long-range radar station in Bryansk Oblast.
- The Kremlin continues to centralize authority over Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's "Akhmat" Spetsnaz forces via the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor is considering banning TikTok in Russia.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on April 16.
- The Republic of Tatarstan is reportedly preparing a new youth employment program that would allow minors aged 14 and older to work at Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, likely as part of an ongoing effort to expand the Russian DIB.
- Russian occupation officials are using the education system, particularly history courses, to Russify Ukrainian children living in occupied areas.

America's Stark Choice in Ukraine and the Cost of Letting Russia Win

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

By Fredrick W. Kagan

April 16, 2024

The current US debate about providing additional military assistance to Ukraine is based in part on the assumption that the war will remain stalemated regardless of US actions. That assumption is false.^[1] The Russians are breaking out of positional warfare and beginning to restore maneuver to the battlefield because of the delays in the provision of US military assistance to Ukraine. Ukraine cannot hold the present lines now without the rapid resumption of US assistance, particularly air defense and artillery that only the US can provide rapidly and at scale.^[2] Lack of air defense has exposed Ukrainian front-line units to Russian aircraft that are now dropping thousands of bombs on Ukrainian defensive positions for the first time in this war.^[3] Ukrainian artillery shortages are letting the Russians use armored columns without suffering prohibitive losses for the first time since 2022.^[4] The Russians are pressing their advantage and advancing slowly but steadily on several sectors of the front. Since the beginning of this year, Russian forces have seized over 360 square kilometers - an area the size of Detroit. Russian advances will accelerate absent urgent American action. US policymakers must internalize the reality that further delaying or stopping American military assistance will lead to dramatic Russian gains later in 2024 and in 2025 and, ultimately, to Russian victory.

The United States thus has only two real choices today. It can quickly resume providing military aid to let Ukraine stabilize the front lines near the current locations. Or it can let the Russians defeat the Ukrainian military and drive toward the NATO borders from the Black Sea to central Poland. There is no third option. The risks of a Russian attack against NATO in the near future would rise dramatically if the US allows Russia to defeat Ukraine now, and the challenge of defending the Baltic States in particular could become almost insurmountable. These long-term risks and costs far outweigh the short-term price of resuming assistance to Ukraine.

Russian victory in Ukraine would have devastating consequences for the defense of NATO.^[5] Ukrainian success, even if Ukraine just holds the frontlines roughly where they now are, on the other hand, would make a successful Russian attack on Poland or the Baltic States much harder and riskier. It would dramatically strengthen NATO's ability to deter and defend against future

Russian aggression. The two maps presented below illustrate the advantages Russia would secure by defeating Ukraine and those that NATO would receive from helping Ukraine hold the line or push the Russians further east and south.

NATO's Future Is Linked with Ukraine's Regardless of Ukraine's Membership Status

A successful Ukrainian military will be the largest and most powerful in Europe after Russia's—it will be far stronger than that of any European NATO state. Ukraine will deploy its forces along its borders with Russia and Belarus to deter and defend against future Russian aggression. Ukraine will rely on continued assistance at first in the form of equipment but, over time, primarily in the form of money to purchase and maintain its own equipment, from a wide array of European and Asian states that keenly understand the importance of preventing a renewed Russian attack.[6] Ukrainians will recognize that their future is linked with NATO's survival and deterring Russian attacks on NATO as well as on Ukraine, even if Ukraine is not a member of the alliance.

Russian military leaders planning an invasion of the Baltic States or an attack on Poland will have to assume that Ukraine might enter such a war on NATO's behalf regardless of Ukraine's membership status. That planning assumption will have a dramatic impact on Russian campaign plans for a war of aggression against NATO, as we shall see.

If Russia defeats Ukraine, on the other hand, NATO will face tremendous challenges in defending its northeastern members. Ukrainians will not tamely submit to Russian conquest, to be sure, and Russian military victory will very likely be followed by a massive Ukrainian insurgency.[7] But the Russians are already preparing forces distinct from their regular military units to handle such an insurgency, and they will very likely be able to sustain conventional military capabilities to threaten NATO from Ukrainian territory even while addressing Ukrainian insurgents.[8] The Russians will also impress hundreds of thousands or even millions of Ukrainians into military service, along with the defense industrial base Ukrainians are now constructing, significantly increasing Russia's military and economic potential.

In this dire scenario, therefore, NATO must expect to face large Russian conventional forces along its entire border from the Black Sea to the Arctic, bringing the southern Polish, Hungarian, Slovakian, and Romanian borders under threat of Russian ground attack for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union. This threat would pin NATO forces in southeastern Europe and would draw additional forces from the US and Western European NATO states to southern and central Europe, depriving NATO of reserves that would otherwise be available to reinforce the Baltic States rapidly in the event of a threatened Russian invasion. These NATO troops, inexperienced in fighting modern mechanized war, would be staring down a battle-hardened Russian military, emboldened from its victory in Ukraine.

The Russian military could prepare campaign plans for an attack on Poland and/or the Baltic States with no concern for its rear areas. That planning assumption would allow Russia to concentrate against the Baltic States forces they would otherwise have to array along the Ukrainian frontier to deter or defend against a Ukrainian effort to help defend NATO. It is almost impossible to overstate how much the success or failure of Ukraine's current efforts to fight off the Russian attack changes the prospects of a future Russian attack against NATO's northeastern flank.

Scenarios and Assumptions

The maps below depict current NATO deployments, notional Ukrainian deployments based on pre-war Ukrainian military positions, and notional Russian force concentrations for an invasion of the Baltic States. The underlying scenario assumes that the Russians will prioritize cutting the Suwalki Corridor that runs between northwestern Belarus (around Grodno) and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad to prevent NATO from reinforcing or supplying the Baltic States while Russian armored and airborne units seize the Baltic States themselves. The scenario also assumes that the Russians will seek to prepare and attack fast enough to avoid giving NATO time to bring large reinforcements from the US, France, Germany, and the UK to the Suwalki Corridor and the Baltic States before they invade. It thus considers a Russian invasion force largely drawn from units in the newly-reestablished Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts, as those forces could move to attack positions and launch an invasion much more rapidly than a larger Russian force drawing on units in the Caucasus, near Central Asia, or in the Far East. The challenge the Russians would face in covering the frontier of a strong and independent Ukraine would likely consume any forces the Russians might choose to make available from further south and east in any event. Generating the Russian combat power necessary to take the Baltic States with the reduced strike force in that scenario would likely require some reinforcement from central Russia as well. That scenario would require a much larger and slower mobilization of Russian forces that NATO would see and be able to respond to.

The deployments and movements depicted on these maps are notional, and the details are open to debate and discussion. The bottom line, however, is very clear. An independent Ukraine with a strong military and a pro-Western government will make a Russian attack on NATO much more difficult, risky, and costly for Moscow. An independent and strong Ukraine will thus help NATO deter such a Russian attack and defeat it if deterrence fails. A victorious Russia that succeeds in its aim of destroying Ukraine entirely, on the other hand, will pose a major conventional military threat to NATO in a relatively short period of time. It will be much harder to deter future Russian aggression and both more difficult and far more costly to defeat it if deterrence fails. The choice before the US today is thus stark, but the answer is clear. American interests now and in the future are served far better by resuming aid to Ukraine now than by allowing Russia to win.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 15, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

April 15, 2024, 8pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on April 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials continue to warn that US security assistance is vital to Ukrainian forces' ability to defend against current and future Russian offensive operations forecasted to begin in late spring and summer. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces are preparing to repel a future Russian major offensive expected in late May or the beginning of June but noted that this will be "catastrophically difficult" without Western military assistance.[1] Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated on April 14 that the current situation in eastern Ukraine is "tense" and that Russian forces are focusing their efforts west of Bakhmut in the Chasiv Yar direction.[2] Umerov stated that Ukrainian forces are successfully using modern technology against Russia's larger quantities of personnel. The spokesperson for the Ukrainian Khortysia Group of Forces, Lieutenant Colonel Nazar Voloshyn, stated on April 15 that Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka directions can only use one to five artillery shells for every 10 artillery shells that Russian forces fire, but that Ukrainian artillery is more precise than Russian artillery.[3] Ukrainian forces' ability to repel recently intensified Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine has degraded due to materiel shortages and will likely continue to degrade in the near future should delays in US security assistance continue.[4] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are currently capitalizing on Ukrainian materiel shortages resulting from the lack of US security assistance to make marginal tactical advances but that future Russian assaults may be able to achieve more significant and threatening gains, particularly west of Bakhmut, should the US continue to withhold assistance to Ukraine.[5]

A senior Estonian military official described intensified Russian offensive frontline operations and deep rear area strike campaigns as intended to degrade both Ukraine's will to fight and Western unity. Chief of the Estonian General Staff Major General Enno Mots stated in an interview published on April 14 that Russian forces' attempts to exploit vulnerabilities on the frontline across the theater — which Mots described as "amoeba tactics" — and Russia's escalation of deep rear strikes are attritional tactics ultimately aimed at exploiting the Ukrainian military's current materiel shortages, which is consistent with ISW's recent observations about Ukrainian air defense, artillery, and manpower shortages.[6] Mots noted that Ukraine needs significant resources for repelling Russian aggression and reconstruction, and that fragmenting Western unity creates a dilemma that interrupts the "smooth" timely and consistent flow of supplies to Ukraine, ultimately backfiring and reducing support for Ukraine.[7] Mots' interview underscores several salient observations, including: that US failures to provide timely and consistent military aid to Ukraine (which only the US can provide at scale) has negative ripple effect on Ukraine's international partners globally; that materiel shortages are forcing Ukraine to husband materiel and prioritize areas of the front at the expense of others; and that persistent Russian information operations are aimed at convincing Western policymakers that Russia can and will outlast Western military assistance to Ukraine.[8] Mots emphasized that Russia does not care about manpower or materiel losses. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksandr Lytvynenko similarly stressed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "addicted" to the idea conquering Ukraine and will not give up his aims of completely seizing Ukraine and destroying the Ukrainian state.[9] Lytvynenko emphasized the importance of not conceding territory to Putin and ensuring meaningful Western security guarantees for Ukraine to deter future aggression.[10]

Russian forces continue to adapt their drone tactics along the frontline as part of an offense-defense arms race to mitigate Ukrainian technological adaptions designed to offset Russian materiel advantages along the frontline. Ukrainian drone operators told the *Washington Post* in an article published on April 14 that the number of drones that both Russian and Ukrainian forces use has made the battlefield “almost transparent,” but that Russian forces have significantly increased electronic warfare (EW) jamming since fall 2023.[11] The Ukrainian drone operators stated that it can be difficult to distinguish between Ukrainian and Russian drones because about 100 Russian and Ukrainian reconnaissance and attack drones can operate simultaneously within a 10-kilometer radius. The Ukrainian drone operators also reported that Russian forces understand how valuable Ukrainian drone operators are and specifically target them with guided glide bomb and multiple rocket launch system (MLRS) strikes. A Ukrainian drone instructor and brigade commander stated on April 15 that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is rapidly developing drones that operate at a wide range of frequencies to make it more difficult for Ukrainian EW systems to down them, and observed that both sides are increasingly using first-person view (FPV) drones that were not as prominent a year ago. [12] The instructor reported that his brigade detects 70 to 90 FPV drones per day but cannot down all of them, and that Russian forces sometimes equip drones with munitions that can detonate after Ukrainian forces down them. ISW has observed an increase in Russian reconnaissance and FPV drone usage along the frontline and Russian complaints about the lack of sufficient EW, especially in southern Ukraine, in fall 2023.[13]

Russian officials doubled down on efforts to amplify Iran’s “justification” for the April 13 large-scale Iranian strikes against Israel that falsely equates them with an April 1 Israeli strike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus. Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) Vasily Nebenzya claimed at an April 14 UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting that Iran conducted the April 13 strikes in response to the UNSC’s inaction following Israel’s April 1 strike against IRGC officials. Nebenzya also claimed that Israel constantly bombs Syria.[14] Nebenzya called on Israel to “abandon its military actions in the Middle East” and reiterated Russian calls for a ceasefire in Gaza.[15] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that Russia opposes escalation and supports a political and diplomatic resolution of conflicts in the Middle East.[16] The Russian government will likely continue to amplify information operations designed to justify Iran’s April 13 strikes against Israel to the international community.

A Russian insider source claimed that Russian officials are preparing to redeploy some former Wagner Group elements serving in Africa Corps to Belgorod Oblast. The insider source claimed on April 15 that the Kremlin believes that Russian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) Lieutenant General Andrei Averyanov failed to meet the Kremlin’s deadlines to develop the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps.[17] The insider source claimed that Russian authorities are preparing to redeploy unspecified detachments of the Africa Corps from Africa to Belgorod Oblast. The insider source implied that the Wagner Group’s ongoing efforts to recruit personnel for its activities in Africa are actually meant to recruit personnel to deploy to Belgorod Oblast. Russian Africa Corps soldiers deployed to Niger on April 12, and it is unclear if the insider source is claiming that the Africa Corps will cease operations in Africa completely or if only some Africa Corps detachments will redeploy to the Ukrainian-Russian border area.[18] Averyanov previously participated in the Russian delegation that met with officials in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali and appeared to be heavily involved in the Russian government’s efforts to subsume the Wagner Group. [19] Averyanov is notably the commander of GRU unit 29155, who is responsible for the 2018 assassination attempt against Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom and whom a joint investigation by *60 Minutes*, *Der Spiegel*, and the *Insider* has recently implicated in non-lethal directed energy or acoustic weapons attacks against US government personnel within the US and internationally.[20]

Crimean occupation administration head Sergei Aksyonov passed a decree restricting migrant labor in occupied Crimea, undermining the Kremlin’s effort to mitigate labor shortages. The decree banned businesses from hiring migrants for 35 different types of jobs, including transportation, agriculture and food production, natural resource supplies, public utilities, trade (except trade in motor vehicles and motorcycles), culture, and education.[21] The decree notably does not ban migrants from construction work, which indicates that Crimean occupation officials may be able to legally employ migrants to build fortifications, logistics routes, or other infrastructure in support of Russia’s war effort. [22] Aksyonov stated that the uncontrolled presence of labor migrants in occupied Crimea and in Russia is “unacceptable” and that Crimean occupation law enforcement identified more than 500 individuals who had violated Russian migration laws.[23] Russian authorities have notably imported migrants from Russia to occupied Ukraine as part of efforts to repopulate and rebuild in occupied areas, as ISW has previously reported.[24] Some Russian milbloggers welcomed these restrictions and noted that Russian officials should enforce more measures to control migrant labor and enforce stricter visa and citizenship requirements.[25] Aksyonov’s decree and milblogger suggestions, however, contradict the Kremlin’s recent attempts to balance opposing efforts to set social expectations for a protracted Russian war effort and to assuage Russian society’s concerns about the

economic consequences of the war and labor migration.[26] Putin implied on April 4 that Russia needs to continue importing foreign laborers given that Russia will experience a high demand for human capital and face labor shortages in the coming years.[27] ISW assessed on April 4 that Putin appeared to be telling Russia's xenophobic ultra-nationalist community that Russia must continue to rely on migration, while Aksyonov's decree appears to be directly appealing to this ultra-nationalist community while disregarding Putin's messaging.

Russian state media seized on Georgian protests against a proposed law similar to Russia's "foreign agent" law, likely as part of Kremlin efforts to amplify political discord in Georgia. Kremlin newswire TASS reported extensively on Georgian parliamentary debates on April 15 about a proposed law that would require non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that receive more than 20 percent of their budget from foreign sources to register as "an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power" - a label that notably replaces the term "foreign agent" that Russia uses and was featured in previous versions of the proposed law.[28] The Georgian parliament passed the first reading of the bill in 2023, then withdrew it from further consideration following widespread public protests opposing the bill.[29] TASS particularly focused on the protests in Tbilisi against the proposed law and repeatedly emphasized that Western diplomats in Georgia, such as the EU mission and US embassy in Georgia, opposed the bill.[30] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov responded on April 4 to the reintroduction of the bill in the Georgian Parliament and called claims that this is a "Russian project" absurd.[31] Peskov claimed that such laws are a "global practice" and that "no sovereign states wants interference from other countries in domestic politics." Russian media similarly largely highlighted public protests and societal discord during the 2023 protests in opposition to the first version of the foreign agent law.[32] Russia has routinely attempted to portray Ukraine's and other post-Soviet countries' politics as chaotic in an attempt to destabilize target states and make them easier for Russia to influence or outright attack.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials continue to warn that US security assistance is vital to Ukrainian forces' ability to defend against current and future Russian offensive operations forecasted to begin in late spring and summer.
- A senior Estonian military official described intensified Russian offensive frontline operations and deep rear area strike campaigns as intended to degrade both Ukraine's will to fight and Western unity.
- Russian forces continue to adapt their drone tactics along the frontline as part of an offense-defense arms race to mitigate Ukrainian technological adaptions to offset Russian materiel advantages along the frontline.
- Russian officials doubled down on efforts to amplify Iran's "justification" for the April 13 large-scale Iranian strikes against Israel that falsely equates them with an April 1 Israeli strike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus.
- A Russian insider source claimed that Russian officials are preparing to redeploy some former Wagner Group elements serving in Africa Corps to Belgorod Oblast.
- Crimean occupation administration head Sergei Aksyonov passed a decree restricting migrant labor in occupied Crimea, undermining the Kremlin's effort to mitigate labor shortages.
- Russian state media seized on Georgian protests against a proposed law similar to Russia's "foreign agent" law, likely as part of Kremlin efforts to amplify political discord in Georgia.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Siversk (northeast of Bakhmut), Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City on April 15.
- Russian prosecution rates of men who had fled compulsory military service have reportedly increased since fall 2022.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 14, 2024

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

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

April 14, 2024, 7:15pm ET

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

Israel's success in defending against large-scale Iranian missile and drone strikes from Iranian territory on April 13 underscores the vulnerabilities that Ukrainian geography and the continued degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella pose for Ukrainian efforts to defend against regular Russian missile and drone strikes. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force launched roughly 170 Shahed-136/131 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles at targets in Israel in a strike package similar to recent Russian strike packages against Ukraine.^[1] Russian forces have experimented with cruise missile, ballistic missile, and drone strikes of varying sizes and combinations, and are now routinely conducting large, combined strikes against targets in Ukraine.^[2] Iran's similarly large, combined strike package was far less successful than recent Russian strikes in Ukraine, however, with Israeli air defenses intercepting almost all of the roughly 320 air targets except several ballistic missiles.^[3] Iranian drones and missiles had to cross more than 1,000 kilometers of Iraqi, Syrian, and Jordanian airspace before reaching Israel, affording Israel and its allies hours to identify, track, and intercept missiles and drones on approach to Israel.^[4] Russian forces launch drones and missiles from throughout occupied Ukraine and in close proximity to Ukraine from within Russia, affording Ukrainian air defenders a fraction of the time that Israel and its allies leveraged to successfully blunt the mass Iranian missile and drone strike.^[5] Israel also has a robust air defense umbrella that is responsible for responding to potential attacks across shorter borders with its neighbors, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank; whereas, Ukraine has increasingly degraded air defense capabilities to employ against missile and drone strikes across a much wider frontline in Ukraine as well as its international borders with Belarus and Russia. Ukraine also currently lacks the capability to conduct air-to-air interception with fixed wing aircraft as Israel and its allies did on the night of April 13. Ukraine's large size compared to Israel makes it more difficult for Ukraine to emulate the density of air defense coverage that Israel enjoys, especially amid continued delays in US security assistance.

The exhaustion of US-provided air defenses resulting from delays in the resumption of US military assistance to Ukraine combined with improvements in Russian strike tactics have led to increasing effectiveness of the Russian strike campaign in Ukraine.^[6] Without substantial and regular security assistance to Ukraine, Russian strikes threaten to constrain Ukraine's long-term warfighting capabilities and set operational conditions for Russia to achieve significant gains on the battlefield.^[7] Ukraine requires significant provisions of Western air defense systems and fighter jets capable of intercepting drones and missiles in order to establish a combined air defense umbrella that is even remotely as effective as the one Israel and its allies successfully used on April 13.^[8]

Russia's strike campaign against Ukraine demonstrates that even a limited number of successful ballistic or cruise missile strikes can cause significant and likely long-term damage to energy and other infrastructure, highlighting the need for an effective and well-provisioned air defense umbrella capable of a sustained high rate of interception. Recent large-scale Russian strike packages using drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles against Ukraine have caused significant damage to Ukrainian energy infrastructure. All 15 ballistic missiles and seven of the 44 cruise missiles that Russian forces launched against Ukrainian energy facilities on the night of March 21 to 22 successfully penetrated Ukrainian air defenses.^[9] Some of the missiles significantly damaged the Dnipro Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) in Zaporizhzhia City and took it completely offline, and it will take some time to repair the plant.^[10] Three of seven ballistic missiles and eight of 30 cruise missiles that Russian forces launched against Ukrainian HPPs on the night of March 28 to 29 successfully penetrated Ukrainian air defenses, damaging HPPs and thermal power plants (TPPs) in central and western Ukraine.^[11] All 18 ballistic missiles and six of the 24 cruise missiles that Russian forces launched against Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of April 10 to 11 successfully penetrated Ukrainian air defenses, of which five missiles completely destroyed the Trypilska TPP in Kyiv Oblast.^[12] The Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities on the night of April 10 to 11 also damaged energy facilities in Zaporizhzhia and Lviv oblasts.^[13] The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 11 that Russian strikes, not including the April 10 to 11 strike series, have disrupted 80 percent of the generation capacity of DTEK, Ukraine's largest private energy company, which supplies about 20 percent of Ukraine's power.^[14]

Ukrainian Deputy Energy Minister Svitlana Hrynychuk told CNN in an article published on April 14 that successful Russian strikes over the course of just a few days in the past few weeks have destroyed a year's worth of Ukrainian repairs to energy facilities following the winter 2022-2023 Russian strike campaign.^[15] A Ukrainian source told CNN that Russian forces have changed their strike tactics to launch a large number of missiles and drones simultaneously against a limited number of targets. DTEK Head Maksym Timchenko stated that Russia began targeting Ukrainian energy generation infrastructure, instead of transmission systems, in late March 2024.^[16] DTEK previously warned that more accurate and concentrated Russian strikes are inflicting greater damage against Ukrainian energy facilities than previous Russian attacks did.^[17] **Israel, the US, and their allies and partners should be cognizant of the risk that even small numbers of missiles penetrating defense umbrellas can cause nonlinear damage to modern societies if they hit the right targets.**

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is falsely equating the April 13 large-scale Iranian strikes targeting Israel with the April 1 Israeli strike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus, amplifying Iran's "justification" for the April 13 strikes. The Russian MFA issued a statement on April 14 in response to the April 13 Iranian strikes amplifying Iran's claim that Iran conducted the April 13 strikes as an act of "self-defense" in response to claimed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets, including the April 1 strike targeting IRGC officials in Damascus.[18] The Russian MFA reiterated its condemnation of the April 1 Israeli strike and accused Western members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) of impeding the UNSC's ability to "adequately respond" to the April 1 Israeli strike targeting IRGC officials. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held a phone call with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian later on April 14, and the Russian MFA again amplified Iran's claim that the April 13 strikes were a response to the April 1 Israeli strike in the readout of the call.[19] Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova notably refused an Israeli request for Russia to condemn the April 13 Iranian strikes, claiming that Israel has never condemned a Ukrainian strike against Russia and criticizing Israel for its statements supporting Ukraine.[20] The Russian government is willfully furthering an information operation to justify Iran's April 13 strikes against Israel to the international community.

Russian milbloggers largely responded to the April 13 Iranian strikes against Israel by suggesting that the increased threat of military escalation in the Middle East will likely draw Western, specifically US, attention and aid away from Ukraine. Russian milbloggers leaned into an established information operation on April 13 and 14 claiming that the Western media will slowly stop covering the war in Ukraine as Western attention turns to the risk of escalation in the Middle East and suggested that the US and Ukraine's other Western allies may begin to falter in their expected aid deliveries to Ukraine because the West may prioritize aiding Israel.[21] Several Russian milbloggers specifically gloated that if Ukraine does not receive additional Western air defense systems, Russian drones and missiles will "safely cruise" in uncontested Ukrainian air space.[22] Russian milbloggers and Kremlin officials, including Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov, expressed similar hopes following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.[23] Significant delays in US military assistance have already created shortages in Ukraine's air defense missile and ammunition stockpiles, hindering Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian frontline offensive operations and drone and missile strikes against rear areas, creating opportunities that Russian forces are actively exploiting. Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely operating on the assumption that US military assistance to Ukraine will either be further delayed or permanently ended, and any evidence supporting that notion will likely encourage Russian efforts to strain Ukrainian forces past their breaking point on the battlefield and in deep rear areas. ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian offensive operations and Russia's ongoing strike campaign is heavily dependent on continued US security assistance and that the longer Ukrainian forces go under-provisioned, the harder it will be to defend against Russian offensive operations.[24]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that the senior Russian military command aims to seize Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast by Russia's Victory Day holiday on May 9.[25] The Russian military command's objective to seize Chasiv Yar in only three and a half weeks indicates that the Russian command likely assesses that Russian forces will be able to seize the town at a faster tempo of offensive operations than efforts to seize Bakhmut in May 2023 or Avdiivka in February 2024.[26] The Russian military command likely assesses that continued Ukrainian critical munitions shortages will enable Russian forces to seize Chasiv Yar in several weeks, despite ISW's assessment that Russian forces have currently only reached the easternmost part of the Kanal Microraion in easternmost Chasiv Yar. The Russian command has routinely set unrealistic goals for Russian advances, however, and a Russian milblogger expressed hope that Russian forces may be able to just enter the Novyi Microraion in southeastern Chasiv Yar by May 9.[27] The Russian military will likely intend to capitalize on significant Ukrainian artillery and air defense shortages that are crucial to Ukrainian defense and that were not constraining Ukraine's defense of Bakhmut or Avdiivka to the same degree as their current constraints, however. The Russian military command will likely continue efforts against Chasiv Yar until the effort culminates, but Russian forces may be able to make speedier advances than in prior efforts given the degree of Ukraine's current artillery and air defense shortages.

The Russian military's ongoing restructuring of the Western Military District (WMD) into the Moscow and Leningrad military districts (MMD and LMD) is reportedly shifting areas of operational responsibility (AOR) for Russian force groupings in Ukraine. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on April 14 that Russian units part of the Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod border groupings will form part of the LMD and that elements of the 11th Army Corps (AC) and the 138th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army [CAA]) and likely elements of the currently-forming 44th AC and the 25th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th CAA) will form the "Northern" Grouping of Forces alongside existing units on the border in Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts.[28] This report suggests that the entire 6th CAA and 11th AC are also subordinated to the LMD, which

would be consistent with the boundaries of the military district and the permanent stations of those formations. Mashovets also reported that the 1st Guards Tank Army, 20th CAA, and 25th CAA will integrate into the MMD and be responsible for the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line on the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis — an observation also largely consistent with the military district boundaries and permanent stations of those formations. Mashovets also speculated on possible commanders for the MMD as well as the LMD and Northern Grouping of Forces, but ISW is unable to confirm these speculations.[29] Mashovets' report suggests that the LMD's Northern Grouping of Forces is pulling Russian formations currently operating on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line — including elements of the 6th CAA and 11th AC — to the northern international border and elsewhere in the theater, which will undermine any Russian offensive efforts on that line and may create confusion in the Russian military command as it seeks to disentangle the WMD into the MMD and LMD.[30] This redeployment could support possible future Russian operations against Kharkiv City to which Ukrainian leaders have previously alluded.[31]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has reportedly fired the commanders of a combined arms army and motorized rifle regiment operating in southern Ukraine likely for failing to recapture areas lost during the Ukrainian summer-fall 2023 counteroffensive. Russian sources claimed on April 13 and 14 that the Russian military command fired Lieutenant General Arkady Marzoev, commander of the Russian 18th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District [SMD]) that has been fighting near Krynyk, Kherson Oblast, as well as the commander of the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army [CAA], SMD) that has been fighting near Robotyne, Zaporizhia Oblast.[32] ISW is unable to confirm these reported firings. Elements of the 18th CAA have been repelling Ukrainian attacks and attempting to push Ukrainian forces from their positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast since Ukrainian forces established a limited tactical bridgehead in November 2023, and have notably failed.[33] Elements of the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment have been conducting periodic counterattacks to recapture territory in and around Robotyne since September 2023 and suffered significant degradation as a result.[34] Elements of the 18th CAA and the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment have been unable to recapture all the territory that Ukrainian forces captured in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts during the summer-fall 2023 counteroffensive. If the Russian sources' speculations are accurate, the Russian MoD is likely replacing these commanders in hopes that new leadership will oversee the seizure of more territory around Robotyne and Krynyk, thereby allowing the Russian MoD to claim with some degree of believability that Russia has undone the results of the Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Key Takeaways:

- Israel's success in defending against large-scale Iranian missile and drone strikes from Iranian territory on April 13 underscores the vulnerabilities that Ukrainian geography and the continued degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella pose for Ukrainian efforts to defend against regular Russian missile and drone strikes.
- The exhaustion of US-provided air defenses resulting from delays in the resumption of US military assistance to Ukraine combined with improvements in Russian strike tactics have led to increasing effectiveness of the Russian strike campaign in Ukraine.
- Russia's strike campaign against Ukraine demonstrates that even a limited number of successful ballistic or cruise missile strikes can cause significant and likely long-term damage to energy and other infrastructure, highlighting the need for an effective and well-provisioned air defense umbrella capable of a sustained high rate of interception.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is falsely equating the April 13 large-scale Iranian strikes targeting Israel with the April 1 Israeli strike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus, amplifying Iran's "justification" for the April 13 strikes.
- Russian milbloggers largely responded to the April 13 Iranian strikes against Israel by suggesting that the increased threat of military escalation in the Middle East will likely draw Western, specifically US, attention and aid away from Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that the senior Russian military command aims to seize Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast by Russia's Victory Day holiday on May 9.
- The Russian military's ongoing restructuring of the Western Military District (WMD) into the Moscow and Leningrad military districts (MMD and LMD) is reportedly shifting areas of operational responsibility (AOR) for Russian force groupings in Ukraine.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has reportedly fired the commanders of a combined arms army and motorized rifle regiment operating in southern Ukraine likely for failing to recapture areas lost during the Ukrainian summer-fall 2023 counteroffensive.
- Ukrainian forces advanced south of Kremminna and southwest of Donetsk City and Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut)

and Avdiivka.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 13, 2024

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

April 13, 2024, 7:45pm ET

Russian forces are pursuing at least three operational-level efforts that are not mutually reinforcing but let Russian forces prioritize grinding, tactical gains on a single sector of their choice at a time. Ukrainian forces will increasingly struggle to defend against these Russian efforts the longer Ukraine lacks further US military assistance. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on April 13 that the situation in eastern Ukraine has significantly worsened in recent days and that Russian forces are conducting mechanized attacks in the Lyman, Bakhmut, and Pokrovsk (west of Avdiivka) directions.^[1] Syrskyi stated that hot and dry weather conditions have made most open terrain accessible to Russian tanks and that Russian forces are dedicating new units to achieving tactical successes despite heavy losses. The Russian efforts in the Lyman, Chasiv Yar, and Pokrovsk directions each pursue operationally significant objectives, but these operations are not mutually supporting, and Russian forces still seem to be alternating emphasis among the different operational directions rather than leaning into all three at any given time. [2] Ukrainian forces have successfully defended against prior Russian operational-level offensive efforts of this sort when they had the resources the US is currently withholding, forcing these efforts to culminate before they could achieve operationally significant results.^[3] Ukrainian forces currently struggle with significant shortages of both artillery shells and air defense means, both of which are critical components of their defense, and Russian forces are capitalizing on these shortages and improved weather conditions.^[4]

The Russian military command likely assesses that Ukrainian forces will be unable to defend against current and future Russian offensive operations due to delays in or the permanent end of US military assistance. Russian forces have recently periodically shifted their focus among offensive operations in the Lyman, Chasiv Yar, and Pokrovsk directions; Russian forces first prioritized the capture of Avdiivka in early 2024, alongside simultaneous but less intense operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, then leaned into the Lyman direction while slightly decreasing the tempo near Avdiivka, and now are intensifying efforts to seize Chasiv Yar in March-April 2024.^[5] Though Russian forces likely lack the ability to conduct more than one simultaneous effective large-scale operational effort as they have throughout the war, Russian forces are now able to use multiple alternating offensive efforts to stretch Ukrainian defensive capabilities amid Ukrainian artillery and air defense shortages.^[6] The current pattern of Russian offensive operations allows elements of units participating in less intensive efforts to rest and reconstitute while other units, presumably those that are more rested or those that have recently received reinforcements. They can then intensify efforts in another operational direction, forcing Ukrainian forces to reallocate their defensive resources across the theater and creating vulnerabilities that Russian forces can exploit. Russian forces are reportedly developing operational- and strategic-level reserves capable of sustaining ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine, likely to support an anticipated spring-summer offensive effort.^[7] ISW continues to assess that these reserves are unlikely to be ready to act as a first-echelon penetration force or second-echelon exploitation force capable of conducting large-scale mechanized assaults in 2024 as long as Ukrainian forces have the wherewithal to resist them.^[8] Russian forces would more likely use these reserves to restaff or reinforce existing formations and continue grinding, infantry-led assaults with occasional limited mechanized pushes in their direction of choice at key moments. If the United States does not resume providing aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian forces continue to lack essential artillery and air defense munitions in particular, however, even badly-trained and poorly-equipped Russian troops might be able to conduct successful offensive operations.

The offensive effort to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances as the seizure of the town would likely allow Russian forces to launch subsequent offensive operations against the cities that form in effect a significant Ukrainian defensive belt in Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces have long aimed to capture a group of major cities in Donetsk Oblast that include Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, and Kostyantynivka, and the Russian military initially attempted and failed to conduct a wide operational encirclement of Ukrainian forces in eastern Donetsk Oblast by driving on Slovyansk in spring 2022.^[9] The Ukrainian liberation of Izyum, Kharkiv Oblast and further advances in northern Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts during the fall of 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive disrupted Russian plans to resume

efforts to drive on the northern edge of this Ukrainian “fortress” belt.[10] Russian forces continued their drive towards the southern portion of the Donetsk Oblast “fortress” belt with their attritional, months-long effort to seize Bakhmut, but the seizure of the city and the culmination of Russian offensive operations in the area in May 2023 did not allow Russian forces to immediately threaten the southern edge of the “fortress” belt.[11] Russian forces began localized offensive operations west of Bakhmut in November 2023 and are now operating on the eastern outskirts of Chasiv Yar. The Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would allow Russian forces to begin attacking the southern “fortress” cities in the Ukrainian defensive belt directly. Chasiv Yar is roughly seven kilometers from Kostyantynivka (the southernmost “fortress” city) and roughly 20 kilometers from Druzhkivka. Russian forces could launch subsequent offensive operations directly on Druzhkivka or Kostyantynivka after some period of rest and replenishment following the possible seizure of Chasiv Yar. Russian forces could also drive on Oleksilevo-Druzhkivka (15km west of Chasiv Yar) in an effort to cut off and isolate Kostyantynivka from the rest of the “fortress” belt and set conditions for the operational encirclement of the city. These options depend on the Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar, however, which is not certain.

Russian threats to Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka are very operationally significant since these “fortress” cities help form the backbone of the Ukrainian defense in Donetsk Oblast and of eastern Ukraine in general. The isolation of Kostyantynivka or the outright seizure of the settlement would likely significantly degrade Ukraine’s ability to hold the frontline further south in Donetsk Oblast as it would sever a major ground line of communication along the H-20 (Kostyantynivka-Donetsk City) highway and require Ukrainian forces to commit a significant portion of manpower and materiel to the defense of the remaining “fortress” belt and relatively less fortified areas of central and western Donetsk Oblast. Russian advances through Kostyantynivka and Druzhkivka and then further west into Donetsk Oblast would likely present Russian forces with greater opportunities to collapse the Ukrainian frontline in Donetsk Oblast and possibly restore relatively rapid maneuver to the battlefield in pursuit of seizing all of Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces will be challenged to seize either city rapidly as long as Ukrainian forces have the wherewithal to defend them, however. ISW is not forecasting that the Russians will be able to seize either city in the near term. Russian advances further west of these “fortress” cities into Donetsk Oblast could also present Russian forces with opportunities to make offensive operations along diverging axes along the Donetsk Oblast frontline mutually supporting an offensive push on Pokrovsk and the western borders of Donetsk Oblast. The possible Russian seizure of Kostyantynivka and Druzhkivka would significantly degrade Ukraine’s operational position even if the frontline then stabilized since the possible Russian seizure of these cities would present Russian forces with more secure positions from which threaten a wider area of Donetsk Oblast that is more sparsely populated and offers less advantageous terrain to defend. These cities, even after the likely widespread destruction that a Russian offensive operation would cause, would present opportunities for Russian forces to establish a significant defensive line that could materially degrade the prospects for Ukrainian counteroffensive operations to retake them. The threat to Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka presents a potential major operational setback for Ukraine that would be very challenging to reverse. **ISW is neither forecasting that Russian forces will seize Chasiv Yar nor forecasting that Russian forces will be able to threaten or even seize Kostyantynivka or Druzhkivka. ISW offers these considerations of the threat that the Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would present because they are a plausible most dangerous course of action (MDOA) especially if the US does not rapidly resume the provision of military assistance to Ukraine.**

Russian forces may not be able to seize Chasiv Yar rapidly and would likely struggle to leverage its operational significance immediately as long as Ukrainian forces have the resources needed to hold their positions. The Russian Southern Grouping of Forces and substantial elements of the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces are currently responsible for offensive operations from northeast of Bakhmut to southeast of Chasiv Yar, and elements of the 98th VDV Division, 11th VDV Brigade, the 150th Motorized Rifle Division’s 102nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (8th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) are attacking the immediate outskirts of Chasiv Yar.[12] Elements of the 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet) and Volunteer Corps and limited elements of the 98th VDV Division are attempting to advance on Chasiv Yar from the northeast, and elements of the 83rd VDV Brigade, the Luhansk People’s Republic 2nd Army Corps (AC), and the 3rd AC are currently attempting to recapture territory southeast of Chasiv Yar and push Ukrainian forces across the Siversky-Donets Donbas Canal.[13] Russian forces appear to have committed their most combat-effective elements in the area to frontal assaults on Chasiv Yar, and these frontal assaults will likely produce gradual gains at attritional costs as long as Ukrainian defenders have essential materiel. The elements that Russian forces have currently concentrated northeast and southeast of Chasiv Yar are relatively less combat effective and will struggle to make advances similar to those made east of Chasiv Yar against supplied Ukrainian defenders. Russian tactical gains east of Chasiv Yar have not set conditions for an encirclement or envelopment of the settlement, and Russian forces would likely have to make notable tactical gains southeast and northwest of Chasiv Yar before pursuing an envelopment or encirclement of the settlement, which may

require additional and combat effective units and formations. Available imagery, which ISW will not present or describe in greater detail at this time to preserve Ukrainian operational security, shows that Ukrainian forces have established significant fortifications in a ring shape in the Chasiv Yar area, and Russian forces will likely struggle to rapidly break through these defenses at their current offensive tempo in the area as long as Ukrainian forces have the ammunition needed to resist.[14] In the absence of significant new Russian deployments, Russian forces will likely have to fight their way directly through the town or attempt a narrow tactical-level turning movement, which would force Russian forces to contend with Chasiv Yar's fortifications, elevated Ukrainian positions, and the obstacle of the Siversky-Donets Donbas Canal.

The possible Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar in itself does not allow Russian forces to conduct a successful operation to threaten Kostyantynivka and Druzhkivka, and Russian forces would likely need to set other operational conditions to threaten the southern "fortress" cities. The Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would create a notable salient, and a Russian attempt to advance further west immediately from Chasiv Yar would make that salient increasingly vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks. Russian forces would likely need to recapture territory that Russian forces lost southeast of Chasiv Yar during the summer 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive to stabilize the advancing Russian front, an effort that elements of the 83rd VDV Brigade, 2nd AC, and 3rd AC have struggled to pursue. Russian attempts to advance towards Kostyantynivka would likely allow Ukrainian forces to use positions in the Toretsk-Pivnichne area to interdict and threaten rear Russian logistics lines and possibly isolate the immediate battlespace west of Chasiv Yar. The terrain between Chasiv Yar and the southern edge of the Ukrainian "fortress" belt is predominantly open fields with limited cover and concealment, which would likely require Russian forces to conduct effective mechanized maneuver to advance up to the cities. Ukrainian forces have demonstrated their ability to repel intensive Russian mechanized assaults and degrade Russian logistics when well-provisioned, and the Russian ability to leverage the operational significance of Chasiv Yar likely rests in large part on whether the US will resume security assistance to Ukraine.[15]

Ukrainian artillery and air defense shortages resulting from the lack of US security assistance are allowing Russian mechanized forces to make marginal tactical advances, and future Russian mechanized assaults may be able to achieve more significant gains should the US continue to withhold assistance to Ukraine. Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces are strengthening the "most problematic" areas at the front with electronic warfare (EW) systems, air defense systems, drones, and anti-tank missiles.[16] Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces also need to improve the quality of their training, especially for infantry units to optimize their use of limited and dwindling Western-supplied weapons and equipment. The *Telegraph* reported on April 12 that a Ukrainian lieutenant colonel stated at the end of February 2024 that Russian forces often have three times as many artillery shells as Ukrainian forces and that some Ukrainian artillery units only have enough shells to strike a single Russian mechanized assault group out of several Russian mechanized groups, forcing the Ukrainians to use small arms to defend against subsequent Russian mechanized assaults.[17] A Russian Storm-Z instructor stated on April 13 that recent Russian mechanized assaults have achieved tactical successes but have been unable to make significant advances due to Ukrainian counterattacks, the exhaustion of Russian fire support during the assault, and the incompetence of Russian forces that are meant to consolidate gained positions.[18] The instructor stated that recent Russian tactical advances are not the result of improvements in the quality of Russian combat capabilities, increases in Russian technical means, or the optimization of Russian organizational structures but are rather due to Russia's increased use of glide bombs and constraints on Ukrainian artillery fire resulting from the lack of US supplies. The instructor claimed that Ukrainian forces are attempting to compensate for their decreased firepower by increasing their use of strike drones but noted that Ukrainian drones are able to strike but not destroy Russian armored vehicles, as ISW has previously observed.[19]

ISW continues to assess that continued delays in US security assistance are specifically impacting Ukraine's ability to respond to an increased tempo of Russian mechanized assaults in eastern Ukraine.[20] Sparse and inconsistent Ukrainian air defense coverage along the front resulting from shortages in Ukrainian air defense systems and missiles has facilitated Russia's intensification of guided and unguided glide bomb strikes, which Russian forces used to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in February 2024 and which Russian forces are using again during their current offensive operations near Chasiv Yar.[21] Ukrainian forces have also suffered from ongoing artillery ammunition shortages, which they have partially mitigated by using first person view (FPV) drones to blunt Russian infantry and armored vehicle assaults.[22] ISW continues to assess, however, that while Ukrainian FPV drones are likely able to temporarily render armored vehicles *hors de combat*, the relatively light payloads on the current FPV drones are unlikely to destroy armored vehicles very often.[23] Ukrainian forces have been partially able to repel the recently increased tempo of Russian mechanized assaults despite these shortages but will likely be unable to continue to defend against Russian mechanized assaults as effectively in the future should delays in US security assistance continue.

Ukrainian forces have previously demonstrated their ability to repel Russian mechanized assaults and inflict significant equipment losses on Russian forces when adequately provisioned. Ukrainian forces destroyed significant elements of a Russian motorized rifle brigade that tried to cross a pontoon bridge over the Siverskyi Donets River in 2022, and Russian forces lost at least 130 tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) during a three-week offensive near Vuhledar in 2023.[24] Ukrainian forces were recently able to inflict serious armored vehicle losses during several waves of Russian mechanized assaults on Avdiivka in fall 2023 before artillery shortages worsened through the winter into the spring of 2024.[25] ISW has generally observed that recent Russian mechanized assaults have exhibited the same tactical patterns that have previously resulted in large Russian vehicle losses in 2022 and 2023, and Ukrainian forces are therefore likely able to repeat their previous successes against Russian mechanized assaults should the US provide Ukraine with the necessary assistance.

[26]

Germany announced that it will immediately transfer another Patriot air defense system to Ukraine in response to recent very urgent Ukrainian requests for additional Patriot systems to defend against the increased Russian strike campaign amid ongoing Ukrainian efforts to expand Ukraine's air defense capabilities. The German Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on April 13 that Germany will immediately transfer another Patriot system to Ukraine to defend against the ongoing increased Russian strike campaign against the Ukrainian energy grid.[27] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky later clarified that the Patriot system includes an unspecified number of missiles and that Germany and Ukraine are discussing the provision of an additional IRIS-T air defense system.[28] German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated that the Russian strike campaign against Ukrainian citizens and infrastructure is endangering Ukraine's energy supply and destroying defense industrial facilities that are critical to Ukraine's operational readiness.[29] Zelensky and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba recently called on Ukraine's Western allies to send Ukraine more Patriot batteries to protect Ukrainian cities and frontline areas, particularly Kharkiv City, from Russian ballistic missiles.[30] Kuleba stated on April 10 that Ukraine urgently needs seven Patriot batteries, and the additional German-provided Patriot system will significantly ease, but not resolve, the strain on Ukraine's air defense umbrella and the limited number of Patriot batteries currently in Ukraine.[31] Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhaylo Podolyak stated during an interview on April 13 that Ukraine has not run out of Patriot and IRIS-T missiles, but that Ukraine's supply of Western air defense missiles is "in deficit." [32] Former Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat warned in January 2024 that Ukraine began rationing its air defense equipment and ammunition and used a considerable amount of Ukraine's existing air defense missile stockpile in defending against several large Russian drone and missile strike series in the first two weeks of January.[33] Recent large-scale Russian strikes have likely only further degraded Ukraine's air defense missile stockpiles, and the German MoD and Zelensky did not specify how many additional Patriot missiles Germany is sending to Ukraine alongside the system.

Ukrainian officials also continue to discuss their envisioned use of F-16 and other fixed wing aircraft as part of Ukraine's broader air defense umbrella. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Major Ilya Yevlash stated on April 13 that Ukraine needs at least 150 aircraft to effectively conduct air operations and noted that the Ukrainian Air Force will base its rearmament around F-16s, Swedish produced Gripen multirole fixed-wing aircraft, and other aircraft.[34] Yevlash stated that Ukraine will use F-16s to augment existing Ukrainian ground-based air defenses defending against Russian Shahed-136/131 drones and cruise and guided missiles and to constrain Russian aviation operations. Yevlash noted that even two squadrons, roughly 18 aircraft, could significantly influence the situation in the Ukrainian air space and ease pressure on strained Ukrainian air defense systems. Zelensky stated on April 6 that the promised F-16 fighter jets from Ukraine's Western partners only account for 10 percent of the fighter aircraft that Ukraine would need to defeat the Russian aviation threat.[35] Zelensky suggested that Ukraine will need a combination of air defense systems and fighter aircraft to defeat the Russian aviation threat. Some of the promised European-provided F-16s are expected to arrive in Ukraine in the summer of 2024, although ISW continues to assess that only the United States can rapidly provide aircraft and air defense systems to Ukraine at the scale necessary to significantly improve Ukraine's air defense capabilities.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian forces are pursuing at least three operational-level efforts that are not mutually reinforcing but let Russian forces prioritize grinding, tactical gains on a single sector of their choice at a time. Ukrainian forces will increasingly struggle to defend against these Russian efforts the longer Ukraine lacks further US military assistance.**
- **The Russian military command likely assesses that Ukrainian forces will be unable to defend against current and future Russian offensive operations due to delays in or the permanent end of US military assistance.**

- The offensive effort to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances as the seizure of the town would likely allow Russian forces to launch subsequent offensive operations against the cities that form in effect a significant Ukrainian defensive belt in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian threats to Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka are very operationally significant since these “fortress” cities help form the backbone of the Ukrainian defense in Donetsk Oblast and of eastern Ukraine in general.
- Russian forces may not be able to seize Chasiv Yar rapidly and would likely struggle to leverage its operational significance immediately as long as Ukrainian forces have the resources needed to hold their positions.
- Ukrainian artillery and air defense shortages resulting from the lack of US security assistance are allowing Russian mechanized forces to make marginal tactical advances, and future Russian mechanized assaults may be able to achieve more significant gains should the US continue to withhold assistance to Ukraine.
- Germany announced that it will immediately transfer another Patriot air defense system to Ukraine in response to recent very urgent Ukrainian requests for additional Patriot systems to defend against the increased Russian strike campaign and ongoing Ukrainian efforts to expand Ukraine’s air defense capabilities.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut) and Donetsk City.
- Bloomberg reported on April 12 that Russia still relies on Chinese companies to supply most of the foreign-produced machine tool components and microelectronics to Russia’s defense industry for Russian weapons production.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 12, 2024

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

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

April 12, 2024, 5:55pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Russia’s ongoing strike campaign against Ukrainian energy facilities aims in part to devastate the Ukrainian defense industry, confirming ISW’s ongoing assessment that Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities aim to degrade Ukrainian defense industrial capacity. Putin stated during a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on April 11 that Russian drone and missile strikes against Ukraine’s energy sector are connected to Russia’s goal of “demilitarizing” Ukraine – one of his three stated goals in Ukraine.^[1] Putin characterized Russia’s ongoing strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure as a “forced” response to recent Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian oil and gas facilities and openly stated that Russian strikes indirectly aim to degrade Ukraine’s defense industrial capacity. The recent Russian strike campaign is degrading Ukraine’s power generation capacity while also exploiting reported Ukrainian air defense missile shortages in a renewed effort to collapse Ukraine’s power grid.^[2] Putin likely hopes to prevent Ukraine’s defense industry from developing to the point of near self-sufficiency in the long term as a strong defense industry could put Ukraine in a good position to defend against future Russian aggression and significantly reduce Ukraine’s dependence on Western aid.^[3] Significant delays in Western aid, due in part to successful Russian information operations and Western hesitancy, have created an opportunity for Russian offensive operations and Russia’s strike campaign.

ISW continues to assess that the development of Ukraine’s defense industrial base (DIB) over time can allow Ukraine to sustain its defense against Russia and longer-term national security needs with significantly reduced foreign military assistance.^[4] Ukrainian officials have expressed their intention to expand Ukraine’s DIB domestically and abroad since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion, and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov previously identified increased Ukrainian domestic production of weapons and military equipment as a priority for 2024.^[5] US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller has stated that the short- and medium-term provision of Western air defenses to Ukraine will be a critical element of Ukraine’s ability to stand up its defense industry, which will, in turn, decrease Ukrainian dependence on Western aid and especially US aid to Ukraine in the long term.^[6] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently emphasized that Ukraine cannot mitigate the lack of sufficient air defense systems and that only Western-provided air defense systems, namely Patriot systems, allow Ukraine to defend Ukraine against the intensified Russia strike campaign.^[7] ISW continues to assess that the US will not need to send large security assistance packages to Ukraine indefinitely if Ukraine can sufficiently expand its defensive industrial capacity, but the West’s provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine is crucial for Ukraine’s ability to defend its energy infrastructure and its developing defense industry against Russian strikes.^[8]

Russian forces are domestically producing and fielding a new air-to-surface subsonic cruise missile against Ukraine designated the Kh-69 as part of continued efforts to improve strike packages and penetrate Ukraine's degraded air defense. Ukrainian media reported on April 11 that Ukrainian law enforcement sources stated that Russian forces destroyed the Trypilska Thermal Power Plant (TPP) in Kyiv Oblast on April 11 with new Kh-69 missiles, which Russian forces had reportedly used in "isolated cases" in 2023 prior to the April 11 strike.[9] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Major Ilya Yevlash confirmed on April 12 that Russian forces used the Kh-69s in the April 11 strike and described the Kh-69 missiles as an improved version of Kh-59 cruise missiles, which Russian forces have frequently used in strike packages against Ukraine in recent weeks.[10] ISW has not previously observed the Russian use of Kh-69 missiles in Ukraine. Russian forces have reportedly launched Kh-69 missiles from 400 kilometers away from their targets, exceeding a previous estimated range of 300 kilometers and the 200-kilometer range of the most recent Kh-59MK2 variant.[11] Russian forces can reportedly launch the missiles from more numerous Su-34 and Su-35 tactical aircraft rather than exclusively from strategic bombers.[12] Yevlash stated that Russian forces are domestically producing the Kh-69 missiles but that their ability to manufacture the missiles depends on their ability to source critical components.[13] While the Russian stockpiles and production capability of these Kh-69 missiles are unclear, Russia is unlikely to be able to produce them at a significantly greater speed or quantity than its other domestically produced missiles. Yevlash noted that Ukrainian forces are still developing methods to counter the Kh-69s but emphasized that Patriot air defense systems would likely be able to intercept them.[14]

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that it prevented a group of Central Asians from perpetrating a terrorist attack against a Russian military facility in occupied Ukraine with Ukraine's help, likely as part of efforts to set information conditions to portray any future Ukrainian attack on legitimate Russian military targets in occupied Ukraine as "terrorist" attacks. The FSB claimed on April 11 that it detained six citizens of an unspecified Central Asian state for allegedly preparing a Ukrainian-orchestrated terrorist attack on a Russian military facility in occupied Donetsk Oblast.[15] The FSB claimed that the attackers were planning to go to Turkey and then back to Ukraine after carrying out the attack - a narrative that likely attempts to parallel how the Crocus City Hall attackers traveled to Turkey before the March 22 attack.[16] Russia routinely labels Ukrainian strikes against legitimate Russian military targets in occupied Ukraine and within Russia as "terrorist" attacks.[17]

The FSB also claimed that it prevented a terrorist attack on a synagogue in Moscow on April 10 and that the FSB killed one of the alleged terrorists, a native of an unspecified Central Asian country, during a shootout.[18] The FSB claimed on March 7 that it prevented members of the Islamic State (IS) in Kaluga Oblast from conducting an attack on a Moscow synagogue.[19] The FSB may have not claimed that Ukraine was involved in the attack that the FSB allegedly stopped on April 10 due to the FSB's prior public statements connecting the previous plans for an attack on a Moscow synagogue to IS. Russian authorities recently conducted counterterrorism operations in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria and the Republic of Dagestan, and ISW continues to assess that the increased frequency of counterterrorism operations in Russia is likely due to either Russian law enforcement's actual heightened fears of another terrorist attack in Russia or is part of efforts to show the Russian public that authorities are taking competent preventative steps following the major law enforcement and intelligence failure that was the Crocus City Hall attack.[20] These counterterrorism activities are also further evidence that Russian authorities actually assess that terrorist threats emanate from Central Asian and Muslim communities instead of Ukraine.[21]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Russia's ongoing strike campaign against Ukrainian energy facilities aims in part to devastate the Ukrainian defense industry, confirming ISW's ongoing assessment that Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities aim to degrade Ukrainian defense industrial capacity.**
- **ISW continues to assess that the development of Ukraine's defense industrial base (DIB) over time can allow Ukraine to sustain its defense against Russia and longer-term national security needs with significantly reduced foreign military assistance.**
- **Russian forces are domestically producing and fielding a new air-to-surface subsonic cruise missile against Ukraine designated the Kh-69 as part of continued efforts to improve strike packages and penetrate Ukraine's degraded air defense.**
- **The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that it prevented a group of Central Asians from perpetrating a terrorist attack against a Russian military facility in occupied Ukraine with Ukraine's help, likely as part of efforts to set information conditions to portray any future Ukrainian attack on legitimate Russian military targets in occupied Ukraine as "terrorist" attacks.**
- **Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.**

- Russia is reportedly sending about 2,400 Eastern Military District (EMD) military personnel currently in Russia to fight in Ukraine to make up for personnel losses at the front.
- Russian occupation officials continue to expand educational programs that aim to indoctrinate Ukrainian children and erase their Ukrainian identity.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 11, 2024

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

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

April 11, 2024, 6:25pm ET

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

Russian forces conducted another large-scale series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of April 10 to 11 that caused notable and likely long-term damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 82 air targets at Ukraine on the night of April 10 to 11, including 20 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from Saratov Oblast; six Kinzhal aeroballistic missiles from Tambov Oblast; 12 S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Belgorod Oblast; four Kh-59 cruise missiles from occupied Zaporizhia Oblast; and 40 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and occupied Cape Chauda, Crimea. [1] Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down 57 air targets, including 16 Kh-101/555 missiles, two Kh-59 missiles, and 39 Shahed drones. [2] Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrenergo stated that this strike series was the third large-scale Russian strike on Ukrainian electricity generation in 2024, likely referring to the March 22 and 28 strikes that damaged Ukrainian thermal and hydroelectric power plants (TPPs/HPPs). [3] Ukrainian energy company Centrenergo reported that an unspecified Russian strike destroyed the Trypilska TPP in Kyiv Oblast — the largest supplier of electricity to Kyiv, Cherkasy, and Zhytomyr oblasts. [4] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Synehubov stated that Russian forces conducted at least 10 strikes on critical infrastructure in Kharkiv City and Oblast. [5] Lviv Oblast Military Administration Head Maksym Kozytskyi reported that Russian forces struck a gas distribution facility and electric substation in Lviv Oblast with drones and unspecified missiles. [6] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces damaged an energy facility in Zaporizhia Oblast with unspecified missiles, that debris from a downed drone caused a fire at an energy facility in Odesa Oblast, and that Russian forces targeted Odesa City with a Kh-31 anti-radar missile, but that the missile malfunctioned over the Black Sea. [7] Ukrainian officials also reported that an unspecified number of Russian ballistic missiles struck Mykolaiv City and that Russian guided glide bombs struck a power plant in Sumy City during the day of April 11. [8] The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 11 that Russian strikes, not including the April 10–11 strike series, have disrupted 80 percent of the generation capacity of DTEK, Ukraine's largest private energy company, which supplies about 20 percent of Ukraine's power. [9] The WSJ reported that DTEK's chief executive, Maksym Timchenko, stated that DTEK spent \$110 million repairing damage during the war's first year and that it will cost more than twice that much to fix the most recent destruction caused by Russian strikes.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that Ukraine needs more Patriot air defense batteries to protect both Ukraine's population centers and frontline areas. The *Washington Post* reported on April 10 that Kuleba is currently focusing on obtaining seven Patriot batteries from other countries as quickly as possible to defend Ukraine's largest cities. [10] Kuleba reportedly stated that Ukraine would place at least one of these batteries closer to the frontline. Kuleba recently emphasized that Ukraine especially needs Patriot systems to defend against Russian ballistic missiles, such as Kinzhals, as Ukraine's Soviet-era air defense systems are unable to intercept these missiles. [11] Russian strikes have forced Ukraine to make difficult decisions between providing air defense coverage to large population centers in the rear and active areas on the frontline, and Russia appears to be exploiting Ukraine's degraded air defense umbrella in an attempt to collapse Ukraine's energy grid and constrain Ukraine's defense industrial capacity while Russian ground forces take advantage of their ability to use air strikes on Ukrainian frontline positions to make slow but steady gains. [12] ISW continues to assess that sparse and inconsistent air defense coverage along the front has likely facilitated Russia's intensification of guided and unguided glide bomb strikes, which Russian forces used to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February 2024 and which Russian forces appear to be using again during their current offensive operations near Chasiv Yar. [13]

The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted a new mobilization law on April 11, a significant step in addressing Ukraine's manpower challenges amid growing manpower constraints in Ukrainian units defending on the frontline.[14] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the new mobilization law will come into force after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signs the law in May.

[15] Ukrainian Joint Forces and "Khortysia" Group of Forces Commander Lieutenant General Yuriy Sodol addressed the Verkhovna Rada ahead of the vote and reiterated that one of Ukraine's main problems is its manpower challenges.[16] Sodol stated that some Ukrainian units are severely undermanned and suggested that some Ukrainian detachments are undermanned to the point that the detachment can currently only defend roughly 20 of the 100 meters a detachment at full end strength is typically able to defend. Sodol suggested that the Ukrainian military is currently deploying three partially manned brigades to cover the same area that one fully manned brigade can typically defend, forcing Ukraine to allocate additional units to defensive actions that could otherwise be resting in rear areas or preparing for future counteroffensive actions. ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian offensive operations and eventually challenge the theater-wide initiative depends heavily on the provision of US military assistance and the continuation of non-US military support as well as on Ukraine's efforts to restore and reconstitute existing units and create new units.

[17]

US European Command (EUCOM) Commander and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Christopher Cavoli reported that EUCOM and NATO are strengthening their ability to respond to the “chronic threat” that Russia poses to global stability and European security in hopes of deterring future Russian aggression against NATO. Cavoli stated during a briefing to the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee on April 10 that Russia poses a “chronic threat” to the world and warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin does not intend to limit or stop his aggression at the borders of Ukraine.[18] Cavoli reported that EUCOM is responding to the Russian threat by enhancing its deterrence posture across Europe, including strengthening EUCOM’s eastern flank with rotational force deployments, expanding EUCOM’s pre-positioned stocks, and modernizing EUCOM’s infrastructure to enable a rapid reception of reinforcing forces. Cavoli stated that EUCOM and NATO are exercising extensively to demonstrate their ability to defend against and deter future Russian aggression against NATO. Cavoli noted that China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are forming “interlocking, strategic partnerships” that are antithetical to US national security interests and aim to challenge the existing global security framework. Kremlin officials, particularly Putin, are increasingly contextualizing the war in Ukraine as part of a long-term geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West in order to justify Russia’s long-term war effort in Ukraine and future Russian aggression against other European countries.[19]

Ukraine and Latvia signed a bilateral security agreement on April 11 providing for long-term Latvian assistance and security commitments to Ukraine.[20] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the agreement will provide annual aid to Ukraine valued at 0.25 percent of Latvia’s GDP from 2024 through 2026 and confirms Latvia’s 10-year commitment to aid Ukraine in reconstruction, the protection of critical infrastructure, de-mining, unmanned technology, and cyber security.[21] Latvia will also provide about 112 million euros (about \$120 million) worth of military aid to Ukraine in 2024.[22]

Russian authorities conducted a counterterrorism operation and reportedly killed two suspected terrorists in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria on April 11. The Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK) stated that Russian authorities declared a counterterrorism regime in Nalchik and Chereksky Raion, Kabardino-Balkaria and killed two militants who were reportedly planning sabotage and terrorist attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria.[23] The NAK also conducted a counterterrorism operation and reportedly detained three militants in the Republic of Dagestan on March 31.[24] Russian security forces are likely intensifying counterterrorism operations in Russia — particularly in the North Caucasus, which has seen Islamic State-Caucasus Province (Wilayat al Qawqaz) and other jihadist activity over the years — due to heightened fears of terrorism in Russia following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack. Continued Russian counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus and intensified measures targeting Central Asian migrants in Russia are further evidence that Russian authorities actually assess that threats emanate from Russia’s Central Asian and Muslim communities instead of Ukraine despite Russian efforts to baselessly tie Ukraine to the Crocus City Hall attack.[25] ISW remains confident that Islamic State (IS) conducted the Crocus City Hall attack and has yet to observe independent reporting or evidence to suggest that an actor other than IS was responsible for or aided the attack.[26]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted another large-scale series of missile and drones strikes against Ukraine on the night of April 10 to 11 that caused notable and likely long-term damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure.
- Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that Ukraine needs more Patriot air defense batteries to protect both Ukraine's population centers and frontline areas.
- The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted a new mobilization law on April 11, a significant step in addressing Ukraine's manpower challenges amid growing manpower constraints in Ukrainian units defending on the frontline.
- US European Command (EUCOM) Commander and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Christopher Cavoli reported that EUCOM and NATO are strengthening their ability to respond to the "chronic threat" that Russia poses to global stability and European security in hopes of deterring future Russian aggression against NATO.
- Ukraine and Latvia signed a bilateral security agreement on April 11 providing for long-term Latvian assistance and security commitments to Ukraine.
- Russian authorities conducted a counterterrorism operation and reportedly killed two suspected terrorists in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria on April 11.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna, in the direction of Chasiv Yar west of Bakhmut, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on April 11.
- Russian exiled opposition outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe reported on April 11 that Russian courts have commuted sentences in over half of all criminal cases against Russian veterans and active-duty servicemen due to military service in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 10, 2024

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

The Ukrainian military's effective use of drones on the battlefield cannot fully mitigate Ukraine's theater-wide shortage of critical munitions. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in an interview with German outlet *BILD* published on April 10 that Ukraine is successfully domestically producing drones, but that drones cannot replace air defense systems, long-range missile systems, or artillery.^[1] Ukrainian forces have partially mitigated ongoing artillery ammunition shortages by using first-person view (FPV) drones to blunt Russian infantry and armored vehicle assaults, although artillery systems can deliver much more powerful strikes than loitering munitions and drone-dropped munitions. An unnamed NATO official told *Foreign Policy* in an article published on April 9 that Ukrainian forces have used FPV drones to "destroy" over two-thirds of the total number of Russian tanks that the Ukrainians have "destroyed" in recent months.^[2] Ukrainian FPV drone pilots reportedly target a Russian tank's "open hatch, the engine or ammunition stored in the turret."^[3] Ukrainian FPV drones are likely able to temporarily render armored vehicles *hors de combat* during a combat operation, but current FPV drones with relatively light payloads are unlikely to destroy armored vehicles rendering them irretrievable and irreparable very often. Electronic warfare systems and increased armor on armored vehicles can also make it difficult for FPV drones to strike a specific target location on the vehicle, although technological and tactical competition can create periodic windows of opportunity for offense or defense to gain an advantage.^[4] *Reuters* reported on March 26 that Ukrainian FPV drone pilots acknowledged that they would be unable to hold the frontline without artillery and infantry.^[5] Ukrainian forces have managed partially to repel an increased tempo of Russian mechanized assaults in recent weeks despite ammunition shortages.^[6] Ukraine's ability to repel mechanized assaults with FPV drones is a partial mitigation, however, and continued shortages of artillery deprive Ukrainian forces of the ability to destroy armored vehicles rapidly and in large numbers.

US European Command (EUCOM) Commander General Christopher Cavoli warned on April 10 that Russian forces currently have a five-to-one artillery advantage along the frontline – a statement consistent with Ukrainian officials' reports – but that Russian forces could have a 10-to-1 artillery advantage "in a matter of weeks" if the United States continues to delay the provision of military aid to Ukraine.^[7] Zelensky and senior Ukrainian military officials have recently warned that delays in Western military assistance have forced Ukraine to cede the battlefield initiative to Russia and that the Ukrainian military cannot plan a successful counteroffensive or defensive effort without knowing when and what kind of aid Ukraine will receive. ISW continues to assess that delays in Western military assistance have forced the Ukrainian military to husband materiel and that Ukrainian forces must make difficult decisions prioritizing certain aspects of its defense at the cost of lives and lost territory as well as at the expense of contesting the initiative to constrain Russian military capabilities or planning for future counteroffensive operations.^[8]

Zelensky stated that there are no mitigations for insufficient air defense systems and indicated that Russian strikes are forcing Ukraine to reallocate already scarce air defense assets to defend Kharkiv City. Zelensky told *BILD* that drones cannot replace air defenses and that Ukraine needs air defenses to survive.^[9] Russian forces have recently intensified their strike campaign against Ukraine, and Ukrainian officials have recently warned that if Russian forces sustain the current high tempo of this campaign, then Ukraine will likely lack the air defense missile stocks necessary to protect Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure.^[10] Zelensky discussed plans with Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk on April 10 to redeploy Ukrainian air defenses to protect Kharkiv City, against which Russian forces have recently intensified missile, drone, and glide bomb strikes.^[11] The Russian strike campaign has pressured Ukraine to prioritize protecting strategic objects, population centers, and energy infrastructure in deep rear areas over the frontline and near rear areas such as Kharkiv City.^[12] This further reorganization of Ukrainian air defenses to protect Kharkiv City will presumably draw from Ukraine's existing arsenal of missiles and launchers, which will stretch Ukraine's already limited air defense capabilities and provide Russian forces with the opportunity to further exploit weakened air defenses elsewhere. As ISW has recently assessed, degraded and thin Ukrainian air defenses would afford Russian aviation prolonged security to operate on the frontline, significantly increase devastating glide bomb strikes at scale, and possibly even permit routine large-scale Russian aviation operations against near rear Ukrainian logistics and cities.^[13]

US emergency efforts to bolster Ukraine's existing air defense capabilities remain insufficient to protect Ukraine against Russian strikes. The US Department of Defense (DoD) approved the possible sale of equipment worth \$138 million on April 9 to repair and modernize Ukraine's HAWK air defense systems due to Ukraine's "urgent need" to defend against Russian airstrikes but acknowledged that the possible transfer would "not alter the basic military balance" in Ukraine absent additional aid.^[14] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba recently emphasized that Patriots can shoot down Russian ballistic missiles that Ukraine's Soviet systems cannot, and Zelensky recently stated that Ukraine will need an additional 25 Patriot air defense systems, likely meaning launchers, to extend full air defense coverage to all of Ukraine's territory.^[15] NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe and US European Command Commander General Christopher Cavoli warned on April 10 that Ukraine will run out of missiles for the launchers it already has "in fairly short order" if the United States does not continue to support Ukraine and stressed that the US failure to provide Ukraine with additional military assistance has generated battlefield effects that favor Russia.^[16]

Zelensky warned about the threat of a potential future Russian ground offensive operation targeting Kharkiv City, which would force Ukraine to reallocate some of its already-strained manpower and materiel capabilities away from other currently active and critical sectors of the front. Zelensky told *BILD* that he cannot rule out the possibility of a major Russian offensive operation on Kharkiv City and noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to seize Kharkiv City since the beginning of the full-scale invasion because Kharkiv City is a major Ukrainian city and has symbolic meaning for both Russia and Ukraine.^[17] Zelensky noted that Ukrainian forces are doing everything possible to prevent Russia from seizing Kharkiv City. Zelensky recently told *CBS* that Ukrainian forces are also constructing fortifications and defensive positions near Sumy City in response to a reported significant buildup of Russian forces in neighboring Bryansk Oblast.^[18] A Russian ground operation against Kharkiv in the very near future is unlikely, but Russian efforts to create strategic reserves and reposition forces in the theater could allow Russian forces to launch an offensive toward the city in the summer.^[19]

The threat of a Russian offensive operation targeting Kharkiv or Sumy city appears to be forcing the Ukrainian military to redistribute its limited manpower and materiel to the construction of defensive fortifications in those areas and an active Russian operation to seize these cities would only further exacerbate this dynamic. The Russian military maintains the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine, and Russia's ability to conduct opportunistic offensive operations in almost any area of the frontline will continue to strain Ukraine's already stretched resources, regardless of any one operation's success in actually seizing a targeted city or settlement.^[20] The Russian forces are able to allocate significant resources in hopes of achieving operationally significant breakthroughs in frontline areas of their choosing and can exploit areas of the front previously made vulnerable by Ukrainian manpower and materiel transfers. Russian forces are currently concentrating significant resources near Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka and continue to make slow, grinding advances in those areas, largely due to Ukrainian manpower challenges and delays in US and Western aid.^[21] Ukrainian forces will likely not be able to contest the theater-wide initiative and more proactively allocate their resources without continuing to address their manpower issues and receiving additional Western aid.

The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada considered and adopted provisions from Ukraine's draft mobilization law on April 10 as part of an ongoing effort to increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term. The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada National Security and

Defense Committee adopted the second reading of the draft mobilization law on April 9 and submitted it to the wider Verkhovna Rada for consideration, which began on April 10.[22] Ukrainian officials reported that the Verkhovna Rada adopted a provision from the law allowing for the mobilization of Ukrainian convicts and a provision amending Ukraine's criminal code to increase penalties for mobilization evasion.[23] Ukrainian officials reportedly removed an existing provision from the draft law that would have stipulated the end of active military service for mobilized personnel after 36 months of service.[24] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Spokesperson Dmytro Lazutkin stated on April 10 that Ukrainian officials will consider issues regarding the conclusion of military service of individuals and rotations of military personnel in a separate draft law.[25] Ukrainian efforts to establish a more sustainable mobilization apparatus will support the Ukrainian military's ability to restore and reconstitute existing units and create new units. ISW continues to assess that Western-provided materiel continues to be the greatest deciding factor for the Ukrainian military's ability to restore and augment its combat power, however.

Russian officials continue to indicate that they are not interested in any meaningful negotiations on the war in Ukraine amid Switzerland's announcement that it will host a global peace summit on the war on June 15 and 16.[26] Swiss officials stated that Switzerland will send invitations for the summit to representatives of over 100 countries and that the summit will include discussions of various peace proposals, including Ukraine's Peace Formula and China's vague 12-point peace plan.[27] The Russian Embassy in Switzerland reiterated previous Russian statements that Russia would reject any invitation to the summit and that any discussions about Ukraine without Russia are pointless.[28] Russian officials have repeatedly falsely blamed Ukraine and the West for the lack of peace negotiations, despite numerous public Russian statements suggesting or explicitly stating that Russia is not interested in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine.[29] The Kremlin continues efforts to destroy Ukrainian statehood and identity and fundamentally weaken NATO and has shown no legitimate indication that it is open to reconsidering these objectives.[30]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov attempted to downplay tension in Armenian-Russian relations amid Armenia's continued efforts to distance itself from political and security relations with Russia. Peskov claimed on April 10 that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will meet in the near future to discuss "existing questions" about Armenian-Russian relations.[31] Peskov asserted that Armenia is Russia's ally and that Russia engages with Armenia on the assumption that Russia and Armenia can resolve all problems through dialogue.[32] Pashinyan stated on April 10 that Armenian-Russian relations are "not experiencing their best time" and that Armenia has "not made a single wrong step" in this relationship.[33] Pashinyan stated that Armenian-Russian relations are transitioning from a "historical" nature to "real" relations, likely a reference to growing dissatisfaction at Russia's inability and unwillingness to support Armenian interests in Nagorno-Karabakh and increasing Armenian interest in deepening cooperation with the West.[34] Pashinyan stated that Armenia is still considering whether it will participate in the May 8 Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit and did not mention if he would attend Putin's presidential inauguration on May 5.[35] Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan announced on April 9 that he would not attend the Council of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) meeting on April 12 in Minsk, although Kremlin newswire TASS claimed that Armenia would send a deputy minister.[36] Armenian Minister of High-Technology Industry Mkhitar Hayrapetyan stated that Armenia is considering terminating an agreement with Russia that allows Russia to broadcast Russian state television programs in Armenia following the March 29 announcement that Armenia blocked two of Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov's shows.[37]

Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin claimed that Russia has no economic reason to import foreign labor, a direct contradiction of Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent efforts to justify Russia's current migration laws to his xenophobic ultra-nationalist constituency. Bastrykin claimed during a speech at the St. Petersburg International Legal Forum on April 10 that Russia has no economic reason to import migrant workers, particularly workers from Central Asian countries.[38] Bastrykin stated that an Uzbek government official once asked Bastrykin why Russia takes in so many migrants and allows migrants to apply for Russian citizenship, particularly young migrants whom Bastrykin insinuated were dangerous. Bastrykin claimed that there is "no way" Russia can overcome the reported trend of increased migrant crime in Russia and claimed that migrants in Russia are unwilling to assimilate into Russian culture and society. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) published a "criminogenic index" in January 2024 that detailed which migrant groups are more predisposed to criminal activity and indicated that the number of crimes committed by migrants in Russia has increased annually since 2019.[39] Bastrykin reiterated a sentiment that he claimed to see on social media – that migrants who are Russian citizens should sign military service contracts and fight in Ukraine while migrants who are unwilling to fight in Ukraine should return to their native countries.[40] Russian milbloggers and some State Duma members have previously justified Russia's ongoing coercive crypto-mobilization effort, which disproportionately targets migrants, by claiming that migrants who receive Russian citizenship must fight in Ukraine to "earn"

their Russian citizenship and that migrants who fight in Ukraine will receive Russian citizenship. [41] Putin stated on April 4 that Russia's future labor shortage is "absolutely certain" and that Russia will either have to import labor from abroad or increase its existing labor productivity.[42] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is unlikely to approve anti-migrant policies that could worsen Russia's labor shortages and degrade Russia's crypto-mobilization efforts despite xenophobic demands from Russian ultranationalists to drastically reduce – if not eliminate – migration to Russia. [43] Bastraykin's contradiction of Putin further illustrates that the Kremlin's attempts to appeal to ultranationalist anti-migrant fervor may continue to generate inconsistencies and contradictions with the Kremlin's migration policy and rhetoric.

Key Takeaways:

- The Ukrainian military's effective use of drones on the battlefield cannot fully mitigate Ukraine's theater-wide shortage of critical munitions.
- Zelensky stated that there are no mitigations for insufficient air defense systems and indicated that Russian strikes are forcing Ukraine to reallocate already scarce air defense assets to defend Kharkiv City.
- Zelensky warned about the threat of a potential future Russian ground offensive operation targeting Kharkiv City, which would force Ukraine to reallocate some of its already-strained manpower and materiel capabilities away from other currently active and critical sectors of the front.
- The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada considered and adopted provisions from Ukraine's draft mobilization law on April 10 as part of an ongoing effort to increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term.
- Russian officials continue to indicate that they are not interested in any meaningful negotiations on the war in Ukraine amid Switzerland's announcement that it will host a global peace summit on the war on June 15 and 16.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov attempted to downplay tension in Armenian-Russian relations amid Armenia's continued efforts to distance itself from political and security relations with Russia.
- Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin claimed that Russia has no economic reason to import foreign labor, a direct contradiction of Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent efforts to justify Russia's current migration laws to his xenophobic ultra-nationalist constituency.
- Russian forces recently captured Ivanivske, a settlement east of Chasiv Yar, and advanced near Avdiivka.
- Eight Russian senators and 16 State Duma deputies submitted a bill to the Russian State Duma that would likely allow Russian authorities to deploy Russian Federal Penitentiaries Service (FSIN) employees to Ukraine, amid reports that Russia is intensifying its crypto-mobilization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9, 2024

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Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

April 9, 2024, 8pm ET

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

Russian state media highlighted Russia and China's joint effort to combat perceived Western "dual containment" targeting Russia and China during Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on April 9. Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Wang suggested that China and Russia engage in "dual counteraction" in response to alleged Western attempts at "dual containment" targeting Russia and China.[1] Lavrov claimed that the Russian–Chinese "comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction" have reached an "unprecedented level," and that Russia and China have mutual international interests and will coordinate to solve internal and external problems.[2] Lavrov claimed that Russian–Chinese relations extend beyond a "military-political alliance of the Cold War" and that both countries are working to create a "multipolar world order" through multilateral formats that include BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).[3] Russia has consistently pushed the idea of a Russian-led "multipolar world order" that imagines Russia as the leader of a coalition of non-Western states in opposition to the US and West.[4] Lavrov claimed that Russia and China will continue to cooperate on anti-terrorism measures and that Russia and China signed another plan for

inter-Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) consultations in 2024.[5] The Russian MFA stated that China and Russia “exchanged views” on possible ways to resolve the war in Ukraine, that both sides called international meetings that discuss an end to the war without Russia “futile,” and that Russia “positively” assesses China’s suggestions for an end to the war, likely in reference to the 12-point peace plan that China released in February 2023.[6] The Russian MFA notably did not mention bilateral military or technological cooperation, possibly due to recent reports that China is increasingly helping Russia’s defense industrial base (DIB) and even providing Russia with geospatial intelligence that Russia likely uses to support military operations in Ukraine.[7] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin continues to be concerned with China’s reticence to participate fully in the Kremlin’s desired no-limits partnership, and that China continues to hold the upper hand in the Russian–Chinese relationship despite recent reports suggesting that China is increasingly willing to assist Russia’s war efforts in Ukraine.[8]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on April 9 that it transferred roughly a brigade’s worth of small arms and ammunition seized from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Ukraine on April 4. CENTCOM reported that the US government transferred over 5,000 AK-47s, machine guns, sniper rifles, RPG-7s and over 500,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition to the Ukrainian military.[9] CENTCOM stated that it obtained these munitions on December 1, 2023 through a Department of Justice (DoJ) civil forfeiture claim opened against the IRGC in July 2023. [10] CNN reported that CENTCOM had already transferred over one million rounds of seized IRGC ammunition to Ukraine as of October 2023.[11]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) is likely responsible for a drone strike against the Borisoglebsk Airbase in Voronezh Oblast overnight on April 8 to 9. GUR Spokesperson Andriy Yusov told *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* that two unspecified drones struck the aviation center in Borisoglebsk, which reportedly trains Russian frontline bomber and attack aviation flight crews, and that preliminary information suggests that the strike damaged unspecified production facilities at the airbase.[12] Ukrainian outlet *RBK-Ukraine* cited its own source within GUR as confirming that the Borisoglebsk strike was a GUR operation.[13] Geolocated footage published on April 9 shows one drone striking the airbase.[14] Russian sources reported that one Ukrainian drone struck the facade of the Chlakov aviation training center near the airbase and another drone struck the same spot an hour later, only damaging the outside of the building.[15] ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of the type and extent of damage from the drone strike.

Russian ultranationalist milbloggers continue to employ virulently anti-migrant rhetoric and call for xenophobic domestic policies, but in doing so are exposing the inherent hypocrisy in Russia’s treatment of its own indigenous ethnic minority communities. Several ultranationalist milbloggers seized on an April 5 post by the Leningrad Oblast House of Friendship cultural center for awarding the local “Khorezm” Uzbek cultural organization with a grant for its work in “harmonization of interethnic relations and support for small indigenous peoples of Leningrad Oblast.”[16] Several milbloggers retorted that Uzbeks are not indigenous to Leningrad Oblast and questioned why an Uzbek cultural organization received an award from the Leningrad Oblast budget.[17] One milblogger emphasized that Leningrad Oblast has formally defined Vepsians, Vods, and Izhorians as the ethnic groups indigenous to Leningrad Oblast.[18] Another Russian milblogger published a post on April 9, which was later amplified by a Telegram channel affiliated with imprisoned Russian former officer and ultranationalist commentator Igor Girkin, calling the domestic situation in Russia a “migration catastrophe,” accusing migrants of attacking the Russian domestic rear and of “unleashing ethnic, economic, and religious terror against indigenous citizens of the Russian Federation of all ethnicities.”[19] The milbloggers who criticized the Leningrad Oblast authorities and the post amplified by the Girkin-affiliated channel all narrowly define Muslim migrants from Central Asian countries as an explicit threat to “indigenous Russians.”[20]

This same ultranationalist community, however, has been inconsistent and hypocritical in selectively defining who it believes to be an “indigenous Russian,” and the actual indigenous populations of Russia’s ethnic minority republics have faced discrimination and poor treatment at the hands of ethnic Russians, particularly against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers have criticized Tuvans, an ethnic minority group indigenous to Siberia, for using indigenous Tuvan orthography on road signs, while accusing Tuvan activist groups of inciting “ethnic discord” in Russia.[21] The Kremlin has also heavily relied on the more geographically remote and economically disenfranchised Russian federal subjects, many of which are indigenous ethnic minority republics, to disproportionately bear the brunt of mobilization for the war in Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians in major population centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg from high casualties and the realities of the war.[22] Indigenous Buryat, Kalmyk, Tuvan, and Sakha activist organizations have spoken out against the Kremlin’s heavy reliance on ethnic minority indigenous populations for force generation purposes.[23] Russian authorities have also been trying to undermine cultural identity in the Republic of Tatarstan through amendments to state national policy that remove provisions on “strengthening Tatarstan’s identity.”[24]

Russian ultranationalists' anti-migrant rhetoric, which has increased exponentially following the March 22 Crocus City Hall terror attack, has exposed gaps in the Kremlin's already strained relationship with migrant communities within Russia. The Kremlin is likely struggling to balance appeasing the anti-migrant calls of ultranationalist commentators, who comprise a major Kremlin support base, with its reliance on migrants and ethnic minority communities to fill roles both on the battlefield and in the domestic labor economy, as ISW has previously assessed.[25]

The Kremlin will likely be able to leverage a new agreement signed by the Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, and a state-owned Russian bank to further its efforts to destabilize Moldovan society, attack Moldova's democratic government, and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU). Gutsul met with Petr Fradkov, the chairman and CEO of Russian state-owned bank Promsvyazbank (PSB), in Moscow on April 9.[26] Petr Fradkov is the son of Mikhail Fradkov, the former long-time director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and current director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies.[27] PSB will reportedly open accounts for an estimated 5,000 government employees and 20,000 pensioners in Gagauzia, who will reportedly receive cards for Russia's Mir payment system, whose operator the US sanctioned in February 2024.[28] Gutsul asked PBS to provide "humanitarian aid" and "additional funding" to Gagauzian pension payments and public sector salaries.[29] Gutsul claimed that Moldovan authorities may detain her upon her return to Chisinau, echoing previous claims by pro-Russian Moldovan actors that Moldovan authorities were going to detain Gutsul in Chisinau following her visit to Moscow in March 2024, though authorities did not detain Gutsul.[30] It is unclear if Gagauzia will be able to implement the agreement with PSB, however. Gagauzian outlet *Notka* reported that the head of the Gagauzian Department of Justice Petr Manol noted that the governor of Gagauzia does not have the power to independently sign international agreements under Moldovan law.[31] The Mir system also does not work in Moldova except in the breakaway republic of Transnistria, the other pro-Russian region of Moldova.[32] Fradkov mentioned that PSB will give "special services at PSB at a separate tariff" to Gagauzian residents' relatives who live in Russia, but it is unclear if PSB payments to Gagauzian pensioners and public sector employees will only go through the Gagauzian diaspora in Russia.[33]

The current pro-Russian Gagauzian government previously attempted to use Russian money to finance increased pension payments that were part of a campaign promise from a Kremlin-affiliated political candidate, and the new Gagauzia-PSB deal may be part of propaganda efforts to portray Russia as the sole benefactor of the autonomous region. Ilan Shor, a US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician who founded the Kremlin-affiliated Shor Party under which Gutsul ran for governor of Gagauzia, promised to increase pensions in Gagauzia and other Shor Party-affiliated Moldovan regions in October 2023 in the lead up to the November 2023 local elections.[34] Moldovan outlet *NewsMaker* reported that a Russian citizen living in Israel, whose name repeatedly appears in documents related to Shor's various promised deals, transferred 15 million Moldovan lei (about \$850,000) to the Gagauzian regional pension payments account.[35] Gutsul claimed that the Moldovan federal government blocked this money, and a spokesperson for leading Moldovan political Party of Solidarity and Action stated that the money came illegally from an organized crime group and that law enforcement agencies should investigate its origins.[36] The April 9 Gagauzia-PSB deal is noteworthy because Kremlin-affiliated actors are now directly and openly linked to Gagauzian government financial promises. Gutsul highlighted this relationship on April 9, claiming that Russia is the "friend" and "protector" who "saved" Gagauzia.[37] Gutsul also claimed that the Moldovan central government is enacting an "economic blockade" on Gagauzia — similar to language used by Kremlin and Transnistrian actors to promote Kremlin information operations about Tiraspol-Chisinau relations in recent months.[38] The Kremlin may be able to exploit the PSB deal regardless of the deal's legality or how Moldovan authorities react. If Moldovan authorities prevent the deal from moving forward, pro-Russian Moldovan actors and the Kremlin will likely use the situation to promote the Kremlin's ongoing narratives targeting the current Moldovan government and to stir up anger in Gagauzia. If the Gagauzian government is able to somehow enact the agreement, however, the Kremlin could use the payments to economically capture a segment of Gagauzia to do the Kremlin's bidding, or could cut off the payments at a future time of Moscow's choosing to foment a crisis.

The Kremlin may also hope to use the Gagauzia-PSB deal to recreate the way in which Kremlin-affiliated Moldovan political parties previously influenced Moldovan elections and public opinion. Shor reportedly paid demonstrators to protest against Moldovan President Maia Sandu in 2022, and Moldovan authorities raided Shor Party offices following the Gagauzia gubernatorial election in the summer of 2023 as part of investigations into voter bribery.[39] The Kremlin may hope to use pro-Russian political parties in Moldova and the PSB payments to Gagauzia in similar tactics to influence Moldova's upcoming elections, particularly the presidential election in late 2024 and parliamentary elections in the summer of 2025.

Russia is reportedly considering creating a new ministry for youth policy and patriotic education, likely as part of an ongoing attempt to instill pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-approved ideology in Russia's next generation. Russian outlet *Vedomosti* reported on April 9 that four unnamed sources close to the Russian presidential administration stated that Russian authorities are considering creating a new ministry for youth policy and patriotic education that would be formed on the basis of the Russian Federal Agency of Youth Affairs (Rosmolodezh), which would then take over some patriotic education functions from the Ministry of Education.[40] The sources also claimed that the Russian government is considering merging the Ministry of Science and Higher Education with the Ministry of Education (also known as the "Ministry of Enlightenment" in its literal Russian translation), which the Russian government divided in 2018. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported in October 2023 that the Russian federal budget significantly increased its allocations for funds promoting patriotic education. *Verstka* reported that Russia allocated 43.8 billion rubles for patriotic education in 2023, almost four times the number of funds that Russia allocated to patriotic education in 2022. [41] *Verstka* also noted that Russia increased funding in 2023 to patriotic youth projects including the World Youth Festival and Yunarmia, a military-patriotic movement that instills pro-Russian and militarized ideals in youth in Russia and occupied Ukraine. Russia is likely trying to expand efforts to disseminate pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-approved ideology to create a generation of Russians pliant to the Kremlin's goals, especially as Russia sets domestic information conditions for a long war effort in Ukraine and increasingly postures against the West.

Russian military authorities in Armenia detained another Russian citizen in Armenia, likely in an effort to assert military and political power over Armenia and to challenge Armenia's sovereignty amid a continued deterioration of Armenian–Russian relations. The Armenian branch of the international human rights organization Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Vanadzor reported on April 9 that Russian military police at the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, detained Russian citizen Anatoly Shchetin in Armenia for desertion and intend to forcibly transfer him to Russia. [42] Helsinki Citizens' Assembly's lawyer Ani Chatinyan told *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*'s Armenian service *Radio Azatutyun* that the organization sent a report of the crime to the Armenian Prosecutor General's Office and that Russian law enforcement agencies do not have the right to detain people in Armenia and instead should transfer operations to Armenian law enforcement. [43] The Armenian Prosecutor General's office told *Radio Azatutyun* that it has processed the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly's report in accordance with its procedures. Russian military police at the 102nd Military Base previously detained a Russian citizen in Armenia for desertion in December 2023.[44] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan responded to the December 2023 arrest in February 2024 and stated that Armenian authorities are investigating the incident and that Armenia "cannot tolerate illegal actions on [its] territory."^[45]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian state media highlighted Russia and China's joint effort to combat perceived Western "dual containment" targeting Russia and China during Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on April 9.
- US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on April 9 that it transferred roughly a brigade's worth of small arms and ammunition seized from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Ukraine on April 4.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) is likely responsible for a drone strike against the Borisoglebsk Airbase in Voronezh Oblast overnight on April 8 to 9.
- Russian ultranationalist milbloggers continue to employ virulently anti-migrant rhetoric and calls for xenophobic domestic policies, but in doing so are exposing the inherent hypocrisy in Russia's treatment of its own indigenous ethnic minority communities.
- The Kremlin will likely be able to leverage a new agreement signed by the Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, and a state-owned Russian bank to further its efforts to destabilize Moldovan society, attack Moldova's democratic government, and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU).
- Russia is reportedly considering creating a new ministry for youth policy and patriotic education, likely as part of an ongoing attempt to instill pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-approved ideology in Russia's next generation.
- Russian military authorities in Armenia detained another Russian citizen in Armenia, likely in an effort to assert military and political power over Armenia and to challenge Armenia's sovereignty amid a continued deterioration of Armenian–Russian relations.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna, west of Avdiivka, and south and southwest of Donetsk City on April 9.

- Kremlin officials continue efforts to ease public fears about another possible wave of partial mobilization.
- The Russian occupation regime in Crimea is systematically persecuting clergy and parishes affiliated with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 8, 2024

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

Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, and George Barros

April 8, 2024, 8:15pm ET

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

Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian oil refineries are reportedly forcing Russia to seek gasoline imports from Kazakhstan. Three unnamed industry sources told *Reuters* in an article published on April 8 that Russia asked Kazakhstan to establish an “emergency reserve” of 100,000 metric tons of gasoline that Kazakhstan could supply to Russia in case of shortages exacerbated by Ukrainian drone strikes and resulting refinery outages.^[1] One of the unnamed sources stated that Kazakhstan and Russia have already reached an agreement allowing Russia to use Kazakh gasoline reserves in some unspecified capacity. Advisor to the Kazakh Energy Minister Shyngys Ilyasov denied that the Kazakh Energy Ministry had received such requests from Russia, however.^[2] *Reuters* reported on April 2, citing its own data, that constant Ukrainian drone strikes have shut down about 14 percent of Russia’s overall oil refining capacity.^[3] *Reuters* also previously reported on March 27 that Russia has significantly increased its gasoline imports from Belarus following Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian oil refineries and that Russia has imported 3,000 metric tons of gasoline from Belarus in the first half of March as compared to 590 metric tons in February and no gasoline imports in January.^[4] Recent Russian efforts to import gasoline from Belarus and Kazakhstan indicate that Russia is likely increasingly concerned about the immediate domestic supply of distillate petroleum products following Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil refineries.

Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) indirectly suggested that it may have been responsible for an explosion that disabled a Russian Baltic Fleet small missile carrier at the naval base in Baltiysk, Kaliningrad Oblast on April 7. The GUR published footage on April 8 allegedly of an explosive detonating in the control room of the Russian Baltic Fleet’s *Serpukhov* Project 21631 Buyan-M class corvette on April 7.^[5] The GUR reported that the resulting fire destroyed the *Serpukhov*’s automation and communications systems and that repairs will take a long time to complete. Some Ukrainian media outlets cited their sources within GUR as stating that GUR conducted the attack against the ship.^[6] ISW has not observed independent confirmation of damage to the *Serpukhov*. Baltic Fleet elements in Kaliningrad Oblast have notably conducted several recent electronic warfare (EW) exercises, and Estonian and United Kingdom (UK) officials have linked Russian EW forces in Kaliningrad with multiple recent GPS jamming incidents in the Baltic region since December 2023, including one incident that jammed the satellite signal of a plane carrying UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps.^[7]

Recent discourse among select Russian milbloggers highlights contradictory Russian rhetoric in the Russian information space between narratives that seek to portray Russian forces as more capable than Ukrainian forces and other narratives that criticize the Russian military for shortcomings that result in high Russian infantry casualties. Several milbloggers recently discussed and criticized the tactic of having infantry ride atop armored vehicles to frontline positions before dismounting to conduct frontal assaults.^[8] This is not a novel tactic for either Russian or Ukrainian forces, but the tactic, which exposes unprotected infantry to threats, recently appears to have attracted more scrutiny from Russian military commentators. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on April 8 that shows elements of the 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division apparently employing this tactic on the outskirts of Chasiv Yar (east of Bakhmut), wherein armored vehicles transported infantry to frontline positions, the infantry dismounted, and the armored vehicles quickly withdrew.^[9] One milblogger responded to separate footage that reportedly shows about 25 Russian personnel riding on the side of a tank in an unspecified area, before Ukrainian forces either struck the tank or the tank ran over a mine, forcing the personnel to rapidly dismount and run across an open area without cover or concealment.^[10] The milblogger called this kind of tactic “extremely crazy,” but another milblogger refuted this characterization and claimed that this practice of using armored vehicles to rapidly transport and dismount infantry reveals more about the lack of Russian

armored vehicles on certain sectors of the front than it does about the underlying tactics of such assaults.[11] The second milblogger claimed that Ukrainian fires have significantly attrited Russian armored vehicle numbers especially near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and Krynyk, Kherson Oblast, so Russian troops must make do with very few armored vehicles to transport personnel to compensate for losses in armor and prevent further such losses.[12]

Another milblogger questioned why Russian media fixated on footage of failed Ukrainian armored attacks during the summer 2023 counteroffensive even though Russian forces themselves struggle with many of the same tactical issues when conducting similar attacks, especially due to the saturation of drones in the battlespace.[13] A milblogger affirmatively responded and noted the reality of Russian soldiers on the ground in Ukraine differs dramatically from conversations propagated in the Russian information space, emphasizing that Russian commentators can “laugh at [Ukraine’s] counteroffensive in the Zaporizhia direction, and then lose many times more [Russian soldiers] on the Avdiivka front,” and concluding that Russia is lying to itself about the losses it is suffering in the war.[14] The discourse between Russian milbloggers about the use of Russian armored vehicles and their survivability on the battlefield, as well as about the conduct of Russian assaults, highlights arguments that many Russian milbloggers continue to have over how the war is being fought and suggests that many milbloggers are very attuned to the impacts these conversations are having on the wider understanding of the war.

The Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldova autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, insinuated that Romanian officials control the Moldovan government — the latest in a series of recent Kremlin efforts to question European pro-Western governments’ sovereignty. Gutsul claimed on April 8 during an interview on Russian state television channel *Channel One (Perviy Kanal)* that if Gagauzia begins the process of seceding from Moldova, there will be a reaction not only from the Moldovan government in Chisinau, but also from Bucharest, Romania, which Gutsul claimed “controls” Moldovan authorities, implying that Moldova is not sovereign.[15] Gutsul claimed that Moldovan authorities may respond to Gagauzian secession with “loud, threatening statements” or deploy forces to Gagauzia and claimed that unification between Moldova and Romania would be the “death” of Moldova and Moldovan language and culture. [16] Gutsul claimed on April 5 that Gagauzia would “immediately” begin the process of seceding from Moldova should Moldova unify with Romania.[17] Gutsul’s April 8 interview on Russian state television is likely aimed at setting conditions to justify potential future Russian aggression against Moldova to Russian-speakers and pro-Russian audiences in Gagauzia, Moldova’s pro-Russian breakaway republic of Transnistria, and other pro-Russian areas of Europe and Central Asia and in Russia itself. The Kremlin likely views its efforts in Moldova as part of Russia’s wider existential geopolitical conflict with the West. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and MFA officials recently insinuated that Western countries are somehow guiding the Armenian government’s national security policy and claimed that Finland has “lost its independence in making foreign policy decisions” since its accession to NATO.[18] The Kremlin previously made similar false claims that NATO controls Ukraine and is using Ukraine to threaten Russia in order to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.[19] The Kremlin will likely continue claiming that its various target states are not fully sovereign to set information conditions for Russian hybrid or conventional operations against them. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely attempting to use pro-Russian actors in Moldova to destabilize Moldovan democracy and society, prevent Moldova’s accession to the European Union (EU), or even justify future hybrid or conventional operations against in Moldova.[20]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian oil refineries are reportedly forcing Russia to seek gasoline imports from Kazakhstan.**
- **Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) indirectly suggested that it may have been responsible for an explosion that disabled a Russian Baltic Fleet small missile carrier at the naval base in Baltiysk, Kaliningrad Oblast on April 7.**
- **Recent discourse among select Russian milbloggers highlights contradictory Russian rhetoric in the Russian information space between narratives that seek to portray Russian forces as more capable than Ukrainian forces and other narratives that seek to criticize the Russian military for shortcomings that result in high Russian infantry casualties.**
- **The Kremlin-affiliated governor of the pro-Russian Moldova autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, insinuated that Romanian officials control the Moldovan government — the latest in a series of recent Kremlin efforts to question European pro-Western governments’ sovereignty.**
- **Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the Russian Cabinet of Ministers and Russian machine construction company KONAR JSC to increase the production of components for the domestic machine tools industry, likely as part of ongoing efforts to expand the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and mitigate the effects of international sanctions.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 7, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

April 7, 2024, 4:15pm ET

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov reported that Ukraine anticipates Russian offensive operations to intensify in late spring and early summer. Budanov stated in an interview with German broadcaster ARD published on April 7 that Ukraine expects that Russian offensive operations will especially intensify in the Donbas. [1] Budanov also reported that Russian forces will likely attempt to advance to Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut) and in the direction of Pokrovsk (about 43km northwest of Avdiivka). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky previously stated in a CBS News interview published on March 28 that the major Russian offensive effort may start in late May or June.[2] ISW has recently observed that Russian forces intensified the tempo of their offensive operations across the theater, including by conducting a roughly reinforced company-sized mechanized assault toward Chasiv Yar on April 4, and continues to assess that the Russian military appears to be successfully mitigating likely increased manpower and materiel losses.[3] Zelensky and senior Ukrainian military officials have recently warned that delays in security assistance have forced Ukraine to cede the battlefield initiative to Russia and that the Ukrainian military cannot plan a successful counteroffensive nor defensive effort without knowing when and what kind of aid Ukraine will receive. ISW continues to assess that delays in Western military assistance have forced the Ukrainian military to husband materiel and that Ukrainian forces likely must make difficult decisions prioritizing certain aspects of its defense at the expense of contesting the initiative to constrain Russian military capabilities or plan for a future counteroffensive operations as prolonged US debates about military aid continue.[4]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will meet with Chinese officials in China on April 8 and 9 amid Western warnings that China is increasingly helping Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and even providing Russia with geospatial intelligence. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that Lavrov will meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss bilateral cooperation and "hot topics," including the war in Ukraine.[5] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told the BBC on April 6 that China is "propping up the Russian war economy" and supporting the Russian DIB.[6] Bloomberg reported on April 6 that unspecified sources stated that China's support for Russia has "deepened" recently.[7] Bloomberg reported that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken briefed unspecified European allies on China's support and asked them to directly speak to China about the issue. Bloomberg's sources reportedly stated that China and Russia have increased space cooperation and that China has given Russia microelectronics, optics, machine tools for tanks, and propellants for missiles. Bloomberg reported that White House National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson said that China has also provided Russia with nitrocellulose — an intermediary good used in producing gunpowder and explosives — and turbojet engines. Bloomberg reported that China is also providing Russia with geospatial intelligence, including satellite imagery which the Russian military likely uses to support military operations in Ukraine. The Atlantic reported on March 18 that Ukrainian military sources believe that Russia may be using unspecified third parties to buy satellite imagery from US companies for targeting data to conduct long-range strikes.[8]

Russian forces reportedly continue to systematically use prohibited chemical weapons in Ukraine and are attacking Ukrainian positions with chemical substances almost daily throughout the frontline. The Telegraph published an investigation into the systematic use of Russian chemical weapons in Ukraine on April 6 and found that Ukrainian soldiers report near daily Russian attacks using K-51 grenades with CS-gas — a riot control agent (RCA) that causes harmful but not necessarily lethal effects and that is prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory.[9] Ukrainian soldiers told the Telegraph that these attacks are not immediately incapacitating but do usually cause panic at Ukrainian positions that Russian forces try to exploit when conducting assaults.[10] A Ukrainian commander near Robotyne, Zaporizhia Oblast reportedly stated that soldiers in his unit regularly carry gas masks due to the high frequency of Russian CS attacks in the area.[11] The Telegraph reported that there are unconfirmed reports that Russian forces have used chlorine, chloropicrin, and possibly even hydrogen cyanide substances

against Ukrainian forces.[12] The Ukrainian Support Forces Command stated on April 5 that Ukrainian forces had recorded 371 cases of Russian forces using munitions containing chemical substances during March 2024 alone and 1,412 cases of Russian forces using chemical weapons between February 2023 and March 2024.[13] The Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade acknowledged in a now-deleted post that elements of the brigade deliberately used K-51 grenades with CS gas on Ukrainian positions near Krynyk in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast in December 2023.[14]

Russian officials accused Ukraine of launching a series of drone strikes against the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on April 7, but the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not attribute responsibility for the strikes. ZNPP occupation officials claimed that a Ukrainian drone struck a canteen located on the territory of the ZNPP and damaged a truck unloading food in the area.[15] ZNPP occupation officials claimed that other Ukrainian drones later struck the ZNPP's cargo port area and the dome of the 6th Power Reactor, which did not result in any critical damages or casualties.[16] Russian officials called on the international community to condemn Ukraine for "nuclear terrorism." [17] IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi stated that ZNPP occupation authorities informed IAEA experts that a drone detonated at the ZNPP and that the report is consistent with IAEA observations.[18] Grossi did not specify the party responsible for the drone strike and called on both parties to refrain from such actions in order to not "jeopardize nuclear safety." [19] Russian authorities have repeatedly attempted to use Russia's physical control over the ZNPP to force international organizations, including the IAEA, to meet with Russian occupation officials to legitimize Russia's occupation of the ZNPP and by extension Russia's occupation of sovereign Ukrainian land.[20]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi openly condemned and is taking action following reports that members of Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) may have purposefully intimidated a Ukrainian journalist investigating corruption within the SBU by issuing the journalist a draft summons. Ukrainian outlet *Slidstvo.Info* stated on April 6 that some SBU personnel may have instructed employees of a military registration and enlistment office to deliver draft summons to a *Slidstvo.Info* journalist who had been investigating corruption in the SBU's cybersecurity department.[21] Syrskyi condemned the reported intimidation scandal, denounced any attempts by Ukrainian military officials to harass or otherwise compromise the integrity of journalists, and ordered an official investigation into the matter on April 7.[22] ISW continues to assess that corruption is endemic to rapid wartime mobilization in any country and that Ukrainian officials are actively and openly identifying and resolving corruption problems, including by leveraging the robust and expansive Ukrainian community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[23]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov reported that Ukraine anticipates Russian offensive operations to intensify in late spring and early summer.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will meet with Chinese officials in China on April 8 and 9 amid Western warnings that China is increasingly helping Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and even providing China with geospatial intelligence.
- Russian forces reportedly continue to systematically use prohibited chemical weapons in Ukraine and are attacking Ukrainian positions with chemical substances almost daily throughout the frontline.
- Russian officials accused Ukraine of launching a series of drone strikes against the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on April 7, but the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not attribute responsibility for the strikes.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi openly condemned and is taking action following reports that members of Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) may have purposefully intimidated a Ukrainian journalist investigating corruption within the SBU by issuing the journalist a draft summons.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amid continued positional fighting along the entire line of contact on April 7.
- Chieftain of the All-Russian Cossack Society and Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Nationalities Nikolai Doluda claimed on April 7 that more than 30,000 Cossack personnel have fought in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 6, 2024

[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 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 2pm ET on April 6 ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that Ukraine does not have enough materiel to contest the battlefield initiative. Zelensky stated during an interview aired on April 6 that Ukrainian forces currently do not have enough ammunition to initiate and sustain future counteroffensive operations and reiterated that Ukrainian forces are currently using drones to partially compensate for artillery ammunition shortages across the theater.^[1] Zelensky stressed that Ukraine must conduct countermeasures to deprive Russian forces of the ability to prepare and conduct significant offensive efforts and not only rely on defensive operations. Zelensky stated that striking Russian force concentrations is one such countermeasure but that Ukrainian forces lack long-range weapons to strike Russian force concentrations and other targets necessary to undermine Russian operations. Senior Ukrainian officials have long called for timely and sustained Western military assistance that would enable Ukraine to conduct both defensive and counteroffensive operations when the timing is optimal for Ukraine to undertake such efforts, as opposed to having materiel shortages constrain Ukraine's ability to plan and execute operations and losing opportunities to exploit Russian weaknesses.^[2] Zelensky recently stated that delays in security assistance forced Ukraine to cede the battlefield initiative to Russia, and Ukrainian officials have warned that Ukraine cannot plan either a successful counteroffensive or defensive effort without knowing when and what kind of aid Ukraine will receive. ISW continues to assess that shortages in Western military assistance have forced Ukrainian forces to husband materiel, and Zelensky's statement suggests that Ukrainian forces are now having to make difficult decisions about prioritizing certain aspects of its defense over constraining Russian military capabilities or preparing for counteroffensive operations.^[3] The *New York Times* similarly reported on April 5 that Ukrainian forces are close to running out of some types of munitions and that Ukrainian officials have observed a five-to-one Russian artillery advantage throughout the frontline.^[4] Ukrainian soldiers reportedly told the *New York Times* that Ukrainian forces currently have enough cluster munitions that are effective at repelling Russian infantry assaults but are low on high-explosive artillery shells needed to repel mechanized assaults.^[5]

Zelensky stressed that additional Western security assistance is necessary for Ukrainian forces to effectively defend Ukraine's airspace against the intensified Russian strike campaign and increased Russian aviation operations along the frontline. Zelensky stated that Ukraine will need an additional 25 Patriot air defense systems, likely meaning launchers, to extend full air defense coverage to all of Ukraine's territory.^[6] Zelensky warned that if Russian forces sustain the tempo of their current missile and drone strikes then Ukraine will likely lack the air defense missile stocks needed to protect Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure.^[7] Russian forces appear to be exploiting Ukraine's already degraded air defense umbrella in an attempt to collapse Ukraine's energy grid, likely in an effort to constrain Ukraine's long-term defense industrial capacity.^[8] Russian missile and drone strikes have consistently pressured Ukraine's limited air defense and have forced Ukraine to make difficult decisions about providing air defense coverage between large population centers in the rear and active areas of the frontline.^[9] Sparse and inconsistent air defense coverage along the front has likely facilitated Russia's intensification of guided and unguided glide bomb strikes, which Russian forces used to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February 2024.^[10] Zelensky stated that the previous downing of Russian aircraft has temporarily constrained glide bomb strikes and that Russian forces are now conducting glide bomb strikes from further away, increasing the need for long-range air defense systems.^[11]

Zelensky cautioned that the arrival of all promised F-16 fighter jets from Ukraine's Western partners in 2024 will provide Ukraine with only 10 percent of the fighter aircraft Ukraine would need to completely defeat Russian aviation and restore Ukraine's ability to operate effectively in the air domain.^[12] Zelensky stated that Ukraine will need a combination of air defense systems and fighter aircraft to combat the Russian aviation threat, namely to prevent the Russian use of KAB guided glide bombs.^[13] Zelensky also added that Ukraine is currently developing new weapons to defend against Russian KAB guided glide bombs as part of this combined air defense. The further

degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella would not only limit Ukraine's ability to protect critical elements of its war effort in the rear but would also likely afford Russian aviation prolonged secure operation along the frontline. Such security would allow Russian forces to significantly increase glide bomb strikes at scale and possibly even allow Russian forces to conduct routine large-scale aviation operations against near rear Ukrainian logistics and cities to devastating effect.[14] Western security assistance that allows Ukraine to establish a robust combined air defense system will enable Ukraine to protect its cities while providing air defense to potentially operationally significant defensive and counteroffensive operations.

Continued delays in US security assistance are specifically impacting the capabilities that Ukrainian forces need to respond to the increased tempo of Russian mechanized assaults in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi warned on April 6 that a particularly difficult situation has emerged east of Chasiv Yar and west of Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast, both areas where ISW has observed a recent intensification of Russian mechanized assaults ranging from platoon-sized to battalion-sized attacks.[15] Syrskyi also observed that Russian forces are conducting platoon-, company-, and sometimes battalion-sized infantry assaults in separate directions. The Press Service of the Ukrainian Airborne Forces stated that Russian forces with massed armored vehicle support are still attempting to break through Ukrainian defenses west of Avdiivka despite not yet repeating mechanized assaults as large as the ones that they conducted in the area between March 29 and March 31.[16] Geolocated footage published on April 6 indicates that elements of the Russian 90th Guards Tank Division (41st Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) recently conducted a likely company-sized mechanized assault southeast of Umanske (west of Avdiivka), and a Ukrainian airborne assault brigade reported that its personnel destroyed 10 Russian tanks, five BMP infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and a MT-LB IFV during 11 mechanized assaults in the area.[17] **Ukrainian forces have so far successfully repelled intensified Russian mechanized assaults throughout eastern Ukraine in the past week but have done so despite persisting materiel shortages.**

The Kremlin explicitly threatened its long-term ally Armenia on April 5 over Armenian outreach to the West following Russia's failure to prevent Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Union (EU) High Representative Josep Borell, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Powers met on April 5 in Brussels to discuss continued Western support of Armenian democratic and economic development.[18] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a statement later on April 5 responding to the meeting, in which the Russian MFA claimed that the West is attempting to "drag the South Caucasus [region] into a geopolitical confrontation" between Russia and the West.[19] The Russian MFA stated that "extra-regional interference" in the South Caucasus region is "irresponsible" and "destructive" and aims to drive a wedge between the South Caucasus countries and Russia. The Russian MFA threatened that Western interference could result in the "most negative consequences for [regional] stability, security, and economic development" and an "uncontrollable increase in tension" in the region. The Russian MFA explicitly threatened the Armenian government and warned that Armenia could "go down the wrong path," which the MFA claimed is fraught with security and economic issues, could result in an "outflow of the population," and is reminiscent of the issues that Russia's invasion has caused Ukraine. The Russian MFA accused the West of attempting to "deceive" Armenia into withdrawing from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAU) and requesting that Russia withdraw from Russia's military base in Armenia and from the Yerevan International Airport.

The Russian MFA's April 5 statement follows several months of Kremlin threats against Armenia in response to ongoing Armenian efforts to secure new, Western security guarantees and efforts to blame Armenia for deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.[20] Armenian officials recently stated that Armenia is considering withdrawing from the CSTO and applying to join the EU and recently asked Russia to withdraw Russian border guards from the Yerevan International Airport.[21] The Russian MFA's statement insinuates that the Armenian government is not independently making decisions about its security, and that Western countries are somehow guiding the Armenian government's decisions. The Kremlin has made similar ridiculous claims that the West controls the Ukrainian government as part of Kremlin efforts to question and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty.[22] The Kremlin has previously conducted hybrid wars against former Soviet states that have sought EU accession.

The Russian MFA also continues to threaten Finland and claimed that Finland has "lost its independence in making foreign policy decisions" since its accession to NATO — a narrative that the Kremlin routinely used to falsely claim that NATO was controlling Ukraine and using Ukraine to threaten Russia. Russian Ambassador to Finland Pavel Kuznetsov stated during an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS on April 6 that Finland is on a "destructive course" in its

relationship with Russia and that Finland's accession to NATO is making the Baltic region a "zone of potential escalation."^[23] Kuznetsov threatened Finland and the NATO alliance broadly, claiming that Russia would have to respond to a buildup of NATO material and manpower or the deployment of a nuclear weapon in Finland and that Russia's response would be "adequate but not necessarily symmetrical." Kuznetsov claimed that Finland has joined the "party of war until victory over Russia" by joining NATO and accused perceived Finnish "Russophobia" of causing a complete breakdown of the Russian-Finnish relationship. Kuznetsov insinuated that Finland has no option but to improve its relationship with Russia, given that "we can't escape geography," but blamed Finland unilaterally for the poor state of Russian–Finnish relations, despite the artificial migrant crisis that Russia created on the Russian–Finnish border in fall 2023 and repeated Russian threats against Finland and the wider NATO alliance.^[24] ISW continues to assess that Russian threats against NATO member states are aimed at leading the West to deter itself and that Russian claims of imagined threats originating from NATO are aimed at setting informational conditions to justify and support an envisioned long-term geopolitical confrontation with the West.^[25]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov announced on April 5 that 3,000 former Wagner Group personnel will join the Akhmat Spetsnaz unit following successful negotiations between Akhmat and Wagner commanders.^[26] Kadyrov claimed that Commander of the Akhmat Spetsnaz (and deputy commander of the 2nd Luhansk People's Republic's [LNR] Army Corps [AC]) Apty Alaudinov reached an agreement with Wagner leadership that Wagner commander Alexander Kuznetsov (call sign "Ratibor") will join Akhmat Spetsnaz along with 3,000 Wagner personnel. Kadyrov added that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) already allocated a required number of vacancies within the Akhmat Spetsnaz unit to accommodate the Wagner personnel, and that Wagner personnel can start combat missions after resolving all organizational issues. Kadyrov's mention of the Russian MoD indicates that these Wagner elements will be subordinated under the Russian MoD's authority rather than Rosgvardia. Alaudinov also amplified a Kremlin-affiliated milblogger's claim that the main group of Wagner commanders and 5,000 Wagner personnel are transferring to the 2nd AC under the Russian MoD.^[27] The milblogger added that the Russian military is still discussing whether these 5,000 Wagner personnel will form a regiment like the unit under Kuznetsov, form a new separate brigade, or be distributed among existing brigades.

The claimed transfer of 3,000 Wagner personnel into MoD's Akhmat Spetsnaz indicates that the Russian MoD is successfully formalizing control over some elements of the remaining Wagner Group force — an objective it has been pursuing since 2023. ISW previously assessed that the Russian MoD launched a campaign in early-to-mid-2023 which aimed to directly subordinate Wagner forces under the Russian MoD. ISW also assessed that deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner personnel started the mutiny in June 2023 in protest of the Russian MoD's efforts to consolidate control over Wagner forces.^[28] The transfer of Wagner personnel to Akhmat Spetsnaz units sparked some criticism from Wagner-affiliated irregular formations, such as the Rusich Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group which accused these Wagner personnel of selling out to the Russian MoD.^[29] One Russian milblogger also accused Kadyrov of exaggerating the number of transferred Wagner personnel, claiming that most Wagner personnel hate Kuznetsov and are located in Africa.^[30] Kremlin-affiliated milbloggers largely celebrated the claimed transfer, claiming that Wagner personnel had two options: to either hold on to their past grudges or let them go to serve the Russian state.^[31] One Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that former Wagner forces previously formed the Kamerton detachment under Akhmat Spetsnaz and that the Russian MoD did not ban this detachment from using Wagner symbology, networks, and management systems.^[32]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that Ukraine does not have enough materiel to contest the battlefield initiative.
- Zelensky stressed that additional Western security assistance is necessary for Ukrainian forces to effectively defend Ukraine's airspace against the intensified Russian strike campaign and increased Russian aviation operations along the frontline.
- Zelensky cautioned that the arrival of all promised F-16 fighter jets from Ukraine's Western partners in 2024 will provide Ukraine with only 10 percent of the fighter aircraft Ukraine would need to completely defeat Russian aviation and restore Ukraine's ability to operate effectively in the air domain.
- Continued delays in US security assistance are specifically impacting the capabilities that Ukrainian forces need to respond to the increased tempo of Russian mechanized assaults in eastern Ukraine.
- The Kremlin explicitly threatened its long-term ally Armenia on April 5 over Armenian outreach to the West following Russia's failure to prevent Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.

- The Russian MFA also continues to threaten Finland and claimed that Finland has “lost its independence in making foreign policy decisions” since its accession to NATO — a narrative that the Kremlin routinely used to falsely claim that NATO was controlling Ukraine and using Ukraine to threaten Russia.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov announced on April 5 that 3,000 former Wagner Group personnel will join the Akhmat Spetsnaz unit following successful negotiations between Akhmat and Wagner commanders.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin passed two laws on April 6, offering Russian society some concession for its sacrifices to support Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 5, 2024

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Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

April 5, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) and Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted one of the largest series of drone strikes against military facilities within Russia, targeting at least four Russian airbases, on the night of April 4 to 5. Ukrainian media reported that sources within Ukrainian security services, including the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR), stated that the SBU and Ukrainian forces conducted successful strikes on airfields near Kursk City and Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai; the Engels Airbase in Saratov Oblast; and the Morozovsk Airbase in Rostov Oblast. [1] These Ukrainian security sources reportedly stated that the Ukrainian drone strikes significantly damaged three Tu-95MS strategic bombers at Engels airbase, damaged two Su-25 fixed-wing aircraft at the airbase near Yeysk, and destroyed six unidentified aircraft and significantly damaged another eight unidentified aircraft at the Morozovsk Airbase.[2] The Ukrainian strikes reportedly killed four Russian military personnel at the airbase near Yeysk and seven Russian personnel at the Engels Airbase and wounded and killed up to 20 Russian personnel at the Morozovsk Airbase.[3] Geolocated footage shows explosions and Russian air defenses activating near all the airbases except for the one near Yeysk.[4] ISW has not yet observed any visual confirmation that Ukrainian forces damaged or destroyed aircraft or infrastructure at any of the airbases. Satellite imagery collected on April 4 indicates that there were three Tu-160 heavy strategic bombers, five Tu-95 strategic bombers, an Il-76 transport aircraft, and a Tu-22 bomber at Engels Airbase; ten L-39 training and combat aircraft, five An-26 transport aircraft, an An-74 transport aircraft, an An-12 transport aircraft, four Su-27 fixed-winged aircraft, four Su-25 fixed-wing aircraft, one Su-30 fixed-wing aircraft, and several Ka-52 and Mi-8 helicopters at the Yeysk Airbase; and 29 fixed-wing aircraft, primarily Su-34s, at the Morozovsk airfield.[5] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 44 drones over Rostov Oblast, six drones over Krasnodar Krai, and a drone each in Saratov, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts on the night of April 4 and into the morning on April 5.[6] Ukrainian drone strikes have typically only targeted individual airbases within Russia, and Ukraine’s ability to strike four separate airbases in one strike series represents a notable inflection in the capabilities that Ukrainian forces are employing in their campaign against Russian military infrastructure, critical infrastructure, and strategic industries within Russia.

ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes against targets within Russia are a necessary component of Ukraine’s campaign to degrade industries that support the Russian war effort and military capabilities deployed in the Russian rear through asymmetric means. Russian forces routinely use Tu-95 strategic bombers stationed at Engels Airbase to launch Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles at targets in Ukraine, and the Russian military had roughly 60 Tu-95 aircraft as of 2023.[7] If confirmed, the possible loss of roughly five percent of Russia’s strategic Tu-95 bombers in a single strike would be notable. ISW has also previously observed that the loss of fixed-wing aircraft is not negligible since Russia likely has about 300 various Sukhoi fixed-wing aircraft.[8] Russian forces are currently using Sukhoi fixed-wing aircraft to conduct guided and unguided glide bomb strikes along the entire frontline in Ukraine and have previously leveraged significantly intensified glide bomb strikes to make tactical gains.[9] Sustained Ukrainian strikes against Russian airfields within Russia will degrade the Russian Aerospace Force’s (VKS) ability to conduct missile and air strikes throughout Ukraine.

The recently intensified tempo of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine will likely result in increased manpower and materiel losses, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to be successfully mitigating these losses. Russian forces have conducted several mechanized

assaults roughly at the platoon, company, and battalion levels west of Bakhmut near Chasiv Yar, west of Kremenna near Terny, and west of Avdiivka near Berdychi, Semenivka, and Tetenke over the past week after primarily conducting infantry-led "meat" assaults across the theater following the start of the campaign to seize Avdiivka in October 2023.[10] The previous pattern of Russian infantry-led attacks did not employ armored vehicles at scale at the expense of greater manpower losses, and Russia appears to have successfully leveraged its ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts to make up for increased manpower losses.[11] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on January 15 that Russia recruits around 30,000 personnel per month, which the Russian military uses to replenish personnel losses in Ukraine and form tactical and operational-level reserves.[12] The observed new trend in which Russian forces are now employing more vehicles than was the previously observed standard for tactical assaults suggests that the Russian military may no longer be as constrained or concerned about its armored vehicle and tank losses. The British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank reported on February 12 that Russia is likely able to sustain its current rate of vehicle losses (over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles annually) for at least two or three years by mainly reactivating vehicles from storage. [13] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on February 4 that the Russian defense industry can produce 250-300 "new and thoroughly modernized" tanks per year and can repair around 250-300 additional damaged tanks per year, suggesting that Russia can currently compensate for its vehicle losses in Ukraine by refurbishing vehicles from Soviet-era storage.[14] The Kremlin is unlikely to conduct unpopular manpower or economic mobilization efforts in the short term unless Russia's manpower or materiel losses significantly increase past the point that Russia's current crypto-mobilization campaign and defense production capacity can accommodate. The recent intensification of mechanized attacks in eastern Ukraine indicates that the Russian command appears to believe that Russia is capable of compensating for losses in these intensified mechanized assaults while preparing for a forecasted offensive effort in Summer 2024.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal indicated that Ukraine is starting to staff new units, but that Ukraine needs further Western military assistance to properly equip them. Shmyhal stated in an interview with Estonian outlet *Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR)* published on April 4 that Ukrainian forces are staffing an unspecified number of new brigades with new personnel but are waiting for Western partners to deliver military equipment, weapons, and ammunition to equip these brigades at their full end strength.[15] Shmyhal stated that Ukraine can meet its necessary objectives with "usual mobilization" and that Ukraine has begun rotating out frontline personnel, which is consistent with Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi's recent statements that Ukraine does not need to conduct a proposed effort to mobilize 500,000 new personnel.[16] Ukrainian forces have recently transferred rear area personnel in noncombat units to frontline units to enable force rotations and lowered the mobilization age from 27 to 25 to address ongoing manpower issues.[17] Shmyhal's statement highlights Ukraine's need for continued timely and consistent Western military assistance in the short- and medium-term to maintain its defense.

Shmyhal also reported that Russian missile and drone strikes have damaged or disrupted roughly 80 percent of electricity generation at Ukrainian thermal power plants (TPPs) in recent weeks, as Russian forces continue to exploit the degraded Ukrainian air defense umbrella in an effort to collapse Ukraine's energy grid.[18] Russian forces intensified missile and drone strikes on March 22 and have since been primarily targeting Ukrainian critical energy infrastructure, and Shmyhal added that these strikes have damaged or disrupted more than six gigawatts of power generation at Ukrainian TPPs and hydroelectric power plants (HPPs).[19] Recent Russian drone and missile strikes have notably expanded their target sets to include Ukrainian HPPs.[20] The increasing damage and disruptions to major Ukrainian power plants threaten to accelerate the degradation of Ukraine's energy generation capabilities and constrain Ukraine's ability to stabilize future disruptions to its energy grid in the long term.[21] The Russian effort to collapse the Ukrainian energy grid may aim to heavily degrade the critical defense industrial capacity that Ukraine needs to support a long war effort against Russia.[22] Continued delays in US security assistance will continue to degrade Ukrainian air defense capabilities and present Russian forces with greater opportunities to severely damage Ukraine's energy infrastructure.[23]

Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russian forces are systematically and increasingly using chemical weapons and other likely-banned chemical substances in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Support Forces Command stated on April 5 that Ukrainian forces have recorded 371 cases of Russian forces using munitions containing chemical substances during the last month and 1,412 cases of Russian forces using chemical weapons between February 2023 and March 2024.[24] The Ukrainian Support Forces Command reported that Russian forces primarily use K-51 and RG-VO grenade launchers to launch munitions containing chemical agents. Ukrainian officials, and a Russian military unit, have previously reported on increasingly common instances of Russian forces using chemical substances in combat that are banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory.[25]

An unattributed drone reportedly struck a military unit in the pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway republic of Transnistria on April 5 amidst an assessed ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within. The Transnistria Ministry of State Security (MGB) claimed that unspecified actors conducted a drone strike against a Transnistrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) military unit in Ribnita on the Dniester River on the afternoon of April 5.[26] The Transnistrian MGB claimed that the drone strike targeted a radar station, which sustained minor damage. Transnistrian authorities did not report any casualties. The Transnistrian MGB did not specify the actor behind the drone strike but noted in their press release that Ribnita is six kilometers from the Transnistrian-Ukrainian border, likely to vaguely allege Ukrainian involvement. Transnistrian sources posted footage of a drone allegedly flying in the area and posted photos of where the drone allegedly hit the ground, but neither the footage nor the photos showed the drone hitting a target or any radar station.[27] Kremlin newswire TASS and other Russian outlets amplified the Transnistrian MGB's claims.[28] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Ukraine had nothing to do with the drone strike and "would not waste valuable drones for such minor provocations." [29] ISW cannot independently verify the details of the reported drone strike or identify the responsible actors, but it is unlikely that Ukrainian forces conducted the strike given the limited means used in the strike. Russian authorities previously baselessly accused Ukraine of conducting a reported drone strike against a military base in Transnistria on March 17 and may similarly blame Ukraine for the reported April 5 strike as part of ongoing Kremlin hybrid operations against Moldova. [30] Yevgenia Gutsul, the governor of the other pro-Russian Moldovan region, Gagauzia, claimed on April 5 that Gagauzia would "immediately" begin the process to secede from Moldova should Moldova unify with Romania, a NATO and European Union (EU) member state.[31] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely trying to exploit both Transnistria and Gagauzia to forward its efforts to destabilize Moldova from within and prevent Moldovan EU accession.[32]

Russia reportedly has conducted thousands of cyber-attacks against Czechia's rail transport infrastructure and that of other European states as part of a broader effort to degrade NATO members' transport logistics since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Czech Transport Minister Martin Kupka reportedly told *Financial Times* (FT) in an article published on April 4 that Czechia suspects Russia of conducting a hacking campaign consisting of thousands of attacks against Czech national railway operator České dráhy to destabilize the EU and destroy critical infrastructure.[33] Kupka noted that Czechia is capable of defending against all the attacks. The European Union Agency for Cyber Security (ENISA) published its first threat report in March 2023 consisting of data collected between January 2021 and October 2022 and found that pro-Russian hacker groups had escalated major cyberattacks against railway companies in Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Estonia.[34] ENISA's March 2023 report also found pro-Russian major cyberattacks against air and maritime transport in the EU more broadly.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) and Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted one of the largest series of drone strikes against military facilities within Russia, targeting at least four Russian airbases, on the night of April 4 to 5.
- The recently intensified tempo of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine will likely result in increased manpower and materiel losses, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to be successfully mitigating these losses.
- Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal indicated that Ukraine is starting to staff new units, but that Ukraine needs further Western military assistance to properly equip them.
- Shmyhal also reported that Russian missile and drone strikes have damaged or disrupted roughly 80 percent of electricity generation at Ukrainian thermal power plants (TPPs) in recent weeks, as Russian forces continue to exploit the degraded Ukrainian air defense umbrella in an effort to collapse Ukraine's energy grid.
- Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russian forces are systematically and increasingly using chemical weapons and other likely-banned chemical substances in Ukraine.
- An unattributed drone reportedly struck a military unit in the pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway republic of Transnistria on April 5 amidst an assessed ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within.
- Russia reportedly has conducted thousands of cyber-attacks against Czechia's rail transport infrastructure and that of other European states as part of a broader effort to degrade NATO members' transport logistics since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amidst ongoing positional fighting along the entire line of contact on April 5.
- Russia's defense industry continues to mobilize to meet the Russian military's needs in Ukraine.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on April 4 that Russia will open two youth centers aimed at indoctrinating Ukrainian youth into Russian culture and historical narratives in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts in the near future.
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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 4, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, and Karolina Hird

April 4, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on April 4 ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov claimed that NATO and Russia are in “direct confrontation,” likely as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to intensify existing information operations meant to force the West into self-deterrence. Peskov claimed on April 4 that relations between Russia and NATO have “slipped to the level of direct confrontation” and that NATO is “already involved in the conflict surrounding Ukraine.”^[1] Peskov accused NATO of moving towards Russia’s borders, likely referencing Finland and Sweden’s recent accessions to the alliance, and claimed that NATO is expanding its military infrastructure closer to Russia. Russian officials have long attempted to frame NATO and the West as an existential threat to Russia as part of the Kremlin’s justifications for its war in Ukraine.^[2] Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on March 18 that a full-scale war between NATO and Russia is undesirable but possible.^[3] Peskov’s repeated claims that NATO and Russia are already in “direct confrontation” represents an intensification of this ongoing narrative but is likely still part of Russia’s reflexive control campaign that uses threatening language to delay and influence important decisions regarding Western support for Ukraine.^[4] This Kremlin narrative is also likely an attempt to pose NATO’s defensive activity in response to Russia’s outright aggression as provocative.^[5] ISW continues to assess that Russia has been preparing for a potential conventional war with NATO, including through ongoing conventional military reforms and by recreating the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) in western Russia.^[6] Russian officials have accused NATO of giving Russia a reason to reconstitute the LMD directly on the border with Finland.^[7]

Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov appealed to Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) members to increase cooperation against perceived Western threats as part of the effort to posture against the West. Gerasimov claimed on April 4 at a meeting of the chiefs of the general staffs of CIS member states that CIS countries are currently facing “increasingly real and diverse challenges, which requires [them] to have well-equipped and well-trained armed forces” as the West consistently destroys the “fundamental foundations of strategic stability and international security institutions.”^[8] Gerasimov also reiterated false Russian accusations that the West sponsors international terrorism. Gerasimov called on the chiefs of general staff of CIS members to analyze the military-political situation developing in the world and on CIS members’ borders, develop integrated military systems, conduct combat training using member states’ combat experience, and increase multilateral military cooperation. Gerasimov is attempting to frame the West as a wider security threat to the CIS countries to portray Russia as the leader of an imagined coalition of countries that oppose the collective West. Russia has routinely attempted to posture against the West by casting Russia as the leader of the “world majority,” a group of countries including post-Soviet and non-Western states that Russia intends to rally to oppose the West.^[9] CIS countries’ governments apart from Belarus have not expressed open support for Russia’s war in Ukraine and have not recognized Russia’s illegal annexation of occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts in September 2022, although Russia likely uses commerce through CIS countries to evade international sanctions.^[10]

The Kremlin leveraged this overall information operation about escalation with NATO to target France specifically, following French President Emmanuel Macron’s recent calls for the West to expand the level and types of security assistance it sends to Ukraine. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu held a phone conversation on April 4, reportedly their first contact since October 2022.^[11] Shoigu threatened that the potential deployment of French troops to Ukraine would “create problems for France itself” in response to French President Emmanuel Macron’s March 16 statement that “perhaps at some point” it would be necessary for French troops to operate in Ukraine. Shoigu’s call with Lecornu is likely an attempt to directly influence recent French calls for Europe and the West to provide more military aid and other support to Ukraine. Shoigu likely attempted to single out France since Macron initiated the ongoing conversation about the

West removing self-imposed constraints on its support for Ukraine. Shoigu is also likely attempting to deter future attempts from any Western states to increase military aid to Ukraine and intensify support for Ukraine by forcing Western leaders to self-deter out of fear of Russian retaliation. Shoigu had similar calls with senior US, UK, French, and Turkish officials in October 2022 in which he promoted Kremlin information operations threatening nuclear escalation in a likely attempt to deter the West from providing tanks to Ukraine.[12] Shoigu also claimed that he and Lecornu noted a “readiness for dialogue on Ukraine” that could resemble the Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations that occurred in Istanbul in April 2022, although a French government source told *Reuters* that “at no moment did [France] show any willingness to dialogue on Ukraine or negotiations.”[13] Shoigu’s attempts to threaten France and deter continued Western support for Ukraine while feigning interest in peace negotiations are part of a wider Russian information operation aimed at convincing Western countries to push Ukraine into unfavorable and unequal negotiations on Russia’s terms.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also promoted information operations feigning interest in negotiations, and Lavrov’s and Shoigu’s likely coordinated informational efforts may signal a new round of intensified Russian rhetoric about negotiations.[14] Lavrov used a meeting of dozens of foreign ambassadors from non-Western states to denounce Ukraine’s “peace formula” while claiming that Russia is ready to negotiate on terms favorable to the Kremlin. Lavrov spoke at a “round table” of more than 70 foreign ambassadors at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Diplomatic Academy on April 4 and reiterated several boilerplate narratives claiming that Ukraine was responsible for starting the war in 2014 and about Ukraine’s alleged involvement in the recent terrorist attack in Moscow. Lavrov also used the ambassadorial meeting to criticize Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s “peace formula” and urge the countries present to not support it. Lavrov told journalists following the meeting that Russia thinks it is “not necessary to talk with Zelensky” but that Russia should negotiate instead with the West.[15] Lavrov claimed that the West, however, is not ready for negotiations. Lavrov also claimed that the current situation on the battlefield has created “new realities” and that Russia is ready for “honest talks based on these new realities and on Russia’s security interests.”[16] Russian officials have repeatedly falsely blamed Ukraine and the West for the lack of peace negotiations, despite numerous public Russian statements suggesting or explicitly stating that Russia is not interested in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine.[17] ISW continues to assess that Russia’s maximalist objectives – which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender – remain unchanged and that any Russian statements suggesting that Russia is interested in peace negotiations are very likely efforts to force the West to make concessions on Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[18]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues attempts to balance the Kremlin’s opposing efforts to set social expectations for a protracted Russian war effort and to assuage Russian society’s concerns about the economic consequences of the war and labor migration. Putin stated during a speech at the 12th Congress of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia in Moscow on April 4 that Russia will experience a high demand for human capital and face labor shortages in the coming years.[19] Putin stated that Russia’s future labor shortage is “absolutely certain” and that it is “critically important” for Russia to increase labor productivity and modernize and automate various economic sectors, such as industrial production, service industries, and the agro-industrial sphere. Putin stated that Russia does not “have much of a choice: either [Russia] needs to import labor from abroad or [Russia] needs to increase labor productivity.” Putin appears to be telling Russia’s xenophobic ultra-nationalist community that Russia must continue to rely on migration to address Russia’s labor shortages, likely to signal to Russian ultranationalist constituents to stop their calls for anti-migrant policies, especially in the wake of the March 22 Crocus City Hall terror attack.[20] ISW previously assessed that anti-migrant policies could worsen Russian labor shortages and degrade Russia’s crypto-mobilization efforts and that Russian authorities are unlikely to fully give into ultranationalist xenophobic demands to drastically reduce – if not eliminate – immigration to Russia at the expense of Russia’s war effort and economic needs.[21]

Putin also claimed that Russia has not transferred its economy to a wartime footing and that Russia’s economy is instead “quite balanced” and fulfilling all social guarantees.[22] Putin did note that the Russian government is concentrating its efforts and administrative and financial resources on developing Russia’s defense industry, however. Putin’s suggestions that the Russian economy either is or is not on a wartime footing depending on the constituency he is addressing is a false binary as Russia has been gradually but effectively mobilizing its defense industry to support its invasion of Ukraine over the past several years.[23] Russia is currently allocating roughly a third or more of its annual federal budget to defense spending, and Polish President Andrzej Duda warned on March 20, citing unspecified German research, that Putin is intensifying efforts to shift Russia to a war economy with the intention of being able to attack NATO as early as 2026 or 2027.[24] The Kremlin has not, and likely cannot, rapidly transition the Russian economy to total economic mobilization as the Soviet Union did during the Great Patriotic War (Second World War), although the Kremlin consistently appeals to the mythos of the Great Patriotic War to suggest that Russia is capable of such an effort.

[25] Putin invoked the idea of a wider Russian social and economic mobilization reminiscent of that of the Soviet Union's total mobilization during a speech to Russian workers on February 2 and may have been gauging domestic reactions to a wider economic or military mobilization.[26] Putin's claim of a peacetime Russian economy is part of a wider pattern wherein the Kremlin oscillates between appeals to a wider economic mobilization to support its war effort on the one hand and appeals to domestic economic stability to cater to an increasingly apathetic domestic populace on the other hand. The Kremlin's routine invocations of a wider economic mobilization likely aim to shore up domestic support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and create fear within the West of the Kremlin's ability to bring to bear a significant amount of materiel in Ukraine.[27] The Kremlin's efforts to reassure Russian citizens about Russia's economic and social stability likely aim to avoid generating public discontent over the prospect of future economic disruptions.[28]

Key Takeaways:

- Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov claimed that NATO and Russia are in "direct confrontation," likely as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to intensify existing information operations meant to force the West into self-deterrence.
- Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov appealed to Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) members to increase cooperation against perceived Western threats as part of the effort to posture against the West.
- The Kremlin leveraged this overall information operation about escalation with NATO to target France specifically, following French President Emmanuel Macron's recent calls for the West to expand the level and types of security assistance it sends to Ukraine.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also promoted information operations feigning interest in negotiations, and Lavrov's and Shoigu's likely coordinated informational efforts may signal a new round of intensified Russian rhetoric about negotiations.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues attempts to balance the Kremlin's opposing efforts to set social expectations for a protracted Russian war effort and to assuage Russian society's concerns about the economic consequences of the war and labor migration.
- Russian forces conducted a roughly reinforced company-sized mechanized assault towards Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut) on April 4 and advanced up to the eastern outskirts of the settlement.
- Russian forces also recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- An unspecified senior NATO official reportedly told Russian opposition news outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* that NATO intelligence agencies have not observed indications that Russia is preparing for a large-scale partial mobilization wave.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 3, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Grace Mapes, and George Barros

April 3, 2024, 8pm ET

Russian forces appear to have increased the number and size of mechanized ground assaults on select sectors of the frontline within the past two weeks, marking a notable overall increase in Russian mechanized assaults across the theater. Ukrainian officials stated on March 20 that Ukrainian forces repelled a large Russian assault in the Lyman direction and published geolocated footage showing Ukrainian forces damaging or destroying several Russian armored vehicles east of Terny (west of Kremminna).[1] Ukrainian forces later defeated a battalion-sized Russian mechanized assault near Tonenke (west of Avdiivka) on March 30 to which Russian forces reportedly committed at least 36 tanks and 12 BMP infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs).[2] A Ukrainian serviceman stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed 12 Russian tanks and eight IFVs during the assault near Tonenke, and Russian forces have likely only conducted one other mechanized assault of that scale along the entire frontline since the beginning of the Russian campaign to seize Avdiivka in October 2023, which was also near Terny on January 20.[3] Geolocated footage published on April 3 shows Ukrainian forces repelling a roughly reinforced platoon-sized mechanized Russian assault near Terny.[4] The April 3 footage is likely recent and is distinct from the March 20 footage of Russian assaults near Terny. Russian forces may be intensifying mechanized assaults before muddy terrain becomes more pronounced in the spring and makes mechanized maneuver warfare more difficult. Russian forces may also be intensifying mechanized assaults to take advantage of Ukrainian materiel shortages before the arrival of expected Western security assistance.[5]

Russian forces may be intensifying the overall tempo of their offensive operations in Ukraine. The intensification of Russian mechanized assaults has occurred generally at the same time as intensified missile and drone strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities.[6] Russian forces escalated its strike campaign in Ukraine by beginning a new pattern of striking hydroelectric power plants around March 22, for example.[7] Russian forces may be intensifying strikes to further pressure the Ukrainian command to deploy air defense systems away from the front in order to more safely intensify aviation operations in support of ground operations.[8] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported that Russian forces have been gradually moving materiel and personnel to frontline positions in small increments making it difficult for Ukrainian forces to monitor Russian force accumulations, suggesting that Russian forces have been preparing for larger-scale assault operations.[9] US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell stated on April 3 that the US assesses that Russia has “almost completely reconstituted militarily” over the past several months, suggesting that Russia is preparing and may already have sufficient manpower and materiel to significantly intensify ongoing offensive operations or initiate offensive efforts in new areas of the theater.[10]

Ukrainian sources continue to stress that the piecemeal and delayed arrival of new Western systems to Ukraine will allow Russian forces to adapt to and offset the likely operational benefits these systems would otherwise provide to Ukrainian forces. *Politico Europe* reported on April 3 that unspecified high-ranking Ukrainian military officers stated that provisions of new Western systems are arriving too late and in insufficient quantities to have maximally effective operational impacts on the battlefield.[11] The Ukrainian officers reportedly stated that Russian forces rapidly adapted to the marginal advantages that new Western-provided weapons systems provide, eliminating those advantages.[12] The Ukrainian officers reportedly pointed to the arrival of Western anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and HIMARS as systems that arrived at the right time to help Ukrainian forces protect Kyiv in the early months of the full-scale invasion and liberate Kherson City in November 2022, respectively.[13] The Ukrainian officers stated that other Western-provided weapon deliveries have not been so timely, however. The officers reportedly stated that Russian forces are likely already optimizing Russia’s air defense network to counter the arrival of F-16 fighter aircraft, which are scheduled to arrive in Ukraine in the summer of 2024. Russian forces have shown the capacity to adapt to fighting in Ukraine both through mass as well as through steady, though uneven, operational, tactical, and technological.[14] The Russian military’s demonstrated ability to adapt, even if uneven or relatively slow, means that Ukrainian forces have a limited window of opportunity to maximally effectively use new Western systems to achieve operationally significant impacts. Individual systems pose specific challenges to Russian forces, and Russian forces would likely struggle to adapt as easily or quickly as they have previously if Ukrainian forces could employ several new systems at scale simultaneously. The arrival of new Western systems in a timely manner would likely allow Ukrainian forces to significantly degrade Russian forces and prevent even marginal Russian tactical gains while also providing Ukraine with capabilities necessary for operationally significant counteroffensive operations

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack has caused a significant increase in Russian contract service applicants amid reported Russian efforts to increase force generation this spring. The Russian MoD claimed on April 3 that Russian military recruitment centers have documented a significant increase in the number of people applying for military service contracts throughout Russia.[15] The Russian MoD claimed that 16,000 Russian citizens have signed military service contracts over the past 10 days and emphasized that most applicants indicated that their main motive for signing a military contract was to “avenge” the victims of the Crocus attack. The Russian MoD claimed that more than 100,000 Russians have signed military service contracts since the beginning of 2024. Kremlin officials and mouthpieces have consistently attempted to falsely implicate Ukraine in the Crocus attack. If accurate, suggests that the Kremlin’s information operation may have been successful.[16] The fear and instability that the Islamic State’s (IS) attack created in Russian society may have spurred some Russian citizens to sign up for military service. The Russian MoD may alternatively be running a simultaneous information operation designed to portray Russians as increasingly signing military contracts for revenge to further convince others to sign contracts and justify its long-term war effort in Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on April 3 that Russia is preparing to “mobilize” an additional 300,000 personnel on June 1.[17] Zelensky may be referring to Russia’s ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts or efforts to increase contract service applications following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, but Zelensky is likely not referring to another wave of Russian partial mobilization akin to Russia’s September 2022. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on March 22 that high-ranking Russian officials stated that the Russian MoD plans to increased force generation starting in the spring and that Russia may intend to generate an additional 300,000 personnel within an unspecified time frame.[18] Russian authorities continue to deny Russian and Ukrainian claims about an imminent Russian partial or general mobilization order, and ISW continues to assess that Russian

authorities would likely intensify crypto-mobilization efforts before deciding to conduct another unpopular wave of mobilization.[19]

Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov warned that Russian companies and local authorities must defend themselves against Ukrainian drone strikes and not rely on Russian air defenses following the April 2 Ukrainian strikes on Russian military production and oil refinery infrastructure in Tatarstan. Minnikhanov stated on April 3 that “there is no need to wait for [Russian] missile defense to work...we must decide on our own, every enterprise, every municipality, every city.”[20] Minnikhanov stated that Russians should “wake up” and realize that “no one will protect you except yourself.” Russian military sources recently told Russian state outlet *Izvestia* that the Russian military is forming mobile fire groups to combat Ukrainian drones, indicating that Russia may be unable to deploy conventional air defense systems to defend all of Russia’s critical facilities.[21] ISW assessed that Ukraine’s April 2 strikes on targets in Tatarstan likely represent a significant inflection in Ukraine’s ability to conduct long-range strikes far into rear Russia’s areas.[22] Minnikhanov’s statement is likely a reflection of increased Russian concern following the April 2 strikes and is a clear acknowledgment and admonition of the Russian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) failure to defend Russian cities and critical infrastructure from Ukrainian drone strikes.

Russian-backed former Ukrainian separatist politician Oleg Tsaryov complained on April 3 that no current Russian political party adequately represents the political interests of Russian ultranationalists, highlighting a possible source of discontent between the pro-Russian ultranationalist community and the Kremlin. Tsaryov responded to a recent claim by Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church, that there is an absence of Russian nationalism in Russian politics, stating that Russian nationalism and demands for the Kremlin to implement nationalist ideals are increasing.[23] Tsaryov claimed that an official nationalist political party could provide the nationalists with a legal avenue through which to pursue policy changes without discrediting themselves and allow more radical nationalists to work with the mainstream nationalists, presumably as part of a Russian nationalist political coalition.[24] Now-imprisoned ardent nationalist Igor Girkin previously founded the Angry Patriot’s Club, his failed initiative to provide fringe Russian ultranationalists with a platform that directly opposed Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime and conduct of the war in Ukraine.[25] Tsaryov’s call for an official nationalist political party highlights a grievance that mainstream Russian ultranationalist milbloggerers may develop over the long term as Putin aims to further increase control over the ultranationalist information space and fails to implement some of their desired political changes.[26] Putin likely aims to suppress any possible ultranationalist political movement that could oppose his regime as he did with the Angry Patriots by having Girkin arrested.[27] Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war of conquest against Ukraine is insufficiently nationalist for Tsaryov.

Ukraine and Finland signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement on April 3.[28] Finland also announced a new military aid package to Ukraine worth 188 million euros (about \$204 million) that includes air defense materiel and large-caliber artillery ammunition.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces appear to have increased the number and size of mechanized ground assaults on select sectors of the frontline within the past two weeks, marking a notable overall increase in Russian mechanized assaults across the theater.
- Russian forces may be intensifying the overall tempo of their offensive operations in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian sources continue to stress that the piecemeal and delayed arrival of new Western systems to Ukraine will allow Russian forces to adapt to and offset the likely operational benefits these systems would otherwise provide to Ukrainian forces.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack has caused a significant increase in Russian contract service applicants amid reported Russian efforts to increase force generation this spring.
- Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov warned that Russian companies and local authorities must defend themselves against Ukrainian drone strikes and not rely on Russian air defenses following the April 2 Ukrainian strikes on Russian military production and oil refinery infrastructure in Tatarstan.
- Russian-backed former Ukrainian separatist politician Oleg Tsaryov complained on April 3 that no current Russian political party adequately represents the political interests of Russian ultranationalists, highlighting a possible source of discontent between the pro-Russian ultranationalist community and the Kremlin.
- Ukraine and Finland signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement on April 3.

- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Donetsk City and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian authorities continue to expand social benefits for Russian military personnel.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 2, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, and George Barros

April 2, 2024, 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 12:45pm ET on April 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law on April 2 that lowers the Ukrainian military's mobilization age from 27 to 25 years of age. The Verkhovna Rada approved the law in May 2023, and the law will come into force on April 3, 2024.[1] Lowering the mobilization age is one of many measures that Ukraine has been considering in an ongoing effort to create a sustainable wartime force-generation apparatus.[2] Lowering the mobilization age from 27 to 25 years of age will support the Ukrainian military's ability to restore and reconstitute existing units and to create new units. [3] Ukraine will need to equip any newly mobilized military personnel with weapons, and prolonged US debates about military aid to Ukraine and delays in Western aid may impact the speed at which Ukraine can restore degraded and stand up new units. ISW continues to assess that Western-provided materiel continues to be the greatest deciding factor for the Ukrainian military's ability to restore and augment its combat power.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on April 2 that Russian forces seized about 400 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory in the first three months of 2024 — a rate of advance not necessarily reflective of wider Russian offensive prospects due to the impact of US security assistance delays. Shoigu claimed during a conference call with Russian military leadership on April 2 that Russian forces have seized 403 square kilometers of territory in Ukraine since the beginning of 2024.[4] ISW has only observed visual evidence allowing ISW to confirm that Russian forces seized approximately 305 square kilometers between January 1 and April 1, 2024. ISW continues to assess that material shortages are forcing Ukraine to conserve ammunition and prioritize limited resources to critical sectors of the front, however, increasing the risk of a Russian breakthrough in other less-well-provisioned sectors and making the frontline overall more fragile than the current relatively slow rate of Russian advances makes it appear.[5] Ukraine's materiel constraints also offer Russian forces flexibility in how they conduct offensive operations, which can lead to compounding and non-linear opportunities for Russian forces to make operationally significant gains in the future.[6]

Ukraine conducted long-range unidentified unmanned aerial systems (UAS) strikes against Russian military production and oil refinery infrastructure in the Republic of Tatarstan, over 1,200 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. Russian Telegram channels posted footage on April 2 showing three UAS striking the territory of the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) near Yelabuga and causing a large explosion upon impact.[7] Geolocated footage of the strike shows that the UAS hit a dormitory area near the Yelabuga Polytechnical College.[8] Russia notably uses the production facilities at the Alabuga SEZ to make Shahed-136/131 drones to attack Ukraine.[9] Additional geolocated footage published on April 2 shows a drone strike against the Taneko oil refinery in Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan, and Russian sources claimed that Russian electronic warfare suppressed the drone, causing it to fall on refinery infrastructure and start a fire.[10] Reuters reported that the Ukrainian drone strike on Taneko, Russia's third-largest oil refinery, impacted a core refining unit at the facility responsible for roughly half of the facility's oil refining.[11] Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) and Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) claimed responsibility for conducting the strikes, and GUR sources reported that the strike on Yelabuga caused "significant destruction" to Shahed production facilities.[12] Russian sources, including Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov, denied that the strikes

caused any significant damage to either the drone production plants within the Alabuga SEZ or the Taneko refinery.[13] *Reuters* noted that its own data shows that constant Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian oil refineries, such as Taneko, have shut down about 14 percent of Russia's overall refining capacity.[14] The April 2 strikes are the first Ukrainian strikes on Tatarstan, and the distance of the targets from Ukraine's borders represents a significant inflection in Ukraine's demonstrated capability to conduct long-range strikes far into the Russian rear. ISW continues to assess that such Ukrainian strikes are a necessary component of Ukraine's campaign to use asymmetric means to degrade industries that supply and support the Russian military.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's address at the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) board meeting on April 2 illustrated Russia's dissonant response to the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack as Russian authorities simultaneously pursue law enforcement actions against migrant communities while also baselessly implicating Ukraine. Putin stated that Russian authorities are assessing the actions of all Russian law enforcement, management, supervisory services, and commercial organizations responsible for the Crocus City Hall concert venue and instructed the MVD to increase security and emergency preparedness at large public gathering areas.[15] Putin explicitly stated that the MVD needs to address several unresolved problems, including its response to extremist groups, likely to preemptively scapegoat possible criticism about the Russian intelligence failure to prevent the Crocus City Hall attack amid reports that Russia ignored international warnings, including from its allies, about the attack.[16] Putin and other Kremlin officials have struggled to reconcile information operations aimed at blaming Ukraine and the West for the attack with the reality of the Kremlin's intelligence failure, and Putin's indirect public criticism of the MVD likely aims to signal to the Russian public that he is addressing the failures that contributed to the attack.[17]

Putin continued to suggest that there are other beneficiaries of the attack that the MVD needs to investigate, however, and Russian MVD Head Vladimir Kolokoltsev proceeded to baselessly portray Ukraine as a transitional criminal and terrorist threat to Russia.[18] The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) baselessly claimed on April 1 that the US is attempting to cover up alleged Ukrainian responsibility for the Crocus City Hall attack, including by blaming the attack on the Islamic State's Afghan branch IS-Khorasan (IS-K).[19] Russian law enforcement and intelligence responses in the North Caucasus — such as a counterterrorism raid in Dagestan on March 31 and intensified measures targeting Central Asian migrants in Russia are further evidence that Russian authorities in practice assess that the terrorist threat is emanating from Russia's Central Asian and Muslim minority communities instead of Ukraine.[20] The Kremlin will likely continue efforts to capitalize on domestic fear and anger about the attack to generate perceptions of Ukrainian and Western involvement in the Crocus City Hall attack and wider alleged "terrorist" attacks within Russia in hopes of increasing Russian domestic support for the war in Ukraine.[21] ISW remains confident that IS conducted the Crocus City Hall attack and has yet to observe independent reporting or evidence to suggest that an actor other than IS was responsible for or aided the attack.[22]

Putin also attempted to address intensified debates about migration that have emerged following the Crocus City Hall attack but continued to express an inconsistent and vague stance on the issue. Putin stated that illegal migration can be a breeding ground for extremist activity and asserted that Russia needs to improve its migration database since the alleged attackers were able to legally stay in Russia without speaking Russian.[23] Putin called for Russia to radically update its approach to migration policy and instructed the MVD to draft its own new migration policy.[24] Putin did not expound upon what this new policy should entail beyond vague demands that it should preserve interethnic and interreligious harmony and Russia's cultural and linguistic identity.[25] Putin reiterated that it is unacceptable to use the Crocus City Hall attack to provoke ethnic, Islamophobic, or xenophobic hatred, a rhetorical position that may collide with the Kremlin's and Russian Orthodox Church's contradictory appeals to ultranationalists' anti-migration fervor.[26] Anti-migrant policies could worsen Russian labor shortages and degrade Russia's crypto-mobilization efforts if Russia deports large numbers of migrants or if significant portions of Russia's migrant communities emigrate due to anti-migrant sentiment, and Russian authorities are generally unlikely to fully give into ultranationalist xenophobic demands to drastically reduce if not eliminate foreign immigration to Russia at the expense of Russia's war effort. The Kremlin's attempts to appeal to ultranationalists may generate further inconsistencies and contradictions within the Kremlin's migration policy, however.[27]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on April 2 that the GUR believes that Russian forces will likely temporarily pause strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in order to replenish low missile stockpiles.[28] Skibitskyi stated that the Russian military currently has about 950 high-precision operational-strategic and strategic level missiles with a range of or exceeding 350 kilometers available in its arsenal.[29] Skibitskyi stated that the Russian military tries to prevent the missile stockpile from falling below 900 missiles and that Russian forces will temporarily pause missile strikes to accumulate

more missiles to a level above this threshold.[30] Skibitskyi stated that Russia plans to produce 40 Kh-101 cruise missiles in April and suggested that Russia will have roughly at least 90 missiles to conduct two or three more large strike series against Ukrainian targets before pausing to restock missiles.[31] Skibitskyi noted that Russian forces have not launched any Kalibr cruise missiles since September 2023 and that Russia has accumulated at least 260 of these missiles and aims to produce 30 more in April. Skibitskyi added that Russian forces may not be launching Kalibr cruise missiles either because Ukrainian air defenses can easily intercept them or because Ukrainian strikes have damaged Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Kalibr missile carriers.[32] Skibitskyi and Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are increasingly launching unknown ballistic missiles from occupied Crimea at Ukraine, but noted that it is unclear if Russian forces are using Zircon hypersonic cruise missiles or modernized Onyx-M anti-ship cruise missiles.[33] Russian forces can launch Zircon missiles at semi-ballistic trajectories, however.[34] Humenyuk reported on March 27 that Russian forces had accumulated "several dozen" Zircon missiles in military facilities in occupied Crimea.[35] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces have accumulated 440 Onyx anti-ship cruise missiles, and that Russia can produce about six to eight of these missiles per month. [36] Russian forces temporarily reduced the intensity of its missile strikes and relied more heavily on Shahed drone strikes in summer and fall 2023 to marginally replenish stocks of high-precision missiles ahead of the intensification of the Russian strike campaign in winter 2023-2024 and spring 2024.[37]

US sanctions against Russia continue to impact Russian financial ties to post-Soviet countries, as Kyrgyzstan's national payment system Elkart announced on April 2 that it would stop processing transactions using the Russian "Mir" payment system to prevent secondary sanctions. Elkart's operator Interbank Processing Center stated that Elkart would stop processing all transactions with the "Mir" payment system starting on April 5 since the US sanctioned "Mir" system's operator, the National Payment Card System Joint Stock Company, in February 2024.[38] Ten of 23 Kyrgyz commercial banks completely or partially suspended their use of the "Mir" payment system in October 2022 after the US Department of the Treasury reported that it would impose sanctions on financial institutions that enter contracts with the National Payment Card System.[39] ISW recently reported that several Kazakh banks and Armenia's Central Bank also suspended the use of Mir payment systems to prevent secondary sanctions.[40]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu confirmed on April 2 that Vice Admiral Sergei Pinchuk became the commander of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF).[41] Pinchuk replaced former BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov, who likely died as a result of a Ukrainian strike on the BSF headquarters in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea in September 2023.[42]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reportedly proposed a NATO aid package that would send \$100 billion of military assistance to Ukraine over five years.[43] Bloomberg reported that all NATO members need to approve the proposal and that the details will likely change during negotiations between member states.[44] Bloomberg reported that the proposal gives NATO control of the US-led Ukraine Contact Defense Group that coordinates weapons supplies to Ukraine and that sources familiar with the talks stated that NATO members are discussing whether the total sum should include bilateral aid to Ukraine. Financial Times reported that NATO foreign ministers will discuss the proposal on April 3 and that discussions will likely continue in the lead up to the NATO summit in Washington in July 2024.[45]

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law on April 2 that lowers the Ukrainian military's mobilization age from 27 to 25 years of age.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on April 2 that Russian forces seized about 400 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory in the first three months of 2024 — a rate of advance not necessarily reflective of wider Russian offensive prospects due to the impact of US security assistance delays.
- Ukraine conducted long-range unidentified unmanned aerial systems (UAS) strikes against Russian military production and oil refinery infrastructure in the Republic of Tatarstan, over 1,200 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's address at the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) board meeting on April 2 illustrated Russia's dissonant response to the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack as Russian authorities simultaneously pursue law enforcement actions against migrant communities while also baselessly implicating Ukraine. Putin also attempted to address intensified debates about migration that have emerged following the Crocus City Hall attack but continued to express an inconsistent and vague stance on the issue.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on April 2 that the GUR believes that Russian forces will likely

- temporarily pause strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in order to replenish low missile stockpiles.
- US sanctions against Russia continue to impact Russian financial ties to post-Soviet countries, as Kyrgyzstan's national payment system Elkart announced on April 2 that it would stop processing transactions using the Russian "Mir" payment system to prevent secondary sanctions.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reportedly proposed a NATO aid package that would send \$100 billion of military assistance to Ukraine over five years.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kremenna and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on April 2.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated on April 2 that the Russian military intends to finish and deploy several newly constructed small missile and patrol ships in 2024.
- The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) is increasing its law enforcement presence in occupied Ukraine in order to intensify Russian control over Ukrainian civilians and strengthen security over critical infrastructure.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 1, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

April 1, 2024, 6:50pm ET

A joint investigation by *60 Minutes*, the *Insider*, and *Der Spiegel* strongly suggests that the Kremlin has waged a sustained kinetic campaign directly targeting US government personnel both in the United States and internationally for a decade, with the likely objective of physically incapacitating US government personnel. The investigation, which the outlets published on March 31, indicates that the infamous Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) Unit 29155 (the same unit whose operatives attempted to assassinate Sergei Skripal with the Novichok nerve agent in the United Kingdom in 2018) may be using nonlethal directed energy or acoustic weapons to target a large number of US government personnel, each of whom has reported experiencing an "anomalous health incident" (also called "Havana Syndrome") of varying severity between 2014 and as recently as 2023.^[1] The investigation cites intercepted Russian intelligence documents, travel logs, call metadata, and eyewitness testimony that places GRU Unit 29155 operatives at many of the locations where US officials experienced Havana Syndrome, either shortly before or during each attack. The investigation suggested that GRU operatives conducted a directed energy attack against an FBI agent in Florida a few months after the agent interviewed detained undercover GRU officer Vitaliy Kovalev at some point between June and December 2020.^[2] Other US government officials claimed they were attacked by the directed energy weapons while they were in the United States, including in Washington, DC. The joint investigation interviewed US Army Colonel Greg Edgreen, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)'s working group investigating Havana Syndrome, who believes that Russia is behind the Havana Syndrome incidents and that the incidents consistently have a "Russia nexus."^[3] Edgreen stated that the incidents all targeted the top five to ten percent "performing DIA officers" and that the victims were either experts on Russia or had otherwise worked to defend US national security interests against Russia. The investigation noted that many affected personnel were assigned to roles aimed at countering Russia following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine after these personnel had previously worked on other portfolios. The investigation reported that these incidents have affected senior US personnel, including a senior official in the National Security Council who served at some point in 2020-2024 and CIA Director Bill Burns' then-deputy chief of staff who experienced an anomalous health incident in September 2021 in Delhi. Several of the US officials who experienced Havana Syndrome have severe life-altering and career-ending injuries. Many US officials' spouses and children also experienced Havana Syndrome while deployed overseas.

Retired CIA officer Marc Polymeropoulos, who experienced Havana Syndrome while in Moscow in December 2017 and ended his career as Chief of Operation for the CIA's Europe and Eurasia Mission Center, stated that if the investigation's attribution of the attacks to Russia's GRU is true, then the attacks fit a pattern of the Kremlin "seeking retribution for events" for which it believes the United States is responsible.^[4] Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh confirmed that a senior unnamed Department of Defense official at the NATO Vilnius summit in July 2023 experienced similar symptoms to other anomalous health incidents.^[5] Senior US intelligence officials have previously publicly stated that the intelligence community cannot attribute a foreign adversary to any of the anomalous health

incidents, and White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre reiterated in response to the joint investigation on April 1 that the intelligence community “has not concluded” that Russian military intelligence was involved in the incidents.[6] If the Russian GRU is confirmed to be responsible for numerous attacks against US military, diplomatic, and intelligence personnel and their families, however, then this would amount to a significant sustained Russian campaign of kinetic attacks against the United States designed to degrade US intelligence capabilities against Russia to which the United States has not publicly responded.

The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) is intensifying efforts to falsely implicate Ukraine in the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack while denying any Islamic State (IS) responsibility or involvement in the attack. The SVR baselessly claimed on April 1 that the United States is attempting to cover up Ukraine’s alleged responsibility for the Crocus City Hall attack, including by blaming the attack on the Islamic State’s Afghan branch IS-Khorasan (IS-K).[7] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) recently demanded that Ukrainian authorities arrest and extradite people allegedly involved in the Crocus City Hall attack and a wider set of alleged “terrorist” attacks in Russia.[8] ISW continues to assess with high confidence that IS conducted the Crocus City Hall attack and has yet to observe independent reporting or evidence to suggest that an actor other than IS was responsible for or aided the attack.[9] The Kremlin likely intends to capitalize on domestic fear and anger about the attack and hopes that perceptions of Ukrainian and Western involvement in the Crocus City Hall attack and wider alleged “terrorist” attacks in Russia will increase Russian domestic support for the war in Ukraine.[10]

Reuters reported on April 1 that Iran warned Russia about a possible “major terrorist operation” at an unspecified date prior to the Crocus City Hall attack, according to “three sources familiar with the matter.”[11] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Russian Presidential Representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov denied the report that Iran warned Russia of a terrorist attack.[12] The Russian government will likely continue to deny any reports that the Kremlin received a warning of a potential terrorist attack before the Crocus City Hall attack to deflect blame from Russia’s law enforcement and intelligence failure and divert accusations towards Ukraine.

The Russian MFA announced on April 1 that it is working to remove the Taliban’s status as a designated terrorist organization in Russia and announced that Russia invited the Taliban to participate in the May 14-19 Russia-Islamic World Forum in Kazan, Tatarstan Republic.[13] The Kremlin’s hyper fixation on pinning the blame for the attack on Ukraine, as opposed to addressing very real and necessary terrorist threats, will likely continue to pose a security threat to Russia in the long term.

Russian authorities are taking measures to further crackdown against migrant communities in Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stated on April 1 that it is preparing a bill that introduces various measures tightening Russia’s migration policy.[14] The proposed bill includes requirements that all foreigners undergo mandatory fingerprinting and photographing upon entering Russia; the creation of a government system containing the digital profiles of foreigners; requirements that all foreigners receive a new identification document confirming their right to live and work in Russia; reductions on the limits on how long foreigners can temporarily stay in Russia from 90 days per every six months to 90 days per year; and authorizations for courts and certain federal executive bodies outside of courts to deport foreigners who “pose a security threat.” The MVD’s proposals to tighten the government’s tracking of and control over migrants in Russia will also likely make it easier for authorities to target and coerce migrants into the Russian military as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts, as such efforts will build out a database of personal information that makes migrant communities more immediately identifiable.[15] Kremlin newswire *TASS* also reported on April 1 that Russian authorities detained the tenth person allegedly complicit in the Crocus City Hall attack and that Russian authorities detained him as part of an ongoing Russian operation, called Operation “Illegal,” which Russian authorities have reportedly regularly conducted in previous years.[16] Russian human rights project First Department reported on March 29 that Russian authorities launched “Operation Anti-Migrant,” a large-scale operation to identify and deport migrants, in St. Petersburg, and Russian authorities are likely increasing their searches on migrants in the wake of the Crocus City Hall attack.[17] It is unclear if Operation “Illegal” and “Operation Anti-Migrant” are related programs.

The Kremlin is reportedly taking steps to directly strengthen its control over government bodies that oversee migration policy. Russian outlet *Vedomosti* reported on April 1 that sources close to the Russian presidential administration and government stated that Russian authorities are considering creating a new department to oversee interethnic and migration policy and that the department will be directly subordinated to the Russian president.[18] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated in response that there are no official decisions about creating a department for interethnic and migration policy yet.[19] Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized during his annual “Direct Line” speech in

December 2023 that Russia needs a “special organ, not just the Ministry of Internal Affairs” to address Russia’s migration issues.[20] Putin may scapegoat certain MVD personnel for Russia’s recent migration issues. A Russian insider source claimed on April 1 that Putin is expected to attend the MVD’s extended board meeting on April 2 which will summarize the MVD’s 2023 activities.[21] The insider source claimed that the meeting will include discussions of migration issues and that unspecified actors will “attack” the head of the MVD’s Main Directorate for Migration Affairs, Valentina Kazakova, and her “curator” MVD Deputy Minister Alexander Gorovoy, likely due to their perceived inaction and inefficacy. The insider source claimed that the Kremlin will likely dismiss MVD leaders, including Internal Affairs Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, after Putin’s inauguration on May 7 and that the Kremlin offered the minister position to the head of the Economic Security Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Sergei Alpatov.

Key Takeaways:

- A joint investigation by *60 Minutes*, the *Insider*, and *Der Spiegel* strongly suggests that the Kremlin has waged a sustained kinetic campaign directly targeting US government personnel both in the United States and internationally for a decade, with the likely objective of physically incapacitating US government personnel.
- The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) is intensifying efforts to falsely implicate Ukraine in the March 22 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack while denying any Islamic State (IS) responsibility or involvement in the attack.
- Russian authorities are taking measures to further crack down against migrant communities in Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on April 1.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to reassure the Russian public that Russian military conscripts will not deploy to most of occupied Ukraine nor participate in combat operations in Ukraine amid the start of the spring semi-annual military conscription call-up that started on April 1.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 31, 2024

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, and George Barros

March 31, 2024, 6:55pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on March 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the April 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) reportedly directed all its clergy to change their liturgy to include pro-war prayers in support of Russia’s war of conquest against Ukraine and is likely threatening to defrock ROC MP clergy who do not support the war. A Russian Telegram channel with insider sources within the ROC MP amplified on March 31 a document dated March 29, in which Head of the ROC MP Affairs, Metropolitan Gregorij of Voskresensk, instructed clergy to read a prayer — the “Prayer for Holy Rus” — on a daily basis during Lent.[1] Metropolitan Gregorij of Voskresensk also called on the clergy to read the “Prayer for Holy Rus” at home and to offer to read this prayer to parishioners. The “Prayer for Holy Rus” is a new prayer that the ROC MP officially introduced in September 2022. This prayer is a highly politicized and pro-war and pro-Kremlin prayer filled with Kremlin talking points and other false Russian narratives. The prayer asks God to “to help [Russian] people and grant [Russia] victory” against “those who want to fight [and] have taken up arms against Holy Rus, eager to divide and destroy her one people.”[2] The mention of “Holy Rus” and “one people” echoes Putin’s long-term false narrative that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians comprise one Russian nation, and is a misappropriation of the history of Kyivan Rus.[3] ROC MP Head Patriarch Kirill — reportedly himself a former Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) officer and a known staunch supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin — first read the “Prayer for Holy Rus” (which he supposedly authored) on September 25, 2022, following Putin’s unpopular call for partial mobilization. The ROC MP had previously instituted politicized prayers in June 2014 and March 2022 supporting Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and ISW has long assessed that the ROC MP is a Kremlin-controlled organization and a known tool within the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit that promotes the Kremlin’s interests and nationalist ideology domestically and abroad.[4]

The ROC MP leadership has intensified internal scrutiny against ROC MP clergy and has reportedly defrocked several clergy members that refused to promote Kremlin-introduced prayers supporting Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A guest researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Ksenia Luchenko, noted that the ROC MP regards individual ROC MP clergy members' refusal to use assigned prayers in liturgy as perjury and a sin punishable by defrocking under the 25th Apostolic Canon.[5] The Christians Against War Project, a Russian organization that tracks persecutions of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian priests, reported that ROC MP or Russian state authorities have already disciplined no fewer than 28 ROC MP clergy members from Russia, five from Belarus, one from Kazakhstan, and six from Lithuania for anti-war rhetoric or refusing to read the assigned pro-war prayers during liturgy.[6] The ROC MP has reportedly administered various punishments, including defrocking, demotions, and excommunication.[7] Local Russian state officials opened administrative cases and issued fines for "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces" against several such anti-war ROC MP clergy members.[8] Patriarch Kirill, for example, approved a decision in February 2024 to defrock one of the most famous and respected ROC MP priests, Archpriest Alexey Uminsky, for refusing to read the "Prayer for Holy Rus." [9] The Court of the Moscow Diocese also defrocked a priest in May 2023 for substituting the word "victory" with "peace" when reading the "Prayer for Holy Rus." Luchenko also reported that clergy members are increasingly self-censoring themselves out of fear that their own parishioners will report them for sharing anti-war sentiments. Parishioners, for example, reportedly called the police on a ROC MP priest in March 2022 after he prayed for peace in Ukraine. The ROC MP recently intensified Kremlin rhetoric about Russia's war in Ukraine and cast it as an existential and civilizational "holy war," and the Kremlin will likely continue to use the ROC MP to promote its imperialist and aggressive goals in Ukraine and elsewhere to secure long-term domestic support for Putin's war efforts.[10] The ROC MP also recently approved an ideological and policy document tying several Kremlin ideological narratives together in an apparent effort to form a wider nationalist ideology around the war in Ukraine and Russia's expansionist future.[11]

Russia conducted another series of missile and drone strikes largely targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of March 30 to 31 as delays in US security assistance continue to degrade Ukraine's air defense umbrella and enable Russia to significantly damage Ukraine's energy grid. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 14 Kh-101/555 cruise missiles from Saratov Oblast; 11 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea; one Iskander-M ballistic missile from occupied Crimea; and one Kh-59 cruise missile from occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[12] The Ukrainian Air Force added that Ukrainian forces shot down nine Kh-101/555 missiles and nine Shahed drones.[13] The Rivne Oblast Police reported that Ukrainian forces also shot down a Kh-55 missile and an Iskander missile over Rivne Oblast.[14] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched two S-300 air-defense missiles at Selydove, Donetsk City and an unspecified number of S-300 missiles at Beryslav, Kherson Oblast.[15] Lviv Oblast Military Administration Head Maskym Kozitskyi reported that Russian forces conducted a cruise missile strike on the same critical infrastructure facility that Russian forces previously struck on March 24 and March 29, and a Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces struck unspecified targets in Stryi, Lviv Oblast.[16] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces targeted energy and agricultural infrastructure in Kherson Oblast, struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv Oblast, and struck energy infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.[17] Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrenergo reported that they implemented emergency power shutdowns in Odesa City and nearby areas following the overnight Russian strike on energy facilities in southern Ukraine.[18] Russian forces reportedly shot down one of their own Kh-101 missiles over Saratov Oblast on the morning of March 31.[19]

Ukrainian forces appear to have repelled a Russian battalion-sized mechanized assault near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on March 30 — the first battalion-sized mechanized assault since Russian forces began the campaign to seize Avdiivka in late October 2023. A Ukrainian serviceman reported on March 31 that Russian forces, including elements of the Russian 6th Tank Regiment (90th Tank Division, Central Military District [CMD]), committed 36 tanks and 12 BMP infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) to a large-mechanized assault near Tonenke on March 30.[20] Geolocated imagery published on March 31 shows a large number of destroyed and damaged Russian armored vehicles and tanks along a road northwest of Tonenke (west of Avdiivka).[21] The Ukrainian serviceman stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed 12 Russian tanks and eight IFVs during the assault and noted that the frontal assault failed to breakthrough the Ukrainian line. This appears to be the first report of any elements of the 90th Tank Division participating in assaults following the Russian seizure of Avdiivka and ISW previously assessed that elements of the 90th Tank Division, alongside other Russian units and formations, likely represent a sizeable uncommitted operational reserve that the Russian military command can commit to continue and intensify efforts to push west of Avdiivka.[22] The elements of the 6th Tank Regiment appear to have failed in their March 30 attack near Tonenke, however, suggesting that elements of Russia's uncommitted operational reserve near

Avdiivka may be too degraded or otherwise unable to lead further Russian advances westward in the short term.

The scale of the Russian mechanized assault on March 30 is significant. Russian forces have not conducted a mechanized assault this large since the beginning of the Russian localized offensive effort to seize Avdiivka in late October 2023, when Ukrainian forces reportedly destroyed almost 50 Russian tanks and over 100 armored vehicles on October 19-20, 2023.[23] Ukraine's ability to defend against the March 30 assault, particularly near Avdiivka where Ukrainian forces have been forced to quickly withdraw to new, defensive positions following the loss of the settlement, is a positive indicator for Ukraine's ability to defend against future large-scale Russian assaults and the expected summer 2024 Russian offensive operation. Ukrainian officials, justifiably so, continue to warn about Ukraine's ability to defend against the expected summer Russian offensive effort in the face of ammunition shortages, manpower limitations, and delayed Western assistance.[24] Ukrainian forces may have had to expend a significant amount of material to defend against the Russian assault near Tonenke, highlighting Russia's ability to conduct assaults that force Ukraine to expend outsized portions of its already limited material and manpower reserves to defend against.[25] Ukraine's demonstrated ability to skillfully defend against a large-scale Russian assault in a particularly critical part of the front despite Ukraine's challenges suggests that Ukrainian forces can achieve significant battlefield effects if they are properly equipped.

The Russian command may be prioritizing the Avdiivka area in Donetsk Oblast. The Russian military command's willingness to commit a battalion's worth of tanks to an attack near Avdiivka indicates that this assault was a priority effort. The Russian command may focus their forecasted late spring/summer 2024 offensive operation on western Donetsk Oblast in hopes of building upon Russian forces' steady but marginal advances in this sector.[26] Ukrainian officials have recently warned that Russian forces are accumulating personnel along the Kharkiv-Luhansk axis, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast, but ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will likely only be able to launch a concerted large-scale offensive operation in one operational direction at a time due to Russia's own manpower and planning limitations.[27]

French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu announced on March 31 that France will provide an unspecified number of Aster 30 surface-to-air missiles and “hundreds” of armored vehicles and other equipment to Ukraine.[28] Lecornu stated that France will provide Ukraine with “hundreds” of old, but still functional, armored vehicles and equipment from the French military and that the materiel will arrive in 2024 and early 2025. Lecornu also reported that France will provide a “new batch of Aster 30 missiles” to Ukraine for the SAMP/T MAMBA air defense systems and that France is developing remotely operated munitions to provide to Ukraine as early as summer 2024.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed on March 31 the scheduled decree authorizing Russia's semi-annual spring military conscription, which will conscript 150,000 Russians between April 1 and July 15.[29] The decree specifies that Russia's spring 2024 conscription will conscript men aged 18 to 30 years old who are not currently in military service. Russia's spring 2024 conscription marks the first conscription cycle in which the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) will conscript men up to age 30. The Russian law raising the upper limit of the conscription age from 27 to 30 years of age officially came into force on January 1, 2024, although Putin signed the law in August 2023.[30] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Russian men who turned 27 before the end of 2023 and men who are 28 or 29 and currently in *zapas* (general mobilizable human resource composed of men who could be mobilized regardless of prior military experience) are excluded from conscription. [31] Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Vice Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyansky stated on March 29 that the spring 2024 conscription cycle will include the conscription of men in occupied Ukraine and all Russian federal subjects, except for certain federal subjects in northern Russia due to inclement weather.[32] The Geneva Convention forbids any occupying power to force civilians in occupied territories to serve in the occupying power's military or auxiliary services.[33] Tsimlyansky also stated that Russia will not deploy Russian conscripts to occupied Ukraine and that conscripts will not participate in combat or support operations in the war in Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin remains unlikely to deploy conscripts to participate in combat operations in Ukraine due to concerns that conscript causalities may cause societal discontent within Russia, although Russia may expand its crypto-mobilization efforts during the spring 2024 conscription cycle.[34] The Kremlin, however, will likely continue using conscripts to defend the international border between Ukraine and Russia.[35]

The Russian military command reportedly appointed Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces Colonel General Alexander Lapin as commander of the newly formed Leningrad Military District (LMD). Ural regional information agency *URA.ru*, citing an unspecified military source, claimed on March 31 that the Russian military command appointed Lapin as LMD Commander.[36] There has been no official confirmation of this appointment. Lapin previously served as the

commander of the Central Military District [CMD] and commanded Russian forces in Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022, which resulted in significant Russian territorial and materiel losses.[37] Russian military bloggers widely criticized Lapin for Russian battlefield defeats under his command in September 2022, but later received praise for his role in defending Belgorod Oblast against raids by all-Russian pro-Ukrainian forces in May and June 2023.[38] *URA.ru* has previously accurately reported on Lapin's previous appointments prior to their official confirmations and may have credible insider sources within the CMD given its affiliation with the Russian government and the outlet's presence within the CMD's geographic boundaries.[39]

The Kremlin continues efforts to enforce Russian federal laws in post-Soviet countries where Russia has no legal jurisdiction. Russian Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov stated on March 31 that Russia will continue to assert its right, contrary to international law, to enforce Russian federal law on officials of NATO and post-Soviet states for their actions taken within the territory of their own countries where Russian courts have no jurisdiction, despite acknowledging that prosecuting such cases would be "unrealistic." [40] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has placed multiple officials from NATO member countries on its wanted list for them allegedly breaking various Russian laws within their own countries.[41] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's attempt to enforce its federal laws over NATO officials for actions in their own countries effectively denies the sovereignty of these states and are part of Russian efforts to set informational conditions justifying possible Russian escalations against NATO states in the future.[42]

Russian authorities conducted a counterterrorism operation and detained suspected terrorists in the Republic of Dagestan on March 31. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Dagestan declared a counterterrorism operation regime in Makhachkala and Kaspiysk, and the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee stated that Russian authorities detained three militants who were allegedly planning terrorist acts.[43] Dagestan Head Sergei Melikov stated that Russian authorities conducted the counterterrorism operation as part of efforts to strengthen security in the region following the Crocus City Hall attack.[44] Select Russian milbloggers alleged that the detained terrorist suspects in Dagestan are connected to the Crocus City Hall attackers.[45] Russian authorities previously meted out minor punishments following large-scale antisemitic riots in Dagestan in October 2023.[46] The intensification of counterterrorism operations in Russia, particularly in the Caucasus region, is likely due to either Russian law enforcement's actual heightened fears of another terrorist attack in Russia or part of efforts to show the Russian public that authorities are taking competent preventative steps following the major law enforcement and intelligence failure that was the Crocus City Hall attack.

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) reportedly directed all its clergy to change their liturgy to include pro-war prayers in support of Russia's war of conquest against Ukraine and is likely threatening to defrock ROC MP clergy who do not support the war.
- The ROC MP leadership has intensified internal scrutiny against ROC MP clergy and has reportedly defrocked several clergy members who refused to promote Kremlin-introduced prayers supporting Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russia conducted another series of missile and drone strikes largely targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of March 30 to 31 as delays in US security assistance continue to degrade Ukraine's air defense umbrella and enable Russia to significantly damage Ukraine's energy grid.
- Ukrainian forces appear to have repelled a Russian battalion-sized mechanized assault near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on March 30 — the first battalion-sized mechanized assault since Russian forces began the campaign to seize Avdiivka in late October 2023.
- French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu announced on March 31 that France will provide an unspecified number of Aster 30 surface-to-air missiles and "hundreds" of armored vehicles and other equipment to Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed on March 31 the scheduled decree authorizing Russia's semi-annual spring military conscription, which will conscript 150,000 Russians between April 1 and July 15.
- The Russian military command reportedly appointed Chief of Staff of the Russian Ground Forces Colonel General Alexander Lapin as commander of the newly formed Leningrad Military District (LMD).
- The Kremlin continues efforts to enforce Russian federal laws in post-Soviet countries where Russia has no legal jurisdiction.
- Russian authorities conducted a counterterrorism operation and detained suspected terrorists in the Republic of Dagestan on March 31.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and southwest of Donetsk City on March 31.

- The Russian government continues to fail to properly compensate volunteer and irregular forces fighting in Ukraine, despite recently passing new legislation that simplifies the access to veteran statuses for these servicemen and their families.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 30, 2024

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Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

March 30, 2024, 6:55pm ET

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that delays in American security assistance have forced Ukraine to cede the battlefield initiative and that these delays continue to threaten Ukraine's defensive capabilities. The *Washington Post* published excerpts of an interview with Zelensky on March 29 in which Zelensky stated that Ukraine will not be able to defend its territory without American support, as Ukraine currently relies on air defense systems and missiles, electronic warfare jammers, and 155mm artillery shells from the United States.^[1] Zelensky stated that continued materiel shortages will force the Ukrainian military to cede more Ukrainian territory and people "step by step" since a smaller but more stable frontline is preferable to a larger but unstable front that Russian forces could exploit to achieve a breakthrough. Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are "trying to find some way not to retreat" from unspecified frontline areas and noted that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the front near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast. Zelensky reiterated that the Ukrainian military's planning ability to make decisions is contingent on US military assistance and that Ukraine cannot plan counteroffensive efforts without knowing whether Ukraine will receive US military assistance, and what future US military assistance will entail. Zelensky warned that Russia will exploit any future scenarios in which Ukraine must cede the initiative: "If you are not taking steps forward to prepare another counteroffensive, Russia will take [these steps]." Zelensky also stated that Ukraine has learned that "if you don't do it, Russia will do it." Zelensky also indicated that Ukraine is conducting rear-area strikes against Russian oil refineries to generate strategic effects as Ukraine cannot plan for or conduct counteroffensive operations without more information about US military assistance. Zelensky stated that Ukrainian strikes against Russian oil refineries and other strategic targets are in response to Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Zelensky's interview is consistent with Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi's recent statements that delays in Western military assistance are constraining Ukrainian forces and that Ukrainian forces are not able to completely compensate for battlefield shortcomings caused by material shortages.^[2]

Russian missile strikes destroyed one of the largest thermal power plants in Kharkiv Oblast on March 22, as continued delays in US security assistance degrade Ukraine's air defense umbrella and increase Russia's ability to significantly damage Ukraine's energy grid. Ukrainian electric company Tsentrenenergo reported on March 29 that Russian missile strikes destroyed all power units and auxiliary equipment at the Zmiivska Thermal Power Plant (TPP) in Kharkiv Oblast on March 22.^[3] Russian forces conducted the largest series of combined drone and missile strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of March 21 to 22 since the start of the full-scale invasion and have since heavily targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure, including hydroelectric power plants (HPPs).^[4] Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities may aim to degrade Ukrainian defense industrial capacity, and Russian forces are likely trying to exploit Ukraine's degraded air defense umbrella to collapse Ukraine's energy grid.^[5] The *Washington Post* reported on March 29 that Ukraine's largest private energy company DTEK stated that Russian drones and missiles are increasingly penetrating Ukraine's air defense, and that more accurate and concentrated Russian strikes are inflicting greater damage against Ukrainian energy facilities.^[6] Previous Russian strikes have recently rendered other Ukrainian energy facilities inoperable before, but the complete destruction of a TPP is rare and notable, and the recently accelerated degradation of Ukraine's energy generation capabilities, if gone unchecked, will likely constrain Ukraine's ability to stabilize future disruptions to its energy grid in the long term.^[7]

Russian forces are demonstrating technological and tactical adaptations and are increasingly using unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) on the frontlines of Donetsk Oblast. Russian and Ukrainian sources amplified footage on March 29 and 30 showing Ukrainian forces striking Russian unmanned ground vehicles in southeastern Berdychi (northwest of Avdiivka) and in the Bakhmut direction.^[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that these UGVs are equipped with AGS-17 grenade launcher systems, which reportedly can fire 50 to 400 grenades per minute.^[9] Russian sources also amplified footage of other Russian small wheeled and tracked unmanned ground drones operating in unspecified areas, which Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) expert Samuel Bendett assessed to be involved in intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), logistics, personnel evacuations, and light combat roles.^[10] The US and NATO should study the rapidly evolving battlefield in Ukraine to develop a deeper understanding of the future of warfare and the characteristics of future warfare.

The Russian military is reportedly forming mobile fire groups to mitigate against Ukrainian drone strike threats but will likely struggle to field these groups at the required scale in the near term. Russian state outlet *Izvestia* reported on March 29 that Russian military sources stated that the Russian military is forming mobile fire groups within unspecified combined arms armies (CAAs) and air force and air defense armies to combat drones, and will equip these groups with thermal imagers, electronic warfare (EW) systems, and machine guns mounted on pickup trucks. [11] *Izvestia* did not report where the Russian military intends to field the mobile fire groups or the size or echelon of these groups. The Russian military notably faces Ukrainian drone threats both within occupied Ukraine as well as within Russia at oil refineries and other critical infrastructure supporting Russia's war effort, and it is unclear if these mobile groups will be able to defend the extent of territory that Ukrainian drones target.[12] *Izvestia*'s description of the Russian mobile fire groups is similar to Ukrainian tactical mobile fire groups, which the Ukrainian military started to deploy at scale in the spring of 2023 to defend against routine Russian Shahed-136/131 drone strikes.[13] Ukrainian forces have long been conducting drone strikes against Russian targets in occupied Ukraine, and the Russian military command's decision to form the mobile fire groups is likely in response to the recent intensification of Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian oil refineries in February and March.[14]

The Russian Ministry of Energy is reportedly working with Rosgvardia to deploy Pantsir-S1 air defense systems to strategic energy facilities within Russia, but Russian ultranationalists have complained that Russian bureaucracy and a Russian priority defending critical assets in the vicinity of Moscow and St. Petersburg are hampering these efforts.[15] The formation of the mobile fire groups indicates that Russia may be unable to deploy conventional air defense systems, such as Pantsir-S1 or S-300 /400 systems, to all critical facilities within western Russia. Russian forces will be more likely to successfully field mobile groups within occupied Ukraine, where there is relatively less airspace to cover and fewer possible Ukrainian flight vectors for Ukrainian drones, than within western Russia. Russian forces appear to struggle with properly deploying short-range air defense systems along expected flight vectors for Ukrainian drones, and the Russian military appears to have even failed to cover important potential targets in reportedly well-defended areas within Russia.[16] The mass deployment of mobile fire groups throughout western Russia could pose similar challenges for Russian forces, as the Russian military may not be able to sufficiently field the groups at scale.

Russian authorities continue to escalate legal pressure against migrants in the wake of the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, prompting both Russian authorities to increase deportations and migrants to voluntarily leave Russia. Russian human rights project First Department reported on March 29 that St. Petersburg authorities have launched "Operation Anti-Migrant" and are conducting a large-scale operation to identify and deport migrants who reportedly violated migration laws from Russia.[17] One of First Department's lawyers stated that Russian law enforcement is conducting raids on hostels and apartments in St. Petersburg and that temporary detention centers in St. Petersburg are overcrowded with migrants. The lawyer stated that Russian authorities deported 64 foreign citizens on March 28 and estimated that Russian authorities deported enough migrants to fill two full planes that recently flew from St. Petersburg to an unspecified destination. Russian opposition news outlet Astra reported on March 30 that more than 400 St. Petersburg police officers and Rosgvardia personnel are participating in the operation and that St. Petersburg police have inspected the paperwork of almost 1,500 foreign citizens, issued several hundred administrative violations, and initiated 10 criminal cases during the operation so far.[18] St. Petersburg City Courts Joint Press Service Head Daria Lebedeva stated that St. Petersburg courts over the past week ruled to forcibly deport 418 migrants and ordered an additional 48 migrants (who had been living in the city) to pay a fine and voluntarily leave Russia for violating migration laws.[19] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers detained three Central Asian migrants accused of preparing to conduct a terrorist attack at an unspecified mass gathering in Stavropol Oblast. [20] Tajikistan's Deputy Minister of Labor, Migration, and Employment Shakhnoza Nodiri stated that Tajikistan has observed an outflow of Tajik migrants from Russia following the Crocus attack and that many Tajik migrants are calling the Tajik government stating that they want to leave Russia out of fear and panic.[21] Nodiri stated that more people are entering Tajikistan than leaving, but that the government expects the outflow of Tajik migrants from Russia to be a temporary phenomenon.

Russian officials have thus far charged nine people for their supposed involvement in the Crocus attack, all of whom Russian authorities have identified as citizens of Tajikistan.[22] The *BBC News Russian Service* reported on March 27 that Russian authorities have significantly increased the number of criminal cases initiated for migration law violations since the Crocus attack, particularly against Tajik citizens.[23] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) reported that Russian citizens from ethnic minorities and migrants in Russia have grown increasingly concerned about ethnically motivated crimes and xenophobic rhetoric in the aftermath of the Crocus attack, and First Department similarly noted that anti-migrant and xenophobic sentiments have risen sharply in Russia following the attack.[24] The Russian ultranationalist community has intensified its calls for anti-migrant policies, and Russian officials recently proposed policies, such as limiting the entrance of migrants to Russia,

introducing harsher punishments for crimes committed by migrants, and abolishing Russia's visa-free regime with Central Asia countries.[25] Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed concern over heightened ethnic tensions in Russian society following the Crocus attack on March 28 and may have signaled to the Russian ultranationalist community that they should stop inflaming ethnic tensions. [26] Russian authorities may seek to detain a larger number of migrants to coerce them into signing military service contracts, given Russia's previous reliance on migrants and prisoners in its crypto-mobilization campaign.[27] Anti-migrant policies could threaten Russia's crypto-mobilization efforts and further worsen Russian labor shortages if Russia deports large numbers of migrants or if significant portions of Russia's migrant communities emigrate, but Russian authorities are unlikely to be willing to give into Russian ultranationalists' xenophobic demands at the expense of Russia's war effort.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated that delays in American security assistance have forced Ukraine to cede the battlefield initiative, not contest the battlefield initiative, and continue to threaten Ukraine's defensive capabilities.
- Russian missile strikes destroyed one of the largest thermal power plants in Kharkiv Oblast on March 22, as continued delays in US security assistance degrade Ukraine's air defense umbrella and increase Russia's ability to significantly damage Ukraine's energy grid.
- Russian forces are demonstrating technological and tactical adaptations and are increasingly using unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) on the frontlines of Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military is reportedly forming mobile fire groups to mitigate against Ukrainian drone strike threats but will likely struggle to field these groups at the required scale in the near term.
- Russian authorities continue to escalate legal pressure against migrants in the wake of the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, prompting both Russian authorities to increase deportations and migrants to voluntarily leave Russia.
- Positional engagements continued throughout the theater on March 30.
- Russian mobilized personnel continue to suffer high casualties while fighting in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 29, 2024

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Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

March 29, 2024, 9:30pm ET

The Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), a Kremlin-controlled organization and a known tool within the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit, held the World Russian People's Council in Moscow on March 27 and 28 and approved an ideological and policy document tying several Kremlin ideological narratives together in an apparent effort to form a wider nationalist ideology around the war in Ukraine and Russia's expansionist future. [1] ROC MP Head Patriarch Kirill, reportedly himself a former Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) officer and a known staunch supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin, chaired the congress of the World Russian People's Council that approved the document, and Kirill likely coordinated the document's ideological narrative and policy recommendations with the Kremlin.[2] The document, "The Present and Future of the Russian World," addresses Russian legislative and executive authorities with specific calls to amend Russian policy documents and laws. These calls are likely either attempts to socialize desired Kremlin policies among Russians before their implementation or to test public reactions to policies that Kremlin officials are currently considering. Putin and Kremlin officials have gradually attempted to elaborate on amorphous ideological narratives about the war in Ukraine and their envisioned geopolitical confrontation with the West since the start of the full-scale invasion, and the ROC MP appears to be offering a more coherent ideological framework for Russians.[3] The ROC MP released the document a week after the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack and roughly a month before the start of the Orthodox Easter Holy Week, and likely aims to seize on heightened anxieties following the terrorist attack and increased Russian Orthodoxy observance to garner support for its desired ultranationalist policies and ideological vision.

The ROC MP intensified Kremlin rhetoric about Russia's war in Ukraine and cast it as an existential and civilizational "holy war," a significant inflection for Russian authorities who have so far carefully avoided officially framing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as any kind of "war." The ROC MP called Putin's "special military operation" a holy war (Svyashennaya Vojna) and

a new stage in the Russian people's struggle for "national liberation...in southwestern Russia," referencing eastern and southeastern Ukraine.^[4] The ROC MP claimed that the Russian people are defending their lives, freedom, and statehood; their civilizational, religious, national, and cultural identity; and their right to live within the borders of a single Russian state by waging Putin's war of conquest in Ukraine. The ROC MP argued that the war in Ukraine is a holy war because Russia is defending "Holy Russia" and the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism. The ROC MP asserted that the war in Ukraine will conclude with Russia seizing exclusive influence over the entire territory of modern Ukraine and the exclusion of any Ukrainian government that the Kremlin determines to be hostile to Russia. The ROC MP's description of Russian goals is in line with repeated Kremlin statements indicating that Putin retains his objective to destroy Ukrainian sovereignty and statehood.^[5] The ROC MP's use and description of the holy war in Ukraine is also consistent with Kremlin efforts to frame the war as an existential national struggle against Ukraine and the collective West but notably expands the alleged threats that defeat in Ukraine poses for Russians.^[6] The term "holy war" may also conjure allusions to the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War), as the Soviet Union's unofficial war anthem shared the same name, and the Kremlin has routinely invoked the mythos of the Great Patriotic War to generate domestic support for the war in Ukraine.^[7] The Kremlin has continued to stress that the war in Ukraine is a "special military operation," however, and the ROC MP's direct acknowledgment of the conflict as a holy war may elicit support from Russians who have found the Kremlin's comparatively restrained rhetoric uninspiring. The ROC MP did not define the holy war as a purely Orthodox concept and instead tied it to the Kremlin's purposefully broad conception of who is a part of the Russian nation and *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World).^[8] Ukrainian victory does not pose these existential threats, however, as Ukraine's struggle to restore its territorial integrity, return its people, and defend its national identity does not infringe on Russian identity, statehood, or territorial integrity.

The ROC MP called for the codification of elements of the *Russkiy Mir* and may be gauging public support for the formal inclusion of ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians in the Kremlin's concept of the Russian nation. The ROC MP stated that Russia is the "creator, support, and defender" of the *Russkiy Mir* and that the *Russkiy Mir* is a "spiritual, cultural, and civilizational phenomenon" that transcends the borders of the Russian Federation and historical Russian lands and encompasses everyone that values Russian traditions and culture.^[9] The ROC MP claimed the *Russkiy Mir*'s mission is to destroy and prevent efforts to establish "universal hegemony in the world" and that the reunification of the "Russian nation" should be one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy. The ROC MP stated that Russia should return to the "trinity doctrine" of the Russian nation, which falsely asserts that the "Russian nation" is comprised of sub-groups of ethnic Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians whom Russia should reunify. The ROC MP called on Russia to codify the "trinity doctrine" in law, make it an "integral part" of the Russian legal system, include it in the "normative list" of Russian spiritual and moral values, and give the concept legal protection. Putin and other Kremlin officials have consistently invoked similar claims about the "Russian people" and *Russkiy Mir* since before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as a means to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine while undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and denying the existence of a Ukrainian ethnic identity.^[10] The ROC MP may be gauging the response to the idea of codifying the "trinity doctrine" on the Kremlin's orders. The Kremlin may codify this doctrine as official Russian policy.

The ROC MP heavily emphasized Russia's need for traditional family values and an updated migration policy to counter Russia's ongoing demographic crisis. The ROC MP labeled Russia's demographic crisis as Russia's main existential threat and characterized steady demographic growth as a critical national security priority. The ROC MP asserted that Russia should aim to grow its population to 600 million people (a roughly 450 million increase) in the next 100 years and laid out a series of measures that it envisions would allow Russia to achieve this monumental task. The ROC MP called for the revival of the "traditional large family" and traditional family values in Russia – echoing Russian President Vladimir Putin's emphasis on 2024 as the "Year of the Family" in recent major national addresses.^[11] The ROC MP claimed that the Russian government should recognize the family and its well-being as Russia's "main national development goal" and a "strategic national priority" and should amend Russia's main strategic planning documents to reflect this.^[12] The ROC MP called on Russian popular culture to create a "cult of the family" in society and suggested various economic benefits the state should enact to encourage larger families. The ROC MP claimed that a new state migration policy is also key to an "effective" demographic policy. The ROC MP complained that migrants who do not speak Russian, do not understand Russian history and culture, and cannot integrate into Russian society are "deforming" Russia's unified legal, cultural, and linguistic space. The ROC MP alleged that the "uncontrolled" influx of migrant labor decreases the "indigenous" population's wages and access to jobs and that "closed ethnic enclaves" are "breeding grounds" for corruption, organized crime, extremism, and terrorism. The ROC MP offered a series of policy recommendations that Russia should prioritize in a new migration policy, including "significant" restrictions on low-skilled foreign laborers, guarantees of employment and high incomes for Russian citizens, protections of the

rights and interests of ethnic Russians, and other indigenous peoples of Russia, the mass repatriation of "compatriots" to Russia, and the relocation of highly-skilled foreign specialists who are loyal to Russia and ready to integrate into Russian society.

The ROC MP's demographic and migration policy suggestions continue to highlight how the Kremlin struggles with inconsistent and contradictory policies concerning migrants and the interests of its ultranationalist population. Select Russian officials and ultranationalist voices have recently called for Russia to enact anti-migrant policies following the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, but ISW continues to assess that Russia is unlikely to introduce any restrictions that would reduce the number of migrants in Russia given that Russia continues to heavily rely on migrants to offset domestic labor shortages and for force generation efforts.[13] Putin asserted in December 2023 that Russia's "compatriots abroad" are those who have historical, cultural, or linguistic ties to Russia, and the ROC MP appears to suggest that the repatriation of such "compatriots" to Russia could be a large resource Russia could tap into to solve its demographic crisis.[14] Some of the ROC MP's other policy recommendations, however, contradictorily seek to restrict some of the very migrants that would fall under Putin's definition of "compatriots abroad." The ROC MP's approach to the *Russkiy Mir* appears to be at odds with Putin's previous definition of *Russkiy Mir* which posits a diverse and inclusive Russian civic nationalism.[15]

The ROC MP appears to be combining previously parallel Kremlin narrative efforts into a relatively cohesive ideology focusing on national identity and demographic resurgence that promises Russians a period of national rejuvenation in exchange for social and civic duties. The ROC MP highlighted that "the restoration of the unity of the Russian people" through the war in Ukraine is a key condition for Russia's survival and successful development throughout the 21st century. This call for restoration amounts to the full-scale destruction of the Ukrainian nation and its envelopment into Russia. The ROC MP aims to also envelop ethnic Belarusians into the Russian nation through its conception of the "trinity doctrine" while also massively repatriating other "compatriots" abroad. The ROC MP's calls for Russians to assume the responsibility for steadily increasing birth rates and averting demographic catastrophe similarly promises Russians that Russian sovereignty and identity will persist in the 21st century. These efforts to expand Russia's control over those it considers to be a part of the *Russkiy Mir*, whether through mass repatriation or forceful means like Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine, serve the same purpose as the calls for Russians to increase birth rates — increasing Russia's overall population with people that ultranationalists consider to be "Russian." The ROC MP argued that the establishment of a stable and sovereign *Russkiy Mir* under the Russian state will lead to economic opportunity and Russia's role as one of the leading centers of a multipolar world order. The ROC MP stated that the typical embodiment of the *Russkiy Mir* after the promised national rejuvenation would be a Russian family with three or more children and their own single-family home, offering ordinary Russians future socioeconomic benefits in exchange for sacrifices made now in backing the ROC MP's suggested ultranationalist ideology and achieving Russia's "unification" with Ukraine and Belarus. The ROC MP's suggested ideology explicitly ties Russian national security to the preservation of an imagined and disputed Russian nation and Russian demographic growth, offering the Kremlin expanded justifications for acts of aggression against neighboring countries and the West in the name of protecting the overall size and growth of the imagined *Russkiy Mir*. **The Kremlin may choose not to fully align itself publicly with the ultranationalist ideology that the ROC MP has proposed at this time but will highly likely borrow from and leverage it to generate support for the war effort in Ukraine and any future acts of aggression against Russia's neighbors and the West.**

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stressed that materiel shortages from delays in Western security assistance are constraining Ukrainian forces and forcing Ukraine to conduct a strategic defense. Ukrainian outlet *Ukrinform* published an interview with Syrskyi on March 29, wherein Syrskyi stated that a strategic defense is logical given Ukraine's materiel shortages and noted that Ukraine is unable to plan operations due to uncertainty around Western military aid provisions.[16] Syrskyi stated that Russian forces' significant personnel advantage, heavy Russian airstrikes, and Ukrainian artillery shell shortages enabled Russian forces to break through Ukrainian defenses and seize Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, in mid-February 2024, and that Ukrainian forces could have successfully defended Avdiivka if they had sufficient artillery ammunition and air defenses in the area. Syrskyi acknowledged that Russian forces significantly increased airstrikes against Ukrainian forces in recent weeks and months and that Russian forces recently had an advantage over Ukrainian artillery ammunition at a ratio of six to one. Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces have been able to offset Russian forces' artillery superiority through rear area strikes, but only in certain areas of the theater.

Ukrainian forces have proven themselves capable of significantly degrading Russian forces when well-provisioned. Ukrainian forces conducted an interdiction campaign using HIMARS to target bridges over the Dnipro River forcing Russian forces to withdraw from west (right) bank Kherson Oblast in

November 2022.[17] Ukrainian forces exploited a surprise breakthrough of Russian lines in Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022.[18] Ukrainian forces are currently waging an ongoing campaign that is limiting the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF)'s ability to operate freely in and control the Black Sea. [19] Syrskyi's interview, particularly his assertion that Ukrainian forces can defend their territory and defeat Russia's invasion provided sufficient Western military assistance no matter how many soldiers Russia generates, underscores how the American failure to provide timely and consistent military equipment and weapons to Ukraine has constrained Ukraine's ability to conduct strategic planning or wage major operations.[20] Syrskyi's statements indicate that Ukraine is attempting to adapt to reduced assistance both on the battlefield and by mobilizing its defense industrial base (DIB), but these efforts are insufficient to fully compensate for the lack of materiel in the near term.[21]

Syrskyi also indicated that Ukraine is attempting to mitigate manpower shortages by reinforcing frontline units with existing personnel from rear areas. Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces have transferred thousands of personnel from rear area non-combat units to frontline combat units and begun force rotations to allow frontline forces to rest.[22] Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces expect to have sufficient personnel to conduct its strategic defense and that this number is well below the 500,000 personnel that Ukrainian officials had suggested mobilizing in December 2023.[23]

The Russian military likely expanded the target set for Russia's strike campaign against Ukraine's critical infrastructure to include hydroelectric power plants. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched a series of missile and drone strikes at targets in Ukraine on the night of March 28 to 29, including 60 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and Kursk Oblast; three Kinzhal missiles from MiG-31 aircraft over Ryazan Oblast; nine Kh-59 cruise missiles from Su-34 aircraft over Belgorod Oblast; four Iskander-K missiles from Kursk Oblast; and 21 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from Tu-95MS strategic bombers that took off from Engels airbase in Saratov Oblast.[24] Ukrainian air defenses downed 58 Shahed drones, five Kh-59 cruise missiles, all four Iskander-K missiles, and 17 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Russian forces deliberately targeted the Kaniv and Dnister hydroelectric power plants in Cherkasy and Chernivtsi oblasts during the March 28-29 strikes. [25] Ukrainian officials reported that these Russian strikes targeted unspecified critical infrastructure in Ivano-Frankivsk and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck the Kryvyi Rih Thermal Power Plant and the Serednodniprovska Hydroelectric Power Plant in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[26] Ukrainian state electricity transmission operator Ukrrenergo reported that Russian strikes on March 28-29 damaged thermal and hydroelectric power plants in central and western Ukraine, causing electricity shutdowns in Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv oblasts.[27] Russian strikes on March 22 significantly damaged Ukraine's Dnipro Hydroelectric Power Plant (DHPP) in Zaporizhzhia City and the facility will likely remain offline for some time.[28] ISW previously assessed that Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities may aim to degrade Ukraine's defense industrial capacity and that Russian forces are likely trying to exploit Ukrainian air defense missile shortages in a renewed attempt to collapse Ukraine's energy grid.[29]

Russia's newly emerging pattern of striking Ukrainian dams and hydroelectric power plants is a significant inflection and an escalation of Russia's strike campaign against Ukraine. Russian forces did not previously conduct sustained missile strikes against Ukrainian dams and hydroelectric power plants. The US and European countries remain unwilling to provide Ukraine with materiel that could prove operationally or strategically significant and assist significant Ukrainian offensive efforts due to fears of Russian escalation or retaliation. Western states' decisions to limit Ukraine's defense capabilities in an effort to manage escalation have failed to prevent Russia from escalating its war against Ukraine, however. Ukraine, moreover, is conducting a strategic defense, not an offensive effort that could seriously threaten Russian positions in occupied Ukraine or Russian territory. US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown Jr. stated on March 28, regarding the provision of long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine, that the "risk of escalation is not as high as maybe it was at the beginning [of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine]."[30] Russia has consistently proven its willingness to escalate its aggression without provocation, and concern about Russian retaliation and escalation in response to the further provision of Western weapons and systems to Ukraine should not dictate US or other Western decision-making regarding this assistance.[31]

Russia vetoed an annual United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution extending a monitoring panel tracking adherence to UN sanctions against North Korea on March 28.

[32] China also abstained from the vote. The UN Security Council has unanimously adopted the annual renewal of the North Korean sanctions monitoring panel's mandate since its inception in 2009.

[33] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov vaguely commented that the veto was in Russia's interest.

[34] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed that the UN sanctions against North Korea are "old models" and have led to "severe humanitarian consequences" in North Korea.[35] Zakharova claimed that the "collective West" is responsible for Russia's veto of the resolution and that the West did not want to accept Russia's proposed "compromises." [36] *Voice of*

America (VOA) reported that Russia and China recently attempted to push the UNSC to add “sunset” clauses to some of the sanctions on North Korea in which the sanctions would expire after an unspecified period of time if the UNSC did not reach a consensus on their extension.[37] Russia recently strengthened its relationship with North Korea as part of efforts to source North Korean ballistic missiles and artillery ammunition to use in Ukraine, and Russia may be helping North Korea evade international sanctions beyond the immediate violations of sanctions involved in North Korean weapons transfers to Russia.[38] Russia’s veto of the supervisory panel is likely part of Russian efforts to prevent the detection of Russia’s own sanctions evasion schemes with North Korea. Russia may also have suspected that the UNSC would not approve the “sunset” clause proposals and instead used these proposals to set information conditions to later blame the West for the expiration of the monitoring panel’s mandate. Kremlin newswire TASS stated on March 27 that Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin met with North Korean Minister of State Security Ri Chang-dae in Pyongyang during a visit on March 25-27 and discussed deepening Russian-North Korean relations.[39]

The Kremlin appears to have succeeded in pressuring Telegram to further censor extremist content following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, highlighting the Kremlin’s ability to pressure significant actors within the Russian information space to act in its interests. Telegram founder and CEO Pavel Durov stated on March 28 that Telegram began measures to prevent extremist posts calling for terrorist attacks on March 24, preventing tens of thousands of alleged attempts to send messages calling for terrorist attacks and blocking thousands of users who sent such messages.[40] Durov stated that Telegram users in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus will be able to limit who can send them private messages beginning next week and emphasized that Telegram is not a place to call for violence.[41] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated on March 28 that Russia has no plans to block Telegram but specifically called on Durov by name to pay more attention to how terrorists use the platform and that the Kremlin “expected more” from Durov.[42] The Kremlin’s ability to pressure Durov is noteworthy given that Telegram is no longer based in Russia, and Durov reportedly left Russia in 2014 after refusing to cooperate with Russian censorship measures. [43]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), a Kremlin-controlled organization and a known tool within the Russian hybrid warfare toolkit, held the World Russian People’s Council in Moscow on March 27 and 28 and approved an ideological and policy document tying several Kremlin ideological narratives together in an apparent effort to form a wider nationalist ideology around the war in Ukraine and Russia’s expansionist future.
- The ROC MP intensified Kremlin rhetoric about Russia’s war in Ukraine and cast it as an existential and civilizational “holy war,” a significant inflection for Russian authorities who have so far carefully avoided officially framing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as any kind of “war.”
- The ROC MP called for the codification of elements of the *Russkiy Mir* and may be gauging public support for the formal inclusion of ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians in the Kremlin’s concept of the Russian nation.
- The ROC MP heavily emphasized Russia’s need for traditional family values and an updated migration policy to counter Russia’s ongoing demographic crisis.
- The ROC MP appears to be combining previously parallel Kremlin narrative efforts into a relatively cohesive ideology focusing on national identity and demographic resurgence that promises Russians a period of national rejuvenation in exchange for social and civic duties.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stressed that materiel shortages from delays in Western security assistance are constraining Ukrainian forces and forcing Ukraine to conduct a strategic defense.
- The Russian military likely expanded the target set for Russia’s strike campaign against Ukraine’s critical infrastructure to include hydroelectric power plants.
- Russia vetoed an annual United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution extending a monitoring panel tracking adherence to UN sanctions against North Korea on March 28.
- The Kremlin appears to have succeeded in pressuring Telegram to further censor extremist content following the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack, highlighting the Kremlin’s ability to pressure significant actors within the Russian information space to act in its interests.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 29.

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is preparing for Russia's semi-annual spring conscription cycle, which will begin on April 1.
 - Russian occupation authorities continue law enforcement crackdowns, including against the Crimean Tatar ethnic minority, to consolidate control over occupied Ukraine.
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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 28, 2024

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

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

March 28, 2024, 8:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on March 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine is currently preventing Russian forces from making significant tactical gains along the entire frontline, but continued delays in US security assistance will likely expand the threat of **Russian operational success, including in non-linear and possibly exponential ways**. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in an interview with CBS News published on March 28 that Ukrainian forces managed to hold off Russian advances through winter 2023–2024 and that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the operational situation.^[1] Ukrainian forces slowed the rate of Russian advances west of Avdiivka following the Russian seizure of the settlement on February 17, and Russian forces have only made gradual, marginal tactical gains elsewhere in Ukraine.^[2] Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are not prepared to defend against another major Russian offensive effort expected in May or June 2024, however.^[3] Russian forces will likely continue to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations through spring 2024 regardless of difficult weather and terrain conditions in order to exploit Ukrainian materiel shortages before the arrival of expected limited Western security assistance.^[4] Russian forces also likely aim to force Ukraine to expend materiel it could otherwise accumulate for defensive efforts this summer and possible counteroffensive operations later in 2024 or in 2025.^[5] Pervasive shortages may be forcing Ukraine to prioritize limited resources to critical sectors of the front, increasing the risk of a Russian breakthrough in other less-well-provisioned sectors and making the frontline overall more fragile than it appears despite the current relatively slow rate of Russian advances.^[6]

ISW assesses that Russian forces have seized 505 square kilometers of territory since launching offensive operations in October 2023, and Russian forces gained almost 100 more square kilometers of territory between January 1 and March 28, 2024, than in the last three months of 2023 (although this rate of advance may be due to a combination of Ukrainian materiel shortages and more conducive weather conditions in the winter than in the fall). This marginal increase in the rate of Russian advance is not reflective of the threat of Russian operational success amid continued delays in US security assistance, however. Materiel constraints limit how Ukrainian forces can conduct effective defensive operations while also offering Russian forces flexibility in how to conduct offensive operations, which can lead to compounding and non-linear opportunities for Russian forces to make operationally significant gains in the future.^[7] The opportunities to exploit Ukrainian vulnerabilities will widen as materiel shortages persist and as Ukraine continues to grapple with how to address manpower challenges.^[8] The arrival of sufficient and regular Western security assistance and the resolution of Ukrainian manpower challenges would narrow these opportunities for Russian forces and provide Ukrainian forces with the ability to stop Russian forces from making even marginal tactical gains, to degrade Russian offensive capabilities, and to prepare for future counteroffensive operations to liberate more Ukrainian territory.^[9]

The continued degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella provides one of the most immediate avenues through which Russian forces could generate non-linear operational impacts. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that Russian forces launched 190 missiles of various types, 140 Shahed drones, and 700 glide bombs at targets in Ukraine between March 18 and 24.^[10] Intensified Russian drone and missile strikes are likely once again placing pressures on Ukraine to prioritize the allocation of sparse air defense assets to defending population centers, critical infrastructure, and industrial facilities in the rear over positions along the frontline.^[11] Kuleba stated that Russia's widespread use of glide bombs along the frontline gives Russia a major battlefield advantage and that the only way to counter these tactics is for Ukrainian forces to shoot down the Russian aircraft conducting the strikes, which requires a sufficient number of air defense systems along the front.^[12] Russian forces notably employed mass glide bomb strikes to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February and have steadily increased their use of guided and unguided

glide bomb strikes against rear and frontline Ukrainian positions in 2024.[13] Ukrainian and Western officials have increasingly warned of a critical shortage of air defense missiles in the coming months, and the further degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella would not only limit Ukraine's ability to protect critical elements of its war effort in the rear but would also likely afford Russian aviation prolonged secure operation along the frontline.[14] This security would allow Russian forces to significantly increase glide bomb strikes at scale and possibly even allow Russian forces to conduct routine large-scale aviation operations against near rear Ukrainian logistics and cities to devastating effect.[15] Expanded aviation operations could allow Russian forces to heavily degrade Ukrainian combat capabilities and isolate sectors of the battlefield in support of efforts to make operationally significant gains.

US security assistance that could establish a wider and more stable Ukrainian air defense umbrella would deny Russian forces these opportunities. Zelensky stated on March 28 that five to seven additional Patriot air defense systems would allow Ukraine to protect population centers, industrial facilities, and the Ukrainian military.[16] Kuleba also noted that Patriot air defense systems are needed to defend Ukraine against intensified Russian ballistic missile strikes, as Ukraine's Soviet-era air defense systems are unable to intercept these missiles.[17] Kuleba added that stronger Ukrainian air defense along the frontline would prevent Ukrainian forces from losing positions and enable Ukraine to force Russian forces to retreat from positions, likely in reference to the possible operational impacts of decreased Russian aviation operations.[18]

Russia's ability to conduct opportunistic but limited offensive actions along Ukraine's international border with Russia offers Russia further opportunities to constrain Ukrainian manpower and materiel, but Western aid provisions and Ukrainian efforts to address manpower challenges would ease the impacts of such Russian efforts. Zelensky told CBS that Ukrainian forces are constructing fortifications and defensive positions near Sumy City in response to a reported significant buildup of Russian forces in neighboring Bryansk Oblast and recent strikes on Ukrainian settlements in the area.[19] Sumy Oblast Military Administration Head Volodymyr Artyuk recently warned that Russia is conducting an information operation threatening a possible Russian attack on Sumy Oblast but stated that Ukrainian authorities have not observed any Russian strike groups near the borders with Sumy Oblast.[20] ISW has not observed visual evidence that Russian forces are concentrating forces in Bryansk Oblast in preparation for any significant military undertaking. Russian forces will likely only be able to conduct a large-scale offensive operation in one direction in the coming months, and it is unlikely that Russian forces would suddenly prioritize a whole new front over the operational directions that they have been focusing on in the past year and a half in Ukraine.[21] Russian forces could theoretically choose to concentrate forces at any point along the over three-thousand-kilometer-long frontline along the Russia-Ukraine and Belarus-Ukraine borders in addition to the frontline in Ukraine, forcing Ukraine to respond to Russian actions by re-allocating already scarce resources from other, more active sectors of the front. Ukraine already appears to be prioritizing its limited manpower and materiel resources to critical sectors of the frontline, and even limited transfers of Ukrainian materiel and personnel from active frontline areas could prove destabilizing.[22] Future Russian offensive operations are not necessarily limited to the existing frontlines in eastern and southern Ukraine, and the Russian military command may only have to deploy a limited number of Russian personnel to any previously inactive sector of the frontline to force Ukraine to redeploy necessary manpower and equipment to that area, potentially creating vulnerabilities that Russian forces could exploit.

Ukraine could overcome these vulnerabilities if it received US military assistance in a timely fashion and addressed its ongoing manpower challenges. Ukrainian officials recently reported that the Ukrainian military is prioritizing rotations and rest for frontline units and other efforts to optimize Ukraine's military organization structure.[23] The need for rotations is only part of the manpower challenge Ukraine faces, however. ISW continues to assess that consistent provision of Western military assistance in key systems, many of which only the US can provide rapidly at scale, will play a critical role in determining Russian prospects in 2024 and when Ukrainian forces can attempt to contest the theater-wide initiative.[24] The course of the war over the rest of 2024 depends heavily on the provision of US military assistance and continuing non-US military support as well as on Ukraine's ability to address its manpower challenges. **The forecast cone — the range of possible outcomes from most advantageous to most dangerous — is very wide and will remain so until it is clear whether the US will resume military support and Ukraine will address its manpower challenges.** Both the US and Ukraine retain considerable agency in determining the course of the war this year and in coming years. This war's immediate and long-term prospects remain highly contingent on decisions yet to be made in Washington, Kyiv, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and elsewhere and on the execution of those decisions in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to make sensationalized statements as part of Russia's ongoing reflexive control campaign, which aims to deter further Western military aid

provisions to Ukraine and deflect attention from the growing Russian force posturing against NATO. Putin, during a visit to the Russian 344th Center for Combat Employment and Retraining of Army Aviation Pilots on March 27, reiterated basic truisms and several boilerplate narratives aimed at distracting Western policymakers with irrelevant and tired Russian threats, likely seeking to delay and influence important decisions regarding additional Western military aid to Ukraine and countering the Russian threat against NATO. Putin claimed that Russia has “no aggressive intentions” towards NATO states and that Russia “would not be doing anything in Ukraine” if it were not for “the coup d'état in Ukraine and subsequent hostilities in Donbas.”^[25] Putin is once again injecting into the international media bloodstream the false narrative that the West and NATO are responsible for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin routinely falsely accuses Western countries of staging a coup in Ukraine in 2014 and Ukraine of violence against Russian-speaking residents of Donbas in an effort to deflect responsibility for the war in Ukraine and manipulate Western perceptions about Russia’s intent and capabilities.^[26]

Putin dismissed claims that Russia wants to attack other countries, including Poland, the Baltic states, and the Czech Republic as “complete nonsense,” while adding that Russia is defending the people living on Russia’s “historical territories” in Ukraine. Putin’s denials of Russia’s increasingly aggressive posturing against NATO’s eastern flank are reminiscent of the Kremlin’s claims that Russian forces would not invade Ukraine in late 2021 and early 2022 (including right up to the eve of the full-scale invasion) — a line the Kremlin used to delay and deter any preparations to counter the Russian threat.^[27] Putin’s denials of Russia’s imperialist aspirations are also incongruent with his own definition of the “Russian World” (“*Russkiy Mir*”) — an ideological and geographic conception that includes all of the former territories of Kyivan Rus, the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation.^[28] The concept of the “Russian World” allows Putin to regard any territories that were once ruled by or claimed to be ruled by a Russian regime as Russia’s “historical territories,” which include Poland and the Baltic states. Putin may elect to “protect” people the Kremlin describes as Russian “compatriots” in these claimed “historic territories” at the time of his choosing by replicating similar narratives he used to invade Ukraine.

Putin also attempted to scare NATO states away from supplying Ukraine with F-16 fighter aircraft and attempted to deter Western audiences from further financial commitments to Ukraine’s and NATO’s security. Putin stated that Russia will destroy F-16 aircraft in Ukraine just like it destroyed other Western-provided military equipment and threatened that Russia would target Western airfields if Ukraine used these facilities to facilitate strikes against Russia. These statements, presented in sensationalized fashion, are, in fact, statements of the obvious — naturally Russian forces will seek to destroy Ukrainian military equipment of any sort, and naturally Russia would regard bases from which such forces conduct military operations against Russian forces as legitimate targets — such is war. Such declarations deserve no attention, yet Putin uses them to achieve important informational effects. Putin and Russian sources previously deliberately overwhelmed the Western information space with reports and footage of destroyed Western-provided military equipment and other Ukrainian tactical losses in summer 2023 to discourage timely Western military aid support and confidence in Ukrainian forces during the counteroffensive period.^[29] Putin additionally attempted to involve himself in the US domestic political debate over defense spending by claiming that Russia spends nearly ten times less on its defense budget than the United States — an irrelevance considering Russia’s far smaller GDP and the fact that the US is not committing its own combat forces (paid for by the US defense budget) to this war.^[30] Putin’s mention of US defense spending also likely attempted to create a false perception that Russia is more successful on the battlefield despite having a smaller defense budget, obscuring the reality that Russia has partially mobilized its economy and imposed hardship on its people to support the war effort while the US and the West are maintaining their economies on a peacetime footing.

Putin’s March 27 statements are neither new nor surprising and best illustrate how the Kremlin routinely overwhelms the Western information space, often with irrelevant or decontextualized truths rather than with outright misinformation or disinformation, to shape global perceptions and advance its own long-term objectives. These statements should be analyzed alongside endless instances of the Kremlin reusing the same narratives, rather than as standalone inflections. Overwhelming, confusing, and manipulating the Western information space and perceptions are part of the Russian strategy of “reflexive control” — or a way of transmitting bases for decision-making to an opponent so that they freely come to a pre-determined decision.^[31] Putin’s statements target the US and Western perception of costs, priorities, risks, and alignment with values to achieve the desired outcome of delaying Western military aid provisions to Ukraine or prevent NATO from recognizing and responding to the potential Russian threat in a timely manner. Putin’s statements and other Kremlin information operations are part of Russia’s principal effort to force the US and the West to accept and reason from Russian premises to decisions that advance Russia’s interests, as ISW has recently assessed.^[32]

The Russian Investigative Committee unsurprisingly claimed that it has evidence tying Ukraine to the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack amid continued Kremlin efforts to link Ukraine and the West to the terrorist attack to generate more domestic support for the war in Ukraine. Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin claimed on March 28 that the Investigative Committee's investigation into the Crocus City Hall attackers confirmed that the attackers received "significant amounts of money and cryptocurrency" from Ukraine that they used to plan the attack. [33] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin likely intends to capitalize on domestic fear and anger and hopes that perceptions of Ukrainian and Western involvement in the Crocus City Hall attack will increase domestic support for the war in Ukraine.[34] The Kremlin will likely continue to conduct information operations targeting the Russian population and international audiences claiming to have evidence linking Ukraine and the West to the Crocus City Hall attack. ISW remains confident that the Islamic State (IS) conducted the Crocus City Hall attack and has yet to observe independent reporting or evidence to suggest that an actor other than IS was responsible for or aided the attack.[35]

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed concern for heightened ethnic tension in Russian society following the Crocus City Hall attacks and may be falsely blaming Ukraine and the West for the Crocus City Hall attack in order to divert domestic attention away from ethnic tensions. Putin claimed on March 28 that he is concerned over statements that "Russia is only for [ethnic] Russians" from "jingo-patriots," likely referencing March 24 footage of Russian ultranationalists harassing a woman from Sakha Republic in the Moscow metro and shouting that "Russia is only for [ethnic] Russians." [36] Putin's choice to quote these random and unknown Russian ultranationalists is likely a deliberate attempt to signal to Russian ultranationalists, including more well-known milbloggers and media and political personalities, that they should stop enflaming ethnic tension in the wake of the Crocus City Hall attack. Putin likely wants to avoid heightened animosity against ethnic minorities in Russia, whom Russia has disproportionately targeted in force-generation efforts, and to avoid continued calls for anti-migrant policies. ISW continues to assess that Russia is unlikely to introduce any restrictions that would reduce the number of migrants in Russia or restrict new migrants from entering Russia given that Russia continues to heavily rely on Central Asian migrants to offset domestic labor shortages and to target Central Asian migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts.[37] Putin intends to falsely direct blame for the Crocus City Hall attack onto Ukraine and the West to generate domestic support for the war in Ukraine, but continued Russian ultranationalist attempts to blame migrants and radical Islamists for the attack highlight the reality that the attack was a notable Russian intelligence and law enforcement failure.[38]

Ukrainian drone strikes against oil refineries in Russia are reportedly forcing Russia to import gasoline from Belarus. Reuters reported on March 27 that Russia has significantly increased gasoline imports from Belarus in March due to unscheduled repairs at oil refineries following Ukrainian drone strikes.[39] Reuters reported that Russia has imported 3,000 metric tons of gasoline from Belarus in the first half of March as compared to 590 metric tons in February and no gasoline imports in January.[40] Russia banned gasoline exports at the beginning of March to stabilize domestic prices, and the significant increase in Belarusian imports suggests that operational Russian refineries may be unable to prevent domestic gasoline prices from rising.[41] Ukrainian drone strikes against oil refineries have significantly disrupted Russia's refining capacity and will likely impact Russian exports of distillate petroleum products and the domestic prices of these goods.[42] Russian officials have noted that a reduction in primary oil refining in 2024 will likely lead to increases in Russian crude oil exports since Russia would not be able to refine as much as it usually does.[43]

An independent investigation found that international information operation campaigns linked to deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin remained active, despite the Russian government shutting down media companies and organizations overtly linked to Prigozhin after his death. US cybersecurity company Mandiant reported on March 28 that several Prigozhin-linked information operation campaigns remain active, namely Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens Campaign, Cyber Front Z, and Togo-based Panafrican Group for Commerce and Investment.[44] Mandiant reported that these campaigns continue to target the US, Ukraine, Russia, and countries in Europe and Africa — all regions that Prigozhin-linked information operations targeted prior to Prigozhin's death. Mandiant did not assess the identity of actors managing these information operation campaigns since Prigozhin's death. ISW has observed reports that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko oversees multiple information operations targeting Russia's domestic information space, Ukraine, and the West.[45]

Senior Russian officials are intensifying their victim-blaming of Armenian leadership as Armenia continues to distance itself from security relations with Russia after the Kremlin abandoned Armenia to its fate as it lost Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on March 28 that the Armenian leadership is consciously contributing to the deterioration of Russian-Armenian relations by making up far-fetched pretexts and distorting the last three and a half years of history.[46] Lavrov further blamed the Armenian leadership for defaming

Russian border guards, Russian military personnel at Russia's 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, and the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) "as a whole." Lavrov also claimed that the European Union (EU) mission in Armenia is "turning into a NATO mission."^[47] Lavrov's increasingly critical statements suggest that the Kremlin is likely preparing a harsher and more concerted response as Armenia continues to take measures to distance itself from Russia and signals interest in strengthening relations with the West.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine is currently preventing Russian forces from making significant tactical gains along the entire frontline, but continued delays in US security assistance will likely expand the threat of Russian operational success, including in non-linear and possibly exponential ways.
- The continued degradation of Ukraine's air defense umbrella provides one of the most immediate avenues through which Russian forces could generate non-linear operational impacts.
- Russia's ability to conduct opportunistic but limited offensive actions along Ukraine's international border with Russia offers Russia further opportunities to constrain Ukrainian manpower and materiel, but Western aid provisions and Ukrainian efforts to address manpower challenges would ease the impacts of such Russian efforts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to make sensationalized statements as part of Russia's ongoing reflexive control campaign, which aims to deter further Western military aid provisions to Ukraine and deflect attention from the growing Russian force posturing against NATO.
- Putin's March 27 statements are neither new nor surprising, and best illustrate how the Kremlin routinely overwhelms the Western information space, often with irrelevant or decontextualized truths rather than with outright misinformation or disinformation, to shape global perceptions and advance its own long-term objectives.
- The Russian Investigative Committee unsurprisingly claimed that it has evidence tying Ukraine to the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack amid continued Kremlin efforts to link Ukraine and the West to the terrorist attack to generate more domestic support for the war in Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed concern for heightened ethnic tension in Russian society following the Crocus City Hall attacks and may be falsely blaming Ukraine and the West for the Crocus City Hall attack in order to divert domestic attention away from ethnic tensions.
- Ukrainian drone strikes against oil refineries in Russia are reportedly forcing Russia to import gasoline from Belarus.
- An independent investigation found that international information operation campaigns linked to deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin remained active, despite the Russian government shutting down media companies and organizations overtly linked to Prigozhin after his death.
- Senior Russian officials are intensifying their victim-blaming of Armenian leadership as Armenia continues to distance itself from security relations with Russia after the Kremlin abandoned Armenia to its fate as it lost Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Donetsk City.
- Russia continues efforts to source ballistic missiles and other weapons from North Korea for use in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 27, 2024

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

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

March 27, 2024, 5:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:15pm ET on March 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) released its 38th report on the human rights situation in Ukraine on March 26, confirming several of ISW's longstanding assessments about Russia's systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in occupied territories and towards Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs).^[1] The HRMMU report details activities between December 1, 2023 and February 29 2024, and includes new findings about Russia's abuse of Ukrainian POWs during this timeframe, based on

interviews with 60 recently released male POWs.[2] Nearly all of the POWs that HRMMU interviewed detailed how they were tortured by Russian forces with beatings and electric shocks and threatened with execution, and over half of the interviewees experienced sexual violence. HRMMU also reported that it has evidence of Russian forces executing at least 32 POWs in 12 different incidents during the reporting period and independently verified three of the executions. ISW observed open-source evidence of several POW executions during this reporting period: the execution of three Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne, Zaporizhia Oblast on December 27, 2023; the execution of one Ukrainian POW near Klishchiivka, Donetsk Oblast on February 9, 2024; the executions of three Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne, the execution of six Ukrainian POWs near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and the executions of two Ukrainian POWs near Vesele, Donetsk Oblast on or around February 18, 2024; and the execution of nine Ukrainian POWs near Ivanivske, Donetsk Oblast, on February 25.[3] The summary execution and mistreatment of POWs is a violation of Article 3 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.[4] The HRMMU report also details the forced Russification of Ukrainian populations in occupied areas, including the imposition of Russian political, legal, and administrative systems onto occupied Ukraine in violation of Russia's international legal obligations as an occupying power.[5] ISW has reported at length on the specifics of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine, consistent with the findings of the UN HRMMU report.[6]

Russian officials are tying the US and the West to a broader set of “terrorist” attacks against Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack, likely to intensify rhetoric about alleged Western and Ukrainian threats to generate greater domestic support for the war in Ukraine. The Russian Investigative Committee and Prosecutor General’s Office stated on March 27 that they will consider an appeal from the Russian State Duma to investigate American and Western financing and organization of terrorist attacks against Russia.[7] The Russian Investigative Committee, Prosecutor General’s Office, and the Duma Deputies that made the appeal did not explicitly reference the Crocus City Hall attack.[8] Kremlin officials have previously tied Ukraine and the West to the Crocus City Hall attack but have yet to make a formal accusation, and the Kremlin may refrain from issuing an official accusation as all available evidence continues to show that the Islamic State (IS) is very likely responsible for the attack.[9] Russian officials routinely describe Ukrainian military strikes against legitimate military targets in occupied Ukraine and Russia as terrorism and consistently claim that Western actors help organize these strikes.[10] The Kremlin likely aims to seize on wider Russian social fears and anger following the Crocus City Hall attack by portraying Ukraine, the US, and the West as immediate terrorist threats. The Kremlin likely hopes that perceptions of Ukrainian and Western involvement in the Crocus City Hall attack will increase domestic support for the war in Ukraine, and Russian officials will likely invoke a broader view of what they consider terrorism to further cast Ukrainians as terrorists and the West as a sponsor of terrorism.[11] The Kremlin may still formally accuse Ukraine of conducting the Crocus City Hall attack if it believes that these other informational efforts are insufficient to generate the domestic response it likely desires.[12]

Russian authorities are increasing legal pressure against migrants in Russia following recent Russian officials’ proposals for harsher, measures against migrant communities in response to the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack. BBC News Russian Service stated that there has been a significant increase in the number of cases related to violations of the rules of entry for foreign citizens into Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack.[13] BBC News Russian Service reported on March 27 that 784 such cases have been registered since the morning of March 25, as compared with 1,106 during the entire previous week. A Russian lawyer who often works with Tajik citizens reportedly told BBC News Russian Service that over 100 people waited for a Moscow district court to hear their cases on March 25 alone and that Russian authorities are especially targeting migrants from Tajikistan during searches. BBC News Russian Service reported that representatives of the Tajik diaspora in Russia are expecting Russian authorities to conduct a large wave of deportations following the Crocus City Hall attack. A Russian insider source claimed on March 27 that unspecified actors gave the Moscow Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) an “unspoken” order to “not spare” migrants and for MVD employees to use their own judgement in the field.[14] The insider source claimed that a source suggested that Russian authorities are not preparing to conduct raids on migrant communities but will apply the “strictest measures” to migrants in “controversial situations.” Kremlin newswire TASS stated on March 27 that Russian police and Rosgvardia conducted a raid at the Wildberries warehouse in Elektrostal, Moscow Oblast to check the documents of migrant workers, and Russian opposition outlet Baza reported that Russian authorities detained 21 people during the raid.[15] Several Russian ultranationalist milbloggers complained that the way Russian-language schools in Tajikistan are teaching about Russia’s historical imperial occupation of Tajikistan is discouraging Tajik migrants from integrating into Russian society, essentially blaming migrants for the alienation that Russian society subjects them to.[16] Select Russian officials recently called for the introduction of several anti-migrant policies, which Russian authorities are unlikely to enact given Russia’s reliance on migrants for its force generation and labor needs.[17] Russian authorities may continue the practice of raiding migrant workplaces and increase crackdowns at border crossings to temporarily placate emotional cries for

retribution following the March 22 attack as the Kremlin continues to develop a cogent and practical response.

Key Takeaways:

- The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) released its 38th report on the human rights situation in Ukraine on March 26, confirming several of ISW's longstanding assessments about Russia's systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in occupied territories and towards Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs).
- Russian officials are tying the US and the West to a broader set of "terrorist" attacks against Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack, likely to intensify rhetoric about alleged Western and Ukrainian threats to generate greater domestic support for the war in Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are increasing legal pressure against migrants in Russia following recent Russian officials' proposals for harsher measures against migrant communities in response to the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and southwest of Donetsk City on March 27.
- Russian Storm-Z personnel continue to complain about their poor treatment by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as the MoD tries to posture efficacy in its force generation and social benefit allocation system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 26, 2024

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

March 26, 2024, 8:20pm ET

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the Crocus City Hall attackers originally fled toward Belarus not Ukraine, directly undermining the Kremlin narrative on Ukraine's involvement, possibly to head off questions about why the attackers headed toward Belarus in the first place. During a visit to Belarus' northwestern Ashmyany raion on March 26, Lukashenko reported that the Crocus City Hall attackers may have been planning to escape Russia's Bryansk Oblast to Belarus, but that Belarus introduced a heightened security regime that forced the attackers to change course towards the Russia-Ukraine border.^[1] Lukashenko stated that the attackers "couldn't enter Belarus" and praised high levels of cooperation between Russian and Belarusian special services for leading to the attackers' arrests. Lukashenko's suggestion that the attackers were heading towards Belarus before Belarusian and Russian special services forced them to change direction flatly contradicts Russian President Vladimir Putin's claims regarding the attackers' planned escape. Putin addressed the Russian Federation on March 23 following the March 22 Crocus City Hall terror attack and claimed that the attackers had "contacts" who had prepared a "window" for their exfiltration across the border into Ukraine, a claim for which there is no evidence that has become central to the Kremlin's baseless accusations that Ukraine was involved in or responsible for the attack.^[2] Geolocated footage from March 23 shows Russian personnel capturing the four attackers in a forest area along the E101 highway about 20 kilometers southeast of Bryansk City, Bryansk Oblast.^[3] The geolocated place of capture is about 95 kilometers from the Ukrainian border at the closest point, or 130 kilometers from where the E101 crosses into Ukraine. This point is notably about 124 kilometers from the Belarusian border, and about 25 kilometers away from the A-240 highway that runs to Gomel, Belarus. Lukashenko's statement about the activation of Belarusian personnel suggests a scenario in which the attackers were initially traveling along the A-240 highway towards Belarus but saw roadblocks or other deterrents and shifted their course east through forest roads to the E101 route.

Lukashenko has very little evident incentive to lie about the facts of the attack in this way. The suggestion that the attackers were traveling towards Belarus, presumably to seek refuge there, could have damaging political consequences for Lukashenko and his regime as it would raise questions about why they thought they would be safer in Belarus and who they thought might receive them there. Lukashenko may therefore have desired to preempt discussions about the attackers' hypothetical links to Belarus by saying that Belarusian forces were instrumental in leading to their arrests. While Lukashenko's claim subverts the standing Kremlin narrative, it reduces his vulnerability

to Kremlin efforts to use non-public information about the attackers' original escape plans to pressure him in the future.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Kremlin officials appear to be struggling to maintain a consistent rhetorical line about the Crocus City Hall attack, indicating that the Kremlin has not fully figured out how to reconcile its information operations with the reality of its intelligence and law enforcement failure. Putin and other senior officials have not fully coalesced around the false narrative that Ukraine somehow conducted the March 22 attack on the Crocus concert venue for which the Islamic State has claimed responsibility. Putin directly suggested that the attackers were connected to Ukraine in his March 23 address following the attack.^[4] Putin then addressed the board of the Russian General Prosecutor's Office on March 26 and referenced the Crocus attack, calling for the Prosecutor General's Office to establish all the facts of the case but not implicitly or explicitly blaming Ukraine for the attack.^[5] Putin only mentioned the Ukrainian government once during an unrelated part of the address about returning Russia's "lost" property abroad — a notable change from his March 25 address that claimed Ukraine was the "customer" of the attack and his March 23 accusation that the attackers were fleeing to Ukraine.^[6] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov similarly refused to state outright on March 26 that Ukraine orchestrated the Crocus attack in response to a press question on how Russia would respond if Russia "confirms" Ukraine's alleged involvement.^[7] Putin's oscillation between blaming Ukraine outright one day and then avoiding the issue the following day suggests that the Kremlin has not yet established a templated line on how to discuss the attack, likely partially as a result of the shock felt by the Russian elite in its aftermath.

Other senior Russian officials have doubled down on the Kremlin's baseless narrative accusing Ukraine of conducting the attack, however, while conceding that Russian authorities currently lack critical information about the attack, seemingly contradicting their own statements and statements made by other Kremlin officials. Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Head Alexander Bortnikov accused the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) of conducting the attack with involvement from the United States and UK in order to create panic in Russian society — a longstanding Kremlin narrative line attempting to portray the war in Ukraine as an existential war against the collective West — but then stated that Russia has not yet identified the person who ordered the attack.^[8] Bortnikov also emphasized that Russian security services conducted every possible measure to prevent the attackers from crossing into Ukrainian territory, aligning with Putin's March 23 address but contrasting with Lukashenko's March 26 claims.^[9] Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev answered a press question on March 26 about whether the Islamic State (IS) or Ukraine conducted the attack with "Ukraine, of course" then later doubled down on this narrative by claiming "many things point to Ukraine's involvement" while appearing on Russian state television channel *Rossiya-1* and suggested that Russian special services and law enforcement agencies will eventually reach this conclusion.^[10]

Russian officials are proposing actionable but likely impractical solutions to the emotional outcries for retribution in response to the Crocus City Hall attack. A Just Russia Party Leader Sergei Mironov called for Russia to abolish the visa-free regime with Central Asian countries in order to regulate migration and counter terrorist attacks.^[11] Russian State Duma Deputy from occupied Crimea Mikhail Sheremet and State Duma Deputy Chairperson and recent New People Party presidential candidate Vladislav Davankov also recently proposed harsher measures against migrants in response to the Crocus City Hall attack.^[12] Russian ultranationalists have intensified calls for anti-migrant measures since the Crocus City Hall attack, although a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger criticized Mironov's proposal to introduce a visa regime with Central Asian countries and claimed that a visa regime would damage Russia's relationship with Central Asian states and Russia's "compatriots" living there.^[13] Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) Head Leonid Slutsky called for Russia to lift the moratorium on the death penalty in response to the Crocus City Hall attack, and United Russia State Duma Deputy Alexander Spiridonov claimed that Russia should consider lifting the moratorium for charges of terrorism.^[14] Mironov claimed that Russia could lift the moratorium on the death penalty through a federal referendum, while Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin claimed that the Russian Constitutional Court could lift the moratorium *without* a referendum.^[15] The Russian Constitutional Court announced that it would not comment on issues about the death penalty because the issue may "become a subject of consideration."^[16] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, conversely, claimed on March 25 that the Kremlin is not discussing lifting the moratorium on the death penalty, despite continued calls by various Russian political leaders.^[17] Russian officials are likely struggling to establish a cogent response to domestic calls for retribution following the Crocus City Hall attack, causing various Russian political factions to attempt to address the situation along diverging avenues. Russia is unlikely to introduce a visa regime with Central Asian countries given that Russia continues to heavily rely on Central Asian migrants to offset domestic labor shortages and to target Central Asian migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts.^[18] The Russian government is also unlikely to lift the moratorium on the death penalty, which it established in 1996, the same year it officially executed the last death sentence.^[19]

The Moldovan Constitutional Court reversed a ruling banning the Kremlin-affiliated Shor Party on March 26, which will likely allow pro-Russian Moldovan actors to reconsolidate around the Shor Party and reverse the impacts of the previous Moldovan ban on the party. Ilan Shor is a US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician who founded the Shor Party and whom Moldovan authorities convicted in absentia for massive fraud and money laundering.[20] The Moldovan Parliament declared the Shor Party unconstitutional on July 19, 2023, and amended the Electoral Code on July 31, 2023, to ban members of political parties deemed unconstitutional from running in elections for five years.[21] The Moldovan Constitutional Court declared these July 2023 changes to the Electoral Code unconstitutional on October 3, 2023.[22] The Moldovan Parliament responded on October 4, 2023, by further amending the Electoral Code to stipulate that people suspected of, accused of, or indicted for the crimes that the argument declaring the political party to be unconstitutional mentioned cannot participate in elections.[23] The Moldovan Constitutional Court then decided on March 26, 2024, that the Moldovan Parliament's amendments to the Electoral Code on October 4, 2023, were also unconstitutional, thereby allowing Shor Party politicians to run in the upcoming Moldovan presidential election in late 2024 and parliamentary elections in the summer of 2025.[24] The Kremlin will likely amend its hybrid operations in Moldova to more directly exploit and promote the Shor Party before the upcoming Moldovan elections as part of the Kremlin's wider hybrid campaign aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within, about which ISW has extensively reported.[25]

Shor-affiliated actors have consistently aligned themselves with Russian authorities. Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) leader Leonid Slutsky met with Vasile Bolea and Alexandr Suhodolskii, Moldovan politicians from the Shor-offshoot Revival Party, in Moscow on March 26.[26] Slutsky claimed that he is ready for more cooperation with the Revival Party and reiterated long-standing Kremlin narratives claiming that the current Moldovan government's policies are antithetical to the interests of the Moldovan population.[27] Slutsky also has previous connections with other Moldovan Shor-affiliated actors. Slutsky met with several Moldovan Shor Party politicians, as well as a Moldovan Socialist Party politician who has links to the Kremlin, in mid-September 2022 just before the outbreak of Shor Party-organized protests in Moldova that demanded the resignation of the current pro-Western government against the backdrop of rising energy prices.[28] Slutsky also endorsed the candidacy of the current governor of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, who initially ran for governor in 2023 as a Shor Party candidate before Moldovan authorities banned the party.[29]

Bolea and Suhodolskii also have connections with other Kremlin officials and pro-Russian Gagauzian politicians. Suhodolskii and Victor Petrov, who ran in the 2023 Gagauzian gubernatorial election and is currently Gutsul's deputy, invited Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov to Gagauzia to attend the "Friendship of the Peoples" forum on April 17, 2023, after Suhodolskii and Petrov reportedly visited Minnikhanov in Kazan at an unspecified time.[30] Moldovan authorities denied Minnikhanov entry into Moldova to attend the forum, however. Gutsul won the Gagauzian gubernatorial election on May 14, 2023, and Suhodolskii, Bolea, and Petrov flew to Israel on May 17, 2023, to meet with Shor. [31] Suhodolskii and Bolea then announced on May 22, 2023, that they were joining the then largely defunct Revival Party.[32] Petrov's pro-Russian "People's Union of Gagauzia" political movement, which Suhodolskii and Bolea have supported since the organization's inception in July 2022, then merged with the Revival Party in July 2023.[33]

Ukrainian officials stated on March 26 that Ukrainian forces successfully conducted a strike on the night of March 23 to 24 against a Ukrainian ship that Russian forces had captured in 2014. Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that Ukrainian forces conducted a Neptune missile strike on the Ukrainian *Kostyantyn Olshanskyi* Ropucha-class landing ship that Russian forces captured during Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. [34] Pletenchuk stated that Russian forces had been disassembling the *Kostyantyn Olshanskyi* at the port in Sevastopol to use it for spare parts but decided to start restoring it in 2024 after concluding that the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) was running out of large landing ships. Ukrainian military officials previously stated that Ukrainian forces successfully struck the *Yamal* and *Azov* Ropucha-class landing ships, *Ivan Khurs* Yury Ivanov-class reconnaissance ship, a BSF communications center, and several unspecified BSF infrastructure facilities in Sevastopol on the night of March 23 to 24.[35] Satellite imagery from March 23 and 24 shows damage to the rear part of the *Ivan Khurs* docked in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea.[36] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes against BSF ships and infrastructure will likely continue to deter Russian forces from redeploying ships to Sevastopol and the western Black Sea and complicate the BSF's ability to maximize its combat capabilities.[37]

Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) Head Vasyl Malyuk stated on March 26 that Russian forces have not used the Kerch Strait Bridge to transfer weapons and other materiel after two successful Ukrainian operations on the Kerch Strait Bridge, likely referring to an explosion in October 2022 and a strike in July 2023.[38]

Separate investigations conducted by Western media outlets have found that Russian forces may be using Starlink terminals in Ukraine. CNN reported on March 26 that frontline Ukrainian troops have increasingly observed Russian forces using Starlink devices despite US sanctions prohibiting Russia's use of Starlink.^[39] CNN noted that Ukrainian troops' increased sightings of Russian forces using Starlink coincide with claims from Russian crowdfunding platforms that they successfully purchased Starlink technology in third-party countries. Ukrainian soldiers also told CNN that Starlink's connection speeds decreased, while connection issues increased in the past several months. ISW previously observed claims in February that Russian forces were using Starlink in occupied Ukraine.^[40] Bloomberg reported on March 26 that its own investigation determined that there are "wide-spanning" examples of unspecified actors trading and selling Starlink kits illegally on the black market.^[41] An anonymous trader told Bloomberg that recent government crackdowns in Kazakhstan against illegal Starlink terminals "barely" reduced illegal Starlink usage. Bloomberg noted that Starlink's operator SpaceX should be able to prevent Russia from using Starlink in occupied Ukraine because SpaceX should be able to identify every Starlink transmitter. ISW cannot independently verify any of these reports.

Key Takeaways:

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the Crocus City Hall attackers originally fled toward Belarus not Ukraine, directly undermining the Kremlin narrative on Ukraine's involvement, possibly to head off questions about why the attackers headed toward Belarus in the first place.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Kremlin officials appear to be struggling to maintain a consistent rhetorical line about the Crocus City Hall attack, indicating that the Kremlin has not fully figured out how to reconcile its information operations with the reality of its intelligence and law enforcement failure.
- Russian officials are proposing actionable but likely impractical solutions to the emotional outcries for retribution in response to the Crocus City Hall attack.
- The Moldovan Constitutional Court reversed a ruling banning the Kremlin-affiliated Shor Party on March 26, which will likely allow pro-Russian Moldovan actors to reconsolidate around the Shor Party and reverse the impacts of the previous Moldovan ban on the party.
- Ukrainian officials stated on March 26 that Ukrainian forces successfully conducted a strike on the night of March 23 to 24 against a Ukrainian ship that Russian forces had captured in 2014.
- Separate investigations conducted by Western media outlets have found that Russian forces may be using Starlink terminals in Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Bakhmut on March 26.
- The Russian military has reportedly started recruiting personnel for elements of the newly reformed Leningrad Military District (LMD).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 25, 2024

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

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

March 25, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on March 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The March 22 Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall is a notable Russian intelligence and law enforcement failure, and explaining currently available open-source evidence does not require any wider and more complicated conspiracy theory either within or against the Russian state. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed during an address on March 25 that "radical Islamists" committed the attack, but immediately and basely accused the United States of trying to cover the "Ukrainian trace" of the attack, directly accusing Ukraine of being the "customer" of the attack.^[1] ISW continues to assess that the attack itself, as well as the claim pattern following the attack, is highly consistent with the way IS conducts and claims such incidents and has observed no evidence that Ukraine was involved in the attack.^[2] Available open-source evidence indicates that the Crocus City Hall attack was the result of a significant Russian intelligence failure, not

a conspiracy initiated by, or targeting, the Russian intelligence apparatus. Russian investigative opposition outlet *Dossier Center* reported on March 24 that Russian intelligence services were closely monitoring IS-K activities before the March 22 attack and alleged that the Russian Security Council received a warning that IS-K might use Tajik citizens for an attack in Russia a few days before IS-K carried out the attack on Crocus City Hall.[3] *Dossier Center* and other Russian insider and opposition outlets also noted that Russian law enforcement was very slow in responding to the incident and reported that security officers first arrived at Crocus City Hall an hour after the attack began, despite the fact that the Moscow Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON) headquarters is less than three kilometers away from the hall.[4]

Sources familiar with the US intelligence community previously noted that the United States warned Russia about “fairly specific” indicators that IS-K wanted to carry out attacks in Russia, and the US Embassy in Russia issued a warning on March 7 that it was monitoring reports of extremist plans to target large gatherings in Moscow, including concerts, over the proceeding 24 hour period.[5] Putin dismissed the warnings as “provocative statements” on March 19, three days before the attack.[6] The Kremlin’s acknowledgement of the US intelligence warnings prior to the attack shows that the Russian government was aware of US warnings, but likely discounted them. The United States also notably warned Iran about an IS-K attack against Iran ahead of the IS-K attack against Kerman on January 4, 2024, a warning that Iran also apparently disregarded.[7]

The responses by both the Russian intelligence apparatus and law enforcement agencies must be situated in the wider domestic Russian context. Russian intelligence could well have decided to ignore the US intelligence warning because of the extreme distrust of the United States Putin has driven deep into the Russian information and security spaces. Russian authorities may have also been concerned about the second-order effects of acting on the intelligence by seeming to target Muslim communities within Russia, which would likely cause even more discontent and alienation in a community that Russia already discriminates against yet relies on for the forcible generation of manpower for its war in Ukraine.[8] The Kremlin may have balanced the cost of acting on intelligence from an adversary it does not trust with the risk of impacting a critical source of mobilizable manpower and found the risk of action too great. Russian law enforcement, for its part, has likely been conditioned to respond to mass-casualty events such as the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis and 2004 Beslan School Siege, so the delay in Russian law enforcement’s deployment to Crocus City Hall may have resulted from conditioning about the need to proceed cautiously in what could have become a mass-hostage situation.[9] Those incidents evolved over the course of several days. Even during the 2015 attack on the Bataclan Theater in Paris the first armed responders did not enter the building until roughly 25 minutes after the attacker had begun shooting on the street but had to withdraw and wait about an hour and a quarter before sufficient backup arrived to start clearing the scene.[10]

Kremlin officials’ and Russian ultranationalists’ continued insistence on blaming Ukraine for an attack that IS-K very likely committed may come at the expense of Russian internal security and civilian lives. A Kremlin-awarded Russian ultranationalist milblogger doubled down on the narrative baselessly blaming Ukraine on March 24 and 25, widely amplifying other ultranationalist claims that IS and IS-K are incapable of conducting a terrorist attack as significant as the Crocus concert venue attack and that the IS claim is a ruse to hide Ukrainian and Western involvement. [11] Other Russian milbloggers further amplified this narrative, claiming that IS and IS-K are weakened and defeated and are now largely “media outlets.”[12] That assertion is demonstrably untrue, as CTP has repeatedly documented.[13] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the United States of making “excuses” for Ukraine in reporting that IS likely conducted the attack.[14] The IS claim of conducting the Crocus concert venue attack is notably consistent with prior IS-claimed attacks and IS risks discrediting itself in the global Salafi-Jihadi community by falsely claiming credit for high-profile attacks.[15] The Russian claims insisting on Ukrainian involvement, on the other hand, forward the Kremlin’s longstanding effort to justify its ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the long-term by falsely portraying the existence of an independent and sovereign Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia. The Kremlin and its ultranationalist mouthpieces are evidently ignoring the clear threat that IS and IS-K operations inside Russian territory poses to Russia’s internal security and its civilians to prioritize instead the informational impacts of falsely accusing Ukraine of involvement while also maintaining a level of access to the ethnic minority communities that may be vulnerable to recruitment by IS-K and similar groups in order to retain a mobilizable resource for the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin has likely decided that the informational value of blaming Ukraine for the Crocus attack is worth whatever internal security risks and civilian casualties Russia may suffer for failing to adequately address a radical Salafi-Jihadi threat within its borders.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that Lieutenant General Esedulla Abachev became the Leningrad Military District (LMD) Deputy Commander as the Russian military continues the formal disbandment of the Western Military District (WMD) and recreation of the

LMD and Moscow Military District (MMD). The Russian MoD posted footage on March 25 showing Abachev awarding personnel of the Russian state border covering group who arrested the Crocus City Hall attackers in Bryansk Oblast and named Abachev as the LMD Deputy Commander, confirming speculation by insider sources about Abachev's new appointment in early March.[16] Russian sources credited LMD personnel, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards, and Chechen "Akhmat" personnel for arresting the Crocus City Hall attackers on March 23.[17] It is unclear why LMD personnel were operating in Bryansk Oblast in the first place, as Bryansk Oblast is part of the new MMD, but some individual units that are now part of the LMD may have been left over in Bryansk Oblast as military reforms and transitions are ongoing.[18] The Russian Western Grouping of Forces Spokesperson recently began wearing a MMD patch, suggesting that the process of disbanding and transferring the WMD is underway.[19] The process of transferring WMD formations into the MMD and LMD may cause some temporary confusion and inconsistencies, as evidenced by the presence of LMD personnel within the MMD during the Crocus City Hall arrests.

Ukrainian officials stated that the Ukrainian strike on occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on the night of March 23 targeted more Black Sea Fleet (BSF) ships and caused more damage than initially reported. Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated on March 25 that Ukrainian forces struck the BSF ship repair plant in Sevastopol where the *Yamal* Ropucha-class landing ship was moored on March 23, making a hole in the *Yamal*'s upper deck and forcing BSF personnel to continuously pump water out of the ship.[20] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that the March 23 Ukrainian strike on the BSF communications center caused substantial damage, which Pletenchuk assessed may significantly hinder the functioning of the BSF because the communications center supported the general activities of the fleet and may have also been responsible for the fleet's provisions, ongoing repairs, and other important functions. [21] Pletenchuk reported that Ukrainian forces also struck the *Ivan Khurs* Yury Ivanov-class reconnaissance ship on March 23 and that Ukrainian officials are verifying the damage to the ship. [22] GUR Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated that Ukrainian forces used Ukrainian Maritime Autonomous Guard Unmanned Robotic Apparatus (Magura) V5 naval drones to strike the *Ivan Khurs* and *Yamal* ships and that these Ukrainian naval drones are becoming more powerful and accurate.[23] Skibitskyi stated that Ukrainian forces also used the Magura V5 drones to strike the BSF's Akula-class and Serna-class ships in November 2023, the *Ivanovets* Tarantul-class corvette and the *Ceasar Kunikov* Ropucha-class landing ship in February 2024, and the *Sergei Kotov* large patrol ship in March 2024.[24] Pletenchuk and Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces have rarely used Kalibr missiles in recent months because the BSF naval base in Sevastopol is the only BSF base that has the infrastructure needed to reload these missiles onto Kalibr-capable ships.[25] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes against BSF ships and infrastructure will likely continue to deter Russian forces from redeploying ships to Sevastopol and the western Black Sea and complicate the BSF's ability to maximize its combat capabilities.[26]

The Kremlin continues to lean on long debunked narratives as part of its wider information operations aimed at discrediting and undermining Western support for Ukraine. Russian Ambassador to the Hague Vladimir Tarabin reiterated the Kremlin's debunked claim that Ukraine is developing biological weapons in US- and NATO-funded biolabs in Ukraine during an interview published on March 25.[27] Tarabin also claimed that Ukrainian forces are "systematically" using a "wide range of toxic chemicals" against Russian military personnel in unspecified areas of the frontline, including chemical substances banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).[28] Tarabin's reliance on the already discredited biolabs narrative calls into question his other allegations. An unnamed Russian company command also claimed that Ukrainian forces are using phosphorus ammunition shells in unspecified areas of the Zaporizhia direction, which are not banned in conventional warfare by the CWC but are prohibited from use against civilians.[29] Russian forces have used white phosphorus against urban areas in Ukraine, risking civilian harm on several occasions.[30] Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, have been accusing the West of continuing to fund biolabs in Ukraine since before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [31] Western publications, officials, and international organizations have long debunked this Russian narrative.[32] These Russian claims are not comparable to the Ukrainian and Russian reporting of Russian forces using chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile (CS) gas or chloropicrin (PS), both of which the CWC — which Russia ratified in 1997 — bans in warfare.[33] Several Russian and Ukrainian sources have provided evidence of the use of such banned chemical agents against Ukrainian positions on the battlefield.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- The March 22 Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall is a notable Russian intelligence and law enforcement failure, and explaining currently available open-source evidence does not require any wider and more complicated conspiracy theory either within or against the Russian state.
- Kremlin officials' and Russian ultranationalists' continued insistence on blaming Ukraine for an attack that IS-K very likely committed may come at the expense of Russian internal security and civilian lives.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that Lieutenant General Esedulla Abachev became the Leningrad Military District (LMD) Deputy Commander as the Russian military continues the formal disbandment of the Western Military District (WMD) and recreation of the LMD and Moscow Military District (MMD).
- Ukrainian officials stated that the Ukrainian strike on occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on the night of March 23 targeted more Black Sea Fleet (BSF) ships and caused more damage than initially reported.
- The Kremlin continues to lean on long debunked narratives as part of its wider information operations aimed at discrediting and undermining Western support for Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka on March 25.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 24, 2024

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

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

March 24, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Ukrainian forces struck a Black Sea Fleet (BSF) communications center in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, and reportedly struck an oil depot and at least partially damaged two BSF landing ships on the night of March 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 24 that Ukrainian forces successfully struck the BSF's *Yamal* and *Azov* Ropucha-class landing ships, a BSF communications center, and several unspecified BSF infrastructure facilities in Sevastopol.^[1] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched over 40 Storm Shadow and Neptune missiles, ADM-160 decoy missiles, and drones during the strike.^[2] Geolocated footage published on March 24 shows a missile strike on the BSF communications center, and satellite imagery published on March 24 shows significant damage to the building.^[3] Russian opposition outlet *Astra* posted footage reportedly of an explosion at an oil depot in occupied Hvardiske (northeast of Sevastopol) and reported that its sources stated that three tanks of petroleum products and a warehouse burned as a result of the drone strike.^[4] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that Ukrainian officials initially confirmed that the *Yamal* and *Azov* landing ships sustained fire damage but are still assessing the extent of the damage to the ships.^[5] Pletenchuk noted that the BSF currently has only five landing ships and that only three will remain operational if the Ukrainian strike seriously damaged the *Yamal* and *Azov*. ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian strikes against BSF assets caused the BSF to move some ships away from its main base in Sevastopol and hampered its ability to operate in the western part of the Black Sea.^[6] Ukrainian officials have recently reported that other BSF bases are structurally inferior to the one in Sevastopol and that Russian forces must still perform some tasks, such as reloading Kalibr missile systems on ships and submarines, in Sevastopol as other bases lack the capacity to handle such missiles.^[7] The latest Ukrainian strikes targeting BSF ships, regardless of the extent of the damage caused, will likely continue to deter Russian forces from redeploying ships to Sevastopol and the western Black Sea and complicate the BSF's ability to maximize its combat capabilities.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of February 23 to 24, mainly targeting southern and western Ukraine. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on March 24 that Russian forces launched 29 Kh-101/Kh-555 missiles from Tu-95MS strategic aircraft and 28 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and occupied Cape Chauda, Crimea.^[8] Ukrainian air defenses reportedly downed 18 Kh-101/555 missiles and 25 Shahed drones over Dniproptetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Sumy, Kyiv, Volyn, and Lviv oblasts.^[9] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces launched two waves of Shahed drones and that Russian drone strikes primarily targeted port infrastructure along the Danube River, a branch of whose delta forms the Ukraine-Romania border, and energy facilities in Dniproptetrovsk Oblast.^[10] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces struck Mykolaiv Oblast with unspecified cruise and ballistic missiles on the evening of March 23 and the night of March 23 to 24.^[11] Lviv Oblast officials reported that Russian forces struck a critical infrastructure facility with

two Kinzhal missiles on the morning of March 24, and Ukrainian state-owned oil and gas company Neftegaz Chairperson Oleksiy Chernyshov stated that Russian forces struck an underground gas storage facility and damaged technical equipment in Lviv oblast.[12] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces also struck Myrnohrad, Donetsk Oblast with four S-300 missiles.[13] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian strikes damaged infrastructure in western Ukraine, residential buildings in Myrnohrad, Donetsk Oblast, and energy infrastructure in Kryyyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and Kharkiv City.[14] Polish Operational Command reported that a Russian cruise missile violated Polish air space on the morning of March 24 for 39 seconds before presumably returning into Ukrainian airspace.[15]

Russian forces are reportedly approaching the outskirts of Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast but are unlikely to threaten the settlement with encirclement or seizure in the coming months. ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced within 1.5 kilometers of Chasiv Yar based on available visual evidence, and Russian milbloggers claimed on March 24 that Russian forces recently advanced further towards and up to the outskirts of the settlement.[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 23 that Russian forces seized Ivanivske (west of Bakhmut and immediately east of Chasiv Yar), although ISW has not observed confirmation of Russian forces seizing Ivanivske or advancing up to the outskirts of Chasiv Yar.[17] Russian forces began a localized offensive operation in the Bakhmut direction in November 2023 that aims to recapture territory that Ukraine liberated during the summer 2023 counteroffensive and to seize Chasiv Yar.[18] Russian forces have only achieved marginal tactical gains northwest and west of Bakhmut in the past four months, however. Select Russian sources have described Russian offensive activity in the Bakhmut area in recent months as conditions setting for a potential intensified offensive operation to encircle and seize Chasiv Yar.[19]

Available imagery, which ISW will not present or describe in greater detail at this time to preserve Ukrainian operational security, shows that Ukrainian forces have established significant fortifications in a ring shape in the Chasiv Yar area, and Russian forces will likely struggle to break through these defenses at their current offensive tempo in the area.[20] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Russian forces planned to transfer forces to the Bakhmut area from the Avdiivka direction following their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February, but that the opportunity to exploit tactical Ukrainian vulnerabilities immediately west of Avdiivka incentivized Russian forces to maintain the tempo of offensive operations in the area and may have prevented the Russian command from accumulating more forces in the Bakhmut direction.[21] It is unclear if the Russian elements that have been operating in the Bakhmut area since the start of the Ukrainian summer 2023 counteroffensive are sufficient for a potential intensified effort to seize Chasiv Yar, or if Russian forces will need to accumulate more forces near Bakhmut if they wish to pursue such an effort. Russian tactical gains east of Chasiv Yar have not set conditions for an encirclement or envelopment of the settlement, and Russian forces would likely have to make notable tactical gains southeast and northwest of Chasiv Yar before pursuing an envelopment or encirclement of the settlement. Russian forces have previously struggled to conduct significant operational encirclements but have shown the ability to conduct gradual envelopments or turning movements that have posed tactical threats to Ukrainian forces, as seen with the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka.[22] The Russian military command may believe that Russian forces will be able to conduct a successful operational encirclement while continued delays in Western security assistance constrain Ukrainian capabilities.[23]

The seizure of Chasiv Yar would offer Russian forces limited but not insignificant operational benefits if they could achieve it. The Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar and surrounding areas would further secure the southwestern flank of the Russian frontline in the Bakhmut-Soledar area, which has long been a wide salient. A Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar and advances north and south of the settlement would push Ukrainian forces further away from Russian ground lines of communication (GLOC) in the Bakhmut area. A Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would likely push Ukrainian forces out of tube artillery range of a section of the E40 highway east of Bakhmut, and Ukrainian forces would likely have to deploy tube artillery in immediate frontline areas to interdict Russian logistics along most of the T-05-13 (Soledar-Bakhmut-Horlivka) highway. Chasiv Yar would also offer Russian forces routes of advance to Kostyantynivka, the southern edge of a major urban agglomeration in Donetsk Oblast that Russia has long viewed as a major operational objective in Ukraine.[24] Advances through Chasiv Yar provide a more immediate route to this urban agglomeration than possible routes of advance from the south along the H-20 highway from Avdiivka or from the southwest from the Toretsk area. Russian forces attempted and failed to conduct a wide sweeping operational encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Donetsk Oblast in spring 2022 that focused on seizing the Ukrainian stronghold of Sloviansk (one of the largest cities in this urban agglomeration).[25] The Russian command may intend to reattempt a wide-sweeping maneuver in 2025 or beyond, and advances west of Chasiv Yar would set further conditions for this possible larger offensive operation.[26] **ISW offers these observations to present the assessment that a Russian seizure of Chasiv Yar would be more operationally significant**

than the Russian seizure of Avdiivka but reiterates that ISW does not forecast that Russian forces will take Chasiv Yar rapidly if they can take it at all.

The Islamic State's (IS) Amaq News Agency published footage on March 23 purportedly filmed from the perspective of the attackers involved in the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack.^[27] The footage further supports ISW's assessment that IS is very likely responsible for the Crocus City Hall attack, despite continued efforts by Kremlin mouthpieces to baselessly tie Ukraine to the attack.^[28]

Russian officials proposed more anti-migrant policies in response to the Crocus City Hall attack. Russian State Duma Deputy from occupied Crimea Mikhail Sheremet proposed on March 24 that Russia limit the entry of migrants into Russia during the war in Ukraine and claimed that Western intelligence targets migrants to conduct terrorist attacks in Russia and destabilize Russia.^[29] Sheremet also claimed that Russia does not have the bandwidth to determine which migrants have "good intentions" since all of Russia's efforts and means are focused on the war. Russian State Duma Deputy Chairperson and recent New People Party presidential candidate Vladislav Davankov also proposed introducing several harsher measures against migrants including introducing a "zero tolerance" policy for migrants who commit any level of offense in their first year in Russia, enforcing "digital control" over migrants, and developing a "migrant replacement" program wherein Russia attempts to expand industrial automation to reduce dependence on labor migrants.^[30] Russian force generation efforts and anti-migrant policies, an increasingly prominent ultranationalist movement that espouses xenophobic rhetoric, and an increasingly ultranationalist Kremlin that stresses the importance of Russian Orthodoxy in public life are likely further alienating migrant communities and generating animosities that Salafi-Jihadi groups can exploit in recruitment efforts.^[31]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov expressed concerns about Russian ultranationalist reactions to the Crocus City Hall attack. Kadyrov claimed that the scale of the Crocus City Hall attack is "much larger and deeper" than solely the attack itself because Russia's enemies are trying to undermine Russia through promoting nationalism.^[32] Kadyrov claimed that Russia has always been a multiethnic and multiconfessional country but that "false patriots" are trying to play on people's emotions and "call for fascist methods." Kadyrov also threatened to have a "short conversation" with instigators of ethnic conflict. Kadyrov is likely attempting to address Russian ultranationalists who used the Crocus City Hall attack to express animosity toward non-ethnic Russian minorities and migrants within Russia.^[33] Kadyrov has previously been at the center of high-profile interethnic and religious scandals, which has likely disrupted his attempts to balance between upholding Chechnya's Islamic values and supporting an increasingly ultranationalist Kremlin.^[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces struck a Black Sea Fleet (BSF) communications center in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, and reportedly struck an oil depot and at least partially damaged two BSF landing ships on the night of March 23.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure on the night of February 23 to 24, mainly targeting southern and western Ukraine.
- Russian forces are reportedly approaching the outskirts of Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast but are unlikely to threaten the settlement with encirclement or seizure in the coming months.
- The seizure of Chasiv Yar would offer Russian forces limited but not insignificant operational benefits if they could achieve it.
- The Islamic State's (IS) Amaq News Agency published footage on March 23 purportedly filmed from the perspective of the attackers involved in the March 22 Crocus City Hall attack.
- Russian officials proposed more anti-migrant policies in response to the Crocus City Hall attack.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov expressed concerns about Russian ultranationalist reactions to the Crocus City Hall attack.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional fighting along the entire line of contact on March 24.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on March 23 establishing a legal basis for enrolling members of the All-Russian Cossack Society into the Russian military's mobilization reserve, likely as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization and military formalization efforts.

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

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

March 23, 2024, 5:45pm ET

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

Russian authorities claimed to have arrested the four attackers and seven others involved in the March 22 “Crocus City Hall” concert venue attack, which Russian authorities reported killed at least 133 civilians. Russian sources claimed that the attackers entered the Crocus venue on March 22 and began firing machine guns at civilians at 19:55 Moscow time, reached the main auditorium by 20:03, and fled the scene in a car at 20:13 – conducting the entire attack and laying explosives that ignited the venue in only 18 minutes.[1] The Russian Investigative Committee and Moscow authorities reported that the attack killed at least 133 and injured at least 140 as of March 23, but this number may grow as Russian authorities find more casualties trapped under rubble in the concert hall.[2] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) reported that it detained four individuals it claims are the attackers in Bryansk Oblast on March 23 as well as seven others whose involvement is not yet specified.[3] Russian sources widely circulated geolocated footage of Russian security forces detaining four individuals alleged to be the attackers before they could flee near Kommuna, Bryansk Oblast (about 14km southwest of Bryansk City).[4] Russian authorities claimed that they detained two individuals in the vehicle that the four were driving and chased down two others who fled into the surrounding forest.[5] Russian sources also amplified footage of Russian security forces interrogating the individuals, all of whom either spoke little Russian or communicated with Russian personnel via translators.[6] Russian sources largely claimed that the attackers are all citizens of Tajikistan, and Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Spokesperson Iryna Volk claimed that none of the individuals whom Russian authorities claimed conducted the attack are Russian citizens.[7]

ISW assesses that the Islamic State (IS) is very likely responsible for the Crocus City Hall attack. IS Amaq's News Agency took responsibility for the attack on the night of March 22, claiming that IS fighters attacked a “large gathering of Christians” on the outskirts of Moscow, “killing and wounding hundreds and causing great destruction...before they [the attackers] withdrew to their bases safely.”[8] The Amaq News Agency later posted a blurred-out image of the four fighters who it claimed conducted its “fiercest attack in years” standing in front of an IS flag.[9] The Amaq News Agency announcement is consistent in terms of style, branding, and language with previous Amaq claims for other attacks. IS media organs make deceptive or false claims only “infrequently” and carefully and try to maintain “high credibility” in their communique in order to define clear ideological objectives and maintain fundraising streams.[10] IS propaganda enables the group to fundraise and disseminate its guidance to lower-level commanders and supporters—IS risks discrediting itself within the competitive Salafi-jihadi community by falsely taking credit for very high-profile attacks. The conduct of the attack itself is also consistent with previous IS attacks, including the 2015 Paris terror attacks.[11] The IS fighters in the Crocus City Hall and some of those involved in the 2015 Paris attacks exfiltrated the target and subsequently evaded security forces for a time.[12]

The Islamic State's Afghan branch IS-Khorasan (IS-K) may have conducted the Crocus City Hall attack. This branch has conducted at least four high-profile attacks outside of central Asia in the last 18 months.[13] US Central Command Commanding General Michael Kurilla notably stated in March 2023 that IS-K would be able to conduct “external operations against US or Western interests abroad in under six months,” meaning that Western intelligence had already assessed that IS and IS-K would be able to field the capabilities for such external attacks by September 2023.[14] US intelligence most recently confirmed that IS-K was responsible for a bombing attack in Kerman, Iran as recently as January 2024, further highlighting IS external attack capabilities.[15] Allegations that the Crocus City Hall attack was a false flag operation are inconsistent with the evidence ISW has observed from the attack itself correlated with other reports of previous IS external attacks that ISW and CTP have covered since the emergence of the Islamic State, as well as the IS claim pattern following the attack.[16] It is also highly unlikely that IS would have conducted the attack on the orders of Ukrainian special services, which several Russian sources have alleged. Amaq News Agency is IS's central media arm. IS would not falsely claim an attack that may have been conducted by one Christian state against another (or by the Kremlin against Russia's own people in some sort of false-flag operation), because the implications of IS conducting an attack at the behest of a predominantly Christian country would damage IS credentials within the Salafi-Jihadi community.

The Kremlin nevertheless and without evidence quickly attempted to tie Ukrainian actors to the Crocus City Hall attack but has yet to formally accuse Ukraine of involvement in the

attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian public on March 23 and claimed that the attackers' "contacts" had prepared a "window" for the attackers' exfiltration across the international border into Ukraine (without mentioning how the attackers were supposed to get through the defenses the Russians have established along the border).[17] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that it apprehended the four attackers as they were attempting to reach their alleged contacts on the Ukrainian side of the border.[18] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova falsely asserted that Ukraine has been spreading terrorism for the past ten years at the behest of the West and that this is why the attackers attempted to flee to Ukraine.[19] The Russians describe Ukrainian military strikes against legitimate targets in Russia as terrorism.[20] Russian State Duma Defense Committee Head Andrey Kartapolov claimed that Ukraine and its allies are the main "stakeholders" in the attack at the Crocus City Hall.[21] Kremlin officials likely aim to indirectly tie Ukraine to the attack to set conditions for information operations that seek to attribute the attack to Ukraine without having to issue an immediate official accusation. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that an employee at an unidentified Russian state-owned media organization stated that state-owned media received instructions from the Kremlin to emphasize the alleged "Ukrainian trace" in the Crocus City Hall attack.[22] Russian ultranationalists responded to these indirect accusations and explicitly claimed that Ukrainian and Western special services orchestrated the Crocus City Hall attack.[23] The Kremlin likely hopes that perceptions about Ukrainian involvement in the attack will increase Russian domestic support for the war in Ukraine, and the Kremlin may still issue an official accusation to this end if it believes that indirect accusations are insufficient to generate the domestic response it likely desires.

Russian ultranationalists responded to the attack by reiterating typically xenophobic calls for anti-migrant policies, reflecting the growing tension in Russian society over the mistreatment of migrants and the impacts migrant disenfranchisement could have on expanding a viable recruitment base in Russia for Salafi-Jihadi groups. Russian ultranationalists widely connected the attack to what they consider unfettered migration to Russia and the development of diaspora communities within Russia that they claim act as parallel societies.[24] Russian ultranationalists denied that their calls for stricter migration policies and the end of diaspora communities were ethnically motivated, and instead accused Ukraine and the West of selecting Tajik attackers specifically to foment further ethnic conflict within Russia.[25] The Russian ultranationalist community has made xenophobia and insecurities about Russia's ethnic composition some of its key ideological principles and has increasingly used incidents involving migrants and non-ethnic Russian groups to express growing hostility towards non-ethnic Russians in Russia.[26] The ultranationalists' attempts to frame the attack as a migration issue while warning against alleged Western attempts to foment ethnic tension are likely indicative of some awareness that further ethnic animosity could increase disenfranchisement and drive migrants towards various Salafi-Jihadi groups. Russia is currently conducting a force generation campaign that is alienating large numbers of migrants from economic and social life in Russia and making military service one of the few avenues for remaining in the country.[27] Russian force generation efforts and anti-migrant policies, an increasingly prominent ultranationalist movement that espouses xenophobic rhetoric, and an increasingly ultranationalist Kremlin that stresses the importance of Russian Orthodoxy in public life are likely further disenfranchising migrant communities and generating animosities that Salafi-Jihadi groups can exploit in recruitment efforts.

Russian sources accused Ukrainian actors of reportedly conducting a successful drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Samara Oblast on the night of March 22 to 23. Footage published on March 23 shows a large fire and a smoke plume rising from the Kuibyshev Oil Refinery in Samara Oblast.[28] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces successfully struck the Kuibyshev refinery and unsuccessfully attempted to strike the nearby Novokuibyshevsky refinery.[29] *BBC Russian Service*, citing sources within Ukrainian security forces, reported that Ukraine is implementing a "detailed strategy to reduce" Russia's economic potential and that Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil infrastructure are part of this strategy.[30] Former US Army in Europe Commander Lieutenant General Ben Hodges stated on March 22 that Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil refineries have significantly impacted Russia's ability to pay for its war effort and supply fuel to the Russian military.[31]

Russia is reportedly delaying the delivery of two S-400 air defense systems to India, likely due to limitations in Russia's production of S-400 systems, an increased need for air defense systems to protect cities and strategic enterprises in Russia from Ukrainian drone strikes, and a reported souring of Russian relations with India. The *Economic Times* reported on March 20, citing unspecified defense sources, that Russian officials informed India that Russia will deliver two remaining squadrons of S-400 air defense systems by August 2026 after delivering three of the five squadrons that Russia reportedly agreed to deliver by the end of 2024.[32] The *Economic Times* stated that Russian officials claimed that they are unable to supply the S-400 systems on time due to the "developing situation" and "requirements" of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian drone strikes against targets in Russia may be constraining Russian air defense systems and prompting the

Russian military command to reallocate air defense systems to better defend Russian cities and strategic facilities.[33] Russia likely also has a limited number of air defense systems allocated for export and may be choosing to delay deliveries to India in favor of supplying more steadfast allies following India's recent decisions to turn away Russian oil tankers over concerns about Western sanctions.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian authorities claimed to have arrested the four attackers and seven others involved in the March 22 “Crocus City Hall” concert venue attack, which Russian authorities reported killed at least 133 civilians.
- ISW assesses that the Islamic State (IS) is very likely responsible for the Crocus City Hall attack.
- The Kremlin nevertheless and without evidence quickly attempted to tie Ukrainian actors to the Crocus City Hall attack but has yet to formally accuse Ukraine of involvement in the attack.
- Russian ultranationalists responded to the attack by reiterating typically xenophobic calls for anti-migrant policies, reflecting the growing tension in Russian society over the mistreatment of migrants and the impacts migrant disenfranchisement could have on expanding a viable recruitment base in Russia for Salafi-Jihadi groups.
- Russian sources accused Ukrainian actors of reportedly conducting a successful drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Samara Oblast on the night of March 22 to 23.
- Russia is reportedly delaying the delivery of two S-400 air defense systems to India, likely due to limitations in Russia's production of S-400 systems, an increased need for air defense systems to protect cities and strategic enterprises in Russia from Ukrainian drone strikes, and a reported souring of Russian relations with India.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on March 23 that will release individuals from criminal liability if they are called up for mobilization or sign military service contracts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 22, 2024

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

March 22, 2024, 10:10pm ET

Russian forces conducted the largest series of combined drone and missile strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure since the start of the full-scale invasion during the night of March 21-22. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 151 drones and missiles at Ukraine overnight, including 63 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai; 12 Iskander-M missiles from Belgorod Oblast and occupied Crimea; 40 Kh-101/Kh-55 missiles from strategic bombers over the Caspian Sea; five Kh-22 cruise missiles from bombers over Rostov Oblast; seven Kh-47 Kinzhal missiles from bombers over Tambov Oblast; two Kh-59 cruise missiles from bombers over occupied Zaporizhia Oblast; and 22 S-300/S-400 air defense missiles from Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[1] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 55 Shahed drones, 35 Kh-101/55 missiles, and two Kh-59 missiles.[2] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces targeted 136 energy facilities in Zaporizhia, Khmelnytskyi, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, Mykolaiv, Vinnytsia, Lviv, and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts, damaging dozens of these facilities in the largest attack against Ukrainian energy infrastructure since February 2022.[3]

Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities may aim to degrade Ukrainian defense industrial capacity, and Russian forces are likely trying to exploit Ukrainian air defense missile shortages in a renewed attempt to collapse Ukraine's energy grid. Ukrainian officials reported that the Russian strikes temporarily caused power, water, and other outages but that Ukrainian authorities have since restored these services.[4] Intensified Russian strikes in winter 2023-2024 reportedly heavily targeted Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, and the Russian strikes on energy infrastructure in early Spring 2024 likely aim to collapse the energy grid in part to stall Ukrainian efforts to rapidly expand its DIB.[5] Russian forces failed to collapse the Ukrainian energy grid on March 22 but may aim to continue intensified strikes on energy infrastructure in subsequent strike series, especially to capitalize on continued delays in Western security assistance that are reportedly expected to significantly constrain Ukraine's air defense umbrella.[6] Russian forces have steadily degraded some Ukrainian power production capabilities: capturing the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear

Power Plant (ZNPP) in March 2022, occupying the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) in February 2022 and subsequently destroying its dam in June 2023, and now significantly damaging the Dnipro Hydroelectric Power Plant (DHPP) in Zaporizhzhia City during the March 22, 2024 strike.
[7] The strikes took the DHPP offline, and it will likely take some time to repair.[8] The Russian strikes may also support Russian efforts to sow internal instability in Ukraine as the Kremlin seeks to degrade domestic and international confidence in the Ukrainian government. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command warned on March 22 that Russia is preparing information operations aiming to falsely portray Ukraine as without power.[9]

Russian forces will likely continue offensive operations through Spring 2024 while preparing for an expected offensive effort in Summer 2024, although Russian forces will likely struggle to launch a concerted large-scale offensive operation in multiple operational directions in Ukraine at the same time. Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk stated on March 22 that Russian forces are currently committing all available resources to the Lyman, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka directions to sustain ongoing offensive operations and retain the advantage of holding the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine.[10] Russian forces have conducted consistent offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine in order to first seize and then retain the theater-wide initiative and appear to be committing tactical and operational reserves to ongoing offensive operations in hopes of destabilizing Ukrainian defensive lines and preventing Ukraine from getting the respite it would need to contest the initiative.[11] Pavlyuk stated that Russian forces are currently creating force groupings of 100,000 personnel in Ukraine but did not specify in which operational directions.
[12] Russian forces have accumulated roughly 100,000 personnel along the Kharkiv-Luhansk axis, roughly 50,000 near Bakhmut (as of fall 2023), over 50,000 near Avdiivka, and are reportedly attempting to accumulate a grouping of roughly 50,000 personnel in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
[13] Pavlyuk stated that Russian forces can use these groupings to replenish units that are currently losing combat power but that Russian forces may form a grouping sufficient to conduct an offensive operation in one operational direction in Summer 2024.[14] The Russian military command also appears to be forming reserves capable of sustaining ongoing offensive operations at their current tempo in Ukraine, but these reserves are unlikely to be able to function as cohesive large-scale penetration or exploitation formations ahead of the Summer 2024 offensive effort.[15] Russian forces have previously struggled to conduct large-scale offensive operations in more than one operational direction at the same time, and the Russian military does not appear to have accumulated multiple large groupings of forces or established the "strategic reserves" that would facilitate two or more large-scale offensive operations.[16]

Russian forces likely seek to exploit current Ukrainian materiel shortages while preparing for efforts that will force Ukraine to expend a sizeable portion of the Western security assistance it may receive in the coming months. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Ivan Havrylyuk stated on March 22 that he expects that European security assistance will even out disparities between Russian and Ukrainian artillery capabilities in the next month or two.[17] Havrylyuk stated that Russian forces currently have a seven-to-one advantage in artillery ammunition over Ukrainian forces, and current Ukrainian ammunition shortages are constraining Ukraine's ability to prevent gradual tactical Russian gains along the front.[18] Pentagon Spokesperson Sabrina Singh stated on March 21 that Ukrainian forces are having to make difficult decisions to withdraw from certain areas due to continued delays in Western security assistance, and ISW has previously assessed that materiel shortages will likely force Ukrainian forces to make tough decisions about prioritizing certain sectors of the front over sectors where limited territorial setbacks are least damaging.[19] Russian forces may seek to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations through spring regardless of difficult weather and terrain conditions in an effort to exploit Ukrainian materiel shortages before promised Western security assistance arrives in Ukraine.[20]

Imminent packages of Western security assistance may address Ukraine's pressing immediate shortages, but Russian offensive efforts will continue to force Ukraine to expend materiel in ways that can reproduce similar shortages over time in the absence of more consistent security assistance. The expected large-scale Russian offensive effort in Summer 2024 will require Ukrainian forces to expend materiel that is in short supply, and the Russian command may intend in part for the summer offensive effort to prevent Ukrainian forces from fielding well-provisioned forces for prolonged periods or accumulating materiel for future counteroffensive operations. Ukraine's European partners are expanding their efforts to provide more regular security assistance to Ukraine but will likely not be able to do so, specifically for artillery ammunition, in the coming months as Ukraine defends against expected Russian summer offensive operations and possible Russian offensive efforts in the second half of 2024. **Consistent provisions of Western military assistance in key systems, many of which only the US can provide rapidly at scale, will play a critical role in determining Russian prospects in 2024 and when Ukrainian forces can attempt to contest the theater-wide initiative.**
[21]

The Ukrainian military command appears to be prioritizing rotations for frontline units but will have to address additional manpower challenges if Ukrainian forces are to seize the initiative even on a localized basis in 2024 as Ukrainian senior military officers say they hope to do. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi announced on March 22 that the Ukrainian military is currently optimizing its military organization structures to simplify and maximize the quality and efficiency of Ukraine's force management.[22] Syrskyi stated that some Ukrainian force groupings will be "reformatted" and that this effort aims to improve the management and distribution of Ukrainian personnel. Syrskyi stated that conducting rotations for frontline units is a key priority, and Syrskyi had observed on March 14 that unspecified Ukrainian units that have been deployed to the frontline for a long time have started conducting rotations.[23] Pavlyuk stated on March 22 that the Ukrainian military has started regrouping and withdrawing a number of brigades from unspecified positions to restore their combat capability.[24] Pavlyuk stated that Ukraine is transferring forces and resources to "recovery areas" in order to give servicemen time to rest, recover, and resupply and allow Ukrainian forces to launch "new actions with new forces." ISW previously assessed that the reported beginning of Ukrainian rotations suggests that the Ukrainian command believes that the situation on whatever unspecified sector(s) of the frontline where the rotations have or will occur has stabilized sufficiently for Ukrainian troops to rotate.[25]

Pavlyuk stated that Ukraine can seize the initiative if the tempo of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine decreases.[26] Russia's theater-wide initiative allows Russia to determine the location, time, intensity, and requirements of fighting along the frontline and allows the Russian military command to reprioritize efforts dynamically to take advantage of perceived opportunities created by Ukrainian materiel shortages or other factors.[27] ISW previously assessed that it would be unwise for Ukraine to cede the advantage of the theater-wide initiative to Russia for longer than is necessary, although it is unclear when Ukraine could be able to challenge Russia's control of the initiative given Ukraine's manpower challenges and delays and uncertainty in the provision of US military assistance. [28] Analyst Michael Kofman told the *Washington Post* on March 15 that the US supplemental aid package would allow Ukrainian forces to "buy time" but that Ukraine must also fix the "structural problem" related to its manpower.[29] The need for rotations is only part of Ukraine's manpower "structural problem."

Russian authorities reportedly intend to significantly expand crypto-mobilization efforts starting in Spring 2024 amid reports about significant decreases in the number of voluntary recruits. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on March 22 that high-ranking sources from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), presidential administration, and regional governments stated that the Russian MoD plans to increase force generation starting in the spring and that Russia may intend to generate an additional 300,000 personnel within an unspecified time frame.[30] *Verstka*'s sources reportedly stated that the Russian military will first focus on recruiting reservists who have signed contracts with the MoD to join the "personnel mobilization reserve" that undergoes military training twice a year. An officer from an unspecified military unit in Trans-Baikal Krai reportedly told *Verstka* that Russian authorities are currently recruiting such reservists in ways similar to those used before partial mobilization in 2022, but that it is unclear if Russian authorities will order another mobilization wave. *Verstka* reported that presidential administration sources stated that Russian authorities aim to persuade and even coerce conscripts whose service term will end in April 2024 or has already ended in 2023 to sign military contracts. *Verstka* reported that sources indicated that military registration and enlistment offices started to issue more deferment certificates to employees of state enterprises and some defense enterprises at the end of February but that the reason for this phenomenon is unclear. *Verstka* reported that sources differed on whether recent activity in the Moscow Mayor's office, including the resumption of work by employees who had previously helped military registration and enlistment offices during the fall 2022 mobilization wave and the creation of a new center for conscripts, is related to the upcoming biannual spring conscription cycle or something else.

Verstka reported that employees of the military recruitment center in Moscow indicated that the pace of Russian voluntary recruitment "dropped sharply" starting in October 2023 with the number of visitors to the Unified Contract Hiring Center in Moscow decreasing from 500-600 per day to 20-30 per day. [31] Russian forces' ability to replenish their significant losses in recent months has been crucial for their ability to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine, particularly offensive operations near Avdiivka that began in October 2023.[32] Should Russian authorities be unable to recruit the quantity of personnel needed to replenish losses and maintain the current tempo of offensive operations in Ukraine through intensified volunteer recruitment efforts, Russian authorities would likely intensify other crypto-mobilization methods, such as the coercive mobilization of convicts and migrants, to sustain offensive operations before deciding to do so by conducting another unpopular wave of mobilization.

A Russian Storm-Z instructor noted that Russian authorities must consider the conflicting interests of the Russian military command, various groups of military personnel in Ukraine, and Russian society when deciding whether to conduct another wave of mobilization or not. The instructor claimed that Russian authorities have resorted to recruiting volunteer military personnel since they are concerned that another mobilization wave would likely spark social tension in Russia and lead to another mass exodus from the country. The instructor claimed that volunteers' recruitment prospects in the post-election period are "ambiguous" and that another mobilization wave would be "fairly logical" to fill both the active army and the strategic reserves. The instructor highlighted, however, that Russian authorities must consider various problematic factors when deciding whether to call for another mobilization. The instructor stated that if Russian authorities were to conduct another mobilization without demobilizing those already called up in Fall 2022, there would be tension between the newly mobilized and previously mobilized personnel; if Russian authorities conduct a larger-scale mobilization than the one in the fall of 2022 and replace those previously mobilized, there would be tension with volunteer recruits who have open-ended contracts; and if Russian authorities do not conduct another mobilization wave, there would be increased tension among the military personnel who have been on the front for a long time. The instructor claimed that Russian authorities can avoid a possible mobilization if Russian forces systematically improve their reconnaissance-fire complexes (RFC) and reconnaissance-strike complex (RSC) in coordination with offensive actions. The instructor also suggested that Russian "meat assaults" are aggravating Russian forces' personnel problems and complained that Russian authorities praise "meat assault" commanders who "amuse" Russian authorities with "beautiful" but untrue frontline reports.

Verstka reported that select Russian officials stated that the Russian military command hopes that increased force generation will allow Russian forces to conduct a future offensive operation to encircle Kharkiv City. Such an operation would pose significant challenges both to the Russian forces responsible for the effort and to the wider Russian campaign in Ukraine, however. **Verstka** reported that its sources stated that conscripts called up in the spring conscription cycle and "incompetent" reservists will go to Russia's southern border in support roles or as border troops as part of efforts to free up more experienced military personnel for an attack on Kharkiv City. [33] A Russian presidential administration source reportedly told **Verstka** that the Russian military needs 300,000 additional personnel in order to launch an operation to encircle Kharkiv City and that Russian forces hope to seize the city without turning it into a "second Mariupol." [34]

A Russian offensive operation to encircle Kharkiv City would be an extremely ambitious undertaking that would require long drives across open terrain that Russian forces have not conducted since the start of the full-scale invasion. [35] Russian forces are currently conducting an offensive operation along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremminna line that aims to reach the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast, but even if that ongoing effort achieves its intended goal, the prospects for Russian advances into Kharkiv Oblast from the east bank of the Oskil River are as challenging as the prospects of advancing elsewhere along the international border with Belgorod Oblast if not more so. [36] Russian forces have committed relatively minimal forces to protect Russia's international borders, and these elements would be insufficient for an operation to encircle Kharkiv City. [37] The reported plan to generate 300,000 new personnel could allow Russian forces to free up relatively combat-effective elements along the frontline in Ukraine for an operation to encircle Kharkiv City, but at the expense of offensive operations in sectors of the front that the Russian military command has been prioritizing for over a year and a half of campaigning in Ukraine. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may intend to conduct limited offensive operations along the international border with Kharkiv Oblast to draw and fix Ukrainian forces and that Kremlin officials may be engaging with ultranationalists' calls to push Ukrainian forces away from the border with Belgorod Oblast to divert Ukrainian attention away from the ongoing Russian offensive operation along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis. [38] ISW has yet to observe any indicators that Russian forces are currently preparing for an offensive operation to encircle Kharkiv City.

This Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for a mass shooting and bombing at a concert venue in the suburbs of Moscow on the evening of March 22. Russian authorities reported that three to five attackers in camouflage opened fire with automatic weapons and detonated explosives during an event at the "Crocus City Hall" concert venue in Krasnogorsk on the northwestern outskirts of Moscow City, killing at least 40 and injuring at least 100. [39] The attackers reportedly fled the scene. [40] Russian reports suggest that up to 6,200 people had gathered at the Crocus concert venue for a sold-out concert, and eyewitnesses reported and posted footage of gunfire, explosions, casualties, and civilians fleeing the venue. [41] The explosions caused a significant fire at the Crocus venue, engulfing roughly 13,000 square meters of the building, causing the roof to cave in, and destroying the top floor. [42] Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) forces, Rosgvardia's Special Rapid Response Unit (SOBR) and Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON) forces, and firefighters deployed to the Crocus concert hall to help fight the fire, evacuate civilians, secure the area, and search for suspects. [43] Russian authorities have detained at least one unspecified individual, though it is unclear if this

individual is a suspected attacker or was detained for another reason in the aftermath of the attacks.
[44]

Russian authorities have not yet reported on the identities or affiliations of the attackers but IS claimed responsibility for the attacks.[45] US officials told the *Washington Post* that the US has "no reason to doubt" the IS claim.[46] The *Washington Post* cited US officials as saying that the American and British embassies in Russia issued warnings on March 8 of possible terrorist attacks at mass gatherings in Moscow and St. Petersburg in part due to reports of IS-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) operating in Russia.[47] CNN Chief National Security Correspondent Alex Marquardt reported that sources informed him that the US has had "fairly specific" intelligence about IS-KP plans for an attack in Russia and that the US informed Russia of the intelligence.[48]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian authorities informed Putin about the attack within several minutes and that Putin is receiving updates from all the relevant services.[49] Russian authorities responded to the attack by canceling public events and issuing "high alert" warnings throughout Russia.[50] Russian authorities also announced increased security measures throughout Moscow Oblast and at Russian airports and rail stations.[51] The Russian Investigative Committee opened a criminal case into the attack and deployed an investigative team to the concert venue shortly after Russian security forces secured the scene.[52] Russian officials and milbloggers threatened punishments and retaliation against the attackers and baselessly suggested that Ukraine was involved in the attack.[53]

Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhaylo Podolyak stated that Ukraine had nothing to do with the attack in Moscow.[54] The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated that it rejected all accusations that Ukraine was involved in the attack.[55] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that there is no indication that Ukraine was involved in the attack.[56]

NATO Military Committee Chairperson Admiral Rob Bauer highlighted the ways in which Russia has prompted NATO's refocus on collective security and the applicability of Ukrainian naval drone operations in other theaters during an interview on March 22. Bauer stated that NATO has been tracking the possibility of a conflict with Russia since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and that Russian aggression has made it necessary for NATO to return to focusing on collective security after focusing on "crisis response" over the last 20 to 30 years.[57] Bauer stated that NATO understands that "time is not on our side" in terms of collective security because "the enemy decides when and where they attack and how long the conflict lasts." Bauer stated on March 21 that "Russia's war against Ukraine has never been about any real security threat coming from either Ukraine or NATO," which is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 to weaken and ultimately destroy NATO – a goal that he still pursues.[58] Bauer also highlighted Ukrainian naval drone operations against Russia's Black Sea Fleet as an "extraordinary example of innovation."[59] Bauer stated that drones will continue to play an important role on land and at sea and that the role of drones in combined missile strikes will increase. Bauer noted that there is an important question about how naval drones can be used in other oceans and seas as effectively as Ukrainian forces have used naval drones in the Black Sea. CTP-ISW has previously reported on similar but unsuccessful efforts by the Houthis to strike vessels in the Red Sea.[60]

US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor is reportedly in Moscow, his second visit in the last two months, as the Kremlin appears to be intensifying efforts to set information conditions to justify a variety of Russian hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova. Shor stated on March 22 that his current trip to Russia is aimed at building a "clear plan" for future Russian and Moldova cooperation.[61] Shor stated that his goal is the "total resignation of the current pro-Western regime" that acts against the interest of the Moldovan people and claimed that the West is attempting to turn Moldova into "some kind of battlefield."^[62] Shor noted that he plans to attend the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 5-8 2024.[63] Shor last visited Russia on February 7 and met with Russian Duma official Leonid Kalashnikov, the chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Eurasian Integration, and Relations with Compatriots Abroad.[64] Shor and Kalashnikov reportedly discussed the "negative impact of the collective West on the lives of ordinary citizens of Moldova." ISW previously assessed that Shor is a prominent Kremlin political proxy in Moldova and that Shor's February 7 meeting with Kalashnikov was a notable inflection. Shor's meeting with Kalashnikov was followed by the February 28 Seventh Congress of Deputies from pro-Russian Moldova breakaway region Transnistria, in which Transnistrian officials requested unspecified "zashchita" (defense/protection) from Russia, and governor of pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia Yevgenia Gutsul's meetings with Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, in early March.[65] Shor may have played a role in orchestrating these events and is almost certainly a significant actor within the Kremlin's efforts to destabilize Moldova.

US sanctions have seemingly prompted India to significantly decrease the amount of crude oil it imports from Russia, likely further constraining Russian attempts to skirt the G7 oil price cap. Bloomberg reported on March 22 that all of India's private and state-run oil refineries are refusing to accept Russian crude oil transported on Russian PJSC Sovcomflot tankers due to US sanctions. [66] Bloomberg noted that the Indian refineries are increasingly scrutinizing which tankers are carrying the Russian oil and that Sovcomflot tankers account for 15 percent of Russian oil shipments to India. [67] Bloomberg also recently reported that two tankers carrying Russian crude oil have been idling off the Indian west coast since February 29.[68] Bloomberg previously reported that Indian oil buyers have turned away tankers carrying Russian crude oil priced above the G7's \$60 per barrel price cap and that India wants to distance itself from Russia due to the war in Ukraine.[69]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted the largest series of combined drone and missile strikes targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure since the start of the full-scale invasion during the night of March 21-22.
- Russian strikes against Ukrainian energy facilities may aim to degrade Ukrainian defense industrial capacity, and Russian forces are likely trying to exploit Ukrainian air defense missile shortages in a renewed attempt to collapse Ukraine's energy grid.
- Russian forces will likely continue offensive operations through Spring 2024 while preparing for an expected offensive effort in Summer 2024, although Russian forces will likely struggle to launch a concerted large-scale offensive operation in multiple operational directions in Ukraine at the same time.
- Russian forces likely seek to exploit current Ukrainian materiel shortages while preparing for efforts that will force Ukraine to expend a sizeable portion of the Western security assistance it may receive in the coming months.
- The Ukrainian military command appears to be prioritizing rotations for frontline units but will have to address additional manpower challenges if Ukrainian forces are to seize the initiative even on a localized basis in 2024 as Ukrainian senior military officers say they hope to do.
- Russian authorities reportedly intend to significantly expand crypto-mobilization efforts starting in Spring 2024 amid reports about significant decreases in the number of voluntary recruits.
- Verstka reported that select Russian officials stated that the Russian military command hopes that increased force generation will allow Russian forces to conduct a future offensive operation to encircle Kharkiv City. Such an operation would pose significant challenges both to the Russian forces responsible for the effort and to the wider Russian campaign in Ukraine, however.
- This Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for a mass shooting and bombing at a concert venue in the suburbs of Moscow on the evening of March 22.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kremenna, Avdiivka, Donetsk City, and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact.
- Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets reported on March 22 that Ukrainian authorities helped return another nine Ukrainian children to Ukrainian-controlled territory from occupied Ukraine and Russia.
- The Moscow military registration and enlistment office has reportedly begun to issue electronic summonses for the Spring 2024 Russian conscription cycle.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 21, 2024

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

March 21, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15pm ET on March 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Russian military command appears to be forming reserves capable of sustaining ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine, but these reserves are unlikely to be able to function as cohesive large-scale penetration or exploitation formations this year. Ukrainian military observer

Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on March 21 that the Russian military command plans for the bulk of its “strategic reserves” to be operational ahead of Russia’s reported summer 2024 offensive but suggested that it is unlikely that Russia’s “strategic reserves” will be equipped to their full end strength by this time due to materiel and manpower shortages.[1] Mashovets cited Russia’s 44th Army Corps (AC), a formation that Russia is reportedly forming as part of the Leningrad Military District (LMD), and Russia’s 163rd Armored Repair Plant as examples of how materiel limitations will constrain the formation of Russian “strategic reserves.” Mashovets stated that the Russian military command will likely only be able to provide 55 to 60 percent of the arms and equipment that the 44th AC will need by the end of 2024. Mashovets similarly stated that Russian authorities are attempting to double the 163rd Armored Repair Plant’s production volumes but that this effort will likely not be completed until the end of 2024 instead of in summer 2024 as planned. Mashovets suggested that Russia’s ability to produce new weapons and equipment and modernize old systems “does not correspond” with how quickly Russia hopes to equip its strategic reserves. Mashovets’ assessment is consistent with ISW’s assessment that Russian defense production is capable of sustaining the current tempo of Russian offensive operations but is unlikely to be able to fully support a potential operational or strategic-level mission in 2024.[2]

Large-scale Russian manpower losses are likely more significant than armored vehicle losses at this point in the war, particularly since Russian forces adjusted their tactics and transitioned to infantry-heavy ground attacks to conserve armored vehicles at the expense of greater manpower losses in fall 2023.[3] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi previously reported that Russia is capable of generating forces at a rate equal to Russian monthly personnel losses (roughly 25,000 to 30,000 personnel per month) and that Russia would have to conduct “mobilization” (likely referring to large-scale mobilization) to establish a “powerful strategic reserve.”[4] The British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank reported on February 12 that Russia is likely able to sustain its current rate of vehicle losses (over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles annually and nearly 8,000 since February 2022) for at least two to three years by mainly reactivating vehicles from storage.[5]

It is unclear what kind of “strategic reserve” Russia is forming based on open-source reporting but known Russian manpower and material limitations suggest that Russia will likely not commit these “strategic reserves” as a cohesive formation to fighting in Ukraine but will instead use them as a manpower pool to replenish losses along the frontline. Russia’s “powerful strategic reserves” could in theory be capable of serving as a first-echelon, penetration force or second-echelon exploitation force, capable of conducting large-scale mechanized assaults into Ukrainian defensive lines and making operationally significant advances if they were fully equipped and properly trained. ISW forecasts that Russia will not develop a strategic reserve that can serve in such capacities, however, due to the limitations discussed above.[6] Russia’s ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts have proven capable of sustaining Russia’s current offensive efforts in Ukraine despite heavy losses and could be capable of recruiting the manpower necessary to form more limited Russian operational reserves.[7] The formation of additional reserves would likely allow the Russian military to backfill losses in Ukraine without taking a significant operational pause between Russia’s ongoing localized offensive efforts this spring and Russia’s anticipated summer 2024 offensive effort, which ISW previously assessed Russian forces are attempting to avoid despite difficult weather and terrain conditions.[8]

Russian offensive tactics will likely increasingly pressure Ukrainian defenses as long as delays in Western security assistance persist. Russian forces are generally relying on their manpower and materiel superiority to conduct a relatively consistent tempo of assaults against Ukrainian positions along the frontline in hopes of wearing down Ukrainian defenders and setting conditions for exploiting Ukrainian vulnerabilities.[9] Russian forces are also expanding their use of tactical aviation, drones, and electronic warfare (EW) systems in Ukraine to prepare for and support these assaults while reportedly conducting artillery fire exceeding Ukrainian artillery fire by a ratio of up to ten to one. [10] Russian forces have significantly increased guided and unguided glide-bomb strikes against rear and frontline Ukrainian positions in 2024, notably employing mass glide-bomb strikes to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February.[11] Russian and Ukrainian forces have heavily integrated drones into their reconnaissance-fire complexes (RFC) along the frontline, and Russian forces rely on drones both before and during assaults.[12] A Ukrainian commander stated on March 20 that Russian forces in the Bakhmut direction currently operate first-person view (FPV) drones at night after Russian artillery units conduct indirect fire during the day, suggesting that Russian forces continue to experiment with tactical drones and may be deconflicting artillery and drone strikes temporally. [13] Russian forces are widely employing EW systems throughout the front to disrupt Ukraine’s own drones and are reportedly increasingly equipping armored vehicles with EW systems to minimize the threat that Ukrainian drones pose to mechanized assaults.[14] Russian artillery advantages allow Russian forces to provide extensive artillery preparation and coverage for Russian assaults and are likely allowing Russian forces to systematically degrade Ukrainian fortifications.

Ukrainian military observer Tatarigami stated on March 20 that Russian forces conduct offensive operations near Bilohorivka (south of Kremenna) and in many other sectors of the front according to the following sequence: Russian forces first conduct reconnaissance with drones, strike Ukrainian forces with glide bombs, conduct artillery preparations, advance with small squad- to company-sized infantry or lightly mechanized groups, attack Ukrainian positions from 50 to 150 meters away with FPV drone support, and then, if successful, seize positions and quickly fortify them.[15] Tatarigami added that once Russian forces sufficiently degrade the Ukrainian defense in an area, Russian forces will then commit larger, company-sized assault groups to exploit vulnerabilities.[16] Tatarigami's observations are consistent with ISW's observations of the general chronology of the majority of current Russian assaults along the front. Russian forces do routinely change the size of assault groups and the amount of equipment they use in assaults, however, likely to test Ukrainian responses and exploit tactical opportunities in specific sectors of the front.[17]

Overall materiel shortages will likely limit how Ukrainian forces can conduct effective defensive operations while also offering Russian forces flexibility in how to conduct offensive operations. Ukrainian ammunition shortages are reportedly forcing Ukraine to husband artillery shells, constraining Ukrainian artillery units from conducting effective counterbattery fire and likely preventing Ukrainian forces from relying on artillery fire to repel Russian assaults.[18] Tatarigami stated that constrained Ukrainian artillery resources complicate Ukrainian efforts to push Russian forces from recently captured positions and often necessitate that Ukrainian forces conduct more costly counterattacks. [19] Open-source investigations indicate that Ukraine's ammunition shortage and inability to conduct sufficient counterbattery warfare has likely allowed Russian forces to establish stationary artillery fire positions allowing for higher and more sustained rates of fire.[20] Ukrainian air defense missiles shortages will likely continue to limit Ukraine's ability to contest air space over occupied Ukraine and threaten the Russian tactical aircraft conducting routine glide-bomb strikes.[21] Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have repeatedly shown that they are able to prevent these Russian offensive tactics from producing tactical gains, however.[22]

Russian forces conducted a larger series of missile strikes targeting Kyiv City on the night of March 20 to 21. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched two Iskander-M/KN-23/Kh-72M Kinzhal ballistic and "aeroballistic" missiles and 29 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from 11 Tu-95MS from Volgodonsk, Rostov Oblast and Engels, Saratov Oblast and that Ukrainian air defenses and mobile fire units shot down all of the missiles over Kyiv Oblast.[23] "Aeroballistic missiles" likely refer to air-launched Kh-72M2 Kinzhal missiles, as Iskander-Ms and North Korean KN-23s are ground-launched.[24] The Kyiv City Military Administration noted that Russian forces have not targeted Kyiv City with missiles strikes in the past 44 days.[25] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported that its sources in the GUR stated that the Russian missile strikes targeted GUR positions.[26] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Patriot and other Western-provided air defense systems can down Russian ballistic missiles but noted that Ukraine does not currently have enough of these systems to cover other areas of Ukraine.[27]

NATO Military Committee Chairperson Admiral Rob Bauer stated that neither Ukraine nor NATO prompted Russia to invade Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces' adaptations and innovations have in part changed modern warfare. Bauer stated on March 21 that "Russia's war against Ukraine has never been about any real security threat coming from either Ukraine or NATO" and that Russian President Vladimir Putin has "not achieved any of his strategic objectives."[28] ISW continues to assess that Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022 not to defend Russia against a nonexistent threat from NATO but rather to weaken and ultimately destroy NATO — a goal he still pursues.[29] Putin has claimed that Russia did not start the war in 2022 and that Russia's invasions of Ukrainian territory in 2014 and 2022 were part of a defensive campaign aimed at protecting Russian people and the Russian state — false narratives that are meant to hide Russia's aggression.[30] ISW also continues to assess that Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine, which amount to complete Western and Ukrainian capitulation and expansionist territorial gains, remain unchanged.[31]

Bauer also stated that Ukrainian forces have "fundamentally changed many aspects of modern warfare" and have quickly adapted and innovated, including by using Soviet-style equipment with modern Western materiel.[32] Ukraine's innovations on the battlefield include its successful employment of so-called FrankenSAM hybrid air defense systems and experimentation and production of different drone technologies for combat missions on the battlefield.[33] Ukrainian officials have recently stated that Ukrainian forces have proven that a well-trained army with more advanced weapons can defeat an enemy with numerical manpower and materiel superiority but that Ukrainian forces can only maintain their superior capabilities with Western support, such as the provision of long-range, high-precision munitions and ammunition for Western-provided artillery systems.[34]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on March 21 that Vice Admiral Konstantin Kabantsov became acting Commander of the Russian Northern Fleet.[35] Kabantsov previously

served as the Northern Fleet's First Deputy Commander and replaced Admiral Alexander Moiseev who became acting Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy.[36]

Bloomberg reported on March 20 that an unspecified source close to the Kremlin stated that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian incursions into Belgorod Oblast are forcing the Russian military to divert forces from the frontline to Belgorod Oblast, although ISW has not observed such claims.[37] It is unclear what forces Bloomberg's source is referencing. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian airborne conscripts repelled recent raids in Tetkino, Kursk Oblast and that elements of the 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade repelled recent raids in Belgorod Oblast.[38] Russian officials stated that Russian military, Federal Security Service (FSB) border personnel, and Rosgvardia personnel repelled recent incursions into Russia, and Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that units of the Chechen "Zapad-Akhmat" Battalion repelled raids from Kharkiv Oblast.[39] Russia previously deployed similar forces to defend against Russian pro-Ukrainian border incursions in June 2023. [40] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin must balance between the reputational cost of accepting that pro-Ukrainian forces will sometimes be able to conduct minimally effective cross-border raids into Russia while conserving its military resources for use in Ukraine and the resource cost of allocating additional forces and means to border security to reassure the Russian populace at the expense of its military operations against Ukraine.[41] The Kremlin may not suffer as high a reputational cost for limited border incursions in 2024 as it did in 2023 due to ongoing censorship efforts, however.

US sanctions continue to influence the financial sector in post-Soviet countries, as two banks in Kazakhstan recently banned the use of Russia's "Mir" national payment system to prevent secondary sanctions. Kazakhstan's Freedom Finance Bank stated on February 28 that it suspended operations with the "Mir" payment system due to US sanctions.[42] Kazakhstan's Bereke Bank also stopped issuing cash from cards using the "Mir" system on March 6.[43] Russia's Sberbank, which fell under Western sanctions in 2022, previously owned Bereke Bank, and a company owned by the Kazakh government bought over 99 percent of Bereke Bank's shares in September 2023, leading the US Treasury Department to remove sanctions on Bereke Bank in March 2024.[44] ISW previously reported that Armenia's Central Bank will reportedly ban the use of the "Mir" system on March 29 and that 17 of 18 Armenian commercial banks will stop using the system on March 30.[45] The US imposed sanctions against the "Mir" system's operator, the National Payment Card System Joint Stock Company, in February 2024.[46]

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian military command appears to be forming reserves capable of sustaining ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine, but these reserves are unlikely to be able to function as cohesive large-scale penetration or exploitation formations this year.
- Russian offensive tactics will likely increasingly pressure Ukrainian defenses as long as delays in Western security assistance persist.
- Russian forces conducted a larger series of missile strikes targeting Kyiv City on the night of March 20 to 21.
- NATO Military Committee Chairperson Admiral Rob Bauer stated that neither Ukraine nor NATO prompted Russia to invade Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces' adaptations and innovations have in part changed modern warfare.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on March 21 that Vice Admiral Konstantin Kabantsov became acting Commander of the Russian Northern Fleet.
- **Bloomberg reported on March 20 that an unspecified source close to the Kremlin stated that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian incursions into Belgorod Oblast are forcing the Russian military to divert forces from the frontline to Belgorod Oblast, although ISW has not observed such claims.**
- US sanctions continue to influence the financial sector in post-Soviet countries, as two banks in Kazakhstan recently banned the use of Russia's "Mir" national payment system to prevent secondary sanctions.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 21.
- Russian officials continue to highlight the work of Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) in supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 20, 2024

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

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

March 20, 2024, 6:30pm ET

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

Several Russian financial, economic, and military indicators suggest that Russia is preparing for a large-scale conventional conflict with NATO, not imminently but likely on a shorter timeline than what some Western analysts have initially posited. Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the leaders of Russian State Duma factions on March 19 and outlined priorities for his fifth presidential term.^[1] Putin emphasized the importance of developing the Russian economy and expanding the social programs announced in his February 29 address to the Federation Council.^[2] Putin claimed on March 19 that he personally witnessed how corporate interests fueled appointments to legislative bodies while he was working in Leningrad and later St Petersburg, although he himself likely made substantial commissions from illegally endorsed contracts and licenses while serving as St. Petersburg Deputy Mayor and Head of Committee.^[3] Putin urged the Russian State Duma faction leaders to act in the interest of the state instead of corporations or parties and emphasized the importance of appointing people based on skill and competence. Putin similarly criticized the Russian “elite” in his February 29 Federation Council address by claiming that the individuals who “lined their pockets” in the 1990s are not the elite, but that the “real elite” are workers and military servicemen who proved their loyalty to Russia.^[4]

Putin is likely attempting to set conditions to stabilize Russia’s long-term financial position at a higher level of government expenditure and is signaling that Russia’s long-term financial stability will require imposing at least some pain on some wealthy industrialist *siloviki* (Russian strongmen with political influence). Putin likely understands that financial crackdowns against industrialist *siloviki* could risk the political rapport Putin has built with them and is trying to mitigate those consequences. Russia does not appear to be facing imminent financial crisis, and increased military spending has been the most significant change in Russian budgetary policy, so efforts to secure Russia’s financial future are much more likely intended to set long-term conditions than to address immediate financial concerns.^[5] Russia continues efforts to circumvent international sanctions, and the International Monetary Fund assessed that Russia’s GDP will grow by 2.6 percent in 2024 and reported that Russia’s GDP grew faster than all Group of Seven (G7) countries’ economies in 2023.^[6]

Polish President Andrzej Duda emphasized in a March 20 interview with CNBC that Putin is intensifying efforts to shift Russia to a war economy with the intention of being able to attack NATO as early as 2026 or 2027, citing unspecified German research.^[7] Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen stated on February 9 that new intelligence indicates that Russia may attempt to attack a NATO country within three to five years, an accelerated timeline from NATO’s reported assessment in 2023.^[8] The timeline for the reconstitution of a significant Russian conventional military threat depends heavily on the financial resources Putin is willing to put against military efforts. In the absence of other explanations for Putin’s apparent preparations to risk damaging his relationship with wealthy Russian clients and in the context of continuing announcements of plans to expand the Russian military considered below, Putin’s attempts to set conditions to stabilize Russia’s economy and finances are most likely part of Russian financial and domestic preparations for a potential future large-scale conflict with NATO and not just for a protracted war in Ukraine.

The Russian military continues to undertake structural reforms to simultaneously support the war in Ukraine while expanding Russia’s conventional capabilities in the long term in preparation for a potential future large-scale conflict with NATO. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu addressed the Russian MOD board on March 20 and discussed ongoing Russian military reforms intended to increase the Russian military’s combat capabilities.^[9] Shoigu reported that Russia has formed the “Dnepr River Flotilla” and a “brigade” of boats as part of the flotilla. The Dnepr River Flotilla is the historical name of various special military river units that were active during the Russo-Turkish wars in 1735-1739 and 1787-1792, the Russian Civil War, and World War II, but this is the first time that Russian military officials have confirmed the formation of the Dnepr River Flotilla in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine.^[10] The Dnepr River Flotilla would most likely be deployed along with the Dnepr Grouping of Forces in Kherson Oblast and will likely defend against Ukrainian cross-river raids and counteract Ukrainian efforts to sustain a limited presence in left (east) bank Kherson Oblast. The size and level of equipment of the Dnepr River Flotilla remains unclear, but the Russian military command may also intend to use it to support Russian cross-river raids and attempts to land in Ukrainian-controlled west (right) bank Kherson Oblast. Russian and Ukrainian sources confirmed that Russian forces were able to conduct a limited raid and temporarily land in west bank Kherson Oblast on March 13, and the Dnepr River Flotilla could feasibly support further such cross-river attempts.^[11] It is unlikely that the Dnepr River Flotilla has the manpower and equipment necessary to establish an enduring large-scale Russian presence in west bank Kherson Oblast or credibly threaten to re-occupy significant territory in Kherson Oblast at this time, but the presence of a new formation in this area may

force Ukraine to commit manpower and scarce materiel to an axis that has been relatively inactive since November 2022. The deployment of the Dnepr River Flotilla may force the Ukrainian command to make challenging decisions about resource attribution as it husbands limited stores of artillery ammunition and other critical military equipment.

Shoigu outlined several ongoing efforts to bolster Russia's conventional military capabilities, more likely as part of Russia's long-term effort to prepare for a potential conventional war with NATO than as part of the war against Ukraine. Shoigu stated that Russia has formed an army corps (AC) (likely either in reference to the AC currently forming in Karelia or to the 40th AC, which has deployed to Kherson Oblast) and a motorized rifle division (potentially in reference to the 67th Motorized Rifle Division, which is committed to the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast line as part of the new 25th Combined Arms Army).[12] Shoigu also claimed that the Russian military plans to form two combined arms armies (CAAs) and 14 divisions, and 16 brigades by the end of 2024. Russia formed two new CAAs — the 25th and the 18th — in 2023, and it is unclear if Shoigu is suggesting that Russia intends to stand up two additional CAAs over the course of 2024.[13] Shoigu initially announced in January 2023 that Russia would also create three new motorized rifle divisions, two new air assault divisions, and reorganize seven motorized rifle brigades into motorized rifle divisions, and Shoigu's March 20 speech did not differentiate between air assault and motorized rifle divisions, so it is likely that Shoigu is suggesting that Russia will stand up two new divisions in 2024 in addition to the 12 divisions (air assault and motorized rifle, inclusive) he announced in January 2023. ISW continues to assess that Russia currently lacks the manpower, military infrastructure, and training capacity to properly staff several entirely new divisions to army-level formations to full end strength in the *immediate to medium-term*.[14] Such reforms, however, are more likely intended to build out Russia's *long-term* military capabilities vis-a-vis NATO, as opposed to immediately creating and staffing new formations up to the army level.

Ongoing personnel changes within the Russian MoD may be further indicators of Russia's preparations for a conflict in the long-term. Shoigu introduced Lieutenant General Andrei Bulyga as the Deputy Defense Minister for logistics support during the MoD address on March 20, confirming the Russian MoD's initial announcement of Bulyga's appointment on March 11.[15] The Russian Armed Forces Headquarters of Logistics Support, which Bulyga now heads, is intended to organize and coordinate logistical support for Russian troops in both peacetime and wartime.[16] Bulyga's appointment is unlikely to remedy logistics and support issues faced by Russian troops in Ukraine in the immediate term, but Bulyga may spearhead reforms to the logistics headquarters that will have more noticeable impacts in the medium to long-term. Bulyga will likely task his department with addressing logistical issues to support the ongoing conventional military reforms, setting conditions for longer-term efforts to build out Russia's conventional capabilities.

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a drone strike against a Russian air base in Saratov Oblast on March 20 amid further indications that Ukrainian drones strikes within Russia are achieving limited asymmetric effects against Russian military assets and economic output. Ukrainian and Western media reported that the GUR struck unspecified targets at the Engels air base in Saratov Oblast with Ukrainian-produced drones. [17] Satellite imagery indicates that there were 11 Russian aircraft present at the air base on March 19, although ISW has yet to observe any visual confirmation that Ukrainian forces struck Russian aircraft at Engels-2 Air Base.[18] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces destroyed four Ukrainian drones over Saratov Oblast, and Saratov Oblast Governor Roman Busargin claimed that the strikes did not cause any damage.[19] Geolocated footage from Engels includes the sound of loud explosions from nearby but is unclear if the footage depicts strikes against targets in Engels or the sound of Russian air defense striking aerial targets.[20]

Recent Ukrainian drone strikes against oil refineries within Russia may have significantly disrupted Russia's refining capacity. *Bloomberg* reported on March 20 that Ukrainian drone strikes may have disabled up to 11 percent of Russia's total refining capacity.[21] Torbjorn Tornqvist, Chief Executive Officer of multinational energy commodities trading company Guvnor, estimated on March 18 that Ukrainian strikes have taken 600,000 barrels of daily Russian oil refining capacity offline, and American multinational financial institution JPMorgan Chase and Co. estimated that the strikes have taken 900,000 barrels of daily refining capacity offline.[22] The decline in Russia's refining capacity appears to have prompted a surge in gasoline and diesel prices on the St. Petersburg International Mercantile Exchange, but only a marginal increase in the cost of domestic fuel prices within Russia. [23] Russian Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov stated on March 20 that the Russian Energy Ministry expects refining volumes to remain roughly the same in 2024 as in 2023, although Russian Deputy Energy Minister Pavel Sorokin stated on March 14 that a possible reduction in primary oil refining in 2024 would likely lead to increases in Russian crude oil exports (since Russia would not be able to refine as much as it usually does).[24] Tornqvist estimated that offline Russian refining capacity will likely immediately impact Russian distillate exports (petroleum products produced in conventional

distillation operations).[25] ISW has yet to observe reports of decreased Russian crude oil and petroleum product exports following Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil refineries in recent weeks. Russia relied on oil revenues to buoy federal budgets amid increased spending on its war in Ukraine in 2023, and significant constraints on Russian oil exports could have substantial impacts on Russia's ability to balance a record level of defense spending in 2024 with its commitments on social spending.[26]

Ukrainian drone strikes against targets within Russia are also likely increasing pressures on available Russian air defense assets. Director of the Russian Energy Ministry's Department for the Development of the Gas Industry Artem Verkhov stated on March 19 that the Russian Energy Ministry is working with Rosgvardia on proposals to deploy Pantsir-S1 air defense systems to strategic energy facilities within Russia.[27] GUR spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Russia has already deployed Pantsir air defense systems at energy facilities, however, and that Russian claims about the planned deployments are meant to reassure the Russian public.[28] Previous Ukrainian drone strikes against strategic targets in Moscow and Leningrad oblasts may have fixed Russian short-range air defenses along expected flight routes, and Russian ultranationalists have recently complained about a lack of available air defense assets in other Russian federal subjects in deep rear areas.[29] **The Ukrainian ability to target Russian military infrastructure within Russia, threaten Russian oil refining and exports, and increase pressure on Russia's air defense umbrella demonstrates that Ukraine can achieve asymmetrical impacts through strikes with limited numbers of mostly domestically produced drones.**

Kremlin-affiliated actors in the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia are invoking narratives that mirror previous Russian claims about Ukraine in the years leading up to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely as part of the Kremlin's wider hybrid efforts to destabilize Moldova. Yevgenia Gutsul, the governor of Gagauzia, stated in an interview with Russian outlet *Izvestia* published on March 20 that she would like Gagauzia to receive "zashchita" (a word that means both "defense" and "protection") from Russia so that Gagauzian residents can have the right to a prosperous life, Gagauzian farmers can export their products to Russia, and Gagauzia can receive gas at a lower price — points Gutsul recently claimed she spoke about with Russian President Vladimir Putin.[30] Gutsul also claimed that Gagauzia is not considering leaving Moldova but wants the Moldovan government to observe the 1994 law on Gagauzia's "special legal status" and implied that Gagauzia would consider leaving if this condition was not met.[31] Gutsul has recently drawn increased attention to the fact that Moldovan President Maia Sandu has not signed the decree to confirm Gutsul as a member of the Moldovan government, as required by the 1994 law.[32] Sandu stated in September 2023, however, that she would not sign the decree until the Moldovan Prosecution Service completed its investigation regarding corruption and bribery in the Gagauzia gubernatorial elections that brought Gutsul to power.[33]

Gutsul's claims that the Moldovan government is not adhering to the law on Gagauzia's special status parallel the Kremlin's previous accusations that Ukraine did not adhere to the Minsk Agreements' stipulations on the "special status" for the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).[34] Kremlin officials and mouthpieces and Transnistrian authorities have also similarly claimed that Moldova abandoned the 5+2 negotiating process that aimed to resolve the decades-long conflict in Moldova's other pro-Russian region, the breakaway republic of Transnistria.[35] The Kremlin has notably claimed that Ukraine's alleged violations of the Minsk Agreements "forced" Russia to launch its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[36] The Seventh Congress of Transnistrian Deputies on February 28 formally requested unspecified "zashchita" from Russia in response to alleged increasing pressures from Moldova.[37] ISW previously assessed that the use of a word that means both "defense" and "protection" was likely intended to set conditions for the Kremlin to interpret "defense" in a military sense if it so chooses.[38] Gutsul's use of "zashchita" and the fact that both Transnistrian and Gagauzian authorities have invoked narratives that mirror those surrounding the Minsk Agreements in a major Russian publication suggest that the Kremlin is orchestrating a wider effort between pro-Russian actors in Gagauzia and Transnistria as part of the Kremlin's ongoing hybrid operations to destabilize Moldova from within.[39]

Moldovan Interior Minister Adrian Efros stated on March 20 that the recent footage of a single drone allegedly flying from the direction of Odesa Oblast and striking a helicopter on the territory of a military unit in Transnistria is a video "montage" meant to cause panic and fear and that there was actually no explosion.[40] The Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB), which is reportedly a "department" of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), responded to Efros' statement and stated that it will present all available "evidence" of the incident to Interpol for assistance in an investigation.[41] ISW previously assessed that Russia or Russian-linked actors would likely be the beneficiaries of the alleged drone strike in Transnistria.[42] Russia or Russian-linked actors would also likely benefit from the dissemination of fake footage of a drone strike in Transnistria that heightens tensions between Transnistrian and Moldovan authorities and that the Kremlin could use to justify any future Russian activity in Transnistria. ISW cannot independently verify the details of the singular drone strike in

Transnistria, but it is consistent with the way that Russia staged provocations in Donbas leading up to the 2022 full-scale invasion.

Key Takeaways:

- Several Russian financial, economic, and military indicators suggest that Russia is preparing for a large-scale conventional conflict with NATO, not imminently but likely on a shorter timeline than what some Western analysts have initially posited.
- The Russian military continues to undertake structural reforms to simultaneously support the war in Ukraine while expanding Russia's conventional capabilities in the long term in preparation for a potential future large-scale conflict with NATO.
- GUR reportedly conducted a drone strike against a Russian air base in Saratov Oblast on March 20 amid further indications that Ukrainian drones strikes within Russia are achieving limited asymmetric effects against Russian military assets and economic output.
- Kremlin-affiliated actors in the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia are invoking narratives that mirror previous Russian claims about Ukraine in the years leading up to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, likely as part of the Kremlin's wider hybrid efforts to destabilize Moldova.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Donetsk City on March 20.
- The Russian military continues to train drone operators for operations in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19, 2024

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

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

March 19, 2024, 5:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on March 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin presented the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) as a key guarantor of Russian security and sovereignty following his victory in the Russian presidential election, likely signaling that Russian security services and *siloviki* (Russian strongmen with political influence) will continue to represent his core constituency in his fifth presidential term. Putin delivered his first major address following his March 18 electoral victory speech at the FSB board meeting on March 19 and praised FSB officers for ensuring Russian security and sovereignty.^[1] Putin thanked FSB officers for successful operations in Ukraine, for suppressing attempts to interfere in Russian internal affairs, and for repelling "terrorist" attacks against Russia (in reference to limited raids by all-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteers in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts).^[2] Putin also highlighted the FSB's role in suppressing attempts by unnamed actors to provoke internal unrest and interethnic conflict within Russia and the FSB's responsibilities to ensure Russia's economic security, combat corruption, and protect critical infrastructure.^[3] Putin's appeals to these FSB functions likely sought to remind his domestic constituency that his regime has the backing of an extensive security apparatus, which the Kremlin has been attempting to expand since the start of the full-scale invasion, particularly since the Wagner Group's failed rebellion in June 2023.^[4] It is notable that one of the greatest challenges to the stability of Putin's rule came from a *silovik*, deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Putin likely aims to signal that Russia's *siloviki* are firmly united in support of his fifth presidential term and his war effort in Ukraine.^[5] Putin, a former KGB officer himself, may be highlighting the FSB as an organization that has his current favor, although Putin has traditionally pitted Russia's security organizations and *siloviki* against each other to compete for his support and prevent any singular entity from amassing too much power.^[6]

Russia continues efforts to build a coalition to counterbalance the West by pursuing bilateral relationships with Iran, North Korea, and China. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko met with Chinese Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming in Moscow on March 19 to discuss the situation on the Korean Peninsula.^[7] Rudenko and Liu accused the United States and its allies of threatening the military situation in northeastern Asia and warned the United States against the proliferation of Cold War-style "bloc thinking."^[8] Russia has notably been pursuing an intensified relationship with North Korea and has received ballistic missiles and artillery ammunition from North Korea in exchange for likely technological cooperation and other unspecified support,

which has generated concern in Seoul about the security situation on the peninsula.[9] Russian Ambassador to China Igor Morgulov additionally met with Chinese Xinhua News Agency Head Fu Hua to discuss bilateral cooperation in the media sphere.[10] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi held a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 19 to discuss bilateral cooperation, and Raisi affirmed his willingness to help Russia stabilize the South Caucasus region, potentially in reference to ongoing developments in Armenia and Azerbaijan.[11] Russia's pursuit of a stronger political and diplomatic bilateral relationship with Beijing while also leveraging its bilateral relationships with Iran and North Korea for military benefit represents the type of "bloc thinking" of which Liu and Rudenko accused the US and its allies. The Kremlin has exploited the war in Ukraine to pursue bilateral relationships and create a coalition of states to counterbalance the West, which has long been a central aspect of Russia's foreign policy.[12]

Armenia's Central Bank will reportedly ban the use of Russia's "Mir" national payment system to prevent Armenia from falling under secondary US sanctions.[13] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on March 19 that a high-ranking source in the Armenian banking sector stated that Armenia's Central Bank will ban local Armenian banks from using the "Mir" system starting on March 29.[14] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenian service Radio Azatutyun reported that 17 of 18 Armenian commercial banks will stop using the "Mir" national payment system on March 30 and that only VTB-Armenia, a subsidiary of the Russian VTB Bank, will continue to use the system. [15] Turkey and Uzbekistan stopped using the "Mir" system in 2022, likely to avoid secondary sanctions.[16] The United States imposed sanctions against VTB Bank in February 2022 and against "Mir" national payment system's operator the National Payment Card System Joint Stock Company in February 2024.[17]

Pro-Russian actors in Moldova are continuing efforts to support wider Kremlin hybrid efforts to destabilize Moldova. The Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) informed Russian Ambassador to Moldova Oleg Vasnetsov that the Moldovan government is expelling an unspecified Russian diplomat in connection with their organization of polling stations in Transnistria for the Russian presidential elections despite the lack of official Moldovan consent.[18] Vasnetsov and Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded, stating that Russia will not leave Moldova's "unfriendly" actions unanswered.[19] Ilan Shor, a US-sanctioned, pro-Russian Moldovan politician, stated in an interview with Russian-language diaspora-focused outlet RTVi published on March 16 that he plans to become the Moldovan Prime Minister following the 2025 Parliamentary elections.[20] Governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, stated on March 19 that she will sue Moldovan President Maia Sandu for defamation after Sandu stated to journalists on March 18 that Gustul works for a "criminal group and not the residents of Gagauzia" and Sandu would therefore not sign the decree to include Gutsul in the Moldovan government.[21] Sandu stated in September 2023 that she would not sign the decree until the Moldovan Prosecution Service completed its investigation regarding corruption and bribery in the Gagauzia gubernatorial election that brought Gutsul to power.[22] ISW continues to assess that Russia and Russian-linked actors in Moldova are engaged in a hybrid campaign that is most likely aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within ahead of the upcoming Moldovan presidential election in late 2024 and Parliamentary elections in summer 2025.[23] Shor is currently living in exile in Israel after he fled Moldova in 2019 to avoid serving a prison sentence for massive fraud and money laundering charges.[24] The Moldovan Constitutional Court also deemed Shor's pro-Russian political party, the Shor Party, unconstitutional in 2023. [25] Shor's confident statement that he plans to become the Moldovan Prime Minister in 2025 indicates that he hopes a pro-Russian politician will become Moldovan president in 2024, exonerate him, vacate his prison sentence so that he can safely return to Moldova and then presumably appoint him prime minister. It is also notable that Gutsul plans to sue Sandu for defamation now, as Sandu made identical statements in November 2023 about her refusal to allow Gutsul into the Moldovan government because of Gutsul's involvement in a "criminal group," which did not prompt Gutsul to press charges at that time.[26] Gutsul's avowed decision to press charges now suggests that charges against Sandu are part of a wider effort to discredit or distract Sandu in her campaign for re-election.

Ukraine's European partners continue efforts to stand up significant initiatives to provide military support to Ukraine. Bloomberg reported on March 19 that the European Union (EU) has prepared draft legislation that would allow the transfer of profits from frozen Russian assets to Ukraine as early as July 2024.[27] EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell stated that the EU should transfer 90 percent of Russian frozen asset revenue to an EU-run fund to finance security assistance for Ukraine and that he will submit a formal proposal for this mechanism to EU member states on March 20. [28] Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for National Defense Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz additionally announced on March 18 that Germany and Poland are creating an "armored vehicle coalition" to support Ukraine and noted that Sweden, the UK, and Italy have already declared their willingness to participate in the coalition.[29]

The Russian military confirmed that Northern Fleet Commander Admiral Alexander Moiseev replaced Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov as acting Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy. The Russian military officially introduced Moiseev as acting Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy at a Russian Navy ceremony in Kronstadt in St. Petersburg on March 19.[30] ISW recently assessed that Moiseev may have been appointed as acting Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy to retain a high-ranking command role as the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) deprives the Northern Fleet of its status as an “interservice strategic territorial organization” (a joint headquarters in Western military parlance) to restore the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts (MMD and LMD).[31]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin presented the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) as a key guarantor of Russian security and sovereignty following his victory in the Russian presidential election, likely signaling that Russian security services and siloviki will continue to represent his core constituency in his fifth presidential term.
- Russia continues efforts to build a coalition to counterbalance the West by pursuing bilateral relationships with Iran, North Korea, and China.
- Armenia's Central Bank will reportedly ban the use of Russia's "Mir" national payment system to prevent Armenia from falling under secondary US sanctions.
- Pro-Russian actors in Moldova are continuing efforts to support wider Kremlin hybrid efforts to destabilize Moldova.
- Ukraine's European partners continue efforts to stand up significant initiatives to provide military support to Ukraine.
- The Russian military confirmed that Northern Fleet Commander Admiral Alexander Moiseev replaced Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov as acting Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy.
- Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance near Avdiivka on March 19.
- Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov stated on March 19 that the Russian military will not increase the number of conscripts summoned during the upcoming semi-annual spring conscription cycle in comparison to the previous fall 2023 conscription cycle.
- Kremlin officials continue to implicate themselves directly in the illegal removal of Ukrainian children to other Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine and the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 18, 2024

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

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

March 18, 2024, 8:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on March 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed occupied Crimea 10 years ago, setting conditions for the full conquest of Ukraine Putin still seeks. Putin signed an illegal annexation treaty with Crimean occupation officials on March 18, 2014, after Russian soldiers without identifying insignia (also known colloquially as "little green men" and, under international law, illegal combatants) swiftly and quietly invaded Crimea in February 2014.[1] Russian occupation officials staged a false and illegitimate referendum in Crimea on March 16, 2014, calling on Russia to annex Crimea.[2] Putin delivered an annexation speech to the Russian government on March 18, 2014, establishing the same false narratives he later used to set information conditions to justify and launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Putin falsely claimed that Russia was protecting Crimeans from the "oppressive" Ukrainian government, that Ukraine is not a real state, and that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians shared the same culture, civilization, and human values.[3] Putin celebrated the 10th anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2024, during which he attempted to justify his continued occupation of parts of Donbas and southern Ukraine and to set conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.[4]

Russian occupation authorities have consistently oppressed Ukrainians on the peninsula — the same charge of which Putin accused the Ukrainian government to justify his invasion — and Russia has since militarized Crimea to support its broader territorial ambitions against

Ukraine. Putin militarized Crimea for eight years and used it to launch a large-scale invasion of southern Ukraine in February 2022.[5] Russia also began efforts in 2014 to materially change the ethnic demographics of Crimea by resettling thousands of Russians in the peninsula and sought to eradicate both the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar national identities to further integrate Crimea into Russia and secure Russia's control over the peninsula.[6] Amnesty International released a report commemorating the 10th anniversary of Crimean occupation on March 18 stating that Russian authorities have systematically tried to eradicate the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar national identities in Ukraine over the past 10 years by interrupting, limiting, and prohibiting the use of the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages.[7] Amnesty International also reported that Russian occupation authorities have suppressed religious and cultural rights in Crimea, and extensively restricted freedom of speech. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is using a similar occupation playbook to establish permanent control over newly occupied territories in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.[8] Putin's aims were never limited to the annexation of Crimea, and his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 under the amorphous stated goals of "demilitarizing," "denazifying," and rendering Ukraine "neutral," indicates that Putin sought nothing less than regaining full Russian control of Ukraine and still maintains this objective today. The conditions of occupied Ukraine suggest, however, that prolonged Russian occupation of already occupied territories or the rest of Ukraine will be accompanied by oppression and ethnic cleansing to consolidate permanent Russian control.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use claimed record levels of voter turnout and support for his presidential candidacy to set informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine. The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) claimed on March 18 that Putin won the presidential election with 87.28 percent of the votes.[9] Russian CEC Chairperson Ella Pamfilova claimed that the Russian election had a record voter turnout of 77.44 percent.[10] The CEC claimed that the 2018 Russian presidential election had a 67.47 percent voter turnout and that Putin won with 76.67 percent of the vote.[11] Putin and senior Russian officials claimed that the reported record voter turnout and high public support for Putin demonstrated Russia's unity and trust in Putin.[12] The CEC claimed that Putin won 88.12 to 95.23 percent of the vote in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts, and Crimea.[13] Russian occupation officials have likely falsified record high support for Putin in occupied Ukraine and likely coerced Ukrainian citizens to participate in the elections, which were inherently coercive given the large number of Russian forces operating in occupied Ukraine.[14] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that 99.8 percent of the personnel in the Russian armed forces voted in the presidential election of whom 97.27 percent voted for Putin.[15] Putin claimed that he did not expect such high election results in occupied Ukraine and that the results demonstrate that people in occupied Ukraine are "grateful for Russian protection" and, therefore, he said that Russia will do everything to ensure the "protection" of occupied Ukraine. [16] Putin is likely continuing efforts to set informational conditions to justify a protracted conflict and long-term occupation of Ukraine under the guise of "protecting" civilians in occupied Ukraine who are only in danger because of the Russian invasion.[17]

Putin responded to French President Emmanuel Macron's recent proposals to send Western troops to Ukraine by claiming that NATO personnel are already in Ukraine. Putin stated on March 18 that military personnel from NATO member countries are already in Ukraine, including personnel who speak French and English, and acknowledged Macron's claim that Western personnel would perform "secondary functions." [18] Putin also reiterated Kremlin talking points about the possibility of full-scale conflict between Russia and NATO and Russia's feigned interest in peace negotiations aimed at undermining Western support for Ukraine and convincing Western countries to push Ukraine into negotiations that would ultimately undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. [19] *Politico* recently reported that France is prepared to build a coalition of countries that are open to sending Western military personnel to Ukraine following Putin's recent claims that "Western escalations," such as sending NATO military contingents to Ukraine, could risk nuclear conflict. [20] Putin's claim that Western military personnel are already operating in Ukraine suggests that Putin believes that the West has already violated this purported "red line," and thus that Western concern over Russia's response to the violation of the "red line" (if it ever existed at all) is baseless. ISW previously noted that Ukrainian forces and Western assistance to Ukraine have crossed Russia's supposed "red lines" several times over the course of the war without drawing a significant Russian reaction, indicating that many of Russia's "red lines" are most likely information operations designed to deter Ukrainian and Western actions.[21]

Putin re-emphasized the idea of a "sanitary zone" in Ukraine in a manner congruent with Russian Security Council Deputy Chair Dmitry Medvedev's recent call for the total elimination of Ukrainian statehood and absorption into the Russian Federation. Putin responded to a media question on March 18 on whether Russia needs to occupy Kharkiv Oblast to ensure security of Belgorod Oblast, stating that he does "not rule out" the idea of establishing a demilitarized "sanitary zone" in Ukrainian-controlled areas in response to recent "tragic events" along the Ukrainian-Russian international border. Putin was likely referring to recent pro-Ukrainian Russian cross-border raids in

Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[22] Putin called the depth of this demilitarized zone a “separate issue” and refused to discuss which areas Russia needs to occupy and when, but noted that Russia may need a demilitarized zone that is difficult for Ukraine to “overcome” using “primarily foreign made” weapons.[23] Putin has previously emphasized the idea of a demilitarized zone that would push Russia and Russian-occupied of Ukraine out of range of both Ukrainian and Western-provided weapons, a goal that is unobtainable as long as Ukraine remains independent with any capability of fighting because Putin would likely lay claim to any Ukrainian territory in the demilitarized zone. [24] Putin’s demilitarized zone narrative is subtler than Medvedev’s direct calls for the total annihilation of the Ukrainian state but is still congruent with the goals outlined in Medvedev’s sardonically-named seven point “peace plan.”[25] Medvedev reiterated the Kremlin’s calls for Ukrainian “demilitarization,” “denazification,” and total defeat that Putin has highlighted as the Kremlin’s war aims since February 2022, and Medvedev’s seven points have a strong ideological basis in Putin’s 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” as ISW has previously reported.[26]

Putin admitted that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces are comprised of Russian citizens amid the continuation of cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 18. Putin stated on March 18 that “four groups of traitors” (likely referring to the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), Siberian Battalion, and Ichkerian volunteers) are conducting cross-border raids into Russia and insinuated that Russia will execute the traitors.[27] Putin claimed that Russian forces have destroyed 800 of the 2,500 all-Russian pro-Ukrainian personnel he estimated to be involved in conducting the attacks into Russia.[28] Putin previously accused “Ukrainian forces” of conducted the cross-border raids on March 12 to 15.[29] Russian milbloggers praised Putin and agreed that Russian “traitors” need to “eliminated,” despite previously also claiming that “Ukrainian forces” were conducting the raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[30] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the volunteer forces continued limited ground attacks near Spodaryushino and Kozinka, Belgorod Oblast and the Siberian Battalion posted a photo claiming to show volunteer forces operating in Kozinka.[31] The Russian MoD recently added a section to its daily situational report to account for the “Belgorod direction,” suggesting concern within the Russian MoD regarding how long these cross-border raids will continue.[32] Pro-Russian all-Ukrainian volunteer forces conducted isolated cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 22, June 1, and June 4–5 in 2023.[33] The previous raids appear to have been more limited than the current raids, which began on March 12 and have continued over the past six days.[34]

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova baselessly accused Ukraine of conducting the reported March 17 drone strike against a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Moldova, likely as part of an ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova. Zakharova claimed on March 17 that the drone strike in Transnistria was a Ukrainian “attempt to shake [up] the situation in Transnistria and sow panic among Russian voters in Transnistria.”[35] Zakharova additionally claimed that official Moldovan statements denying Ukraine’s involvement in the strike are “ridiculous,” and Transnistrian authorities accused Moldovan authorities of an “inadequate reaction” to the strike and previous “terrorist attacks” in Transnistria.[36] The Moldovan Bureau of Reintegration previously stated that the drone strike was deliberately meant to spread fear and panic in Transnistria, implying that the strike was part of an adversarial information operation targeting Moldova, and the Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation accused Russia of conducting the strike to manipulate the information space.[37] ISW cannot independently verify the details of the singular drone strike in Transnistria or identify the responsible actors, but it is unlikely that Ukrainian forces conducted the strike given the limited means used in the strike and the insignificance of the target. Russia or Russian-linked actors could benefit from the strike in order to further the Kremlin’s ongoing efforts to set information conditions to justify a variety of Russian hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed occupied Crimea 10 years ago, setting conditions for the full conquest of Ukraine Putin still seeks.
- Russian occupation authorities have consistently oppressed Ukrainians on the peninsula — the same charge of which Putin accused the Ukrainian government to justify his invasion — and Russia has since militarized Crimea to support its broader territorial ambitions against Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use claimed record levels of voter turnout and support for his presidential candidacy to set informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.
- Putin responded to French President Emmanuel Macron’s recent proposals to send Western troops to Ukraine by claiming that NATO personnel are already in Ukraine.
- Putin reemphasized the idea of a “sanitary zone” in Ukraine in a manner congruent with Russian Security Council Deputy Chair Dmitry Medvedev’s recent call for the total

- elimination of Ukrainian statehood and absorption into the Russian Federation.
- Putin admitted that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces are comprised of Russian citizens amid the continuation of cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 18.
 - Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova baselessly accused Ukraine of conducting the reported March 17 drone strike against a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Moldova, likely as part of an ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova.
 - Russian forces recently made a marginal confirmed advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
 - Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia needs to form a veteran-led Russian “Administrative Corps” as part of the “Time of Heroes” initiative, which will incorporate Russian veterans into the Russian workforce.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 17, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mapes, Kateryna Stepanenko, and George Barros

March 17, 2024, 5pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00 pm ET on March 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

French President Emmanuel Macron underlined the necessity for European countries to continue supporting a Ukrainian victory against Russia in order to ensure Ukrainian and European security. Macron stated in a March 16 interview with Ukrainian TV channels 1+1 and *My-Ukraina* that there will be “no peace in Europe if Ukraine is forced to capitulate.”[1] Macron called on European countries to speed up military assistance deliveries to Ukraine and stated that a “lasting peace” will restore the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and guarantee the security of Ukraine and all of Europe.[2] Macron also implied that negotiations require both Russia and Ukraine to engage in negotiations, highlighting Russia’s unwillingness to engage in legitimate and good-faith negotiations with Ukraine as an equal party.[3] Macron’s emphasis that only Russia and Ukraine can engage in legitimate negotiations directly challenges an ongoing Russian information operation aimed at framing the West as the only meaningful negotiating party in order to convince the West to accept the Kremlin’s premise that Ukraine has no independent agency and to gain concessions from the West that undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Macron also stated in a March 16 interview with French outlet *Le Parisien* that “perhaps at some point” it would be necessary for French troops to operate on the ground in Ukraine to counter Russian forces but that he “does not want it.”[4] Russian sources hyper-focused on Macron’s response to a question in which he affirmed that he would ask Russia for a ceasefire in Ukraine during the summer 2024 Olympics in Paris.[5] Russian official sources largely rejected Macron’s offer of a ceasefire, citing France’s continued support for Ukraine.[6] Macron stated that France would maintain a message of peace in accordance with the spirit of the Olympic movement but that a message of peace and tolerance does not preclude Ukraine’s need to fully restore its sovereignty and territorial integrity.[7]

The Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU), Special Forces (SOF), and Unmanned Systems Forces reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Krasnodar Krai on the night of March 16 to 17. Sources in the SBU told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* that the Ukrainian SBU, SOF, and Unmanned Systems Forces struck the crude oil atmospheric distillation columns of the Slavyansk oil refinery in Slavyansk-on-Kuban, Krasnodar Krai, resulting in a large fire.[8] Krasnodar Krai Operational Headquarters claimed that several drones attempted to strike the Slavyansk oil refinery and that Russian forces neutralized them, though falling drones caused a fire.[9] A Russian milblogger claimed that two of 17 drones that targeted the Slavyansk oil refinery struck the facility.[10] *Suspilne* reported that SBU drones have recently successfully struck 12 oil refineries in Russia.[11] A Russian milblogger claimed that the Ukrainian strike on the Slavyansk oil refinery is the ninth Ukrainian strike on a Russian oil refinery in the past week.[12] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian strikes on oil refineries are more serious than strikes on fuel depots because international sanctions against Russia complicate Russia’s ability to repair technologically complex oil refinery facilities.[13]

Unspecified actors launched a drone at a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic in Moldova, on March 17 amidst an assessed ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within. Transnistrian outlets claimed on March 17

that a single drone struck a helicopter on the territory of an unspecified military unit in Transnistria, posted video footage of the moment of the drone strike, and alleged that the drone flew from the direction of Odesa Oblast.[14] Neither Transnistrian nor Russian authorities have accused Ukrainian forces of conducting the strike as of this writing but may do so in the future. The former Transnistrian Supreme Council Chairman, Alexander Shcherba, claimed that the strike had "Ukrainian fingerprints" and that the "main beneficiary" was Ukraine.[15] The Moldovan Bureau of Reintegration stated that the struck helicopter had not flown for years, and the strike was deliberately meant to spread fear and panic in Transnistria, implying it was part of an adversarial information operation targeting Moldova, though the Bureau of Reintegration did not explicitly accuse Transnistrian or pro-Russian forces of conducting the strike.[16] Moldovan authorities stated that they were in contact with the Ukrainian government.[17] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov described the situation as a Russian provocation.[18] The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation accused Russia of conducting the strike to manipulate the information space.[19] ISW cannot independently verify the details of the singular drone strike in Transnistria or identify the responsible actors, but it is unlikely that Ukrainian forces conducted the strike given the limited means used in the strike and the insignificant target. Ukrainian officials have also recently stated that Transnistria does not pose a military threat to Ukraine.[20] Transnistrian authorities recently asked Russia for unspecified "*zashchita*" (defense/protection) against Moldova, and Russia or Russian-linked actors would likely be the beneficiaries of this provocation in order to further the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to set information conditions to justify a variety of Russian hybrid operations that aim to destabilize Moldova, about which ISW has extensively warned.[21]

All-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces reportedly seized a Russian administrative building in the Belgorod Oblast border area amid continued cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast. The all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) and Siberian Battalion claimed on March 17 that their forces entered the Gorkovsky border settlement in Belgorod Oblast and seized the settlement's administration building.[22] Russian milbloggers either denied this claim or claimed that the settlement was already deserted several years ago.[23] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), amplified footage claiming to show Russian air defenses downing a Ukrainian helicopter near Lukashivka, Sumy Oblast that was reportedly en route to Belgorod Oblast.[24] Russian milbloggers initially claimed that Russian forces downed a Western-produced helicopter, but the Russian MoD later claimed that the helicopter was a Soviet-era Mi-8.[25] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) denied the Russian claims that Russian forces downed a Ukrainian helicopter and characterized the claims as part of a Kremlin information operation.[26] Russian milbloggers claimed that limited ground activity continued near Kozinka and Spodariushino, Belgorod Oblast.[27]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) signaled that it intends to protect the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) against Ukrainian strikes and may have replaced the BSF commander as part of this effort. The Russian MoD reported on March 17 that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited the BSF command post in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea where he received reports about Ukrainian operations and the BSF's performance.[28] Shoigu emphasized that the BSF must conduct daily training exercises to repel aerial and unmanned maritime vehicle strikes so that all Russian crews are ready to defend against such strikes.[29] Shoigu ordered that the BSF install additional weapons, including large-caliber systems and machine guns, on unspecified BSF assets to augment Russian defenses.[30] Shoigu also received a report from Russian Vice Admiral Sergei Pinchuk, whom some Russian sources recently claimed replaced Admiral Viktor Sokolov as BSF commander.[31] ISW remains unable to confirm this claim, however. A Ukrainian strike campaign has forced the BSF to redeploy the majority of its naval assets away from its main base in Sevastopol to smaller and less capable bases in Novorossiysk and elsewhere, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) reported that Ukrainian strikes have disabled roughly 33 percent of the BSF's warships as of early February 2024, including 24 ships and one submarine.[32] Shoigu's posturing to protect the BSF sets conditions for Shoigu to either take credit should the BSF become more effective at protecting itself against Ukrainian strikes or blame other commanders should the BSF fail in this effort.

Key Takeaways:

- French President Emmanuel Macron underlined the necessity for European countries to continue supporting a Ukrainian victory against Russia in order to ensure Ukrainian and European security.
- The Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU), Special Forces (SOF), and Unmanned Systems Forces reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Krasnodar Krai on the night of March 16 to 17.
- Unspecified actors launched a drone at a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic in Moldova, on March 17 amidst an assessed ongoing Kremlin

hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova from within.

- All-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces reportedly seized a Russian administrative building in the Belgorod Oblast border area amid continued cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) signaled that it intends to protect the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) against Ukrainian strikes and may have replaced the BSF commander as part of this effort.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities continue to militarize children in occupied Ukraine as part of efforts to Russify Ukrainian children and create a resource for Russia's future force generation needs.

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 Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Ukrainian Defense Industrial Base Efforts
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives
- Significant Activity in Belarus

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)

Ukrainian military officials recently reported that Ukrainian forces repelled three Russian reconnaissance and sabotage groups on the Ukrainian-Russian international border near Stara Huta and Brusky, Sumy Oblast.[33] It is unclear whether the Ukrainian military officials were referring to previously reported Russian reconnaissance and sabotage groups in the same area on March 16 or additional Russian operations on March 17 that occurred since the initial reports.[34]

Positional fighting continued on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line on March 17, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. Positional fighting continued northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka; west of Kremenna; and south of Kremenna near Bilohorivka.[35] Elements of the Chechen Akhmat "Aida" detachment continue to operate near Bilohorivka, and elements of the 346th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff's Main Directorate [GRU]) are reportedly operating near Lysychansk.[36]

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

Russian forces reportedly unsuccessfully attacked in the Siversk direction (northeast of Bakhmut) on March 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Rozdolivka (southwest of Siversk).[37] Elements of the Russian 6th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps [AC]) reportedly continue to operate near Spirne (southeast of Siversk).[38]

Positional engagements continued around Bakhmut on March 17 but did not result in changes to the frontline. Positional battles continued northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka; west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske and east of Chasiv Yar; southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka, Shumy, and Pivdenne.[39] Elements of the Russian 6th Motorized Rifle Division (3rd AC) reportedly continue to operate in the Bakhmut direction; and elements of the Russian 78th "Sever-Akhmat" Special Purpose Motorized Regiment are reportedly operating near Klishchiivka.[40]

Russian forces recently marginally advanced northwest and west of Avdiivka amid continued positional fighting in the area on March 17. Geolocated footage published on March 16 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced northwest of Tetenke (west of Avdiivka), and a Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced along Tsentralna Street in the settlement.[41] Geolocated footage published on March 16 also indicates that Russian forces recently advanced to the central part of Orlivka (northwest of Avdiivka).[42] Positional battles continued northeast of Avdiivka near Oleksandropil; northwest of Avdiivka near Novobakhmutivka, Berdychi, and Orlivka; west of Avdiivka near Tetenke; and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske and Nevelske.[43]

Russian and Ukrainian forces recently advanced on the Donetsk City frontline amid continued positional fighting on March 17. Geolocated footage published on March 14 shows elements of the Russian 39th Motorized Rifle Brigade (68th AC, Pacific Fleet) striking Ukrainian positions south of Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City), indicating that Ukrainian forces have advanced in the area.[44] Geolocated footage published on March 17 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced northeast of Marinka (immediately west of Donetsk City).[45] Positional fighting continued west of Donetsk City near Krasnohorivka and Heoriivka and southwest of Donetsk City near Novomykhailivka and Pobeda.[46] Elements of the Russian 305th Artillery Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Eastern Military District [EMD]) are reportedly operating near Novomykhailivka.[47]

Positional engagements continued in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on March 15. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are advancing near Malynivka (southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[48] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks southeast of Velyka Novosilka near Vodyane and Volodymyrivka and south of Velyka Novosilka near Urozhaine.[49] Elements of the Russian 60th Motorized Rifle Brigade (5th CAA, EMD) are reportedly operating near Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka).[50]

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

Russian forces reportedly seized Myrne (northeast of Robotyne) amid continued positional fighting in western Zaporizhia Oblast on March 17. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that elements of the Russian 35th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District [EMD]) seized Myrne after pushing Ukrainian forces from the settlement.[51] Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced near Robotyne and Verbove (east of Robotyne).[52] Positional engagements continued near Robotyne and northwest of Verbove.[53] Elements of the Russian BARS-3 "Rodina" Battalion (Combat Army Reserve) are reportedly operating in the Zaporizhia direction.[54]

Positional engagements continued in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, particularly near Krynyk and the Antonivsky roadway bridge area, on March 17.[55] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian Spetsnaz forces conducted a raid in an unspecified area of west (right) bank Kherson Oblast at an unspecified time earlier this week.[56]

Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign (Russian Objective: Target Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure in the rear and on the frontline)

Russian forces launched several drone and missile strikes on Ukraine on March 16 and March 17. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces struck Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts with five S-300 missiles and struck Chernihiv Oblast with two Kh-59 cruise missiles on the night of March 16 to 17.[57] Ukrainian officials reported on March 17 that Russian forces struck an infrastructure facility in Mykolaiv City with two ballistic missiles, likely Iskander-Ms.[58] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 16 Shahed-136/131 drones from occupied Cape Chauda, Crimea, overnight on March 16 to 17 and that Ukrainian forces shot down 14 Shaheds over Odesa Oblast.[59] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that some Shahed drones damaged agricultural enterprises in Odesa Oblast overnight.[60]

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

Russian authorities continue to militarize children in occupied Ukraine as part of efforts to Russify Ukrainian children and create a resource for Russia's future force generation needs. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lysohor stated on March 17 that Russian authorities have approved the creation of the Luhansk Cadet Corps under the Russian Investigative Committee (Russia's rough equivalent to the American Federal Bureau of Investigation), possibly before 2025.[61] Lysohor stated that Luhansk Cadet Corps will teach Ukrainian children about pro-Russian concepts including their "debt" to the Russian "Motherland." The Ukrainian Resistance Center

stated on March 17 that Russian authorities have spent a decade developing a plan to introduce a Russian federal military training system for civilians in occupied Crimea and plan to introduce the same military training system in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.[62] The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated the Kremlin ordered the establishment of centers for military-patriotic education and military training for civilians in each of Russia's municipal entities and in occupied Ukraine and that occupation authorities are focusing on the expansion of the Young Cadets National Movement (Yunarmiya) as part of these efforts. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that occupation authorities plan to build an "Avangard" military-patriotic education center in occupied Sevastopol in 2025-2027 that will train about 5,000 Ukrainian children annually. The "Avangard" centers reportedly cooperate with the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF), and the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) will reportedly use the new "Avangard" center in Sevastopol to recruit personnel from occupied Crimea. Yevpatoria occupation administration head Elena Demidova announced in October 2023 that Russian occupation officials opened an "Avangard" center in the "Gagarin" children's health camp in occupied Yevpatoria, Crimea, which reportedly accepted its first group of 100 ninth-through-eleventh grade students in early October 2023, to teach Ukrainian children basic Russian military training and organize "patriotic leisure activities." [63] Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported in August 2023 that the Russian Investigative Committee and its head, Alexander Bastrykin, were using toys, clothes, and school supplies to coerce Ukrainian children in orphanages in Russia to join the Russian cadet corps and that Bastrykin ordered some Russian cadet corps to prepare to receive Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine as early as February 25, 2022.[64]

Russian authorities continue to use financial incentives to encourage Russian civilians to voluntarily sign contracts for military service with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on March 11 that Tatarstan regional authorities temporarily increased the signing bonus for signing a contract to join the Russian military from 305,000 rubles (about \$3,300) to 400,000 rubles (about \$4,300) until March 25.[65] A Russian insider source claimed on March 17 that taxi drivers are reporting an increased number of advertisements on taxi driver forums offering monetary bonuses for joining the Russian military.[66]

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

Nothing significant to report.

Ukrainian Defense Industrial Efforts (Ukrainian objective: Develop its defense industrial base to become more self-sufficient in cooperation with US, European, and international partners)

Note: ISW will be publishing its coverage of Ukrainian defense industrial efforts on a weekly basis in the Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. ISW will continue to track developments in Ukrainian defense industrial efforts daily and will refer to these efforts in assessments within the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment and other ISW products when necessary.

ISW is not publishing coverage of Ukrainian defense industrial efforts today.

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)

Note: ISW will be publishing coverage of activities in Russian-occupied areas twice a week in the Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. ISW will continue to track activities in Russian-occupied areas daily and will refer to these activities in assessments within the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment and other ISW products when necessary.

ISW is not publishing coverage of activities in Russian-occupied areas today.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

The March 2024 Russian presidential election concluded on March 17, and Russian President Vladimir Putin is the likely victor as expected. Russian state newswire TASS reported that exit polls suggest that 87 percent of voters voted for Putin, which is congruent with ISW's previous assessments that the Kremlin aims to portray public support for Putin at about 80 percent.[67] Russian authorities continue efforts to portray the Russian presidential election as a popular and legitimate election, including by claiming that voter turnout exceeded 90 percent in some federal subjects and that the overall voter turnout was 70 percent as of 15:45 Moscow time on March 17, exceeding the alleged

turnout of 67.54 percent of the last 2018 Russian presidential election.[68] Senior Russian officials continued to accuse the West of interfering in the election and claimed that attempts to divide Russia only united Russians around the election and Putin, even as demonstrations against the choreographed election continued in Russia.[69] Russians across the country and the global Russian diaspora organized large-scale “Noon against Putin” protests, lining up en masse at noon on March 17 to vote against Putin so that a surge of ballots against Putin simultaneously would complicate the Kremlin’s efforts to falsify votes in Putin’s favor.[70] Many Russian opposition outlets posted imagery showing anti-war slogans written on election ballots.[71] Russian authorities continued to crack down on certain demonstrators who damaged ballot boxes or polling centers, reportedly detaining at least 75 Russians on March 17 alone.[72] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian military veterans and athletes attempted to argue with and disperse demonstrators against the choreographed election.[73]

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)

Nothing significant to report.

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, March 16, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

March 16, 2024, 5:20pm ET

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

The Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) reportedly conducted a series of successful drone strikes against three Russian oil refineries in Samara Oblast on March 16. Sources in Ukrainian special services told Ukrainian outlet *RBK-Ukraine* that the SBU struck the Novokuibyshevsky, Kuibyshevsky, and Syzran Rosneft oil refineries in Samara Oblast.[1] *RBK-Ukraine* reported that the three refineries process an estimated 25 million tons of oil per year, or 10 percent of Russia’s annual oil refinement output.[2] Geolocated footage published on March 16 shows a fire at the Syzran oil refinery following the drone strikes, and Samara Oblast Governor Dmytro Azarov stated that there was also a fire at the refinery in Novokuibyshevsky.[3] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on March 13 that Russian authorities recently strengthened anti-drone protection at the Novokuibyshevsky, Kuibyshevsky, and Syzran oil refineries following previous Ukrainian drone strikes targeting Russian oil infrastructure and reported on March 14 that Russian oil and gas and industrial enterprises are currently the main purchasers of anti-drone systems in Nizhny Novgorod Oblast.[4] *Kommersant* also reported that Rosneft has not restarted operations at the Tuapse oil refinery following the January 25 Ukrainian drone strike against the facility, indicating that the January 25 strike likely significantly damaged the facility.[5] Russian milbloggers deliberated whether the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or Rosgvardia are to blame for not protecting Russian oil refineries and criticized general Russian bureaucracy for delaying the deployment of anti-drone countermeasures and air defense systems to defend Russian critical infrastructure operators against Ukrainian drone strikes.[6] One Russian milblogger asked why Russia has not been able to implement even an “elementary decision,” such as copying Ukraine’s mobile fire groups, to defend against drone strikes.[7]

All-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteers continue limited cross-border raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts. The all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) stated on March 16 that it is continuing a “limited military operation” in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts and denied previous Russian claims about the RDK, Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion suffering heavy losses in raids in recent days.[8] The RDK posted footage of alleged Russian prisoners of war (POW) that it recently captured and called on Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov to meet in order to negotiate the exchange of 25 Russian POWs.[9] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian

forces repelled the cross border raids near Popivka, Sumy Oblast, and in the direction of Spodaryushino and Kozinka in Belgorod Oblast.[10]

Russian authorities appointed Boris Kovalchuk, the son of Russian President Vladimir Putin's reported "personal banker" Yuri Kovalchuk, to a position within the Russian Presidential Administration. Russian news outlet *RBK*, citing sources familiar with the matter, reported on March 15 that Russian authorities appointed Boris Kovalchuk the deputy head of the Presidential Control Directorate, a department of the Russian Presidential Administration that monitors how Russian federal and regional authorities implement Russian President Vladimir Putin's orders and directives. [11] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on March 6 that Kovalchuk left Russian energy company Inter RAO, which he headed for 15 years, and that Russian authorities initially gave Kovalchuk four positions to choose from – head of Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom, head of Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft, Deputy Prime Minister for the Fuel and Energy Complex, or governor of St. Petersburg.[12] *Bloomberg* also reported on March 12 that Russian authorities were considering appointing Kovalchuk as Russian Minister of Energy.[13] The Kovalchuk family are also longtime friends of Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko, who has gained increased influence with Putin since the start of the full-scale invasion.[14] Boris' Kovalchuk's new position within the Russian presidential administration suggests that both the Kovalchuk family and even Kiriyenko's wider faction are gaining increased influence within the Kremlin and with Putin himself.

Russian authorities threatened Russian election disruptors and some Russian citizens' continued attempts to disrupt voting in the Russian presidential election on March 16. Russian opposition outlet *Sever Realii* reported on March 16 that Russian authorities have opened at least 15 criminal cases across Russia for attempts to disrupt the election and sent at least two people to pre-trial detention centers.[15] Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova stated that "simple-minded people" tried to disrupt the voting process by committing arson or damaging ballot boxes at 29 polling stations in 20 Russian federal subjects.[16] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed that Russian citizens who attempt to disrupt the election are "scoundrels" and "traitors" who can face criminal charges for obstructing the exercise of electoral rights.[17] Medvedev threatened that attempts at election disruption are a form of "direct" assistance to Ukraine and the perpetrators could face charges of high treason. Russian State Duma deputy Yana Lantratova told Russian state news outlet *RIA Novosti* on March 16 that Duma deputies are preparing a bill that would increase the sentencing severity for Russians who attempt to disrupt elections and are allegedly acting on instructions from a foreign state opposing Russia during wartime. [18] The bill reportedly imposes stricter sentences of five to eight years in prison for disrupting elections. Lantratova stated that Duma deputies are preparing the bill as quickly as possible so Russian lawmakers have time to adopt it before the 2026 Russian legislative elections. Isolated public protests against the Russian presidential election and Russian President Vladimir Putin are highly unlikely to impact the course or outcome of the choreographed Russian presidential election, but Kremlin officials may be quickly responding to these incidents out of concerns that continued disruptions will tarnish the Kremlin's effort to portray the election as Russia unifying around Putin.

Group of Seven (G7) countries issued a joint statement on March 15 warning Iran against transferring ballistic missiles or related technology to Russia.[19] The G7 stated that it is prepared to respond swiftly and in a coordinated manner should Iran provide Russia with ballistic missiles or related technology, including new and "significant measures" against Iran.[20] The G7 statement did not specify what those measures may be, but a senior US official reportedly told journalists that one option under consideration is an effective ban on Iran Air flights to Europe. [21] *Reuters* reported in late February 2024 that Iranian sources stated that Iran had begun ballistic missile transfers to Russia and that Russia has already received 400 Iranian short-range ballistic missiles.[22] Western media reported on March 15 that the senior US official stated that the United States and its allies have not confirmed that Iran has transferred the missiles to Russia, however. [23] Russia and Iran have been reportedly negotiating transfers of the Iranian short-range ballistic missiles in recent months as Russia continues to increasingly rely on Iran for key components and weapons for its war effort in Ukraine.[24]

Key Takeaways:

- The Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) reportedly conducted a series of successful drone strikes against three Russian oil refineries in Samara Oblast on March 16.
- All-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteers continue limited cross-border raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.

- Russian authorities appointed Boris Kovalchuk, the son of Russian President Vladimir Putin's reported "personal banker" Yuri Kovalchuk, to a position within the Russian Presidential Administration.
- Russian authorities threatened Russian election disruptors and some Russian citizens' continued attempts to disrupt voting in the Russian presidential election on March 16.
- Group of Seven (G7) countries issued a joint statement on March 15 warning Iran against transferring ballistic missiles or related technology to Russia.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- A Russian insider source claimed on March 16 that Rosgvardia Director Viktor Zolotov revoked a reported agreement allowing former Wagner Group units to operate independently within Rosgvardia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 15, 2024

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

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

March 15, 2024, 8:50pm ET

Russian forces will likely continue ongoing offensive efforts to destabilize Ukrainian defensive lines in Spring 2024 while also preparing for a forecasted new offensive effort in Summer 2024. The provision of Western security assistance will likely play a critical role in Ukraine's ability to hold territory now and to repel a new Russian offensive effort in the coming months. Russian forces are attempting to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine in an effort to prevent Ukrainian forces from stabilizing their defensive lines.^[1] Russian forces are particularly concentrating on pushing as far west of Avdiivka as possible before Ukrainian forces can establish a harder-to-penetrate line in the area.^[2] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on March 15 that Russian forces have concentrated their efforts on the Avdiivka direction and have been conducting daily mechanized and infantry assaults in an attempt to break through Ukrainian defenses.^[3] Although Ukrainian forces have recently been able to slow Russian advances west of Avdiivka, pervasive materiel shortages caused by delays in Western security assistance appear to be forcing Ukraine to prioritize limited resources to critical sectors of the front, increasing the risk of a Russian breakthrough in other less-well-provisioned sectors and making the frontline overall more fragile than it appears despite the current relatively slow rate of Russian advances.^[4] Russian forces will continue to use the advantages provided by possessing the theater-wide initiative to dynamically reweight their offensive efforts this spring and into the summer, likely in hopes of exploiting possible Ukrainian vulnerabilities.^[5] Russian forces may be pressing their attempts at a breakthrough before difficult weather and terrain conditions in spring will likely constrain effective mechanized maneuver on both sides of the line and further limit Russian capabilities to make significant tactical advances while the ground is still muddy.^[6] Russian forces have intensified offensive operations during similar conditions before, however, and Russian forces may seek to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations through spring regardless of difficult weather and terrain conditions in an effort to exploit Ukrainian materiel shortages before promised Western security assistance arrives in Ukraine.^[7]

Ukrainian and Western officials are increasingly warning about both significant Ukrainian materiel shortages and a new large-scale Russian offensive this summer.^[8] The intent and design of the Russian Summer 2024 offensive effort is not immediately clear and likely will not be until Russian forces launch it, but the Russian military command likely intends to capitalize on any gains it makes in the coming weeks as well as on forecasts that the Ukrainian military may be even less-well-provisioned this summer than it is now. **Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have shown that they can prevent Russian forces from making even marginal gains during large-scale Russian offensive efforts, and there is no reason to doubt that Ukraine could further stabilize the frontline and prepare for repelling the reported Russian offensive effort this summer if materiel shortages abated.**^[9]

Western and Ukrainian officials are expressing concerns about delays in Western security assistance to Ukraine ahead of this expected Russian offensive effort. EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell

stated on March 14 that the West must increase and speed up its support for Ukraine as the next months will be "decisive" ahead of the expected major Russian offensive in the summer of 2024.[10] Borrell stated in an interview with *PBS* published on March 14 that Europe alone cannot, however, make up for the lack of US aid as the US has a much stronger and larger military capacity, as ISW has previously assessed.[11] The *Washington Post* reported on March 15 that a senior US official stated that there is no "bright" future for Ukraine if the US does not pass the supplemental aid package for Ukraine.[12] A senior advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly told the *Washington Post* that Russian forces are highly likely to make significant territorial gains in Summer 2024 if the US does not provide aid to Ukraine. The *Washington Post* reported that Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Michael Kofman assessed that the US supplemental aid package would allow Ukrainian forces to "buy time" but that Ukraine must also fix the "structural problem" related to its limited manpower resources.

The threat of significant Russian gains in the coming months does not mean that there is no threat of Russian forces making such gains through offensive operations this spring. Relative Russian successes this spring, even tactical, may set conditions for Russian forces to pursue operationally significant gains in the summer. Neither would a Ukrainian ability to further stabilize the current frontlines this spring preclude Russia from pursuing a breakthrough this summer. Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces will likely be able to prevent any significant Russian advances both in Spring and Summer 2024 as long as sufficient Western security assistance arrives in the next months in a manner that allows Ukrainian forces to address current materiel shortages and prepare for and sustain future defensive operations.

Pressing shortages in air defense systems and missiles will likely dramatically reduce Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian strikes both in rear and frontline areas in the coming weeks if not addressed rapidly. The *Washington Post* reported on March 15 that Ukrainian policymakers conveyed to Western official sources that Ukraine may use up some of its air defense systems by the end of March.[13] The Ukrainian officials reportedly stated that Ukraine has previously aimed to shoot down four out of every five missiles that Russian forces launch at Ukrainian rear cities but that Ukrainian air defense shortages may force Ukraine to only target one out of every five Russian missiles. Ukraine has already had to make difficult decisions regarding the placement of its limited air defense systems in rear and frontline areas, and Russian forces have recently taken efforts to strain Ukrainian air defenses both in rear population areas and along the frontline.[14] Russian forces have recently experimented with strike packages with different means of penetrating and further pressuring the Ukrainian air defense umbrella.[15] Russian forces also utilized air strikes to tactical effect in the seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February and have intensified and improved their use of glide bombs along various sectors of the front.[16] A 60 percent reduction in Ukraine's ability to target - let alone shoot down - Russian missiles will further exacerbate these allocation issues. ISW continues to assess that the US remains the only immediate source of necessary air defense systems like Patriots.[17]

Russian forces have shown the capacity to adapt to fighting in Ukraine and will likely aim to scale lessons learned from the war in Ukraine to ongoing efforts to prepare the Russian military for a potential long-term confrontation with NATO. *Foreign Policy* reported on March 14 that Director-General of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) Kaupo Rosin told journalists that the Russian military is "turning into a learning organization" after the past two years of war in Ukraine and is currently resolving its battlefield problems within months.[18] Rosin stated that Estonian intelligence assesses that Russian forces have largely addressed battlefield issues with large amounts of manpower and materiel and that reforms relying on mass will likely result in a low-tech, Soviet-style Russian military with significant firepower and artillery.[19] Russian forces have addressed many tactical and operational challenges in Ukraine through their ability to field a greater amount of materiel and manpower than Ukrainian forces, notably seen with a reliance on manpower-intensive "meat assaults" to maintain a relatively high tempo of offensive operations.[20]

Notable Russian adaptations through mass are not the only adaptations that Russian forces have made in Ukraine, however, as the Russian military has demonstrated an uneven propensity for operational, tactical, and technological innovation and learning. The Russian defensive effort against the Ukrainian summer 2023 counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast was relatively successful largely due to the 58th Combined Arms Army's (Southern Military District [SMD]) ability to prepare for

and conduct a doctrinally sound "elastic defense" that Russian forces had previously struggled to conduct in Ukraine.[21] That Russian defensive effort also successfully employed technological adaptations with electronic warfare (EW) systems and drones, and the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) appears to have established some degree of effective reconnaissance-fire complex (RFC) to repel Ukrainian mechanized assaults.[22] It remains unclear to what degree the Russian military has internalized and disseminated these adaptations among different Russian force groupings in Ukraine, but the Russian military is attempting to adapt to the tactical and operational challenges of fighting in Ukraine at scale.[23] Ongoing Russian offensive operations suggest that the Russian command may have learned from previous operational campaign design mistakes, and the Russian military is employing select tactical-level adaptations on certain sectors of the front.[24] Continued widespread Russian tactical failures throughout Ukraine suggest that the Russian military command has struggled the most to internalize and disseminate adaptations at the tactical level, however.[25]

Rosin stated that Russia is currently attempting to restructure and expand in anticipation of a possible war with NATO in the next 10 years, and other Western intelligence agencies have previously made similar assessments.[26] ISW assesses that the ongoing recreation of the Leningrad and Moscow military districts (LMD and MMD) and efforts to create at least a dozen new formations are likely preparations for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO.[27] Russian forces will also likely attempt to ensure that the Russian military has widely scaled adoptions from its current conventional war in Ukraine to forces that it envisions potentially fighting a conventional war against NATO countries that do not have similar recent experiences to draw from.

Senior European officials stressed that a Russian victory in Ukraine would result in Russia posing a strategic threat to NATO security. European Union (EU) High Commissioner Josep Borrell stated on March 14 that a Russian victory in Ukraine that places Russian troops on the borders of Poland, Moldova, and the Baltic states would be an "unbearable" security cost to Europe and the United States.[28] Borrell noted that there is no alternative to NATO to ensure European security against a Russian threat and stated that Russia's invasion acted as a "strategic wake-up call" for Europe to take more responsibility for its own defense capacities in the future.[29] French President Emmanuel Macron agreed with Borrell, stating that Russia's war in Ukraine is "existential for our Europe and for France."[30] Macron emphasized that a Russian victory in Ukraine would diminish European security and that if the situation in Ukraine deteriorates, Europe should "be ready to make sure that Russia never wins that war [in Ukraine]."[31] Director-General of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) Kaupo Rosin stated that a war between Russia and NATO is not inevitable but that the future of Europe heavily depends on the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine.[32]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev questioned the sovereignty of Latvia, a NATO member state, and threatened Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs following Medvedev's March 14 call for the total elimination of Ukraine and Ukraine's absorption into Russia under Medvedev's "peace formula." Medvedev threatened Rinkēvičs' life in a post on March 15 and claimed that Russia will hang Rinkēvičs alongside the current "Nazi" Ukrainian government for "wishing for the death of Russia." [33] Medvedev also claimed that Latvia is a "non-existent country." ISW previously noted that Medvedev's sardonic and extreme March 14 "peace formula" more explicitly outlines real and central elements of the Kremlin's ideology and stated war aims and justifications. [34] Medvedev's March 15 post is a similarly explicit presentation of the Kremlin's ideological framing of the war in Ukraine as part of Russia's longer-term conflict with the West and NATO that Putin has previously alluded to by claiming that Russia is fighting a geopolitical "Nazi" force gaining power in the West.[35] Medvedev's threats against Rinkēvičs and the current Ukrainian government follow previous Kremlin efforts to assert its right, contrary to international law, to enforce Russian federal law on officials of NATO member and former Soviet states for actions taken within the territory of their own countries where Russian courts have no jurisdiction, effectively denying the sovereignty of those states.[36]

French President Emmanuel Macron stated on March 15 that he is not ruling out sending Western troops to Ukraine but that the current situation does not require it. [37] Macron stated that anyone advocating for "limits" on aid to Ukraine is choosing defeat and that "to have peace in Ukraine, [Europe] must not be weak." Macron noted that if France decides to send French troops to Ukraine in the future, the responsibility for the decision will lie solely with Russia. Macron stated that

the West is doing everything possible to help Ukraine and that there can be no lasting peace in Ukraine without recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty and internationally recognized borders, including Crimea. *Politico* previously reported that France is building an alliance of countries open to potentially sending Western troops to Ukraine.[38]

Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed continued limited raids from Ukrainian territory into Russia's border region on March 15. Putin accused "Ukrainian forces" - referring to likely elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion - of conducting the cross-border raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts on March 12 to 15 in order to disrupt Russia's ongoing presidential election and turn international attention to Ukraine.[39] Putin claimed that the Russian people will respond to these raids with "even greater unity" and that pro-Ukrainian forces will not intimidate Russia. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian border units and the Russian military continued to repel assaults by pro-Ukrainian forces near Spodaryushino and Kozinka, Belgorod Oblast and Tetskino, Kursk Oblast on March 14 and 15.[40] Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of Russia's 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian Main Military Intelligence Directorate's [GRU]) are also defending against the attacks on the borders of Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[41]

Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Kaluga Oblast, and recent Ukrainian strikes against oil refineries reportedly caused a spike in Russian domestic oil prices. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported that the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a drone strike against the Pervy Zavod oil refinery near Kaluga City overnight on March 14 to 15 and that Russia uses this refinery for military purposes.[42] Geolocated footage published on March 15 shows a drone impact and a large explosion at the Pervy Zavod refinery, which is reportedly the largest petrochemical complex in Kaluga Oblast.[43] Russian news outlet *RBK* reported on March 13 that the price of Russian AI-95 grade oil exceeded 60,000 rubles (about \$648) per ton for the first time since September 2023 due to Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil refineries and that the price of other grades of Russian oil similarly increased on March 13. [44] *RBK* also reported that the shutdown of the two main oil processing units at the Ryazan oil refinery and another main oil processing unit at the Nizhny Novgorod refinery due to Ukrainian strikes on March 13 may reduce Russian gas production by eight to nine percent and significantly impact the Russian oil market.[45]

Several Russians made limited attempts to disrupt the first day of voting in the Russian presidential election on March 15. Russian opposition outlet *Sever Reali* reported on March 15 that the Russian Investigative Committee opened eight criminal cases against Russians who committed arson and damaged ballot boxes at polling stations throughout Russia and in occupied Ukraine. [46] Russian sources amplified footage of several Russians pouring dye, ink, or paint into ballot boxes, and Russian officials reported that some Russians also poured paint on ballot counting devices and set polling stations on fire.[47] The Moscow Prosecutor's Office warned that residents should not attend "Noon Against Putin" protests outside polling stations at noon on March 17.[48] Isolated public protests against the Russian presidential election and Russian President Vladimir Putin are highly unlikely to impact the course or outcome of the Russian presidential election unless there is widespread public participation, which is also unlikely.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces will likely continue ongoing offensive efforts to destabilize Ukrainian defensive lines in Spring 2024 while also preparing for a forecasted new offensive effort in Summer 2024. The provision of Western security assistance will likely play a critical role in Ukraine's ability to hold territory now and to repel a new Russian offensive effort in the coming months.
- Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have shown that they can prevent Russian forces from making even marginal gains during large-scale Russian offensive efforts, and there is no reason to doubt that Ukraine could further stabilize the frontline and prepare for repelling the reported Russian offensive effort this summer if materiel shortages abated.

- The threat of significant Russian gains in the coming months does not mean that there is no threat of Russian forces making such gains through offensive operations this spring.
- Pressing shortages in air defense systems and missiles will likely dramatically reduce Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian strikes both in rear and frontline areas in the coming weeks if not addressed rapidly.
- Russian forces have shown the capacity to adapt to fighting in Ukraine and will likely aim to scale lessons learned from the war in Ukraine to ongoing efforts to prepare the Russian military for a potential long-term confrontation with NATO.
- Senior European officials stressed that a Russian victory in Ukraine would result in Russia posing a strategic threat to NATO security.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev questioned the sovereignty of Latvia, a NATO member state, and threatened Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs following Medvedev's March 14 call for the total elimination of Ukraine and Ukraine's absorption into Russia under Medvedev's "peace formula."
- French President Emmanuel Macron stated on March 15 that he is not ruling out sending Western troops to Ukraine but that the current situation does not require it.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed continued limited raids from Ukrainian territory into Russia's border region on March 15.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike against a Russian oil refinery in Kaluga Oblast, and recent Ukrainian strikes against oil refineries reportedly caused a spike in Russian domestic oil prices.
- Several Russians made limited attempts to disrupt the first day of voting in the Russian presidential election on March 15.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk and Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian Treatment of Prisoners of War Coordinating Headquarters Representative Petro Yatsenko stated that Russia has intensified its efforts to recruit military personnel from abroad.
- Ukrainian sources and Russian opposition media reported that occupation officials continue coercive efforts to artificially inflate voter turnout and perceptions of support for Russian President Vladimir Putin in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 14, 2024

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

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

March 14, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on March 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev posted a detailed call for the total elimination of the Ukrainian state and its absorption into the Russian Federation under what he euphemistically called a "peace formula."^[1] Medvedev's demands are not novel but rather represent the Kremlin's actual intentions for Ukraine — intentions that leave no room for negotiations for purposes other than setting the precise terms of Ukraine's complete **capitulation**. Medvedev begins the "peace plan" by rhetorically stripping Ukraine of its sovereignty, referring to it as a "former" country and placing the name Ukraine in quotation marks. Medvedev laid out the seven points of his "peace formula," which he sardonically described as "calm," "realistic," "humane," and "soft."^[2] The seven points include: Ukraine's recognition of its military defeat, complete and unconditional Ukrainian surrender, and full "demilitarization"; recognition by the entire international community of Ukraine's "Nazi character" and the "denazification" of Ukraine's government; a United Nations (UN) statement stripping Ukraine of its status as a sovereign state under international law, and a declaration that any successor states to Ukraine will be forbidden to join any military alliances without Russian consent; the resignation of all Ukrainian authorities and immediate provisional parliamentary elections; Ukrainian reparations to be paid to Russia; official recognition by the interim parliament to be elected following the resignation of Ukraine's current government that all Ukrainian territory is part of Russia and the adoption of a "reunification" act bringing Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation; and finally the dissolution of this provisional parliament and UN acceptance of Ukraine's "reunification" with Russia.^[3]

The tone of Medvedev's post is deliberately sardonic, and the calls he is making appear extreme, but every one of the seven points in Medvedev's "peace formula" are real and central pieces of the Kremlin's ideology and stated war aims and justifications — Medvedev just simplified and synthesized them into a single brutal Telegram post. The first two of the seven points call for the complete military defeat, disarmament, "demilitarization," and "denazification" of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the full "demilitarization" (stripping Ukraine of all its military and self-defense capabilities) and "denazification" (complete regime change) as Russia's main goals in Ukraine when initially announcing the invasion on February 24, 2022. Putin and other Kremlin officials have frequently re-emphasized these goals in the subsequent two years of the war.^[4] Medvedev's calls for the resignation of all Ukrainian authorities and the creation of a new provisional government are calls for regime change simply made with more specificity about the methods. The demand that any successor state to Ukraine be forbidden to join military alliances without Russian permission is a call for Ukraine's permanent neutrality, a demand that Putin and other Kremlin officials reiterate regularly.^[5]

Putin established the principles that align the Kremlin's objectives in Ukraine with Medvedev's seven points in Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Putin claimed in that article that Ukrainians and Russians are historically one united people who were violently and unjustly separated by external nefarious forces.^[6] Putin used this essay to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and claims over its own political, social, historical, linguistic, and cultural development — all suggestions that underpin Medvedev's calls to dissolve Ukraine as a legal entity and fully absorb it into the Russian Federation. Putin and other Russian officials have long set informational conditions to define Ukraine as an integral and inseparable part of Russian territory and set Russia's goal in Ukraine as "reuniting" Ukrainian territories with their supposed historic motherland.^[7] **Medvedev's "peace formula" makes explicit and brutal what Putin and the Kremlin have long demanded in somewhat more euphemistic phrases: that peace for Russia means the end of Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state of any sort with any borders. Those advocating for pressing Ukraine to enter negotiations with Russia would do well to reckon with this constantly reiterated Russian position.**

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on March 14 that unspecified Ukrainian units that have been deployed to the frontline for a long time have started rotations.^[8] Syrskyi stated that these unit rotations, during which deployed units will be replaced at the front with fresher units, will help stabilize the operational situation but did not specify where along the frontline Ukrainian forces were conducting the rotations in order to preserve Ukrainian operational security.^[9] Ukrainian forces would likely be unable to conduct significant rotations in areas where the Ukrainian command assesses the situation is difficult or at risk of a Russian breakthrough. The reported beginning of Ukrainian rotations suggests that the Ukrainian command believes that the situation on whatever unspecified sector(s) of the frontline where the rotations will occur has stabilized sufficiently for Ukrainian troops to rotate.

Russian forces may be currently committing tactical and operational reserves to fighting in eastern Ukraine in an effort to maintain and potentially intensify the tempo of ongoing Russian offensive operations. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on March 14 that the Russian military command is committing tactical and operational reserves to Russian offensive efforts in the Lyman direction, near Bakhmut, and west and southwest of Donetsk Oblast to prevent Ukrainian forces from further stabilizing the frontline in these areas.^[10] Mashovets stated that many of these reserves were meant to exploit an envisioned Russian breakthrough of Ukrainian defenses, not necessarily to support current Russian offensive operations against stabilizing Ukrainian defensive positions.^[11] Mashovets stated that Russian forces recently committed additional elements of the 3rd Army Corps (AC) to fighting southwest of Bakhmut; an unspecified reserve regiment of the 20th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) and the 10th Tank Regiment (1st Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] AC) to fighting southwest of Donetsk City; and elements of the 272nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (47th Tank Division, 1st Guards Tank Army [GTA]) to the Lyman direction.^[12] Mashovets added that Russian forces still possess appropriate reserves to further intensify offensive operations but that these reserves would likely be inadequate to permit the Russian military to collapse Ukrainian defenses.^[13] Russian forces have previously struggled to achieve more than gradual marginal tactical gains in Ukraine since mid-2022, and the introduction of tactical or even limited operational reserves in itself does not change Russian prospects for operationally significant gains because Russian forces have not yet demonstrated the capability to conduct sound mechanized maneuvers to take large swaths of territory rapidly.^[14]

The Russian ability to make significant gains is still dependent on the level of Western support for Ukraine, however, and continued delays in Western security assistance will increase the risk of operationally significant Russian gains in the long run. Ukrainian materiel shortages resulting from delays in Western security assistance may be making the current Ukrainian frontline

more fragile than the relatively slow Russian advances in various sectors would indicate.[15] Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have proven that they can prevent Russian forces from making even marginal gains during large-scale Russian offensive efforts, and there is no reason to doubt that Ukrainian forces with sufficient Western security assistance would be able to stabilize the current frontline.[16] Difficult weather and terrain conditions in spring 2024 will likely constrain effective mechanized maneuver on both sides of the line and further limit Russian capabilities to make significant tactical advances while the ground is still muddy.[17] Russian forces are likely committing tactical and operational reserves to sustain the tempo of their offensive operations to press current advantages against ill-provisioned Ukrainian forces before ground conditions slow the overall operational tempo in Ukraine. Russian forces may also seek to maintain the tempo of their offensive operations through spring 2024 regardless of difficult weather and terrain conditions in an effort to exploit Ukrainian materiel shortages before promised Western security assistance arrives in Ukraine. Russian forces are reportedly preparing for a new offensive effort in late May or summer 2024, and Western security assistance to Ukraine will likely play a significant role in determining the prospects of that effort.[18]

Reported Russian transfers of tactical reserves to new areas of the frontline demonstrate Russia's likely ability to dynamically balance and reweight its offensive efforts. Mashovets' reporting about the transfer of elements of the DNR's 10th Tank Regiment to southwest of Donetsk City and elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army's (GTA) 272nd Motorized Rifle Regiment to the Lyman direction are notable as these elements were likely reserves in other directions where Russian forces are conducting offensive operations.[19] Elements of the 10th Tank Regiment participated in the seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February and appear to have rested and likely partially reconstituted in the past month, and the commitment of these elements southwest of Donetsk City instead of west of Avdiivka suggests that the Russian command does not want to intensify the tempo of offensive operations near Avdiivka at the expense of a decreased operational tempo southwest of Donetsk City. Russian forces apparently reconstituting in the Avdiivka area can likely allow Russian forces to intensify efforts to push further west of Avdiivka at a moment of the Russian military's choosing, and the Russian military command may have decided that this potential reserve is sufficient without the elements of the 10th Tank Regiment.[20] Elements of the 1st GTA have been responsible for Russian offensive operations northwest of Svatove since the start of the Russian winter-spring 2024 offensive effort on the Kharkiv-Luhansk axis in January 2024, and the 272nd Motorized Rifle Regiment was likely meant as a reserve to support those offensive operations.[21] The transfer of the elements of the 272nd Motorized Rifle Regiment to the Lyman direction may suggest that Russian forces are currently prioritizing advances in the Lyman direction over advances elsewhere along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line. These tactical transfers are relatively minor but are examples of the way in which the Russian military command can choose to increase or decrease commitment to operations anywhere along the line at will due to the operational flexibility offered by Russia's possession of the theater-wide initiative.[22]

British outlet *The Times* reported on March 14 that the British government believes that Russia deliberately jammed the satellite signal on a plane carrying British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps back to the UK from Poland.[23] *The Times* reported that British officials believed that Russia jammed the satellite signal of a Royal Air Force (RAF) Dassault 900LX Falcon jet transporting Shapps, his staff, and select journalists back to the UK after Shapps observed NATO Steadfast Defender exercises in Poland. The signal jamming reportedly impacted GPS signals for about 30 minutes as the jet flew near Kaliningrad, also preventing passengers from accessing the internet on their mobile phones. Data from the GPSJAM GPS interference tracking site show that much of northern and central Poland and the Baltic Sea region experienced high levels of GPS jamming on March 13.[24] ISW previously reported that widespread GPS disruptions across the Baltic region and much of Poland in late December 2023 and early January 2024 may have been linked to Russian electronic warfare (EW) activity in Kaliningrad.[25] It is unclear if Russian forces deliberately targeted Shapps' plane, but considering the recent rates of GPS interference in this region that have been likely linked to Russian EW activity, Russia could well have targeted the RAF jet for informational and political effects. Russia may have been reacting to Shapps' recent announcement extending the deployment of British Sky Saber air defense systems in Poland through the end of the year, which pro-Kremlin milbloggers amplified likely as part of the information operation to portray the West as threatening Russia.[26]

Continued limited raids from Ukrainian territory into Russian border regions will likely force the Kremlin to choose between paying a reputational or resource cost in responding to the incursions. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), continued to claim that likely elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) continued attacks on Russian border settlements, primarily Tetkino, Kursk Oblast and Kozinka and Spordaryushino, Belgorod Oblast on March 14, but that Russian border guards repelled the attacks.[27] The milbloggers claimed that these likely RDK and LSR forces conducted a

low-altitude helicopter landing near Kozinka in the evening and that Russian forces continued defending against the incursion.[28] A prominent Russian milblogger criticized the Russian military command because Russian border regions cannot “breathe free” in the third year of the war and claimed that “someone” committed a “strategic miscalculation” by deciding to withdraw Russian forces all the way back to the Russian border when withdrawing from northern Ukraine in the first months of the war, making the border the frontline.[29] The milblogger called for the Russian military to implement “corrective measures” that would somehow push the frontline at least 40 kilometers from the Russian border and into Ukraine. Another milblogger criticized Russian forces for not establishing barricades in certain border settlements to prevent attacks from Ukrainian territory.[30] These criticisms highlight the Kremlin’s current dilemma in light of such cross-border incursions. The Kremlin must balance between the reputational cost of accepting that pro-Ukrainian forces will sometimes be able to conduct minimally effective cross-border raids into Russia while conserving its military resources for use in Ukraine and the resource cost of allocating additional forces and means to border security to reassure the Russian populace at the expense of its military operations against Ukraine. Russia previously allocated Rosgvardia and some Chechen “Akhmat” Spetsnaz elements to border security following May 2023 cross-border incursions without meaningfully impacting its military operations in Ukraine and could feasibly choose to make the same choice now.[31]

The Kremlin must choose a balance between acceptable reputational and resource costs, but the Kremlin may not suffer as high a reputational cost in 2024 as it did in 2023 due to ongoing censorship efforts. The Russian military command’s failure to protect Russian border regions from Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian attacks has become a point of neuralgia for the Russian information space, and this neuralgia reached a boiling point resulting from RDK and LSR raids into Belgorod Oblast in late May and early June 2023.[32] Russian ultranationalists heavily criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense’s (MoD) failure to protect Russians within Russia, including criticizing Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov by name. [33] This throughline is notably similar to that of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters when Prigozhin launched his armed rebellion and march on Moscow soon after these raids on June 24, 2023, intending to unseat Shoigu and Gerasimov for continued military failures that traded Russian lives and military competency for personal gain.[34] The Kremlin has since cracked down on the Russian information space’s complaints against the MoD, actively censoring certain fringe and extreme milbloggers through arrests or other measures, encouraging self-censorship and compliance among the remaining milbloggers, and disbanding the Wagner Group following the rebellion.[35] The Russian milblogger response to the March 2024 border raid thus far is relatively neutral compared to its response to previous border raids, indicating that the Kremlin’s efforts to directly and indirectly censor the ultranationalist community has tempered milbloggers’ willingness to respond publicly to military failures. The milbloggers who criticized the Russian response on March 12–14 did not place blame directly on the MoD, Shoigu, Gerasimov, or other prominent military figures by name, title, or epithet, instead writing in the passive voice or blaming a vague “someone.”[36] The majority of the Russian milblogger responses criticized Ukraine and the RDK and LSR rather than the Russian military command and praised the Russian forces defending against the attacks.[37]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev posted a detailed call for the total elimination of the Ukrainian state and its absorption into the Russian Federation under what he euphemistically called a “peace formula.” Medvedev’s demands are not novel but rather represent the Kremlin’s actual intentions for Ukraine—intentions that leave no room for negotiations for purposes other than setting the precise terms of Ukraine’s complete capitulation.
- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on March 14 that unspecified Ukrainian units that have been deployed to frontline for a long time have started rotations.
- Russian forces may be currently committing tactical and operational reserves to fighting in eastern Ukraine in an effort to maintain and potentially intensify the tempo of ongoing Russian offensive operations.
- The Russian ability to make significant gains is still dependent on the level of Western support for Ukraine, however, and continued delays in Western security assistance will increase the risk of operationally significant Russian gains in the long run.
- Reported Russian transfers of tactical reserves to new areas of the frontline demonstrate Russia’s likely ability to dynamically balance and reweight their offensive efforts.
- British outlet *The Times* reported on March 14 that the British government believes that Russia deliberately jammed the satellite signal on a plane carrying British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps back to the UK from Poland.

- Continued limited raids from Ukrainian territory into Russian border regions will likely force the Kremlin to choose between paying a reputational or resource cost in responding to the incursions.
- The Kremlin must choose a balance between acceptable reputational and resource costs, but the Kremlin may not suffer as high a reputational cost in 2024 as it did in 2023 due to ongoing censorship efforts.
- Russian forces advanced west of Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements across the theater on March 14.
- Russian regional governments have reportedly increased economic incentives for Russian volunteers to sign contracts for military service.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 13, 2024

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

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

March 13, 2024, 7:45pm ET

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

Ukrainian shortages of ammunition and other war materiel resulting from delays in the provision of US military assistance may be making the current Ukrainian front line more fragile than the relatively slow Russian advances in various sectors would indicate. Ukrainian prioritization of the sectors most threatened by intensive Russian offensive operations could create vulnerabilities elsewhere that Russian forces may be able to exploit to make sudden and surprising advances if Ukrainian supplies continue to dwindle. Russia's retention of the theater-wide initiative increases the risks of such developments by letting the Russian military command choose to increase or decrease operations anywhere along the line almost at will.

German outlet *Der Spiegel* published interviews with unnamed Ukrainian commanders on March 12 who stated that almost all Ukrainian units and formations have to husband ammunition and materiel because of the overall ammunition shortage and that some Ukrainian units with limited ammunition and materiel can only hold their current positions if Russian forces do not "attack with full force."^[1] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi warned that there is a threat of Russian units advancing deep into Ukrainian formations in unspecified areas of the frontline.^[2]

Ukrainian forces are likely attempting to mitigate problems caused by ammunition shortages by prioritizing the allocation of ammunition to sectors of the front facing larger-scale Russian offensive operations. The lower intensity of Russian offensive efforts against currently de-prioritized sectors likely obscures the risks to Ukrainian forces in those areas resulting from ammunition shortages. ISW continues to assess that Russian forces have the theater-wide initiative and will be able to determine the time, location, and scale of offensive operations so long as they retain the initiative.^[3] Syrskyi's and the Ukrainian commanders' statements suggest that an intensification of Russian offensive operations in an area where Ukrainian forces have not prioritized allocating already limited ammunition supplies could lead to a Russian breakthrough and destabilization along a previously stable sector of the frontline in a short period of time. The current frontline is likely thus not stable, and timely Western resourcing of Ukrainian troops is essential to prevent Russia from identifying and exploiting an opportunity for a breakthrough on a vulnerable sector of the front.

The rate of Russian advance west of Avdiivka has recently slowed, although Russian forces likely retain the capability to intensify offensive operations in the area at a moment of their choosing. Russian forces seized Avdiivka on February 17 after roughly four months of attritional offensive efforts to take the settlement and proceeded to maintain a relatively high tempo of offensive operations in the area to exploit tactical opportunities initially offered by the Russian seizure of the settlement.^[4] Russian forces made relatively quick tactical gains west of Avdiivka in late February and aimed to push as far west as possible before Ukrainian forces could establish more cohesive and harder-to-penetrate defensive lines.^[5] Ukrainian forces appear to have slowed Russian advances along positions near the Berdychi-Orlivka-Tonenke line in early March, however, despite speculation that these positions would be insufficient to receive oncoming Russian offensive operations.^[6] Russian forces likely sought to make the Russian Central Grouping of Forces (comprised of mainly Central Military District [CMD] and Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] elements) the exploitation force to take advantage of the seizure of Avdiivka.^[7] The Russian military command likely intends for CMD elements to continue offensive efforts in the Avdiivka area in the near and medium term.^[8]

The Central Grouping of Forces notably has yet to commit elements of select formations in the area to offensive operations west of Avdiivka as far as ISW has been able to observe.[9] Russian President Vladimir Putin previously credited the 30th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army [CAA], CMD); 35th, 55th, and 74th motorized rifle brigades (all of the 41st CAA, CMD); 1st, 9th, and 114th motorized rifle brigades and 1454th Motorized Rifle Regiment and 10th Tank Regiment (all of the 1st DNR Army Corps [AC]); and the 6th, 80th, and 239th tank regiments (all of the 90th Tank Division, 41st CAA, CMD) with capturing Avdiivka.[10] Elements of the 2nd CAA's 15th and 21st motorized rifle brigades, the DNR 1st AC's 110th Motorized Rifle Brigade, and the Russian "Veterany" private military company (PMC) also heavily participated in Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka beginning in October 2023.[11] ISW has observed reports of elements of all three of the 2nd CAA's brigades; elements of the 41st CAA's 55th and 35th motorized rifle brigades, and elements of the DNR's 1st, 9th, 110th, and 114th motorized rifle brigades attacking northwest, west, or southwest of Avdiivka since February 17.[12] ISW has not observed reports of any elements of the 90th Tank Division committed to fighting following the Russian seizure of Avdiivka, however, and Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on March 2 that elements of the 90th Tank Division were reconstituting and resting in Horlivka (northeast of Avdiivka).[13] Mashovets stated on March 2 that the Russian military command committed elements of the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade from reserve to offensive operations west of Avdiivka, although ISW has not observed wider subsequent reporting about the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade fighting in the area.[14]

Elements of the 90th Tank Division, the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade, the DNR's 1454th Motorized Rifle Regiment and 10th Tank Regiment, and the "Veterany" PMC likely represent a sizeable uncommitted operational reserve that the Russian command can commit to continue and intensify efforts to push west of Avdiivka. These elements likely suffered heavy casualties in offensive operations between October 2023 and mid-February 2024, but a month or more of rest will likely allow Russian forces to replenish these elements and restore their degraded combat capabilities to the low-quality levels that Russian commanders appear willing to accept. ISW previously assessed that the Russian offensive effort in the Avdiivka area would eventually temporarily culminate at least until or unless Russian forces reinforced their attacking elements.[15] **The Russian forces apparently reconstituting in the Avdiivka area can serve as operational reserves and let Russian forces prevent the culmination of their offensive operation and intensify efforts to push further west of Avdiivka, if or when the Russian command chooses to do so.**

Russia's theater-wide initiative in Ukraine will likely allow the Russian military command to dynamically reprioritize offensive operations throughout the frontline. The theater-wide initiative allows Russia to determine the location, time, intensity, and requirements of fighting along the frontline, and the flexibility this opportunity provides will allow the Russian military command to reprioritize efforts dynamically to take advantage of perceived opportunities occasioned by Ukrainian materiel shortages or other factors.[16] The reprioritization of offensive efforts and the commensurate transfer of materiel and manpower to various areas of the front can result in decreased offensive activity, operational pauses, or the temporary culmination of offensive operations in the area from which attacking forces are drawn. Substantial decreases in the tempo of offensive operations, operational pauses, or outright culmination are typically risky as they relieve pressure on defending forces and offer them opportunities to counterattack to regain the initiative in that sector of the frontline. The Russian military command may believe that delays in Western security assistance and growing Ukrainian materiel shortages will reduce these risks and allow Russian forces to reweight efforts without significant risk anywhere in the theater. Russian forces will continue to leverage the advantages of the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine, and ISW assesses that it would be unwise for Ukraine to cede this advantage to Russia for longer than is necessary, although continuing and increasing shortages of materiel will likely leave Ukraine with few choices.[17]

Ukrainian actors conducted large-scale drone strikes against energy infrastructure and military assets within Russia on the night of March 12 to 13. Ukrainian outlets *Suspilne* and *RBC-Ukraine* reported on March 13 that their Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) sources stated that SBU agents conducted drone strikes against oil refineries in Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and Leningrad oblasts and military airfields in Buturlinovka and Voronezh City, Voronezh Oblast.[18] Ryazan Oblast Head Pavel Maikov confirmed that a drone struck the Ryazan oil refinery, starting a fire, and footage shows a plume of smoke rising from the oil refinery area.[19] At least three Ukrainian drones also targeted the Novoshakhtinsk oil refinery in Rostov Oblast, reportedly causing the refinery to temporarily stop operations.[20] Some Russian sources additionally claimed that one drone struck a Federal Security Service (FSB) regional building in Belgorod City, but Russian opposition media noted that Russian state media later deleted reports of this particular strike.[21] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses destroyed 58 drones on the night of March 12 to 13: 11 over Belgorod Oblast; eight over Bryansk Oblast; 29 over Voronezh Oblast; eight over Kursk Oblast; one over Leningrad Oblast; and one over Ryazan Oblast.[22] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger reported that Ukrainian drones specifically targeted the Ryazannefteprodukt Rosneft

refinery in Ryazan Oblast, the Kirishi Petroleum Organic Synthesis (KINEF) refinery in Kirishi, Leningrad Oblast, and the Novoshakhtinsk refinery in Rostov Oblast, but claimed that Russian air defense and electronic warfare (EW) systems destroyed and neutralized all the drones.[23] A Russian aviation-focused milblogger claimed that Ukrainian drones mostly targeted military airfields in Voronezh Oblast.[24]

SBU sources told *Suspilne* that these strikes are intended to reduce Russia's economic output and reduce oil revenue and fuel supplies that Russia uses directly for its war effort in Ukraine.[25] Ukrainian actors have continually conducted similar drone strikes against several major Russian oil refineries in 2024 thus far and successfully struck oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai and Volgograd Oblast in January and February.[26] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported in February that Russian refineries reduced their output by 4 percent in January 2024 compared to the same period in 2024, and by 1.4 percent compared to December 2023.[27] *Kommersant* stated that this reduction was partially a result of increased drone attacks on refinery infrastructure. This reported decline in refinery production is not large, but it shows the potential for Ukraine to generate asymmetrical effects against critical Russian energy and military infrastructure by targeting high-value assets with a few relatively inexpensive drones.

The governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, claimed on March 13 that her recent meetings with Russian officials in Russia led to deepening economic ties between Gagauzia and Russia, which the Kremlin likely hopes to exploit as part of its wider efforts to destabilize Moldova and prevent Moldova from joining the European Union (EU). Gutsul gave a briefing on her meetings in Russia during her visit from March 1 to 8.[28] Gutsul claimed that her meetings focused on three "key" topics that are of the "most concern" to the Gagauz people — a "special gas tariff" for Gagauzia, opening accounts for Gagauzian businesses and individuals remotely in the Russian "MIR" payment system, and the details about excise taxes and duties so Russia can open its markets to Gagauzian companies. Gutsul claimed that Gagauzian businesses exporting goods to Russia "will most likely receive very serious advantages compared to other regions of Moldova." Moldova's other pro-Russian region, the breakaway republic of Transnistria, has long enjoyed free supplies of Russian gas from Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom to an electricity plant in Transnistria.[29] Moldova is still heavily reliant on Transnistrian-produced electricity, despite Moldovan efforts to limit its dependence on Russian energy since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[30] Russian gas supplies to Gagauzia would likely hamper the Moldovan government's efforts to move away from its decades-long dependence on Russian energy as it turns instead to European suppliers and would create another avenue through which Moldova is vulnerable to Russian "energy blackmail" schemes, which the Kremlin has already employed against Moldova in the past.[31] Russia could also use reduced gas prices for Gagauzia to stoke domestic discontent against the backdrop of higher gas prices in Moldova as compared to previous years when Moldova imported Russian gas.[32] Sergei Ibrishim, the Head of the Main Directorate of the Agro-Industrial Complex of Gagauzia, sent an appeal to Kremlin officials in January 2024 claiming that Gagauzian businesses have been unable to sell their products to Russia since Moldova's July 2023 decision to leave the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Interparliamentary Assembly and asked Russian officials to abolish excise taxes and customs duties for Gagauzian exports to Russia. [33] The opening of Russian markets to Gagauzian products and the likely tax benefits that would accompany this opening are likely meant to dissuade Moldova from leaving the CIS, which Moldova plans to do by the end of 2024, and create inconsistencies in Moldova's economic relations that would complicate or derail its progress towards accession into the EU.[34]

The Kremlin is likely trying to use cooperation between Gutsul and other pro-Russian actors and parties in Moldova as part of wider Kremlin hybrid warfare operations in Moldova ahead of upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. Gutsul claimed that she will soon meet with Igor Dodon, Vladimir Voronin, Ilan Shor, and the leadership of the Moldovan Revival Party to discuss "possible cooperation."[35] Dodon is the former pro-Russian president of Moldova who preceded the current president, Maia Sandu.[36] Voronin is also a former Moldovan president and current member of parliament. Dodon, as the leader of the Moldovan Socialist Party, and Voronin, as the leader of the Moldovan Communist Party and a current member of Parliament, formed an electoral alliance in parliament in 2021.[37] Ilan Shor is a US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician who recently met with Kremlin officials in Russia and is currently living in Israel after Moldovan authorities sentenced him *in absentia* for fraud and money laundering in April 2023.[38] The Revival Party is affiliated with Shor's now-banned Moldovan political party, the Shor Party, and multiple parliamentary deputies from Dodon's Socialist party have recently joined the Revival Party.[39]

Gutsul, who ran as a candidate for the Shor Party in Gagauzia's 2023 gubernatorial election, does not have an extensive political background. Gutsul is a lawyer by training, reportedly worked as a telephone operator from 2012–2014 and then as a telecommunications operator, commercial representative, and archivist.[40] Gutsul reportedly started working as a secretary for the Shor Party

from 2018-2022. Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) leader Leonid Slutsky and Russian cultural figures supported her gubernatorial campaign.[41] Gutsul's plans to meet with multiple Kremlin-linked politicians and parties, despite the fact that these actors are not directly involved in Gagauzian politics and do not have previous ties to Gutsul, suggests that these meetings are Kremlin-orchestrated and aimed at furthering wider Kremlin, not Gagauzian, objectives. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is trying to use both Gagauzia and Transnistria as part of its hybrid operations aimed at sabotaging Moldova's EU accession process and keeping Moldova within Russia's sphere of influence.[42] The Kremlin may hope to create and exploit a coalition between Dodon's Socialist Party, Voronin's Communist Party, and various Shor-linked parties, such as the Revival party, to counter Sandu's pro-Western Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) party ahead of the upcoming Moldovan presidential elections in late 2024 and parliamentary elections in 2025.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled another limited cross-border incursion by the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts on the night of March 12 and the morning of March 13. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled all-Russian pro-Ukrainian forces that attempted to conduct a limited incursion near Kozinka and Mokraya Orlovka, Belgorod Oblast and unspecified areas in Kursk Oblast.[43] The LSR posted footage on March 13 and claimed that it seized part of Tetskino, Kursk Oblast, although the footage was geolocated to Ryzhivka, Sumy Oblast.[44] The RDK, LSR, and Siberian Battalion issued a joint statement on March 13 stating that they are targeting Russian military positions in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts and calling on civilians to leave.[45] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov acknowledged the joint statement.[46]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian shortages of ammunition and other war materiel resulting from delays in the provision of US military assistance may be making the current Ukrainian front line more fragile than the relatively slow Russian advances in various sectors would indicate.
- The rate of Russian advance west of Avdiivka has recently slowed, although Russian forces likely retain the capability to intensify offensive operations in the area at a moment of their choosing.
- Ukrainian actors conducted large-scale drone strikes against energy infrastructure and military assets within Russia on the night of March 12 to 13.
- The governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, claimed on March 13 that her recent meetings with Russian officials in Russia led to deepening economic ties between Gagauzia and Russia, which the Kremlin likely hopes to exploit as part of its wider efforts to destabilize Moldova and prevent Moldova from joining the EU.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled another limited cross-border incursion by the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts on the night of March 12 and the morning of March 13.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline on March 13.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to censor protests of wives and mothers of mobilized soldiers ahead of the Russian presidential election.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 12, 2024

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

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

March 12, 2024, 8pm ET

The All-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion conducted a limited cross-border incursion into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts on the morning of March 12. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on March 12 that elements of the RDK, LRS, and the Siberian Battalion were involved in clashes in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[1] Russian sources initially denied reports of the incursion but later claimed that Russian forces repelled Russian pro-Ukrainian forces with tank, armored vehicle, and drone support attacking near Odnorobivka, Kharkiv Oblast and

Nekhoteevka and Spodaryushino, Belgorod Oblast.[2] Footage published on March 12 shows Russian pro-Ukrainian forces operating near Nekhoteevka and Spodaryushino in Belgorod Oblast and in Tetkino, Kursk Oblast.[3] LSR forces reportedly seized Tetkino, although Russian sources claimed that Russian airborne conscripts repelled all the assaults in Tetkino.[4] ISW has previously observed reports that Russia uses conscripts to defend its border with Ukraine against limited incursions and assessed that this is likely due to Russia's unwillingness to transfer forces away from the frontline elsewhere in Ukraine.[5] Russian milbloggers noted that the incursion came days before the Russian presidential election on March 17, and several Russian milbloggers warned that there might be additional incursions in the coming days.[6]

The New York Times (NYT) reported that Russian and Ukrainian forces have differential advantages and disadvantages in their electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. NYT reported on March 12 that Russian forces have more EW equipment but that Russian EW capabilities are spread out unevenly along the front and that Russian armored vehicles are vulnerable to Ukrainian drone strikes due to their lack of mounted EW equipment.[7] The NYT stated that Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) has adopted a "top down" approach to drone production with "heavy military oversight" that has made Russian drones "predictable" and lacking variety. This lack of variation has reportedly made it easier for Russian units to coordinate their drones' flight paths and jammers so that they can jam Ukrainian drones without jamming their own. ISW has previously reported that the effectiveness of Russian EW systems is inconsistent across the front.[8] Russian milbloggers have routinely complained about Russian forces' lack of EW systems in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, for example.[9] Russian milbloggers have also recently criticized the Russian military command's failure to properly equip Russian forces with drones and EW systems after an unsuccessful Russian mechanized assault near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast.[10]

The NYT noted that Ukraine's DIB, on the other hand, has allowed non-military companies to fund and supply drones to Ukrainian forces, which has allowed Ukrainian drone units to test different technologies, procurement processes, and combat missions on the battlefield. The NYT reported that a Ukrainian sergeant commanding a drone platoon stated that Ukrainian and Russian forces are engaged in a "constant arms race" in which one side improves its drone technology, forcing the other side to find a new way to combat this improvement.[11] ISW has also previously reported that Ukraine has over 200 companies (most of which are privately owned) producing various drones for the Ukrainian military as of October 2023.[12] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev recently stated that Russia has opted to mass produce drones, leading to the production of large numbers of drones that lack the technological adaptations needed to compete with Ukrainian drones.[13] Medvedev noted that Ukrainian forces are constantly improving their drones. ISW has observed how recent Russian drone and missile strike packages are also characteristic of the constant air domain offense-defense innovation-adaptation race in which Russia and Ukraine are engaged.[14] Ukrainian and Russian capabilities will likely vary across space and over time as one side will be unlikely to gain a decisive advantage across the entire frontline or permanently in one sector of the front. There will likely be opportunities to take advantage of these shifting variations.

US Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) 2024 Annual Threat Assessment reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin "probably believes" that Russian forces have blunted Ukrainian efforts to retake significant territory and that US and Western support to Ukraine is "finite."[15] The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment reported that Russia "almost certainly" does not want to engage in a direct military conflict with the United States or NATO but "will continue asymmetric activity below what it calculates to be the threshold of military conflict globally."[16] ISW continues to assess that Russia continues to threaten NATO states and is setting conditions to justify future escalations against NATO states but does not assess that Putin desires direct full-scale war with NATO at this time.[17] US National Intelligence Director Avril Haines noted the importance of US security assistance to Ukraine to help Ukrainian forces maintain their previously liberated territories, especially amid "the sustained surge in Russian ammunition production and purchases from North Korea and Iran." [18] ISW has previously assessed that the United States remains the only immediate source of necessary quantities of essential military equipment such as M1 Abrams tanks, armored personnel carriers, advanced air defense systems such as Patriots, and long-range strike systems - equipment that previous US aid packages prioritized.[19]

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan announced an emergency military aid package valued at \$300 million for Ukraine on March 12.[20] Sullivan stated that the aid package is comprised of new funding made available by cost saving measures in unspecified Pentagon weapons contracts.[21] Unnamed US officials told CNN that the new funding is a result of "good negotiations" and "bundling funding across different things" but noted that this is not a sustainable long-term solution to aiding Ukraine, calling the package a "one time shot." [22] This funding does not appear to be part of the reported \$4 billion in presidential drawdown authority fund still available for Ukraine.[23] Sullivan stated that the aid package would provide Ukrainian forces with enough ammunition to last "a couple

of weeks" and noted that this package "does not displace and should not delay the critical need" to pass a supplemental aid package for Ukraine.[24]

Lithuanian and French authorities are expected to meet in Paris in the coming days to discuss accelerating support for Ukraine. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda stated on March 12 that he will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris to discuss ways to accelerate support for Ukraine, to strengthen the security of NATO's eastern flank, and to increase European defense production.[25] Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis stated on March 11 that "now is the time to debate" sending Western military personnel to Ukraine and the "red lines that [the West] has imposed on [itself]" in response to recent French discussions about sending Western military personnel to Ukraine.[26] French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné stated on March 9 during a meeting with Baltic and Ukrainian officials that Ukraine could use foreign troops for operations such as demining and that Russia should not be able to tell the West how to aid Ukraine by setting arbitrary "red lines." [27]

The Kremlin continues to assert its right, contrary to international law, to enforce Russian federal law on officials of NATO members and former Soviet states for actions taken within the territory of their own countries where Russian courts have no jurisdiction, effectively denying the sovereignty of those states. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) placed the Estonian Minister of Internal Affairs, Lauri Laanemets, on its online Russian wanted list.[28] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on March 12 that Russian law enforcement agencies stated that Laanemets is wanted for the destruction and damage of Soviet war monuments.[29] The Russian MVD previously put other Baltic and Polish officials, including Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, on the wanted list for the same charges despite Russia's lack of legal authority to prosecute foreign citizens for allegedly violating Russian laws in foreign states.[30] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also banned 347 citizens from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, including many high-ranking Baltic officials, from entering Russia for allegedly having "hostile" policies towards Russia, interfering in Russian internal affairs, persecuting Russian-speaking populations, demolishing Soviet monuments, "glorifying Nazism," and supplying Ukraine with weapons.[31] The Russian MFA claimed that it could expand the list "at any time." Russia has previously used narratives about Russia's right to protect its "compatriots abroad" (which includes Russian speakers), its alleged fight against neo-Nazism, and its dissatisfaction with the treatment of Soviet monuments in former Soviet states to justify its invasions of Ukraine and aggression against other countries, including NATO member Estonia, in the past.[32] ISW continues to assess that Russia's attempted use of pseudo-legal mechanisms against Baltic officials are part of the Russian efforts to set informational conditions justifying possible Russian escalations against NATO states in the future.[33]

The Kremlin recently implemented a series of personnel changes in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Rosgvardia, and the Russian military command. Russian sources reported that the Russian military command named Lieutenant General Andrei Bulyga Deputy Defense Minister for Logistics.[34] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Bulyga previously served as Russian Western Military District (WMD) Deputy Commander for Logistics, and a Russian insider source, which has previously provided accurate reports regarding Russian command changes, claimed that Bulyga previously served in the Central Military District under Russian Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, who is reportedly the current Russian Ground Forces Commander.[35] Russian State Duma Committee on Information Policy Head Alexander Khinshtein stated on March 11 that Russian President Vladimir Putin reappointed Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Kuzmenkov as Rosgvardia Deputy Director overseeing rear areas and logistics and claimed that Kuzmenkov's return to Rosgvardia means that Kuzmenkov has "completed his tasks" at the Russian MoD.[36] The Russian insider source claimed that the Russian military command appointed Lieutenant General Alexander Peryazev and Igor Seritsky as deputy commanders of the Moscow Military District and Lieutenant General Esedulla Abechev as Deputy Commander of the Leningrad Military District.[37] Peryazev reportedly previously served as the Commander of the Russian 6th Combined Arms Army (WMD); Seritsky reportedly previously served as the Deputy Commander of the WMD; and Abechev reportedly previously served as the Deputy Command of the 8th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District).[38]

Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia would leave the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) if the CSTO fails to meet certain Armenian expectations, as Armenia continues to distance itself from Russian security relations. Pashinyan stated on March 12 that the CSTO must clarify its "zone of responsibility" in Armenia and pledge to defend Armenia against foreign aggression, likely referencing Article 4 of the CSTO Treaty that parallels Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and states that aggression against one CSTO member state is aggression against all member states.[39] Pashinyan stated that Armenia would leave the CSTO at an unspecified date if the CSTO's answers to Armenia's questions do not correspond with Armenia's expectations.[40] Pashinyan expanded on his February 22 statement that Armenia "essentially" froze

its CSTO membership and explained that Armenia does not participate in CSTO sessions, does not have a permanent representative in the CSTO, did not appoint a CSTO Deputy Secretary General, and does not express opinions on documents circulating in the CSTO.[41] CSTO Secretary General Imangali Tasmagambetov stated on March 12 that Armenia has not recently participated in that CSTO secretariat, but that Armenia has not made any official statements about its suspension of CSTO membership.[42] Pashinyan also stated on March 12 that Russian border guards will leave Zvartnots International Airport in Yerevan by August 1, 2024, following a March 6 announcement that Armenia officially informed Russia that “only Armenian border guards” should perform duties at the Zvartnots Airport.[43] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov confirmed on March 12 that Russia received Armenia’s notification that it is terminating Russian border guards’ operations at the Zvartnots Airport.
[44]

Key Takeaways:

- The All-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), and Siberian Battalion conducted a limited cross-border incursion into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts on the morning of March 12.
- The *New York Times* (NYT) reported that Russian and Ukrainian forces have differential advantages and disadvantages in their electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.
- US Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s (ODNI) 2024 Annual Threat Assessment reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin “probably believes” that Russian forces have blunted Ukrainian efforts to retake significant territory and that US and Western support to Ukraine is “finite.”
- US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan announced an emergency military aid package valued at \$300 million for Ukraine on March 12.
- Lithuanian and French authorities are expected to meet in Paris in the coming days to discuss accelerating support for Ukraine.
- The Kremlin continues to assert its right, contrary to international law, to enforce Russian federal law on officials of NATO members and former Soviet states for actions taken within the territory of their own countries where Russian courts have no jurisdiction, effectively denying the sovereignty of those states.
- The Kremlin recently implemented a series of personnel changes in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Rosgvardia, and the Russian military command.
- Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia would leave the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) if the CSTO fails to meet certain Armenian expectations, as Armenia continues to distance itself from Russian security relations.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 12.
- The Kremlin is reportedly considering raising taxes, likely as part of efforts to increase federal budget revenues to fund its war in Ukraine.
- Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko continues to pursue industrial projects in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 11, 2024

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

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

March 11, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30 pm ET on March 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Ukrainian military observer offered assessments of Russian force generation and defense industrial base (DIB) capacities that are consistent with ISW’s previous assessments. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that the Russian military command is aiming to create a “strategic reserve” for offensive operations in spring–summer 2024 but is not planning to equip these newly formed units and formations with the doctrinally required quantities of weapons and equipment due to current Russian DIB production constraints.[1] Mashovets stated that the Russian military command only plans to equip the 27th Motorized Rifle Division — which Russia is reportedly in the process of standing up on the basis of the Central Military District’s existing 21st Motorized Rifle Brigade — with up to 87 percent of its doctrinally required amounts of weapons and equipment by the

second and fourth quarters of 2024 and implied that the Russian military command has a similar goal for other new formations and units. Mashovets assessed that it is unlikely that Russian forces will be able to meet this equipment goal by the fourth quarter of 2024 given that many Russian regiments, brigades, and divisions currently operating in Ukraine only have about 30 percent of the doctrinally required amounts of weapons and equipment. Several Western and Ukrainian military officials and analysts noted that Russia's reported tank production numbers largely reflect restored and modern tanks drawn from storage rather than new production.[2]

Mashovets' assessment is consistent with ISW's assessment that the Russian DIB is capable of sustaining Russia's current tempo of operations, although not likely able to fully support a potential operational or strategic-level offensive operation using a strategic reserve of manpower 2024.

[3] Reports that the Russian military is prioritizing creating new underequipped units and formations are consistent with ISW's assessment that Russia is prioritizing the quantity of manpower and materiel over the quality of its forces.[4] ISW continues to assess that Russia would have the opportunity to expand its DIB and amass resources if it maintains the theater-wide initiative throughout 2024, thus allowing Russia to set conditions for a future offensive operation using a larger reserve of manpower and equipment.[5]

Mashovets stated that the Russian military command intends to form the bulk of the 27th Motorized Rifle Division from the newly formed 433rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (reportedly staffed by degraded elements of the 21st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment), 506th Motorized Rifle Regiment, and 589th Motorized Rifle Regiment.[6] Mashovets stated that Russia is currently forming its 433rd, 506th, and 589th motorized rifle regiments at the Totskoye training ground in Orenburg Oblast and the "Trekhizbenovsky" training ground in occupied Luhansk Oblast and plans to have these units ready for combat by late spring or early summer 2024.[7] These newly formed regiments are likely meant to rapidly deploy to Ukraine to offset frontline losses and are unlikely to be staffed with high-quality recruits or operating at doctrinal end strength.[8] Although Russia likely does not have the capacity to staff and equip these new units near their intended end strength in the near term, the Russian military command almost certainly has long-term intentions to fully equip these and similar units. Mashovets noted that the Russian military command has already been forced to reconsider the formation of a number of units due to "discrepanc[ies]" between Russia's force-generation ambitions and realities and that Russia's ability to deploy its strategic reserves in practice are likely limited "to a certain point." [9] The Russian military command appears to be prioritizing short-term benefits, such as limited territorial gains, over long-term sustainability and large-scale operationally meaningful undertakings in Ukraine amid ongoing Russian reformation and reconstitution efforts. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military command's use of ongoing force structure changes to rush newly created and understrength formations into combat in Ukraine will likely constrain the immediate efficacy of these units on the battlefield but is enough to maintain the current pace of operations.[10] The major variable likely to determine the rate at which such partially replenished Russian forces can advance this summer is the availability of materiel to Ukraine, which in turn depends heavily on the continued provision of US military assistance.

Russia's increased defense industrial base (DIB) production is likely not sustainable in the medium- and long-term as it will likely suffer from labor shortages, decreased weapons and equipment stockpiles, and an inability to completely compensate for military and dual-use items it can no longer acquire due to sanctions. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on March 11 that a senior NATO official stated that Russia can likely sustain its current war effort for two to five more years.[11] WSJ noted that some Russian production figures, such as those for military vehicles, do not differentiate between newly produced items and refurbished ones brought out of storage, such as older, lower quality T-62 and T-54/-55 tanks. ISW has observed that reports of Russia's reported tank "production" numbers in recent years largely reflect restored and modernized tanks drawn from storage rather than new production.[12] Open-source researchers recently analyzed satellite imagery and assessed that Russia has reportedly removed 25 to 40 percent of its tank strategic reserves, depending on the model, from open-air storage facilities since 2022.[13] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program Senior Fellow Dara Massicot assessed on March 8 that Russia's "remaining inventory will dwindle in the next couple of years" if Russia continues its current tempo of operations.[14] WSJ reported that the Bank of Finland concluded that Russia may not be able to sustain its increased DIB production as the DIB takes personnel and material resources away from other sectors of the Russian economy.[15] WSJ reported that Kremlin official statements suggest that the Russian DIB is suffering from a personnel shortage of about 20 percent and that some DIB enterprise employees have recently complained about the lack of training and tools. ISW has previously assessed that Russia's labor shortage, which is partially a result of its war in Ukraine and partially a symptom of Russia's ongoing demographic crisis, will likely continue to complicate Kremlin efforts to balance increasing Russian economic capacity and force generation while catering to select members of the Russian ultranationalist community by disincentivizing migrant workers from working in Russia.[16] The Bank of Finland also reportedly found that Russia's increased DIB

production has focused on low-tech products, such as fabricated steel, and that Russia is still reliant on foreign suppliers for higher-tech items such as semiconductors.[17] WSJ stated that while Russia has successfully evaded sanctions and imported some products, Russia is struggling to source some necessary specialized items, such as tank optics, from third countries.

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported that Russia currently has about three million rounds of old artillery ammunition in its stockpiles, but that much of it is in poor condition. [18] WSJ reported that RUSI and other Western analysts have assessed that Russia's current domestic ammunition production is not sufficient for its war in Ukraine, so Russia will likely continue relying on supplies from partners.[19] CNN reported on March 11 that NATO intelligence estimates that Russia is producing about 250,000 artillery munitions of unspecified caliber per month totaling about three million shells per year.[20] A senior European intelligence official reportedly told CNN the US and Europe can collectively produce only about 1.2 million shells of unspecified calibers per year for Ukraine. CNN stated that the US military set a goal to produce 100,000 shells per month by the end of 2025 and noted that this is less than half of Russia's current monthly production, but US Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology Doug Bush stated on February 5 that this goal of 100,000 shells per month by 2025 only refers to 155mm artillery shells and does not include shells of other calibers that the US produces and that Ukrainian forces use.[21] NATO intelligence estimates of Russian artillery munition production cited by CNN likely include various calibers of munitions, not just 152mm shells that are the analogue to Western 155mm shells, and is likely not a direct comparison to the West's goals for the production of 155mm shells.

Transfers of North Korean weapons to Russia by sea have apparently resumed after a pause since mid-February 2024. North Korea-focused outlet *NK Pro* reported on March 11 that satellite imagery indicates that a ship resembling the Russian *Lady R* cargo ship arrived at North Korea's Rajin Port on March 10 and appears to be loaded with containers that crews will likely fill with arms for delivery back to Russia.[22] *NK Pro* stated that objects, likely delivered to the port by train from inside North Korea, appeared at the pier at Rajin Port where ships are usually loaded before departing to Russia. The *Lady R* ship reportedly delivered cargo from North Korea to Russia twice in October 2023 and once in February 2024. *NK Pro* reported on February 29 that satellite imagery indicated that Russian ships involved in the maritime transport of North Korean ammunition and weaponry to Russia had not docked at the Rajin Port since February 12.[23]

A Ukrainian military source noted that Russian forces are increasingly using grenades equipped with chemical substances in the Zaporizhia direction, in potential violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to which Russia is a signatory. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Dmytro Lykhovy stated on March 11 that Russian forces used at least 60 grenades equipped with a suffocating and tear-inducing substance on Ukrainian positions in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) between March 4 to March 10 alone, noting that most of these attacks occurred in the Zaporizhia direction.[24] Lykhovy suggested that Russian forces are most likely equipping grenades with chloropicrin (PS) or a similar substance. PS is a lung-damaging riot control agent (RCA) that shares the characteristics of tear gas — it is not necessarily lethal but can have extremely irritating and harmful impacts when inhaled.[25] The CWC prohibits the use of PS and other RCAs in warfare, and Russia has been a signatory to the CWC since 1997.[26]

The Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has summoned Russian Ambassador to Moldova Oleg Vasnetsov in response to claims that Russia will operate polling stations in pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria during the Russian presidential election. The Moldovan MFA summoned Vasnetsov to appear on March 12 in response to Moldova's "disapproval" of claims that Russia will operate polling stations in Transnistria.[27] Regional outlet *Transnistrian News* claimed on March 11 that Russian citizens will be able to vote in the Russian presidential election at six polling stations in Transnistria on March 17 despite previous Moldovan rulings that Russia can only operate one polling station at the Russian embassy in Chisinau.[28] Russian Embassy Press Secretary Anatoly Loshakov appeared to deny *Transnistrian News'* claim, stating that the embassy is only organizing voting at the polling station at the embassy.[29] These claims may be part of the Kremlin's efforts to use Transnistria and pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia in information operations to support hybrid operations aimed at sabotaging Moldova's EU accession process and keeping Moldova within Russia's sphere of influence.[30]

Russia, China, and Iran will hold the joint Maritime Security Belt – 2024 naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman between March 11–15.[31] Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Izvestia* reported on March 11 that a detachment ships of Russia's Pacific Fleet, including the *Varyag* Slava-class cruiser, arrived at Iran's Chabahar Port to participate in Maritime Security Belt-2024 alongside Iranian and Chinese naval detachments.[32] The exercise, which was first held in 2019, is intended to practice safe joint naval maneuvers to ensure safe maritime economic activity.[33] The Russian *Marshal*

Shaposhnikov Udaloy-class destroyer; the Chinese *Ürümqi* destroyer, *Linyi* frigate, *Dongpinghu* replenishment ship; and 10 unnamed Iranian ships, boats, and supply vessels and three naval helicopters are taking part in the exercise. [34] Representatives of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, India, and South Africa will observe the exercise.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) claimed that the West intends to use Armenia as a tool against Russia, a notable escalation in its information operations criticizing Armenian efforts to distance itself from security relations with Russia. UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces James Heappey stated on March 10 that the UK recognizes Armenia's decision to "essentially" freeze its participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) "in the face of threats of relation from Russia," while acknowledging that Armenia is not officially leaving the CSTO. [35] The Russian MFA claimed that Heappey's statement was "direct confirmation" of the West's intent to "turn Armenia into a tool against Moscow" and its wider "anti-Russian" efforts in the post-Soviet space and the South Caucasus.[36] The Russian MFA called on Armenian officials to "think seriously." Senior Russian government officials have acknowledged and criticized Armenia's lack of participation in the CSTO since Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan's February 22 announcement that Armenia "essentially" froze its participation in the CSTO.[37] The Kremlin is likely preparing a harsher and more concerted response as Armenia continues to take measures to distance itself from Russia and signal interest in strengthening relations with the West.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill on March 11 that allows Russian authorities to further restrict actors it deems "foreign agents" to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the presidential election. Putin signed a bill that bans Russians from advertising the content of individuals and organizations legally designated as "foreign agents" and from advertising their own content on platforms that "foreign agents" own.[38] ISW previously assessed that this law will impact Russian opposition media's ability to operate and report reliably in Russia and reported that at least one Russian opposition journalist has already suspended their work in Russia due to the new advertising ban.[39] ISW recently observed reports that large Russian advertising agencies have already included unilateral termination clauses in their advertising contracts in case the Kremlin designates a client as a foreign agent during the term of their contract.[40] The Russian Cabinet of Ministers also announced its support for a draft bill that would allow the Russian government to designate foreign organizations whose founders or participants are allegedly affiliated with foreign governments as "undesirable" and fine or imprison individuals found guilty of participating in their events.[41]

France is reportedly prepared to build a coalition of countries that are open to potentially sending Western military personnel to Ukraine.[42] French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné announced on March 9 during a meeting with Baltic and Ukrainian officials that Ukraine could use foreign troops for operations such as demining or similar efforts and that Western personnel in Ukraine would not necessarily fight.[43] Séjourné emphasized that "it is not for Russia to tell us how we [the West] should help Ukraine in the coming months or years," noting that Russia should not be able to control how the West responds to Russia by setting arbitrary "red lines." Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski similarly stated on March 8 that the "presence of NATO forces in Ukraine is not unthinkable."^[44] Séjourné reiterated on March 11 that France seeks to "send strong signals" to Russia and speak to the Kremlin in the "language of balance of power."^[45]

Key Takeaways:

- A Ukrainian military observer offered assessments of Russian force generation and defense industrial base (DIB) capacities that are consistent with ISW's previous assessments.
- Russia's increased defense industrial base (DIB) production is likely not sustainable in the medium and long-term as it will likely suffer from labor shortages, decreased weapons and equipment stockpiles, and an inability to completely compensate for military and dual-use items it can no longer acquire due to sanctions.
- Transfers of North Korean weapons to Russia by sea have apparently resumed after a pause since mid-February 2024.
- A Ukrainian military source noted that Russian forces are increasingly using grenades equipped with chemical substances in the Zaporizhia direction, in potential violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to which Russia is a signatory.
- The Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has summoned Russian Ambassador to Moldova Oleg Vasnetsov in response to claims that Russia will operate polling stations

in pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria during the Russian presidential election.

- Russia, China, and Iran will hold the joint Maritime Security Belt – 2024 naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman between March 11–15.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) claimed that the West intends to use Armenia as a tool against Russia, a notable escalation in its information operations criticizing Armenian efforts to distance itself from security relations with Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill on March 11 that allows Russian authorities to further restrict actors it deems “foreign agents” to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the presidential election.
- France is reportedly prepared to build a coalition of countries that are open to potentially sending Western military personnel to Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kremenna, Bakhmut, and Donetsk City.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues efforts to cater to Russian servicemembers and their families with the promise of various social benefits.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 10, 2024

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

Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

March 10, 2024, 7:00pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30 pm ET on March 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Ukrainian military official confirmed that Russian forces are conducting strikes in Ukraine with improved glide bombs. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Dmytro Lykhovy reported on March 10 that Russian forces struck Myronhrad, Donetsk Oblast, with three universal interspecific glide munition (UMPB) D-30SN guided glide bombs that Ukrainian forces initially originally assessed were S-300 missiles.^[1] Lykhovy stated that improved UMPB D-30SN guided glide bombs essentially convert Soviet-era FAB unguided gravity bombs to guided glide bombs. Russian forces had previously used unguided glide bombs as recently as January 2024.^[2] ISW recently observed Russian milbloggers claim that Russian forces began conducting strikes with FAB UMPB guided glide bombs, as opposed to using unguided glide bombs with unified planning and correction modules (UMPC), in unspecified areas in Ukraine.^[3] A Russian milblogger claimed that UMPB guided glide bombs have a guidance system that includes a noise-resistant GLONASS/GPS “Comet” signal receiver and folding wings similar to a Kh-101 cruise missile.^[4] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces can launch UMPB guided glide bombs from aircraft and ground-based multiple rocket launch systems (MLRS) such as Tornado-S and Smerch MLRS.^[5] A Russian outlet claimed that Russian aviation is currently launching UMPBs without jet engines, but that Russia anticipates employing UMPBs with jet engines in the future.^[6] Russian milbloggers claimed that UMPB guided glide bombs with a jet engine and fuel tank, currently absent from aerial glide bombs with UMPC, will allow Russian aviation to drop guided glide bombs from a lower altitude “similar to air-to-surface cruise missiles” and increase the maximum strike range to 80-90 kilometers.^[7] Russian milbloggers claimed that the increased range of UMPB guided glide bombs will allow Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) to increase the depth of strikes on Ukrainian positions without risk from Ukrainian air forces detecting or destroying Russian fixed-wing aircraft.^[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is attempting to mass-produce UMPB guided glide bombs.^[9] Russian forces will likely attempt to serialize production of UMPB guided glide bombs and increase their use across the frontline.

Russian sources reported that Northern Fleet Commander Admiral Alexander Moiseev has replaced Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy. St. Petersburg news outlet *Fontanka* reported on March 10 that Moiseev was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, and former Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Commander retired Admiral Vladimir Komoyedov later stated that Moiseev is the new Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy in an interview with Ural Regional State newswire *URA.ru*.^[10] Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that Moiseev was appointed to command the Russian Navy and that recent command changes in the Russian Navy are occurring amid a “complete paralysis” of fleet leadership about new threats, likely referring to recent Ukrainian strikes against BSF assets in and near occupied Crimea.^[11] Russian sources recently claimed that the Russian military officially removed BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov and replaced him with BSF Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Sergei Pinchuk.^[12] ISW cannot confirm either Pinchuk’s or Moiseev’s reported appointments. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is in the

process of depriving the Northern Fleet of its status as an “interservice strategic territorial organization” (a joint headquarters in Western military parlance) to restore the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts (MMD and LMD), and Moiseev may have been appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy to retain a high-ranking command role.[13]

Russian occupation authorities opened early voting in occupied Ukraine for Russia's presidential election on March 10 that will last until March 14. Kremlin newswire TASS reported on March 10 that early voting started in occupied Donetsk Oblast, but noted that early voting in areas close to the frontline has been ongoing since February 25.[14] TASS stated that stationary polling stations will open in occupied Ukraine on March 15-17. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lysohor stated that 2,600 Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) election commission officials have been conducting door-to-door campaigning for the past 20 days.[15] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian occupation officials intend to claim a 94 percent voter turnout in occupied Ukraine.[16] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin and Russian occupation officials intend to falsify votes in support of Russian President Vladimir Putin and fabricate a large voter turnout in an attempt to legitimize Russia's occupation of Ukraine to the international community.[17]

Chechen officials organized a march in Grozny, Chechnya, on March 10 in support of Russian President Vladimir Putin's candidacy in the upcoming March presidential election. Russian state media outlet TASS reported that more than 150,000 Chechens attended the march in Grozny and that Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov's eldest child, Chechen Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Khadizhat Kadyrova, organized the march.[18] Russian opposition outlet SOTA amplified a claim on March 9 that the Chechen State University and Grozny State Petroleum Technical University instructed its employees and students to attend the election march on March 10.[19] Kadyrov praised the rally on March 10, emphasizing the importance of the election for the Russian state and praising Putin by name.[20] Kadyrov claimed that many prominent Chechen politicians and voices attended the march but did not mention Kadyrova by name.[21] Chechen National Policy Minister Akhmed Dudayev stated that the march “reflects that we [Chechnya] are one united team of our first President, Hero of Russia Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov.”[22] This election march likely supports Kadyrov's ongoing effort to balance appealing to his Chechen constituency while courting Putin's favor.[23]

Over 1,000 civilian ships have transited Ukraine's “grain corridor” in the Black Sea despite persistent Russian efforts to undermine international confidence in the corridor. US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink stated on March 9 that 1,005 civilian ships have traveled from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea through the “grain corridor” and have delivered roughly 30 million tons of cargo, including grain, to world markets.[24] A civilian ship used the Ukrainian corridor to leave a Ukrainian port for the first time in August 2023 and to reach a Ukrainian port for the first time in September 2023.[25] Russian forces began heavily targeting Ukrainian grain and port infrastructure in summer 2023 in an effort to exact concessions on the renewal of the defunct Black Sea grain deal and have continued those strikes in part to discourage civilian maritime traffic through the corridor.[26]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) awarded a state honor to a prominent Russian ultranationalist — who is an active supporter of imprisoned former officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin — likely as part of ongoing Kremlin campaign to coopt the critical milblogger community. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu signed a decree awarding Russian military volunteer and milblogger Vladimir Grubnik with the “For Military Cooperation” medal on January 24, 2024.[27] Grubnik routinely publishes and amplifies posts in support of Girkin (also known under the alias Strelkov) - who is a prominent critic of the Russian MoD, the Russian military command, and the Kremlin.[28] Grubnik is also a member of the Russian Strelkov Movement, which advocates for Girkin's release from prison, and the Russian Angry Patriots Club, which Girkin founded and briefly headed in 2023.[29] Grubnik had also previously amplified posts that criticized the Russian MoD and the military command, some of which directly accused Shoigu of military failures in Ukraine.[30] Grubnik notably defended Shoigu from accusations posed by deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin during his mutiny in June 2023, however.[31] ISW had previously observed that the Kremlin began to coopt Russian milbloggers critical of the Russian war effort's poor performance by offering them state awards or government positions starting November 2022 in an effort to regain control over the Russian information space.[32] Grubnik's award may indicate that the Kremlin is attempting to secure control over the group of ultranationalists who support Girkin's extremist views, are actively providing military and humanitarian help to Russian forces on the frontline, and have participated in the Russian invasion of Donbas and Crimea in 2014. Grubnik's award, however, is different than the Order of Merit of the Fatherland Second Class medals that the Kremlin previously awarded to two other milbloggers explicitly for their milblogger activities, but the reason for Grubnik's award is likely related to his volunteer efforts on the frontline.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- A Ukrainian military official confirmed that Russian forces are conducting strikes in Ukraine with improved guided glide bombs.
- Russian sources reported that the Russian military command has replaced Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov with Northern Fleet Commander Admiral Alexander Moiseev as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy.
- Russian occupation authorities opened early voting in occupied Ukraine for Russia's presidential election on March 10 that will last until March 14.
- Chechen officials organized a march in Grozny, Chechnya, on March 10 in support of Russian President Vladimir Putin's candidacy in the upcoming March presidential election.
- Over 1,000 civilian ships have transited Ukraine's "grain corridor" in the Black Sea despite persistent Russian efforts to undermine international confidence in the corridor.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) awarded a state honor to a prominent Russian ultranationalist — who is an active supporter of imprisoned former officer and ardent ultranationalist Igor Girkin — likely as part of an ongoing Kremlin campaign to coopt the critical milblogger community.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline on March 10.
- Prominent Russian ultranationalists praised Russian volunteers and mobilized personnel on March 10, likely to assuage continued concerns among these personnel in spite of their improper and unequal treatment in the Russian military.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 9, 2024

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

Christina Haward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

March 9, 2024, 5:55pm ET

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted drone strikes targeting Rostov Oblast overnight on March 8-9 and may have struck a Russian aircraft plant refurbishing and modernizing Russian A-50 long range radar detection aircraft. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 41 Ukrainian drones overnight over Rostov Oblast, and eyewitnesses reportedly stated that the strike caused at least five explosions.^[1] Geolocated footage of a strike shows an explosion at the Beriev Aircraft Plant in Taganrog, Rostov Oblast.^[2] The Beriev Aircraft Plant in Taganrog is reportedly refurbishing and modernizing Russian A-50 aircraft for use in Ukraine, and Russian sources claimed that the plant was repairing an A-50 damaged in a previous drone strike (possibly referring to the attack on a Russian A-50 at the Machulishchi Air Base in Minsk, Belarus, in February 2023).^[3] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty published satellite imagery dated February 29 indicating that the geolocated explosion occurred roughly 900 meters from a Russian A-50 aircraft that previously had been present at the Beriev Aircraft Plant, although it is unclear whether the A-50 was in the same location at the time of the strike.^[4] Senior Ukrainian officials have not commented on the strike at the time of this publication. ISW is unable to confirm that the reported strike damaged any Russian A-50 aircraft, facilities repairing or refurbishing aircraft, or other Russian military infrastructure in the area.

Russian sources widely circulated footage of a Russian strike on March 9 to claim that Russian forces destroyed a Patriot air defense system in eastern Ukraine, although there has yet to be any confirmation of these claims. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage on March 9 purportedly of Russian forces striking a Ukrainian S-300 air defense missile launcher with Iskander missiles near Pokrovsk, Donetsk Oblast.^[5] Russian sources amplified additional footage of the strike's aftermath purportedly showing destroyed German MAN KAT1 trucks, which can be used as a base for Patriot air defense missile launchers.^[6] Russian sources used this footage to claim that Russian forces destroyed a MIM-104 Patriot air defense system, although the Russian MoD has yet to revise its earlier claim about destroying a Ukrainian S-300 system.^[7] Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti reported that a source in Russian law enforcement stated that the Russian Iskander strike destroyed two Patriot air defense systems.^[8] Several OSINT social media accounts concluded that the strike likely destroyed a Ukrainian Patriot air defense system, although another OSINT account noted that Ukrainian forces also use the MAN KAT1 trucks as logistics vehicles.^[9] ISW has not yet observed evidence confirming that Russian forces destroyed a Patriot air defense system.

US officials reportedly told CNN that Russia considered using "tactical or battlefield" nuclear weapons in Ukraine in 2022 – during the same time Russia conducted an intense information

operation aimed at the West about Russia potentially using a nuclear weapon against Ukraine to deter Western support for Ukraine. CNN reported on March 9 that two senior Biden administration officials stated that the United States began “preparing rigorously” for a potential Russian “tactical or battlefield” nuclear strike in late 2022 after collecting intelligence indicating that Kremlin officials at various levels were discussing this possibility.[10] The United States reportedly contacted multiple high-level Kremlin officials, discussed the issue with US allies, and asked China and India to discourage Russia. CNN reported that one US official assessed that Chinese and Indian public statements were a “helpful, persuasive factor” that showed Russia the costs of their potential decision. The sources reportedly stated that the United States believed that significant Russian territorial or personnel losses in Ukraine could have been a “potential trigger” for a Russian tactical nuclear strike as the Kremlin viewed areas of occupied Ukraine, such as Kherson City, as Russian territory and potentially viewed the loss of such territories as a direct threat to the Kremlin or the Russian state – one scenario in which Russia would contemplate using nuclear weapons. CNN reported that US officials believed that the Kremlin may have tried to use claims that Ukraine intended to use a “dirty bomb,” which Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and other Kremlin officials were reportedly promoting in conversations with Western military and political officials at the time, as “cover” for a Russian tactical nuclear strike. Shoigu and other Kremlin officials routinely publicly promoted claims about a Ukrainian “dirty bomb” in October 2022 as part of an information designed to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine following Ukrainian forces’ rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022.[11] Ukrainian forces have transgressed Russia’s nuclear “red lines” several times over the course of the war with no Russian nuclear strike, indicating that many of Russia’s “red lines” are most likely information operations designed to deter Ukrainian and Western action to defeat Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine’s liberation of Russian-occupied territories during counteroffensives in eastern and southern Ukraine in fall 2022 and subsequent Ukrainian strikes against occupied Ukraine violated Russia’s “red lines.”[12] Sweden’s and Finland’s NATO accession also violated Russia’s so-called red lines. ISW continues to assess that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains highly unlikely.[13]

Senior Armenian officials stated that Armenia is considering seeking membership in the European Union (EU), against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations. Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan stated in a March 9 interview with Turkish TV channel *TRT World* that Armenia is considering new opportunities “taking into account the challenges [Armenia] has faced in the last three to four years” including “the idea of joining the EU.”[14] Armenian Parliament Speaker Alen Simonyan stated on February 29 that “[Armenia] should think about [seeking EU candidate status].”[15] Russian officials have not responded to Armenian officials’ statements as of this publication. ISW continues to assess that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s acknowledgement and criticism of Armenia’s lack of participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) indicates that the Kremlin may be preparing a more concerted response to its deteriorating relations with Armenia.[16] The Kremlin has conducted hybrid wars against former Soviet states that have sought EU accession.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine would be open to negotiations with Russia only after Ukraine and its partners develop a peace plan and as Turkey continues to promote its own negotiation platform for the war in Ukraine. Zelensky stated that Ukraine would invite representatives of Russia to a peace summit only after Ukraine and other countries have developed a peace plan at a first peace summit.[17] Ukraine plans to hold the first Ukrainian Peace Formula Summit in Switzerland in 2024.[18] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated on March 8 that Turkey is ready to host a peace summit between Ukraine and Russia.[19] ISW continues to assess that Russia is not interested in good faith negotiations with Ukraine and has no interest in ending the war on anything but Russia’s articulated maximalist terms of destroying Ukraine’s sovereignty and eradicating the notion of a unique Ukrainian national identity.[20]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted drone strikes targeting Rostov Oblast overnight on March 8-9 and may have struck a Russian aircraft plant refurbishing and modernizing Russian A-50 long range radar detection aircraft.**
- **Russian sources widely circulated footage of a Russian strike on March 9 to claim that Russian forces destroyed a Patriot air defense system in eastern Ukraine, although there has yet to be any confirmation of these claims.**
- **US officials reportedly told CNN that Russia considered using “tactical or battlefield” nuclear weapons in Ukraine in 2022 – during the same time Russia conducted an intense information operation aimed at the West about Russia potentially using a nuclear weapon against Ukraine to deter Western support for Ukraine.**
- **Senior Armenian officials stated that Armenia is considering seeking membership in the European Union (EU), against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.**

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine would be open to negotiations with Russia only after Ukraine and its partners develop a peace plan and as Turkey continues to promote its own negotiation platform for the war in Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Avdiivka amid continued positional fighting along the entire frontline on March 9.
- Open-source researchers analyzed satellite imagery and assessed that Russia has reportedly removed 25 to 40 percent of its tank strategic reserves, depending on the model, from open-air storage facilities, although ISW cannot independently verify this report.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 8, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

March 8, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated that a ceasefire in Ukraine would allow Russia to rebuild its forces and means for future offensive operations, as Russia previously did following the start of Russia's 2014 invasion. Zelensky stated on March 8 that a pause in fighting in Ukraine would pose a serious challenge and problem both to Ukraine and all of Europe. [1] Zelensky noted that Russia would benefit from a pause or ceasefire as Russian forces would use the pause to optimize Russia's military and overall war effort, including by training its soldiers, many of whom deploy to the front line with very little training. Zelensky also stated that Russian forces are suffering from missile, artillery, and drone shortages, so Russia is sourcing these weapons from North Korea and Iran and needs to rebuild its stockpiles. Zelensky stated that Russia similarly benefited from previously freezing the war in 2014 and was able to build up its weapons, accumulate forces, and invade Ukraine again in 2022. ISW continues to assess that any ceasefire in Ukraine would benefit Russia, giving it time to reconstitute and regroup for future offensive operations, optimize command and control, implement lessons learned from experience in Ukraine, and resupply Russian forces in a manner that is exceedingly difficult to do while high-intensity combat is underway.[2] Zelensky also stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin's goal is not just to occupy all of Ukraine, but to deprive Ukraine of its independence and integrate Ukraine into Russia using either force or political means. [3] Kremlin officials, including Putin, have repeatedly indicated that Russia hopes to occupy most, if not all, of Ukraine and eliminate Ukrainian statehood and independence.[4] Putin has also geographically defined historical "Russian" lands - a characterization which the Kremlin has used to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine - as encompassing the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union.[5]

Some Russian forces may have improved their tactical capabilities and leveraged limited tactical surprise during the final weeks of the Russian effort to seize Avdiivka, suggesting that select elements of the Russian military may have internalized tactical adaptations from conducting offensive operations in Ukraine. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets published a retrospective on March 8 about the Russian effort to seize Avdiivka in which he stated that Russian forces were able to tactically regroup and shift the tactical focus of their offensive operations from north of the Avdiivka Coke Plant in northwestern Avdiivka to areas near northeastern Avdiivka. [6] Mashovets stated that Russian forces achieved this regrouping and tactical shift without Ukrainian forces fully realizing that the regrouping had shifted Russia's tactical focus.[7] Russian forces initially began their turning movement through Avdiivka after making tactical gains in northeastern Avdiivka, and Mashovets' reporting suggests that Russian forces may have advanced in the area due to some tactical surprise.[8] Even limited tactical surprise, in which attacking forces engage defenders at a time, place, or manner for which the defender is unprepared, is a notable development given that both Russian and Ukrainian forces have widespread visibility throughout the frontline.[9] The Russian force's ability to achieve elements of tactical surprise in such an operating environment with little-to-no concealment is therefore noteworthy. ISW has not observed other recent notable incidents of Russian forces achieving or leveraging tactical surprise. The reported Russian ability to do so near Avdiivka is not necessarily indicative of a wider Russian capability. Russian forces have shown limited tactical-level adaptations on certain sectors of the front, but continued widespread Russian tactical failures throughout Ukraine suggest that the Russian military command has not internalized and disseminated all possible tactical adaptations among all the various Russian force groupings operating in Ukraine. [10]

Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk stated on March 8 that Ukrainian forces are regularly targeting Russian fighter aircraft.[11] Oleshchuk stated that Russian forces continue to conduct guided aerial strikes against Ukrainian frontline positions, but that Russian aircraft "no longer dare" to fly too close to the frontlines and that Ukrainian air defenses recently attempted to strike a Russian aircraft from over 150 kilometers away.[12] Oleshchuk stated that the recent reported downing of Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and Su-34 and Su-35 fighter aircraft have caused Russian forces to "significantly reduce" the frequency of Russian air strikes in Ukraine.[13] ISW has not observed dispositive evidence that the tempo of Russian unguided glide bomb strikes has decreased, however. *Forbes* recently reported that Russian aircraft are conducting one hundred or more sorties per day to conduct unguided glide bomb strikes on Ukrainian positions at a range of 25 miles (about 40 kilometers), indicating that Russian aircraft are continuing to conduct a relatively high volume of glide bomb strikes in Ukraine despite Ukraine's claimed shoot-downs of such aircraft.[14]

Ukraine's European partners continue efforts to send additional aid and materiel to Ukraine. Czech officials stated on March 8 that Ukraine's partners have raised enough funds to purchase the first batch of 300,000 shells to send to Ukraine "in the coming weeks."[15] The Czech Republic is leading an initiative to purchase 800,000 ammunition shells outside of Europe and deliver them to Ukraine.[16] European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis stated on March 8 that the European Union (EU) will send the first tranche of 4.5 billion euros (about \$4.9 billion) to Ukraine in March and will send 1.5 billion euros (about \$1.6 billion) in April as part of the EU's previously announced support package of 50 billion euros (about \$54.7 billion) for 2024-2027.[17]

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors approved a resolution calling for Russia's withdrawal from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), undermining Russian efforts to use the IAEA and other international organizations to legitimize its occupation of the plant.[18] The March 7 IAEA resolution calls for the urgent withdrawal of all Russian unauthorized military and other personnel from the ZNPP and the return of the ZNPP to full Ukrainian control.[19] The resolution also expresses significant concern for the unstable security situation at the ZNPP during armed conflict, including the lack of qualified personnel, gaps in planned and preventative maintenance, lack of reliable supply chains, vulnerable water supply for cooling the ZNPP's nuclear reactors, and the installation of antipersonnel mines between the ZNPP's internal and external perimeters.[20] The March 6 resolution echoes previous calls from the IAEA on March 3, 2022, September 15, 2022, November 17, 2022, and September 28, 2023.[21] Russian authorities have repeatedly attempted to use Russia's physical control over the ZNPP to force international organizations including the IAEA to meet with Russian occupation officials to legitimize Russia's occupation of the ZNPP and by extension Russia's occupation of sovereign Ukrainian land.[22] The IAEA's March 7 resolution reiterates the IAEA's recognition of Ukraine as the legitimate operator of the ZNPP and undermines the consistent Russian assertion that Russia is the only safe operator of the ZNPP.[23]

Ukrainian efforts to encourage women to serve in the Ukrainian armed forces continues allowing Ukraine to tap into a wider mobilization base for its war effort. The Ukrainian Military Media Center reported in honor of International Women's Day on March 8 that over 45,500 women serve in the Ukrainian army as of January 2024, including more than 13,000 women serving in combat roles.[24] Ukrainian officials previously reported that over 5,000 women were actively serving in frontline combat zones as of November 2023.[25] ISW previously noted that Ukraine has not been conscripting women but that Ukrainian women are nonetheless volunteering for military service, including combat roles, and that Ukrainian society appears to be galvanized by a popular desire to defend Ukraine strong enough to bring so many Ukrainian women near and onto the battlefield of their own accord.[26]

Russian information space actors are intensifying their focus on covering recent events surrounding the governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, and are amplifying Kremlin narratives aimed at destabilizing Moldova to a wider audience. Gutsul returned from Russia to Chisinau on March 8 without incident and hundreds of supporters gathered to meet her at the airport.[27] US-sanctioned, pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor claimed on March 7 that Moldovan authorities would arrest Gutsul upon her arrival to Moldova after the Moldovan Prosecutor General's Office publicly stated that Moldovan authorities collected enough evidence to demonstrate Gutsul's involvement in unspecified criminal acts.[28] Kremlin newswire TASS closely followed Gutsul's return to Moldova on March 8, reporting that Gutsul stated that Moldova must have friendly relations with Russia and criticized Moldovan President Maia Sandu after arriving at the Chisinau airport.[29] An abnormally large number of Russian milbloggers reported on Gutsul's return to Moldova and promoted commonplace Kremlin narratives that target the Moldovan government.[30] Such a pattern of activity could indicate a centrally directed Kremlin information operation. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin's intensified focus on

spreading destabilizing narratives regarding Gagauzia after a recent rhetorical focus on Moldova's other pro-Russian region, the breakaway republic of Transnistria, indicates that the Kremlin seeks to use both these regions in information operations to support hybrid operations aimed at sabotaging Moldova's EU accession process.[31]

A recent Russian state-run poll suggests that the Kremlin aims for Russian President Vladimir Putin's predetermined "support level" to be around 80 percent in the upcoming March 17 presidential election in an effort to portray Putin as legitimately popular and use the March election to legitimize Putin's next term. The Public Opinion Foundation, a Russian state-owned polling institution, reported on March 7 that roughly 83 percent of Russians surveyed view Putin favorably and that roughly 82 percent plan to vote for him in the upcoming presidential election. [32] The Public Opinion Foundation published the results of another poll on March 5 claiming that 83 percent of Russians plan to vote in the upcoming election.[33] The Public Opinion Foundation's numbers are consistent with recent reporting from Russian opposition outlets suggesting that the Kremlin aims to portray the election as having a 70-80 percent turnout and for Putin to win the election with 80 percent of the votes.[34] The Kremlin is likely using claims of strong voter turnout and support for Putin to set informational conditions to portray Russian society as confidently unified around Putin and his agenda.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated that a ceasefire in Ukraine would allow Russia to rebuild its forces and means for future offensive operations, as Russia previously did following the start of Russia's 2014 invasion.
- Some Russian forces may have improved their tactical capabilities and leveraged limited tactical surprise during the final weeks of the Russian effort to seize Avdiivka, suggesting that select elements of the Russian military may have internalized tactical adaptations from conducting offensive operations in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk stated on March 8 that Ukrainian forces are regularly targeting Russian fighter aircraft.
- Ukraine's European partners continue efforts to send additional aid and materiel to Ukraine.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors approved a resolution calling for Russia's withdrawal from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), undermining Russian efforts to use the IAEA and other international organizations to legitimize its occupation of the plant.
- Ukrainian efforts to encourage women to serve in the Ukrainian armed forces continues allowing Ukraine to tap into a wider mobilization base for its war effort.
- Russian information space actors are intensifying their focus on covering recent events surrounding the governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, and are amplifying Kremlin narratives aimed at destabilizing Moldova to a wider audience.
- A recent Russian state-run poll suggests that the Kremlin aims for Russian President Vladimir Putin's predetermined "support level" to be around 80 percent in the upcoming March 17 presidential election in an effort to portray Putin as legitimately popular and use the March election to legitimize Putin's next term.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 8.
- *BBC Russian Service* and Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* published a joint report on March 8 that at least 46,678 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, including at least 1,555 confirmed killed in the past two weeks.
- Unspecified actors, likely Ukrainian partisans, assassinated a Russian occupation official in occupied Berdyansk, Kherson Oblast on March 6.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 7, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and George Barros

March 7, 2024, 6:25pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on March 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia has the capability to continue sustaining the current tempo of its war in Ukraine and will likely have the capability to gradually expand its military capabilities in the near term.[1] Lithuanian intelligence published its 2024 national threat assessment on March 7 wherein it assessed that Russia has the manpower, material, and financial resources to sustain its war effort in Ukraine in the near term. Lithuanian intelligence noted that Russia reconstituted and increased its deployed manpower in Ukraine in 2023 despite suffering heavy losses but continues to prioritize quantity of manpower and materiel over quality of forces. Lithuanian intelligence also assessed that Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) has become a driving force within the Russian economy at the expense of other economic sectors and that Russia had allocated at least 10.8 trillion rubles (about \$119 billion) to military spending in 2023. The Lithuanian intelligence assessment stated that Russia's economy is doing better than expected due to high oil prices and Russia's ability to offset Western sanctions. Lithuanian intelligence caveated that short-term factors are driving Russia's economic growth and that Russian structural problems, which impose limits on Russia's short-term capacity, are only likely to deepen in the long term. Lithuanian intelligence also assessed that the Kremlin views Russia's upcoming March 2024 presidential election as a significant event to legitimize Russian President Vladimir Putin and that Putin will be more likely to make unpopular decisions (potentially such as mobilization) after the election, which could allow the Kremlin to address some potential constraints on its long-term war effort.

Lithuanian intelligence also assessed that Russia is unlikely to abandon its long-term objectives of subjugating Ukraine even if Russia fails to achieve these objectives through military means. Lithuanian intelligence assessed that "Russia shows no intention of de-escalating" its war against Ukraine and that Russia is unlikely to abandon its operational objectives in the long-term, even if Russia suffers a military defeat in Ukraine.[2] Lithuanian intelligence stated that Russia will continue to pursue its goal of completely undermining Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty, enforcing Ukraine's neutral status, and destroying Ukraine's military potential in the long term, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia will also continue efforts to expand the Russian state's administrative control to the administrative borders of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts in the short term. Recent Russian official statements underscore that the Kremlin's maximalist objectives in Ukraine have remained unchanged since the beginning months of the full-scale invasion and likely will not change, despite Russian information operations that aim to persuade Western audiences and leaders that Russia has limited objectives in Ukraine to seduce the West to support negotiations that favor Russia.[3]

Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia is preparing for confrontation with NATO in the long term while also waging its war in Ukraine. Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia has allocated substantial resources to the war in Ukraine but maintains the means to prepare for a long-term confrontation with NATO in the Baltic Sea region.[4] Lithuanian intelligence stated that Russia has deployed forces and assets from its western border areas to Ukraine and has thus had to increasingly rely on air and naval capabilities for security and deterrence purposes on NATO's eastern flank. Lithuanian intelligence reported that Russia deployed Kalibr missile carrier ships on combat duty in Lake Ladoga near St. Petersburg for the first time in 2023, likely in response to Finland's accession to NATO, and increased the number of Tu-22M3 heavy bomber flights over the Baltic Sea from none in 2022 to five in 2023. The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (VLA) also recently assessed that the Russian military is forming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) in part to posture against Finland and NATO.[5]

Russian military thinkers are openly discussing how Russia can go to war against NATO in the near future. Russian General Staff Military Academy Head Colonel Vladimir Zarudnitsky claimed in a recent article in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) journal *Military Thought* that the war in Ukraine could escalate into a large-scale war in Europe and that the end of hostilities in Ukraine will not lead to the end of confrontation between the West and Russia.[6]

Sweden formally joined NATO on March 7, becoming the 32nd member of the alliance. The US State Department announced that Sweden fulfilled the conditions of NATO membership and formally entered the alliance.[7]

The governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, met with Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko in Russia on March 7 as Moldovan authorities announced that a criminal case against Gutsul will soon go to court. Gutsul met with Kiriyenko at the World Youth Festival in Sochi and reportedly discussed "the support that Russia can provide to Gagauzia" and the "political situation" in Moldova.[8] Gutsul asked Kiriyenko to help Gagauz people open Russian bank accounts "for social projects," to lift the Russian

embargo on imports from Gagauzia, and to help negotiate with Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom on the supply of gas to Gagauzia at a preferential price. Kiriyenko is reportedly in charge of multiple Kremlin committees that run information operations and hybrid operations against the West, including Moldova.^[9] Moldovan Acting Prosecutor General Ion Munteanu stated on March 7 that Moldovan authorities have enough evidence to demonstrate Gutsul's involvement in unspecified criminal acts, are finalizing a criminal case against Gutsul and will soon take the criminal charges to court.^[10] Moldovan authorities opened a criminal case against Gutsul for illegal financing and bribing voters during her electoral campaign in 2023.^[11] Gutsul previously ran as a candidate of the now-outlawed Shor Party led by US-sanctioned pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor.^[12] Shor denied on March 7 that he illegally financed Moldovan political parties and claimed that Moldovan authorities will arrest Gutsul upon her return to Moldova.^[13] Gutsul claimed on March 7 that she will return to Moldova soon and that she will "speak in detail at a briefing" in Chisinau on an unspecified date.^[14] Gutsul met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on March 6 where Putin reportedly "promised to support Gagauzia and the Gagauz people in defending [their] legitimate rights, powers, and positions in the international arena."^[15] The Kremlin's intensified focus on relations with Gagauzia after a recent rhetorical focus on Moldova's other pro-Russian region, the breakaway republic of Transnistria, continues to indicate that the Kremlin hopes to use both these regions to justify hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and further polarizing Moldova ahead of Moldova's EU accession negotiations and the Moldovan presidential election later in 2024.^[16]

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Chinese calls for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine on March 7; Russia will likely continue to use such calls to promote long-standing information operations aimed at prompting Western concessions.^[17] Wang stated that China maintains an objective and impartial position on the war in Ukraine, rhetoric that is part of China's long-standing efforts to cast itself as an independent mediator in an envisioned aspirational negotiations process.^[18] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin and Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hiu met in Moscow on March 2 to discuss China's desire to facilitate peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.^[19] China has not publicly expounded upon the specifics of a vague 12-point peace plan that it released in early 2023, and Russian officials will likely continue to engage with Chinese calls for negotiations to promote Kremlin information operations about peace negotiations.^[20] Galuzin and Li noted that it is "impossible" to discuss a settlement in Ukraine without Russia's participation and without "taking into account [Russia's] interests in the security sphere," claims that the Kremlin routinely uses to place the onus for negotiations on the West.^[21]

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on March 7 that it neutralized an Islamic State (IS) terrorist cell that had been preparing an attack on synagogues in Moscow.^[22] The FSB stated that it neutralized the IS cell in Kaluga Oblast but did not specify its size.^[23] The Russian Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK) announced on March 3 that the FSB conducted a localized counter-terrorism operation against alleged IS militants in Karabulak, Republic of Ingushetia.^[24] Russian law enforcement has routinely attributed terrorist activity in Russia, and specifically the north Caucasus, to the Islamic State when militants may be affiliated with IS or a different terrorist organization.^[25]

Key Takeaways:

- Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia has the capability to continue sustaining the current tempo of its war in Ukraine and will likely have the capability to gradually expand its military capabilities in the near term.
- Lithuanian intelligence also assessed that Russia is unlikely to abandon its long-term objectives of subjugating Ukraine even if Russia fails to achieve these objectives through military means.
- Lithuanian intelligence assessed that Russia is preparing for confrontation with NATO in the long term while also waging its war in Ukraine.
- Sweden formally joined NATO on March 7, becoming the 32nd member of the alliance.
- The governor of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, met with Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko in Russia on March 7 as Moldovan authorities announced that a criminal case against Gutsul will soon go to court.
- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Chinese calls for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine on March 7; Russia will likely continue to use such calls to promote long-standing information operations aimed at prompting Western concessions.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on March 7 that it neutralized an Islamic State (IS) terrorist cell that had been preparing an attack on synagogues in Moscow.

- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk and Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 7.
- Russian intelligence services likely continue to source and operate sanctioned precision machine tools and dual-use components to produce Russian military equipment.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 6, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

March 6, 2024, 5:20pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00 pm ET on March 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk stated on March 6 that Ukraine will try to seize the initiative and conduct unspecified counteroffensive actions in 2024.[1] Pavlyuk stated that Ukrainian forces will aim to stabilize the frontline while degrading Russian forces in order to rotate frontline Ukrainian units to training grounds in the rear for replenishment and restoration.[2] Pavlyuk stated that this will allow Ukraine to create a grouping of forces that will conduct unspecified counteroffensive actions (possibly but not necessarily counteroffensive operations) in 2024.[3] Pavlyuk stated that Russian forces are concentrating offensive efforts near Avdiivka, in the direction of Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut), and in the Lyman direction and that Russian forces are trying to maintain a relatively high tempo of offensive operations along the frontline in order to retain the theater-wide initiative.[4] Pavlyuk stated that Russian forces are currently suffering significant losses and assessed that Ukrainian forces will stabilize the frontline in the near future.[5] A Ukrainian effort to contest the initiative in 2024 is operationally sound. Russia will be able to determine the location, time, scale, and requirements of fighting in Ukraine as long as it retains the theater-wide initiative, which may allow Russia to force Ukraine to expend materiel and manpower in reactive defensive operations, denying Ukraine the ability to amass the materiel necessary for future counteroffensive operations.[6] ISW continues to assess that it would be unwise for Ukraine to cede the advantage of the theater-wide initiative to Russia for longer than is necessary.

[7]

Continued delays in Western security assistance will likely postpone Ukrainian efforts to regain the theater-wide initiative, however. Materiel shortages are forcing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and uncertainty about future assistance is likely constraining Ukrainian operational planning. [8] Delays in crucial assistance will force Ukraine to make difficult decisions about how to allocate resources between future operationally significant counteroffensive operations and ongoing Ukrainian defensive operations against Russian attackers who currently hold the initiative.[9] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently stated that Ukrainian forces are planning to conduct counteroffensive operations in 2024 but stressed that Ukraine's primary objective remains the defense of Ukrainian territory.[10] Zelensky has also stated that Russia is preparing a new offensive effort that will start in late May or summer 2024, which would likely further postpone opportunities for Ukraine to prepare and launch counteroffensive operations.[11] Well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have proven capable of preventing even marginal Russian gains during large-scale Russian offensive efforts and are capable of heavily degrading attacking Russian forces.[12] Western security assistance is crucial for both Ukraine's ability to concentrate material and manpower for future counteroffensive operations as well as its ability to degrade Russian offensive efforts sufficiently enough so that Ukraine can seize the theater wide initiative.

Russian forces conducted a relatively larger series of drone and missile strikes targeting Ukraine on the night of March 5 to 6 and on March 6, including strikes on Odesa City during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that on the night of March 5 to 6 Russian forces launched five S-300 missiles from occupied Donetsk Oblast and 42 Shahed-136/131 drones from occupied Crimea, Kursk Oblast, and Krasnodar Krai.[13] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces downed 38 Shahed drones over Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Kharkiv, Vinnytsia, and Sumy oblasts.[14] Russian forces later targeted port infrastructure in Odesa City on March 6 with an unspecified number of missiles during Zelensky's and Mitsotakis' visit to the Odesa Port.[15] Western media reported that a Russian missile struck within several hundred meters of a convoy transporting Zelensky and Mitsotakis.[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces launched a high-precision missile strike on a hanger in the Odesa Port where Ukrainian forces were preparing naval drones for operations.[17]

Kremlin officials continue to invoke nuclear threats as part of ongoing Russian information operations aimed at weakening Western support for Ukraine and deterring Western aid to Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov reiterated on March 6 that Russia will only use nuclear weapons if “something” threatens Russia’s existence — a longstanding Russian nuclear weapon usage talking point.[18] Peskov also accused the West of “routinizing” the topic of nuclear war, which Peskov called “extremely dangerous” and “irresponsible,” despite the fact that it is, in fact, Russian officials, who most frequently openly threaten employing nuclear weapons. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded to Finnish President Alexander Stubb’s recent statement about NATO membership providing Finland a nuclear deterrent by claiming that American nuclear facilities in northern Europe would be “legitimate targets” for Russia in a hypothetical direct conflict between Russia and NATO.[19] Zakharova threatened that the security of countries who received nuclear weapons from the US will “clearly suffer.” Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matviyenko stated that Russia needs to reassess and denounce international agreements that do not serve Russia’s national interests, specifically unspecified international agreements signed by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and other Soviet and Russian leaders.[20] Matviyenko’s statement suggests a Russian interest in denouncing a wide variety of international agreements, potentially including nuclear proliferation and security agreements. ISW has recently observed several Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, engaged in nuclear saber rattling but continues to assess that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine and beyond remains highly unlikely.[21]

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Rafael Grossi and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the security of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and nuclear non-proliferation issues on March 6 in Sochi, Russia.[22] Grossi stated that he had an “important exchange” with Putin about the “nuclear safety and security” of the ZNPP, which Russian forces have controlled for over two years.[23] The Kremlin and Russian state-run news outlets highlighted Grossi’s visit to Russia, likely as part of an ongoing effort to portray Russia as a responsible operator of the ZNPP and to prompt international recognition for the Russian occupation of the ZNPP and occupied Ukraine.[24]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the governor of pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, on March 6 and emphasized Russia’s support for Gagauzia. Putin and Gutsul met on the sidelines of the World Youth Festival in Sochi and discussed “complex regional and geopolitical issues,” which Gutsul claimed Gagauzia is at the “epicenter of.”[25] Gutsul informed Putin about the “lawless actions” of Moldovan authorities and claimed that Moldova is systematically “taking away [Gagauzia’s] powers, limiting the budget, violating legal rights, [and] provoking instability and destabilization in Gagauzia and throughout [Moldova].”[26] Gutsul claimed that Putin “promised to support Gagauzia and the Gagauz people in defending [their] legitimate rights, powers, and positions in the international arena.” Gutsul also met with various Russian officials and agreed to intensify economic and cultural ties with Krasnodar Krai and Penza and Pskov oblasts on the sidelines of the World Youth Forum.[27] Gutsul recently met with Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matviyenko, who emphasized Russia’s support for Gagauzia against perceived Moldovan “oppression.”[28] Gutsul’s trip to Russia follows the February 28 Congress of Deputies in pro-Russian Moldova breakaway region Transnistria, which requested “*zashchita*” (defense/protection) from Russia in response to alleged increasing pressure from Moldova.[29] Putin did not respond to the February 28 Transnistrian request, but the Transnistrian requests still afford the Kremlin a wide range of possible courses of action (COAs) at a later time.[30] It is unclear why Putin would choose to meet with Gutsul and engage with Gagauzian authorities after declining to respond to Transnistria’s request for defense/protection. The Kremlin’s recent high-level interactions with Gagauzian authorities after a previous rhetorical focus on Transnistria supports ISW assessment that the Kremlin desires to use both of Moldova’s pro-Russian regions to justify hybrid operations aimed a destabilizing and further polarizing Moldova ahead of Moldova’s EU accession negotiations and the Moldovan presidential election later in 2024.[31]

Moldova suspended the Cold War-era Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty on March 6.[32] Twenty-two NATO members and Warsaw Pact states signed the CFE Treaty in 1990, and it was ratified in 1992 after the fall of the Soviet Union.[33] The CFE was meant to set equal limits on the number of tanks, armored combat vehicles, heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters between NATO and Warsaw Pact states in order to counterbalance the Soviet Union’s advantage in conventional weapons systems in the final years of the Cold War.[34] Moldovan officials stated that Moldova is suspending the CFE Treaty because there has been a “fundamental change in circumstances” in the international security environment since the original signing of the treaty.[35] Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairperson Andrei Kartapolov responded to the Moldovan decision and claimed that it is against Russian interests, despite the fact that Russia itself withdrew from the treaty in 2023.[36] Russian officials’ negative response to Moldova’s decision further suggests that the Kremlin desires to maintain influence over Moldova using a variety of avenues.

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a drone strike on a mining and processing plant in Kursk Oblast on March 6. Ukrainian outlet *Ukrainska Pravda* reported on March 6 that unspecified GUR sources stated that GUR conducted a drone strike on the Mikhailovsky Mining and Processing Plant in Zhelezogorsk, Kursk Oblast.[37] Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit claimed that a Ukrainian drone struck a fuel depot in Zhelezogorsk causing a fire and that another Ukrainian drone struck the Mikhailovsky Mining and Processing Plant.[38] *Ukrainska Pravda* reported that the Mikhailovsky Mining and Processing plants is one of the largest iron ore mining enterprises in Russia. The US has sanctioned the Mikhailovsky Mining and Processing Plant's holding company, Metalloinvest.[39]

Armenia appears to be taking limited measures to reduce its bilateral security cooperation with Russia outside of its reduced participation in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan stated on March 6 that Armenia officially informed Russia that "only Armenian border guards" should perform duties at Zvartnots International Airport in Yerevan.[40] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenian service *Radio Azatutyun* reported that Russian border guards have been serving at the Zvartnots Airport since the signing of a 1992 Armenian-Russian agreement which regulates Russian forces in Armenia but does not specifically mention a Russian presence at Zvartnots Airport.[41]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk stated on March 6 that Ukraine will try to seize the initiative and conduct unspecified counteroffensive actions in 2024.
- Russian forces conducted a relatively larger series of drone and missile strikes targeting Ukraine on the night of March 5 to 6 and on March 6, including strikes on Odesa City during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.
- Kremlin officials continue to invoke nuclear threats as part of ongoing Russian information operations aimed at weakening Western support for Ukraine and deterring Western aid to Ukraine.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Rafael Grossi and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the security of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and nuclear non-proliferation issues on March 6 in Sochi, Russia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the governor of pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, on March 6 and emphasized Russia's support for Gagauzia.
- Moldova suspended the Cold War-era Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty on March 6.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a drone strike on a mining and processing plant in Kursk Oblast on March 6.
- Armenia appears to be taking limited measures to reduce its bilateral security cooperation with Russia outside of its reduced participation in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk and Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian legal system continues efforts to use the Russian criminal justice system to augment Russia's recruitment base.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 5, 2024

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

March 5, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Ukraine destroyed the Project 22160 *Sergei Kotov* large patrol ship of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) off the coast of the Kerch Strait on the night of March 4-5.[1] Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on March 5 that GUR special unit "Group 13" conducted the attack against the *Sergei Kotov* using Magura V5 naval drones, inflicting severe damage on the port and starboard sides of the ship, killing seven sailors, and wounding six.[2] GUR noted that Russian forces were likely able to evacuate 52 other crew members, but that the loss of the ship cost Russia a total of \$65 million.[3] Ukrainian sources noted that the *Sergei Kotov* had either a Ka-29 or Ka-27 helicopter on

board, which Ukrainian forces destroyed along with the ship.^[4] A Russian insider source claimed that after the initial naval drone strike, BSF forces tried to tow the ship back to port, but that the damage was so severe that the ship sank five kilometers off the coast of Cape Takil, southeastern Crimea. [5] The *Sergei Kotov* was one of the BSF's newest vessels and only entered service in January 2021. [6] The Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) reported that Ukrainian forces had disabled about 33 percent of the BSF's warships as of early February 2024, including 24 ships and one submarine.^[7]

Russian milbloggers responded to the sinking of the *Sergei Kotov* by decrying the Russian military command's lack of response to the incident and mounting a wider critique against the bureaucratic inertia of the Russian military apparatus. Russian milbloggers alleged that this is the fourth Ukrainian attack on the *Sergei Kotov* since Russia's full-scale invasion began and that the crew managed to repel similar Ukrainian attacks in July, August, and September of 2023.^[8] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger noted that the *Sergei Kotov* was inadequately equipped to defend itself against such an attack, and many milbloggers questioned why the ship did not have systems to defend against naval drones considering the crew had experienced similar attacks before.^[9] One prominent milblogger stated in a post published on March 5 (which has been viewed 1.7 million times as of this writing) that the Russian military command has no response to the sinking of the *Sergei Kotov* because no one likes to tell the truth to the military command and that the military command refuses to learn important lessons from past experiences to improve the military.^[10] Another milblogger emphasized that it would be very important for the Russian command to listen to the crew of the *Sergei Kotov* to improve and modernize naval vessels and defensive procedures in the future. [11] Another milblogger responded to this assessment and claimed that the Russian command is extraordinarily unlikely to do so because of an "administrative guillotine" in the Russian military bureaucracy that prevents such learning and innovation, as well as the command's larger cultural proclivity to cover up mistakes instead of addressing them.^[12]

The ire expressed by Russian milbloggers towards the Russian military apparatus represents a longstanding source of discontent for pro-war military commentators. Miroslava Reginskaya, the wife of imprisoned ultra-nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin, posted on March 5 an archival letter written by Girkin in 2018 wherein Girkin complained about the incompetence of Russian commanders causing the deaths of Russian soldiers and called for "Stalinist level repressions" against such commanders.^[13] Girkin emphasized that all echelons of the Russian command are filled with such "scum" that contribute to "thousands of large and small disasters, based on incompetence, stupid immense greed, and disregard for people." Girkin's 2018 critique about the inability and lack of willingness of the Russian command to address its mistakes, internalize lessons learned, and disseminate them across the Russian military remains a central component of Russian information space critiques against the Russian military machine nearly six years later in 2024.

Russian aircraft appear to be continuing to conduct a relatively high volume of glide bomb strikes in Ukraine despite Ukrainian officials' reports that Ukrainian forces have downed several bomber aircraft in recent weeks. *Forbes* reported on March 4 that Russian Su-34 aircraft, escorted by Su-35 aircraft, are conducting one hundred or more sorties per day to conduct glide bomb strikes on Ukrainian positions at a range of 25 miles (about 40 kilometers).^[14] The *New York Times* reported on March 5 that Russian tactics are shifting to intensify operations in the air domain and that Russian forces' "more aggressive" air support on the front lines has helped Russian forces to advance recently in eastern Ukraine.^[15] These reports suggest that the Russian Air Force is maintaining a high tempo of fixed-wing air missions in Ukraine and is possibly willing to tolerate risks to fixed-wing aircraft, likely because the Russian command may have decided that the positive effects generated by such air operations outweigh the costs associated with flying such missions. Russian forces used glide bomb strikes to tactical effect in their seizure of Avdiivka in mid-February and are likely attempting to replicate such effects to support ongoing offensive operations elsewhere on the front. ISW cannot independently verify Ukrainian reports of the shootdowns of several Su-34 aircraft in recent weeks.

Forbes also reported that Ukrainian forces are using French-provided AASM Hammer glide bombs after France started supplying Ukraine with 50 of these bombs per month in January 2024. [16] *Forbes* noted that Ukrainian forces previously conducted strikes with US-provided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) glide bombs, but the supply of these bombs has halted due to the recent lack of US aid provisions to Ukraine.

Russia and China are deepening their strategic space cooperation, including cooperation on satellite surveillance and space exploration. Russian space agency Roscosmos Head Yuri Borisov stated on March 5 that Russia and China are considering delivering and constructing a nuclear power plant on the moon in 2032-2035.^[17] Though Borisov's proposal to create a nuclear power plant on the moon is odd, Borisov's statement is indicative of warming relations and Chinese willingness to foster a

long-term strategic partnership with Russia to posture against and possibly threaten the West. The Russian government approved a Russian-Chinese cooperation agreement on space cooperation through 2027 in November 2023 that Roscosmos and the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA) initially signed in November 2022.[18] The agreement outlines three phases to develop and build the International Scientific Lunar Station and jointly explore the moon's surface. Roscosmos and CNSA also signed an agreement in September 2022 on the joint placement of Russian GLONASS and Chinese BeiDou satellite navigation system stations in six Russian and Chinese cities.[19] Russia is reportedly developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon, and a strategic space partnership with China suggests that Russia would be unlikely to use this or similar technology against China and that both states would mutually benefit from Russia's posturing against the West through space and satellite technology.[20]

The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for two senior Russian commanders for their responsibility in perpetrating Russian war crimes – the first time the ICC has charged Russian military commanders. The ICC issued arrest warrants on March 5 for Lieutenant General Sergei Kobylash, the commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces' Long-Range Aviation, and Admiral Viktor Sokolov, the former commander of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), for their role in the war crimes of directing attacks at civilian objects and causing excessive or incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects and the crime against humanity of inhumane acts under the Rome Statute between at least October 10, 2022, to at least March 9, 2023.[21] The ICC last issued arrest warrants for Russian officials' involvement in war crimes in Ukraine in March 2022 against Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[22]

Russian forces are reportedly operating a "black market" to sell Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), including to Russian paramilitary groups that may be conducting their own POW exchanges with Ukraine. British outlet *The Times*, citing Ukrainian Spokesperson for the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs Petro Yatsenko and a Ukrainian POW, reported on March 4 that Chechen paramilitary groups are buying Ukrainian POWs from other Russian military units on a black market for trafficking POWs.[23] The Chechen units are reportedly then using the Ukrainian POWs in exchange for Chechen POWs held by Ukrainian forces. *The Times* stated that Chechen units are likely turning to the black market because Chechen units are currently largely acting in policing or logistics roles in rear areas of Ukraine where there are fewer opportunities to capture Ukrainian POWs and exchange them for Chechen POWs. *The Times* stated that although there are no articles in the Geneva Convention that explicitly prohibit the POW trades, this practice is likely in violation of the clause that "no special agreement shall adversely affect the situation of prisoners of war." Reports of Chechen units apparently conducting their own POW exchanges with Ukraine suggest that some paramilitary units within the Russian military, like the Chechen Akhmat Spetsnaz units, are likely not included in wider, higher-level Russian-Ukrainian POW exchanges. Russian milbloggers have repeatedly criticized Chechen forces for their incompetence and lack of involvement in Ukraine, and Chechen forces have been relegated to rear areas or less active sectors of the front after participating in major Russian offensive operations in 2022.[24]

The director of the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service, Alexandru Musteata, stated on March 5 that the Kremlin has begun to conduct multi-year hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova and preventing its accession to the European Union (EU). Musteata stated that the Kremlin is conducting an "unprecedented level" of hybrid operations aimed at preventing Moldova from joining the EU and keeping Moldova in Russia's sphere of influence. [25] Musteata stated that the first stage of Russian hybrid operations began with attempts to compromise local elections in 2023 and that Russia intends to also interfere in Moldova's upcoming presidential election in late 2024 and parliamentary elections in the summer of 2025. Musteata stated that pro-Kremlin Moldovan politicians with ties to the Kremlin, either directly or through Russian and Moldovan organized crime groups, will try to promote pro-Russia policies in the Moldovan Parliament. Musteata warned that Russia plans to provoke protests and incite inter-ethnic conflict and economic and social crises in Moldova, including in the pro-Russian autonomous region of Gagauzia and the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Transnistria. Musteata stated that Moldovan authorities have already observed an increase in the use of social media platforms to spread anti-EU sentiment. ISW previously warned that the Kremlin could intensify hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and further polarizing Moldova ahead of Moldova-EU accession negotiations and the 2024 presidential election or a suite of other courses of action against Moldova that are not mutually exclusive with hybrid actions. [26]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine destroyed the Project 22160 *Sergei Kotov* large patrol ship of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) off the coast of the Kerch Strait on the night of March 4-5.

- Russian milbloggers responded to the sinking of the *Sergei Kotov* by decrying the Russian military command's lack of response to the incident and mounting a wider critique against the bureaucratic inertia of the Russian military apparatus.
- Russian aircraft appear to be continuing to conduct a relatively high volume of glide bomb strikes in Ukraine despite Ukrainian officials' reports that Ukrainian forces have downed several bomber aircraft in recent weeks.
- Russia and China are deepening their strategic space cooperation, including cooperation on satellite surveillance and space exploration.
- The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for two senior Russian commanders for their responsibility in perpetrating Russian war crimes – the first time the ICC has charged Russian military commanders.
- Russian forces are reportedly operating a “black market” to sell Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), including to Russian paramilitary groups that may be conducting their own POW exchanges with Ukraine.
- The director of the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service, Alexandru Musteata, stated on March 5 that the Kremlin has begun to conduct multi-year hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova and preventing its accession to the EU.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on March 5.
- Russian authorities are reportedly disbanding elements of the former Wagner Group that were supposed to join Rosgvardia or are currently in Belarus.
- Russian law enforcement is likely intensifying crackdowns against Crimean Tatars in occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 4, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, and George Barros

March 4, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on March 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev promoted Russia’s extensive territorial objectives that expand deep into Ukraine’s territory. Medvedev gave a lecture on March 4 called “Geographical and Strategic Borders” at the Russian World Youth Festival, a Kremlin-organized event that includes attendees from more than 100 foreign countries, during which he claimed that “Ukraine is, of course, Russia.”^[1] Russian forces currently occupy the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, but Medvedev defined all the territories on the left bank of the Dnipro River and many territories on the right bank of the Dnipro River as “integral” to Russia’s “strategic historical borders.”^[2] Russian forces currently do not occupy any territory in right-bank Ukraine. Medvedev spoke against the backdrop of a hypothetical English-language map of Eastern Europe that he originally posted on his Telegram channel in July 2022.^[3] The map depicts parts of western Ukraine under Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian control — furthering the recently reignited Kremlin narrative that eastern European states have “territorial disputes” in western Ukraine that is aimed at spoiling Ukraine’s relationships with its western neighbors.^[4] The map shows Ukraine existing as a rump state only within the borders of Kyiv Oblast and the rest of modern-day Ukraine as part of Russia — well beyond the areas that Russian forces currently occupy, and the four oblasts Russia has illegally annexed.^[5] The fact that Medvedev reused a map from 2022 underscores that the Kremlin’s maximalist territorial objectives have remained unchanged since the beginning months of the war.

Medvedev argued that the influence of sovereign great powers, like Russia, extends beyond their geographic borders, catering to a wider maximalist ideological interpretation of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir). Medvedev repeated Russian President Vladimir Putin’s previous statement that “Russia’s borders do not end anywhere.”^[6] Medvedev alleged that a state’s strategic borders, which he differentiated from a state’s geographical borders, directly depend on “how strong and sovereign” the state and its authorities are.^[7] Medvedev claimed that the more “powerful” a state is, the “further its strategic frontiers extend beyond its state borders” and the larger the state’s sphere of “economic, political, and socio-cultural influence.”^[8] Putin made similar remarks recently that suggested that he views weaker states that are unable to unilaterally impose their will upon others, such as Ukraine, as having a truncated sovereignty.^[9] Medvedev claimed on February 22 that Russia “probably” must seize and occupy Kyiv City, which he labelled an historically “Russian” city, at some point in the future.

[10] Medvedev's February 22 and March 4 statements suggest that the existence of a Ukrainian rump state in Kyiv Oblast — even after a hypothetical Russian-led negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine — may be temporary and subject to future Russian attacks.[11] Medvedev also did not specify to where Russia's "strategic" borders would extend should Russia's "geographic" borders expand as shown in the hypothetical map he presented. The map is notably a conservative depiction of possible Russian territorial claims, given Putin's recent geographic definition of Russkiy Mir encompassing the former Russian Empire, which includes parts of Poland, Romania, Finland, and Moldova.[12]

Medvedev indicated that Russia is more interested in subjugating Ukraine's people than taking its territory. Medvedev claimed that Russia's "enemies constantly insist that Russia's main goal is to seize Ukrainian lands" but, as the "riches" of Ukraine's lands, such as wheat, steel, gas, and coal are "almost absent," the main value that Russia seeks from its occupation of Ukraine is through controlling its people.[13] Medvedev also claimed that the concept of a sovereign Ukrainian state and the concept of a Ukrainian national identity that is not Russian must "disappear forever." [14] ISW continues to document how Russian authorities are repeatedly engaging in large-scale and deliberate ethnic cleansing campaigns and systematically working to eliminate Ukrainian language, culture, history, and ethnicity in areas of Ukraine that Russia occupies.[15]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unknown actors detonated explosives and severely damaged a Russian railway bridge over the Chapaevka River near Chapaevsk, Samara Oblast on March 4. The GUR reported that Russia uses the railway to transport military cargo, particularly ammunition produced at a joint-stock company in Chapaevsk. [16] Kremlin newswire TASS reported that the explosion delayed five trains and that Russian authorities suspended traffic across the bridge, but later opened one railway track.[17] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) stated that it opened a criminal investigation into the explosion but did not speculate on the actor responsible for the explosion.[18] Some Russian milbloggers blamed Ukrainian forces for the explosion on the railway bridge.[19]

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly awarded a Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and Spetsnaz-affiliated Russian milblogger, likely as part of the Kremlin's longstanding efforts to co-opt milbloggers and make them loyal to the Kremlin. Russian milblogger channel *Rusich Army* (also known as *Archangel Spetsnaza*) claimed on March 4 that Putin awarded the channel's anonymous head the Russian Order of Merit of the Fatherland Second Class for his efforts in supporting the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[20] *Rusich* is the second Russian milblogger that has received a federal award for his activities as such (Putin awarded *Rybar* founder Mikhail Zvinchuk with the same award on November 16, 2023, likely after co-opting him). [21] The *Rusich* Telegram channel has over one million followers as of March 4 and is well connected among other prominent Russian ultranationalist voices, including the *Rybar* Telegram channel and Russian state TV propagandist Vladimir Solovyov.[22] ISW previously assessed that *Rybar*'s public award was designed to incentivize other Russian milbloggers to offer their loyalty to the Kremlin in exchange for awards and accolades.[23] *Rusich*'s award demonstrates to other milbloggers that the Kremlin is actively willing to publicly praise milbloggers who embrace Kremlin messaging — and suppress negative reporting about Russia's military performance in Ukraine — as the Kremlin continues to encourage self-censorship efforts in the Russian information space.

Kremlin-awarded milbloggers remain a minority in the Russian information space, however, and some milbloggers actively clash with state propagandists despite the Kremlin's consolidation of the information space. Pro-Wagner Group Russian milbloggers strongly criticized Russian state propagandist and Solovyov-affiliate Boris Yakemenko on March 4 for disparaging deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and for accusing Russian milbloggers of failing to contribute to the Kremlin's war effort in late February 2024.[24] Other Russian milbloggers, including deceased milblogger Andrei "Murz" Morozov, who lost faith in the Russian command due to its censorship efforts, regularly clashed with Solovyov and other information-space voices whom these milbloggers deemed as liars or otherwise unreliable.[25] The Kremlin will likely continue to tighten control over some milbloggers by coercing some critical milbloggers into self-censorship and awarding those who are loyal to the Kremlin as it seeks to consolidate control over the Russian information space.

The Russian government reportedly hid data on recipients of social support services in 2022, likely to obfuscate casualties suffered in the first year of the war in Ukraine or to cover up the government's inability to pay promised social support to vulnerable populations. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* investigated the Russian Unified State Information System for Social Security (EGISSO) and reported on March 4 that EGISSO has hidden the data on recipients of social benefits in 2022.[26] *Verstka* noted that that some of the hidden data contain information that could reveal the scale of losses in Ukraine, such as indicators about "widows of military personnel who died during military service" and "citizens who were wounded, concussed, injured, and mutilated while performing military duties." The EGISSO may have hidden this information to prevent social discontent arising

around reports of Russian casualties in Ukraine and decided only to share this information in 2023 and 2024 when the Kremlin line on Russian losses has consolidated somewhat to eliminate social shocks. The Kremlin may have also hidden 2022 social services data to cover its issues in providing promised social support measures to various individuals, particularly those impacted by the first year of the war.

The Kremlin is continuing efforts to ensure high voter turnout in the upcoming presidential election to present the guise of legitimacy and widespread popular support among Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic electorate. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on March 4 that the Russian presidential administration is concerned about meeting its intended 70 to 80 percent voter turnout mark in March 2024 because there is a widespread sentiment in Russia that the election has already been decided and that Russians have generally accepted that Putin has already won again.[27] *Meduza* stated that the Kremlin hopes to obtain this voter turnout by mobilizing the domestic electorate affiliated with the Russian government, particularly employees of the public sector, state corporations, and companies loyal to the Russian government, as well as their families. United Russia employees, for example, are required to bring at least 10 people (family members, friends, and acquaintances) to polling stations. *Meduza* noted that the requirements of these employees decrease proportionately to their proximity to the Kremlin; for example, employees of large corporations only have to bring two people to polling stations. *Meduza* reported that there is no enforcement mechanism for the requirements but that the Kremlin is trying to encourage voting using electronic voting methods and QR codes to make voting more convenient. ISW has long assessed that the Kremlin's election preparations are intended to cast the election as completely legitimate and widely popular with strong voter turnout.

Russian authorities continue to exploit the leaked recording of German military officers discussing the theoretical provision of Taurus missiles to Ukraine to deter Western military aid provisions to Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned the German Ambassador to Moscow on March 4 in response to the leaked recording.[28] German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated on March 3 that the leaked recording is part of the "information war" that that Russian President Vladimir Putin is waging against the West in order to undermine Western unity and resolve in supporting Ukraine.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev promoted Russia's extensive territorial objectives that expand deep into Ukraine's territory.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unknown actors detonated explosives and severely damaged a Russian railway bridge over the Chapaevka River near Chapaevsk, Samara Oblast on March 4.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly awarded a Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and Spetsnaz-affiliated Russian milblogger, likely as part of the Kremlin's longstanding efforts to co-opt milbloggers and make them loyal to the Kremlin.
- The Russian government reportedly hid data on recipients of social support services in 2022, likely to obfuscate casualties suffered in the first year of the war in Ukraine or to cover up the government's inability to pay promised social support to vulnerable populations.
- The Kremlin is continuing efforts to ensure high voter turnout in the upcoming presidential election to present the guise of legitimacy and widespread popular support among Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic electorate.
- Russian authorities continue to exploit the leaked recording of German military officers discussing the theoretical provision of Taurus missiles to Ukraine to deter Western military aid provisions to Ukraine.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- A Russian news aggregator claimed on March 4 that Russian forces replaced Storm-Z convict units with Storm-V units, a mechanism for distributing convicts into the regular Russian military as opposed to keeping them siloed within convict-only units, as was the case with Storm-Z formations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 3, 2024

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

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

March 3, 2024, 5:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on March 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

China and Turkey continue to pursue their own negotiations platforms for a settlement in Ukraine, which the Kremlin is exploiting to further its own information operations aimed at discouraging continued international support for Ukraine. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin and Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hiu met in Moscow on March 2 to discuss China's desire to facilitate peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. [1] Galuzin and Li noted that it is "impossible" to discuss a settlement in Ukraine without Russia's participation and without "taking into account [Russia's] interests in the security sphere." Galuzin and Li added that Western and Ukrainian "ultimatums" and "dialogue formats" only "harm the prospects for a settlement and cannot serve as [the settlement's] basis." Li is expected to visit Ukraine and unspecified EU states following his meetings in Russia. [2] Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated during the Antalya Diplomatic Forum on March 3 that Turkey hopes talks for a ceasefire in Ukraine will "start soon" and that Turkey believes that "both sides have reached the limits" of what they can achieve through military means. [3] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently announced that Turkey is prepared to provide another negotiations platform for Russia and Ukraine, which Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly rejected on March 1. [4]

Russian officials continue to falsely blame Ukraine and the West for the lack of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, despite numerous public Russian statements suggesting or explicitly stating that Russia is not interested in good faith peace negotiations with Ukraine. [5] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed during a panel at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum on March 2 that Ukraine lacks the "goodwill" to negotiate with Russia, insinuating that the lack of substantive negotiations is Ukraine's fault and not Russia's fault. [6] Lavrov claimed that people who misunderstand which party is at fault "lack understanding" about the reality of the situation. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya claimed during an interview with Russian TV channel Rossiya 24 on March 3 that Russia has never refused negotiations, but that Ukraine refuses to talk to Russia. [7] Nebenzya stated that there are currently no negotiations efforts with Ukraine directly or through intermediaries. **ISW continues to assess that any Russian statements suggesting that Russia is or always has been interested in peace negotiations are very likely efforts to feign interest to prompt preemptive Western concessions regarding Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and place the onus for negotiations on Ukraine and the West.** [8]

Recent relatively high Russian aviation losses appear to be prompting a significant decrease in Russian aviation activity in eastern Ukraine, although it is unclear how long this decrease in activity will last. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk stated on March 2 that Russian aviation activity completely stopped in eastern Ukraine around 19:00 local time following the Ukrainian downing of two Russian Su-34 aircraft. [9] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that the decrease in Russian aviation activity continued on March 3 and that Russian forces have continued not to fly A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft following the destruction of an A-50 aircraft on February 23. [10] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces have lost 15 aircraft since February 17, which is not negligible for the Russian military given that Russia likely has about 300 various Sukhoi fighter aircraft. [11] Previous Russian aircraft losses have prompted Russian forces to temporarily decrease aviation activity throughout Ukraine for significant periods of time, although it remains unclear how long this current period of temporary decreased Russian aviation activity will last. [12] Russian forces appeared to tolerate an increased rate of aviation losses in recent weeks in order to conduct glide bomb strikes in support of ongoing Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine, and the Russian command may decide in the future to assume the risk of continued aviation losses in pursuit of further tactical gains. [13]

Delays in Western security assistance will likely make Ukraine's energy infrastructure more vulnerable to Russian strikes. The *Financial Times* published an interview on March 3 with Maksym Timchenko, the executive of Ukraine's largest private energy company DTEK, in which Timchenko warned that delays in security assistance have weakened Ukraine's ability to counter Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. [14] Timchenko stated that Ukraine was initially prepared to protect energy infrastructure at the beginning of Winter 2023-2024 but that in recent weeks more Russian drones and missiles have reached their targets. [15] Timchenko stated that Russian forces have targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure 160 times in 2024 and that more than one million households and businesses have suffered from blackouts. [16] Russian forces launched several massive strike series against Ukraine in December 2023 and January and February 2024, likely forcing Ukrainian forces to expend a significant number of interceptors. [17] Ukrainian officials have stressed that Ukraine is facing a "critical shortage" of air defense missiles, and US officials have reportedly assessed that this shortage will become increasingly significant through spring and summer 2024.

without further security assistance to Ukraine.[18] Timchenko noted that Ukraine's economy depends on the stability of its energy grid, and major malfunctions in the energy grid would likely significantly disrupt ongoing Ukrainian efforts to expand its defense industrial base (DIB).[19] Limited effective air defense systems, dwindling air defense missile stocks, and continued Russian missile and drone strikes are likely forcing Ukraine to make difficult choices about air defense coverage.[20]

Russian forces operating around Avdiivka appear to be adapting to conducting offensive ground operations with trained and untrained personnel. The *Washington Post* published interviews on March 2 with seven Ukrainian servicemen from the 3rd Assault Brigade who discussed overwhelming Russian wave attacks in Avdiivka in the lead up to Russia's capture of the settlement in mid-February. Several interviewed Ukrainian servicemen described Russian forces involved in later direct assaults on Ukrainian positions as well-prepared. One Ukrainian soldier told the *Washington Post* that about three-quarters of Russian personnel his unit engaged with near Avdiivka appeared to have "decent" military training and the rest were "just confused."[21] One Ukrainian serviceman recalled that a group of well-trained Russian soldiers used rocket-propelled grenades to enter their positions, while another serviceman recalled that inexperienced Russian servicemen avoided attacking his position after he was able to shoot eight soldiers in one day. The serviceman stated that the Russian military sent inexperienced personnel who appeared to be 40 to 50 years old to attack in waves each morning, afternoon, and evening without protective vests or helmets near Avdiivka. Another Ukrainian serviceman observed that the Russian skill levels were not "really consistent" and that some servicemen had more advanced equipment than their counterparts who only had basic rifles. The reports about inconsistencies in the nature of Russian attacks and in the quality of attacking personnel indicates that Russian forces may be conducting layered ground attacks alternating between groups of trained forces and untrained forces, likely consisting of mobilized personnel or Russian "Storm" units composed of recruited convicts.[22] Commander of the 2nd Assault Battalion of the 3rd Brigade Mykola Zynkevych similarly recalled in an interview with a Ukrainian publication that Russian forces used 20 to 30 people to attack one position — a lot more than Russian forces used in similar attacks during the effort to seize Bakhmut.[23] Russian forces likely used poorly trained personnel to carry out mass daily attacks on Ukrainian positions and employed trained personnel with better equipment to assault specific positions after exhausting Ukrainian forces. Russian forces are likely attempting to adapt ground attacks to sustain a higher tempo of offensive operations near Avdiivka with personnel of varying levels of training and to prevent rapid attrition of better-trained units and formations.

German officials confirmed that the Kremlin is conducting an information operation aimed at deterring Western states, particularly Germany, from sending additional military aid to Ukraine. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated on March 3 that a leaked recording of German military officers discussing the theoretical provision of Taurus missiles to Ukraine is part of the "information war" that Russian President Vladimir Putin is waging against the West.[24] Pistorius stated that the Kremlin is conducting a "hybrid attack aimed at disinformation, division, [and] undermining [the West's] resolve [and] unity." Kremlin newswire TASS and veteran Russian propagandist and *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan amplified the audio recording on March 1, in which German military personnel discuss how much training and preparation the German military would need to provide should Germany decide to supply Ukraine with Taurus missiles, and should Ukraine decide to conduct a complicated long-range precision strike against Russian targets such as the Kerch Strait Bridge.[25] Kremlin officials and Russian milbloggers seized on the audio to accuse Germany of planning a strike on the Kerch Strait Bridge and to accuse NATO of escalatory actions. [26] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev accused Germany of "preparing for war with Russia" and claimed that any effort to present the audio as an innocent "game of rockets and tanks" is "false." [27] Russian officials have previously intensified their efforts to portray the provision of certain Western systems to Ukraine as significant escalations when those systems are subjects of debate in the West.[28]

The Russian Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK) announced on March 3 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) conducted a localized counter-terrorism operation in Karabulak, Republic of Ingushetia. Kremlin newswire TASS reported that Russian FSB officers conducted the counter-terrorism operation on four streets in Karabulak and killed six militants who were reportedly members of the Islamic State, were on the Russian federal wanted list, and had committed previous crimes.[29] Russian law enforcement has routinely attributed terrorist operations in the north Caucasus to the Islamic State when militants may be affiliated with the Islamic State or a different terrorist organization.[30] Russian milbloggers claimed that the militants wounded several Russian law enforcement personnel, while a Russian outlet reported that a man walking by was killed in a shootout. [31]

Key Takeaways:

- China and Turkey continue to pursue their own negotiations platforms for a settlement in Ukraine, which the Kremlin is exploiting to further its own information operations aimed at discouraging continued international support for Ukraine.
- Recent relatively high Russian aviation losses appear to be prompting a significant decrease in Russian aviation activity in eastern Ukraine, although it is unclear how long this decrease in activity will last.
- Delays in Western security assistance will likely make Ukraine's energy infrastructure more vulnerable to Russian strikes.
- Russian forces operating around Avdiivka appear to be adapting to conducting offensive ground operations with trained and untrained personnel.
- German officials confirmed that the Kremlin is conducting an information operation aimed at deterring Western states, particularly Germany, from sending additional military aid to Ukraine.
- The Russian Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAK) announced on March 3 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) conducted a localized counter-terrorism operation in Karabulak, Republic of Ingushetia.
- Positional engagements continued throughout the theater on March 3.
- Russian regional administrations continue efforts to expand the aperture of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 2, 2024

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

Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, and Kateryna Stepanenko

March 2, 2024, 6:05pm ET

Russian forces appear to be willing to risk continued aviation losses in pursuit of tactical gains in eastern Ukraine, likely along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on March 2 that Ukrainian forces destroyed one Su-34 aircraft that was conducting glide bomb strikes against Ukrainian positions in eastern Ukraine on the morning of March 1.[1] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk later stated that Ukrainian forces attempted to down two additional Russian Su-34 aircraft and one Su-35 and downed one of the Su-34 aircraft. [2] Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces have shot down 15 Russian aircraft since February 17.[3] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces have not deployed A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft over the Sea of Azov for the past six days following the destruction of an A-50 aircraft on February 23 and implied that the absence of A-50 aircraft forces Russian Su-34 and Su-35 aircraft to fly closer to their targets to conduct strikes. [4] Previous Russian aircraft losses have prompted Russian forces to temporarily decrease aviation activity throughout Ukraine, but the increased rate of Russian aviation losses in Ukraine in the past weeks has yet to prompt Russian forces to significantly decrease tactical aviation activity.[5] ISW assessed that Russian forces temporarily established limited and localized air superiority during the final days of the Russian seizure of Avdiivka.[6] Russian forces are likely attempting to reestablish this limited and localized air superiority in order to support tactical Russian advances in the Avdiivka direction and have decided that continued offensive operations with air support outweigh the risk of losing more aircraft. ISW continues to assess that the reported loss of 15 aircraft and possibly some highly trained pilots in about two weeks is not negligible for the Russian military given that Russia likely has about 300 various Sukhoi fighter aircraft.[7]

Transfers of North Korean weapons to Russia by sea apparently paused as of mid-February 2024. North Korea-focused outlet *NK Pro* reported on February 29, citing satellite imagery, that Russian ships involved in the maritime transport of North Korean ammunition and weaponry to Russia have not docked at North Korea's Rajin Port since February 12.[8] *NK Pro* reported that Russian ships have made at least 32 trips between the Rajin Port and Russia's Dunay and Vostochny ports, Primorsky Krai since August 2023. *NK Pro* reported that the Russian *Lady R* cargo ship transported an unspecified number of shipping containers, likely containing North Korean ammunition and weapons, between North Korea and Russia from January 30 to February 8 and that the *Maia-1* cargo ship arrived at Russia's Vostochny Port from North Korea on February 12. *NK Pro* reported that satellite imagery has not captured another large cargo ship traveling between the two piers or new deliveries to the Rajin Port since February 12 and suggested that the pause could be due to production issues in North Korea or other logistical issues. *NK Pro* noted that North Korea could also be transporting weapons to Russia via air or rail. ISW previously reported that Russia uses the Baikal-Amur Railway and the East Siberian Railway to facilitate cargo transfers from and to China and North Korea, both

countries that Russia is increasingly relying on for economic and military support respectively to sustain its war effort in Ukraine.[9] South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik stated on February 26 that North Korea has sent an estimated 6,700 shipping containers of ammunition to Russia in recent months.[10] Shin stated that these containers could carry over three million 152mm artillery shells or roughly 500,000 122mm shells.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly rejected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent offer to host a negotiation platform for Russia and Ukraine.[11] Lavrov attended the Antalya Diplomatic Forum in Turkey on March 1 and responded to a question about Erdogan's offer by stating that there are no current dialogue initiatives that consider Russian interests. [12] Lavrov, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and other Kremlin officials routinely feign openness to negotiations while promoting information operations that place the onus for negotiations on the West. [13] Lavrov's demand for a dialogue initiative that accounts for Russian interests is part of a longstanding effort to prompt preemptive Western concessions regarding Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.[14]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the Antalya Diplomatic Forum to promote Kremlin narratives about Moldova, likely to set conditions for potential Kremlin hybrid operations that aim to destabilize Moldova and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU). Lavrov answered a question at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum in Turkey on March 1 about the recent Congress of Deputies held in pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria, which requested that Russia provide Transnistria "defense/protection." [15] Lavrov claimed that the Moldovan government is "moving in Kyiv's footsteps," reiterating his previous comparisons of Moldovan policies towards Transnistria to Ukraine before 2014. [16] Lavrov continued to claim that Moldova is discriminating against Russian speakers, applying "economic pressure" to Transnistria, and blocking the 5+2 negotiating process for the Transnistria conflict — claims that Kremlin officials and mouthpieces have consistently repeated. [17] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin will use the recent Transnistrian congress as a springboard to intensify hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and further polarizing Moldova ahead of Moldova-EU accession negotiations and the Moldovan presidential election later in 2024. [18]

Senior Russian officials acknowledged Armenia's reduced participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), marking a notable shift in Russian official rhetoric that previously sought to ignore Armenian efforts to distance itself from the CSTO. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that "it is time for Armenia to decide on its status in the CSTO," likely in response to Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's February 22 statement that Armenia "essentially" froze its participation in the CSTO because the CSTO "failed to fulfill its obligations in the field of security" to Armenia, particularly in 2021 and 2022. [19] Pashinyan stated on February 28 that Armenia has not had a permanent representative to the CSTO in the past year and that Armenian officials and forces have not participated in CSTO events and exercises in "a long time." [20] ISW observed that Armenia effectively abstained from the CSTO by failing to send representatives to several consecutive CSTO events in mid-to-late-2023. [21] Pashinyan has increasingly publicly questioned Armenia's security relations with Russia since mid-2023. [22] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs previously responded to Pashinyan's statements about the CSTO by rejecting his claims and emphasizing Armenia's continued membership in the CSTO. [23] Lavrov's acknowledgment of Armenia's continued objection to its participation in the CSTO indicates that the Kremlin may be preparing a more concerted response to its deteriorating relations with Armenia.

The Kremlin appears to have largely permitted displays of anti-war sentiment in Moscow as Russians observed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's funeral on March 1. Russian opposition sources reported that up to 16,500 people attended Navalny's funeral at the Borisovsky Cemetery in Moscow, and footage shows that crowds of people queuing for the funeral chanted anti-war slogans and calls for demobilization. [24] Russian civil rights group OVD-info reported that Russian authorities detained 15 people in Moscow and 89 other people in 18 other Russian cities in connection with Navalny's funeral by the night of March 1 to 2. [25] Russians continued to lay flowers at Navalny's grave in Moscow and at memorials elsewhere on March 2, although relatively large displays of anti-war sentiment did not continue on March 2. [26] The *Moscow Times* reported on March 1 that the Kremlin tasked Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) officials with conducting an operation to "protect the constitutional order from threats" during Navalny's funeral. [27] The Kremlin likely did not order large crackdowns against displays of anti-war sentiment in order to avoid prompting wider outrage while also projecting confidence in public support for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war effort in Ukraine ahead of presidential elections on March 17.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces appear to be willing to risk continued aviation losses in pursuit of tactical gains in eastern Ukraine, likely along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Transfers of North Korean weapons to Russia by sea apparently paused as of mid-February 2024.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly rejected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent offer to host a negotiation platform for Russia and Ukraine.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the Antalya Diplomatic Forum to promote Kremlin narratives about Moldova, likely to set conditions for potential Kremlin hybrid operations that aim to destabilize Moldova and prevent Moldova's accession to the European Union (EU).
- Senior Russian officials acknowledged Armenia's reduced participation in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), marking a notable shift in Russian official rhetoric that previously sought to ignore Armenian efforts to distance itself from the CSTO.
- The Kremlin appears to have largely permitted displays of anti-war sentiment in Moscow as Russians observed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's funeral on March 1.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Avdiivka, and Krynyk on March 2.
- Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov inspected a Russian shipbuilding facility and the construction site of a new military hospital in the Republic of Dagestan during a working trip to Russia's Southern Military District on March 2.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 1, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Riley Bailey, and Karolina Hird

March 1, 2024, 6:15pm ET

Reported details of Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations that occurred in Istanbul in April 2022 indicate that Russia has consistently envisioned a settlement for its illegal invasion of Ukraine wherein Ukraine would be unable to defend itself from a future Russian attack – an objective Russia continues to pursue under calls for Ukraine's "demilitarization." The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on March 1 that documents it obtained of the draft treaty from the 2022 Ukrainian-Russian peace negotiations indicate that both sides initially agreed that Ukraine would be a "permanently neutral state that doesn't participate in military blocs."^[1] The draft treaty also reportedly banned Ukraine from receiving any foreign weapons or hosting any foreign military personnel. The WSJ reported that Russia pushed for the Ukrainian military to be limited to 85,000 soldiers, 342 tanks, and 519 artillery systems, whereas Ukraine wanted the caps to be 250,000 soldiers, 800 tanks, and 1,900 artillery systems. Russia also reportedly demanded that Ukrainian missiles be limited to a range of 40 kilometers, a range that would allow Russian forces to deploy critical systems and materiel close to Ukraine without fear of strikes. The Kremlin has repeatedly called for the "demilitarization" of Ukraine since its full-scale invasion but has not previously provided details on what that would specifically entail.^[2] The Ukrainian military in 2014 – before Russia's first invasion – consisted of about 130,000 personnel, and the documents from 2022 indicate that Russia intended to drastically reduce Ukraine's military to such a level that Ukraine could no longer defend itself.^[3] Russian President Vladimir Putin has most recently emphasized the idea of a "demilitarized" or "sanitary" zone in Ukraine that would place Russian territory – including occupied Ukraine – out of range of both Ukrainian frontline artillery systems and Western-provided long-range systems.^[4] Putin likely aims for the "demilitarization" of Ukraine to allow him to enforce his will upon Ukraine without any substantial resistance.

Reported details of the draft treaty suggest that Russia intended to use the treaty to set conditions for future attacks against Ukraine while also prompting the West to make concessions on Ukraine's sovereignty. The WSJ reported that the United States, United Kingdom, China, France, and Russia were to be guarantors of the treaty.^[5] Russia also reportedly wanted to include Belarus as a guarantor. The guarantor states were supposed to "terminate international treaties and agreements incompatible with the permanent neutrality of Ukraine," including military aid agreements. The WSJ did not specify if other non-guarantor states would have to terminate their agreements with Ukraine as well, although this is likely considering that the treaty would ban Ukraine from having foreign-supplied weapons. It is unclear what Russia considers to be "incompatible" with a permanently "neutral" Ukraine, although the Kremlin most certainly would have broadly interpreted this as forbidding Ukraine from joining NATO, which is stipulated by Ukraine's constitution, thereby likely demanding that Ukraine amend its constitution.^[6] Russia reportedly wanted all guarantors to agree on a response should Ukraine be subject to any attacks, but the WSJ stated that the guarantor states

were unlikely to agree on a response should Russia attack Ukraine again – likely due to the guarantor states' diverging interests. This stipulation likely intended to allow Russia to influence, predict, and prepare for the international response to any possible future Russian attacks on Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that any ceasefire would benefit Russia, giving it time to reconstitute and regroup for future offensive operations.[7]

Russia's territorial objectives beyond the areas it occupied in 2022 likely prevented Russia and Ukraine from agreeing on the status of Russian-occupied areas in Ukraine in April 2022.

The *WSJ* reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky were to hold "face-to-face talks" to discuss areas of eastern Ukraine that Russian forces have occupied since 2014, but that this meeting never took place.[8] The need for Putin and Zelensky to discuss the matter independently and separately suggests that the Russian and Ukrainian negotiating delegations were unable to reach an agreement on the status of the Russian-occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, likely due to Russia's wider expansionist territorial desires, as Kremlin officials have repeatedly indicated.[9] The *WSJ* did not report on any clauses in the treaty concerning Russian-occupied territory outside of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Russian authorities suggested that the Kremlin has likely adopted a more extensive set of goals regarding Ukraine over the course of Russia's war against Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov responded to the leaked April 2022 draft agreement between Russia and Ukraine, claiming that the draft agreement is "no longer relevant" and that "conditions have changed".[10] Peskov's statements are likely part of a current trend of increased Russian confidence in the Russian military's capabilities and the attainability of Putin's maximalist war objectives following the recent seizure of Avdiivka and prolonged US debates about military aid to Ukraine.[11] ISW continues to assess that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains his maximalist objectives in Ukraine, which are tantamount to complete Ukrainian and Western capitulation, and that Russia has no interest in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine.[12]

Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared to disparage Russian elites in his February 29 Federal Assembly speech, more closely aligning himself with the veteran and military community and drawing praise from ultranationalist milbloggers. Putin attempted to distance himself from the Russian elite by claiming that the individuals who "lined their pockets due to economic processes in the 1990s" are not the elite, but that the "real elite" are workers and military servicemen who proved their loyalty to Russia.[13] Putin used this subverted definition of elites to praise the Russian military and align himself more strongly with the veteran and military community, stating that military veterans should hold leading positions in Russian society, business, and government and "should be entrusted with Russia's future" and implying that veterans should take on roles traditionally occupied by Russian elites. Several Russian milbloggers supported Putin's claim that Russian military veterans should hold prominent and influential roles in Russian society and framed Putin's statements as the start of a campaign to change the "elites" of Russia.[14] Putin also proposed expanding and creating multiple economic support measures including "more fairly distributing the tax burden toward those with higher personal and corporate incomes".[15] One Russian milblogger explicitly expressed support for economic reforms that would replace "oligarch capitalism" with "equal opportunities and minimal stratification in living standards".[16] Putin's criticism of Russian elites and economic proposals that would, in theory, reduce their influence may intensify an existing rhetorical line among pro-war milbloggers criticizing Russian elites.[17]

Kremlin officials met with leaders of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia and emphasized Russia's support for Gagauzia against perceived Moldovan "oppression" on March 1. Russian Federation Council Chairperson Valentina Matviyenko met with Gagauzian Governor Yevgenia Gutsul and People's Assembly Chairperson Dmitry Konstantinov in Moscow and criticized Moldovan authorities for "Russophobic" policies that are supposedly antithetical to Moldova's national interests.[18] Matviyenko added that the Russian Federation Council is prepared to provide "all possible assistance" in expanding Russian-Gagauzian relations.[19] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) announced that 10 Russian federal subjects signed a range of bilateral agreements emphasizing economic and humanitarian ties with Gagauzia.[20] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger who has previously focused on discontent in Gagauzia and pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria stated that Gutsul and Konstantinov are "following the example of Transnistria" by asking for Russia's support in the face of Moldovan "oppression".[21] The Transnistrian Congress of Deputies recently met and adopted a series of decisions that likely aim to provide the Kremlin with justifications for a wide range of possible escalatory actions against Moldova that the Kremlin can either pursue immediately or over the long term.[22] ISW has observed indications that the Kremlin hopes to use pro-Russian actors in Gagauzia as another basis to justify future intervention and hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and polarizing Moldova to prevent or slow Moldova's integration in the European Union (EU).[23]

Ukraine and the Netherlands signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement on March 1.

[24] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the Netherlands announced that it would provide 2 billion euros (about \$2.17 billion) in military aid to Ukraine in 2024 and additional security assistance over the next 10 years.[25] Zelensky stated that the bilateral security agreement prioritizes assistance in air defense and artillery systems and naval and long-range weapons.[26] The Dutch Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that it will provide Ukraine with 14 rigid-hull inflatable boats, eight paramilitary river patrol boats, and CB90-class fast assault craft.[27] The Dutch MoD also announced that it is increasing its contribution to the Czech initiative to provide artillery shells to Ukraine from 100 million euros (about \$108 million) to 250 million euros (about \$271 million).[28]

Key Takeaways:

- Reported details of Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations that occurred in Istanbul in April 2022 indicate that Russia has consistently envisioned a settlement for its illegal invasion of Ukraine wherein Ukraine would be unable to defend itself from a future Russian attack – an objective Russia continues to pursue under calls for Ukraine's "demilitarization."
- Reported details of the draft treaty suggest that Russia intended to use the treaty to set conditions for future attacks against Ukraine while also prompting the West to make concessions on Ukraine's sovereignty.
- Russian authorities suggested that the Kremlin has likely adopted a more extensive set of goals regarding Ukraine over the course of Russia's war against Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared to disparage Russian elites in his February 29 Federal Assembly speech, more closely aligning himself with the veteran and military community and drawing praise from ultranationalist milbloggers.
- Kremlin officials met with leaders of the pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia and emphasized Russia's support for Gagauzia against perceived Moldovan "oppression" on March 1.
- Ukraine and the Netherlands signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement on March 1.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City on March 1.
- Russian authorities will likely use annual combat training for Russian reservists to support crypto-mobilization efforts.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 29, 2024

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

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

February 29, 2024, 8:15pm ET

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

Ukrainian officials are reportedly concerned about the possibility of significant Russian territorial gains in summer 2024 in the event of continued delays in Western security assistance. Bloomberg reported that internal Ukrainian assessments state that Russian advances along the frontline could gain significant momentum by summer 2024 unless Ukraine's partners increase provisions of artillery ammunition.[1] Bloomberg reported that sources close to Ukrainian leadership stated that Ukraine expects Russian forces to decide between continuing their current focus on gradual tactical advances and preparing for a larger breakthrough attempt in summer 2024 depending on the results of current Russian offensive operations.[2] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 25 that Russian forces are preparing for a new offensive effort that will start in late May or summer 2024.[3] Russian forces are currently trying to exploit tactical opportunities offered by the Russian seizure of Avdiivka and are attempting to push as far as possible in the area before Ukrainian forces establish harder-to-penetrate defensive lines.[4] Russian forces may determine to adjust future offensive operations based on the level of success they have in attacking subsequent Ukrainian defensive lines west and northwest of Avdiivka, and Ukrainian defenses in the Avdiivka area may impact Russian perceptions of the wider state of Ukraine's defense along the frontline. Russian forces are also conducting a multi-axis offensive operation along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line but have not made any recent significant gains in the area, and the relative success or failure of that effort could similarly influence how the Russian military command views Russian prospects for operationally significant advances.[5] The Russian ability to make operationally significant advances is still largely dependent on the level of Western support for Ukraine, however, as

well-provisioned Ukrainian forces have proven that they can prevent Russian forces from making even marginal gains during large-scale Russian offensive efforts.[6]

Bloomberg also reported that Ukrainian intelligence assessments stated that Russian Vladimir Putin has not given up his original goal of seizing major Ukrainian cities such as Kyiv and Odesa.[7] Putin has recently falsely claimed that Odesa is a “Russian city” and other Russian officials have also applied that expression to Dnipro, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv cities.[8] The Kremlin has resumed expansionist rhetoric in recent months that explicitly calls for the occupation and annexation of additional Ukrainian territory.[9] The Kremlin has intentionally framed this rhetoric to avoid setting limits for further Russian expansion in Ukraine, and this rhetoric may aim to allow Putin to introduce new objectives for conquest in Ukraine when he sees fit.[10]

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his February 29 address to the Federal Assembly to attempt to convince the Russian public that his next term as president will be defined by Russian military success in Ukraine but not at the expense of stagnating or decreased social and economic welfare. Putin stated that Russian combat capabilities have increased “many times over” and that Russian forces “firmly hold the initiative, confidently advance in a number of operational areas” and capture “more territory.”[11] Putin’s characterization of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine is notably more confident than his December 14, 2023, Direct Line statement that Russian forces were in “the active stage of action.”[12] Putin’s willingness to publicly portray his apparent confidence in Russian offensive operations likely stems from Russia’s recent seizure of Avdiivka and prolonged US debates about military aid to Ukraine. Putin spent most of the speech not focusing on the war but instead detailing the specifics of economic policies and social programs he plans to launch.[13] Russia has increased defense spending to record levels in 2024, and Putin is likely stressing his plans for economic and social policies to assuage persisting domestic concerns about the ramifications of Putin’s war in Ukraine for ordinary Russians.[14] Putin attempted to further address these concerns by claiming that the West is attempting to draw Russia into an arms race as the West successfully did with the Soviet Union in the 1980s to the detriment of the Soviet Union’s economy. Putin emphasized, however, that the Russian government is taking measures to develop the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) while increasing social and economic spending, likely in an effort to demonstrate to the Russian public that Russia has measures in place to avoid ballooned defense spending reminiscent of the Soviet Union before its collapse. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that Putin’s Federal Assembly speech was largely his election program for the March 2024 presidential elections.[15] Putin’s apparent growing confidence in discussing the war publicly has not generated any notable inflections in his overall framing of the war in Ukraine, and Putin continues to issue the same justifications and maximalist goals for his full-scale invasion of Ukraine as he has offered all along.

Putin used tired rhetoric about negotiations and nuclear saber rattling during his Federal Assembly speech, likely to seize on Western attention to the speech to promote ongoing Kremlin information operations. Putin reiterated his feigned readiness for dialogue with the United States on issues of “strategic stability” and continued to place the onus for a lack of negotiations on the United States.[16] Putin asserted that if the United States wants to discuss important issues of security, then it is necessary to consider Russia’s national interests.[17] Putin continues to pursue maximalist objectives in Ukraine that amount to full Ukrainian capitulation and aims to weaken and dismantle NATO, objectives that he most certainly views as integral parts of Russian national interests.[18] The Kremlin is currently conducting an information operation feigning interest in negotiations to prompt preemptive Western concessions regarding Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.[19] Putin also emphasized that Russia possesses weapons that can strike Western countries and claimed that Western escalation is threatening a possible nuclear conflict that could destroy civilization.[20] Putin and Russian officials frequently invoke nuclear threats to instill fear in Western audiences and weaken Western support for Ukraine.[21] The Kremlin has not engaged in any significant escalations in response to the provision of new Western systems to Ukraine, and ISW continues to assess that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine and beyond is highly unlikely.[22]

Putin emphasized the Kremlin’s domestic focus on 2024 as the “Year of the Family” to address Russia’s ongoing demographic crisis during his Federal Assembly address. Putin claimed that the main purpose of a family is to have children, a more overt acknowledgement of Russia’s ongoing demographic crisis than he made in his December 31, 2023, New Year’s address.[23] Putin stated on February 29 that all levels of Russian government, civil society, and religious leaders should contribute to the societal, economic, cultural, and educational efforts to promote Russian birth rates. Putin announced a new Russian government project called “Family” to provide social support to families with children and increase the Russian birth rate. The initiatives include expanding and increasing existing social benefits, including providing maternity capital payments to mothers, giving preferential mortgage rates to families with children, and giving tax deductions to children to families with more than one child. The Kremlin’s focus on 2024 as the “Year of the Family” is likely meant to provide an ideological

basis for efforts aimed at increasing Russian birth rates and remedying Russian demographic issues through appeals to Russian “traditional values.” ISW continues to assess that Russia’s war in Ukraine has impacted some aspects of Russian demographics, although Russia has been experiencing a demographic crisis for decades.[24]

Putin did not respond to the February 28 request from the Congress of Deputies from pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria, but this lack of response still affords the Kremlin several possible courses of action (COA) at a later time. The Transnistrian Congress of Deputies adopted seven decisions that provide the Kremlin with justifications for a large range of possible escalatory actions against Moldova that the Kremlin can choose to pursue in the near or long term, and many of these possible COAs are not mutually exclusive.[25] Putin’s lack of response during his February 29 address is either consistent with or does not rule out all five possible Russian COAs that ISW outlined in its February 28 assessment, including the assessed most likely COA (MLCOA) of intensifying hybrid operations to destabilize Moldova and the assessed most dangerous COA (MDCOA) of formally annexing Transnistria in the future to justify military action against Moldova in the long term.[26]

Ukrainian forces downed three more Su-34 fighter aircraft in eastern Ukraine on February 28 and 29. Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk reported on February 29 that Ukrainian forces destroyed two Su-34 aircraft on the night of February 28 to 29 and another Su-34 on the morning of February 29 in the Mariupol and Avdiivka directions.[27] Pavlyuk noted that the aircraft were conducting glide bomb strikes against Ukrainian infantry in eastern Ukraine when Ukrainian forces downed the aircraft.[28] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces have deployed an unspecified large number of aircraft to conduct glide bomb strikes in the Avdiivka direction.[29] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Ukrainian forces have downed 13 Russian aircraft since February 17.[30] The International Institute for Strategic Studies previously estimated that Russia has roughly 300 various Sukhoi fighter aircraft, suggesting that the impact of losing 13 aircraft in almost as many days, and possibly some of their highly trained pilots, is not negligible for the Russian military.[31] Ukrainian forces have also downed two A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft in 2024 so far.[32]

The Kremlin continues to assert its self-arrogated right to enforce Russian federal law on citizens of NATO member and former Soviet states over actions taken within the territory of their own countries. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on February 28 that a Russian court convicted a Latvian citizen in absentia for fighting as a volunteer with the Ukrainian military against Russia and for desecrating a Soviet memorial in Latvia.[33] The Investigative Committee claimed that the Latvian citizen acted out of “political and ideological hatred of Russia,” and the court sentenced the man to 10 years in prison in absentia.[34] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) previously placed several dozen government officials from NATO countries on Russia’s wanted list because of alleged violations of Russian federal law committed outside the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation.[35] Russia, however, does not have the legal authority to prosecute foreign citizens for allegedly violating Russian laws in foreign states. ISW previously assessed that Russian criminal accusations against European officials and citizens may be part of an ongoing Russian effort to set informational conditions justifying possible Russian escalations against NATO states in the future.[36]

Russian officials and Kremlin mouthpieces also accused Latvian authorities of “intimidating” Russian citizens voting in the Russian presidential election in Latvia on February 29. Latvian Minister of Justice Inese Libina-Egnere stated on February 27 that Latvian authorities cannot prevent Russian citizens from voting at the Russian embassy, but noted that Latvia’s Criminal Code considers the “justification of war” (in this case Russia’s war in Ukraine) to be criminally liable.[37] Russian sources seized on Libina-Egnere’s statements on February 29 and falsely claimed that Latvian authorities may criminally prosecute Russian citizens for voting in the presidential election.[38]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a threat to Armenian security as Russian officials refused to acknowledge Armenia’s reduced participation in the CSTO. Pashinyan stated on February 28 that the CSTO is creating security problems instead of fulfilling its obligations to Armenia and that the CSTO’s “lack of an answer” regarding its responsibilities to Armenia “creates a threat” to Armenia’s “security and territorial integrity.”[39] Pashinyan previously stated that Armenia has “essentially” frozen its participation in the CSTO because the organization “failed to fulfill its obligations in the field of security” to Armenia, particularly in 2021 and 2022.[40] Pashinyan noted on February 28 that Armenia has not had a permanent representative to the CSTO in the past year and that Armenian officials and forces have not participated in CSTO events and exercises in “a long time.”[41] ISW previously observed that Armenia appeared to be effectively abstaining from participation in the CSTO after Pashinyan and other Armenian representatives did not attend several consecutive CSTO events in mid to late 2023.[42] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated

on February 28 that Russia “does not accept” Armenia’s non-compliance with the CSTO agreement.
[43]

The Kremlin has reportedly established high-level positions in all federal bodies to promote patriotism and history within each body, likely aimed at strengthening informational and ideological control over federal employees. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on February 29 that leaked Russian government documents indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree in February 2023 establishing a “deputy head of social and political work” in each Russian federal body and that the presidential administration must approve each appointment for the position.[44] *Meduza* reported that the Russian Environmental Management Agency has published guidelines for conducting socio-political work including strengthening Russian patriotism and civic identity and ensuring understanding and support for Russia’s domestic and international policies. [45] The Russian Environmental Management Agency identified methods to educate federal employees about the military and political situations both in Russia and in the world as well as Russian history, including the development stages of Russian international policy, the history of wars and military conflicts, and the formation of Russian statehood. *Meduza* reported that the leaked documents indicate that these measures are considered necessary to counter the “deliberately distorted ideological intervention” from media allegedly funded by unfriendly states and that the Russian Ministry of Education has outlined similar proposals to tighten control over Russian universities. [46] These measures are likely part of a longstanding Kremlin effort to consolidate control over the broader Russian informational and cultural sphere beginning with employees in federal governmental bodies. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported in April 2022 that the Kremlin began considering the idea of creating these deputy heads of information and political work sometime in 2021 and began moving forward on the effort in 2022 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted the Kremlin to prioritize the effort.[47]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials are reportedly concerned about the possibility of significant Russian territorial gains in Summer 2024 in the event of continued delays in Western security assistance.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin used his February 29 address to the Federal Assembly to attempt to convince the Russian public that his next term as president will be defined by Russian military success in Ukraine but not at the expense of stagnating or decreased social and economic welfare.
- Putin used tired rhetoric about negotiations and nuclear saber rattling during his Federal Assembly speech likely to seize on Western attention to the speech to promote ongoing Kremlin information operations.
- Putin emphasized the Kremlin’s domestic focus on 2024 as the “Year of the Family” to address Russia’s ongoing demographic crisis during his Federal Assembly address.
- Putin did not respond to the February 28 request from the Congress of Deputies from pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria, but this lack of response still affords the Kremlin several possible courses of action (COA) at a later time.
- Ukrainian forces downed three more Su-34 fighter aircraft in eastern Ukraine on February 28 and 29.
- The Kremlin continues to assert its self-arrogated right to enforce Russian federal law on citizens of NATO member and former Soviet states over actions taken within the territory of their own countries.
- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a threat to Armenian security as Russian officials refused to acknowledge Armenia’s reduced participation in the CSTO.
- The Kremlin has reportedly established high-level positions in all federal bodies to promote patriotism and history within each body, likely aimed at strengthening informational and ideological control over federal employees.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the frontline on February 29.
- Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec Head Sergei Chemezov stated on February 29 that Rostec plans to produce A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft on an unspecified schedule because Russian forces require more A-50 aircraft.
- Occupation officials continue to support Kremlin efforts to gain further control over religious groups in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 28, 2024

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

February 28, 2024, 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 1:30pm ET on February 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria held the Seventh Congress of Transnistrian Deputies on February 28 and adopted a series of decisions that likely aim to provide the Kremlin with justifications for a wide range of possible escalatory actions against Moldova — actions the Kremlin can pursue both immediately and over the long-term.^[1] The Congress of Transnistrian Deputies adopted seven decisions, including a request to the Russian State Duma and Federation Council for Russian “defense” of Transnistria in response to alleged increasing pressures from Moldova. Transnistrian officials specifically used “zashchita” (защита), a word that means both “defense” and “protection” in their request, likely to set conditions for the Kremlin to interpret “defense” in a military sense if it so chooses. Transnistrian officials invoked the obligations of the Russian “peacekeeping mission” in Transnistria and the roughly 220,000 Russian citizens they claim are residing in Transnistria in their request for Russian “defense.” Transnistrian officials likely aim for these appeals to serve as the basis for any potential Russian intervention in Transnistria and Moldova in the near or long term as they cohere with Russian justifications for previous interventions, most notably its invasions of Ukraine.^[2] The Kremlin has increasingly promoted rhetoric about Russia’s “compatriots abroad,” which include ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, to further justify its war in Ukraine and to likely set informational conditions for provocations in countries where Russian “compatriots” live.^[3] The Kremlin has also used the idea of protecting its “compatriots abroad” to justify the fact that Russian troops have occupied Transnistria since 1992, and Transnistrian officials likely made appeals concerning Transnistrian residents with Russian citizenship to set further informational conditions for the Kremlin to escalate Russian activities in Transnistria and Moldova.^[4] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated on February 14 that Russia is “concerned” about Russian citizens in Transnistria and “will not allow them to become victims of another Western adventure.”^[5]

The Congress of Transnistrian Deputies’ also specifically called for the United Nations (UN) and European Parliament to stop alleged Moldovan violations of Transnistrian rights and freedoms, for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to influence Moldova into an “adequate dialogue,” for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to prevent escalation on the Dniester River, and for the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) to ensure the rights of Transnistrian residents.^[6] Transnistrian officials also called on participants to return to the 5+2 negotiation process for the Transnistrian conflict, which includes Russia, Ukraine, Transnistria, Moldova, and the OSCE as mediators and the European Union (EU) and US as observers. These appeals to multilateral organizations and negotiating formats aim to legitimize Transnistria as a sovereign entity separate from Moldova without pressing claims for its independence while also providing the Kremlin with prepared justifications for escalation and intervention in the name of fulfilling both Russia’s and others’ international obligations. The Congress of Transnistrian Deputies’ appeal to the Russian-led CIS notably could be interpreted as permitting the CIS to “prevent escalation” both in Moldova and Transnistria as it does not specify a side of the Dniester River. The appeals’ focus on protecting Transnistrian rights and freedoms likely aims to set conditions for the Kremlin to apply a similar narrative about preventing “discrimination” and “genocide” against “Russians” in Moldova as the Kremlin did ahead of and during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[7]

Kremlin officials and mouthpieces continue to set information conditions to use Transnistria and pro-Russian Moldovan autonomous region Gagauzia to destabilize Moldova but have yet to indicate how and to what specific end they intend to leverage such information conditions.^[8] These Transnistrian appeals notably do not call on Russian forces to take specific actions and are likely broadly scoped to give the Kremlin the widest set of possible courses of action (COA) for escalations and interventions aimed at destabilizing Moldova. These Transnistrian appeals are also not time delimited and allow the Kremlin to address various appeals whenever it deems necessary or expedient. The Transnistrian

appeals set long-term justifications for the Kremlin to pursue escalations and interventions against Moldova regardless of the outcome of its war in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has yet to signal an immediate route for escalation following the Congress of Transnistrian Deputies, although Russian President Vladimir Putin may respond to the Transnistrian requests during his speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 29.

[9] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reported on February 28 in response to the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies' appeal that protecting the interests of Transnistrian residents and Russia's "compatriots" is one of Russia's priorities and promised to "carefully consider" the Transnistrian requests.[10] Russian State Duma Committee on the CIS Affairs First Deputy Chairperson Konstantin Zatulin stated that the Duma will consider Transnistria's proposals in consultation with Putin and the Russian MFA as soon as the proposals arrive.[11] Russian State Duma Committee on International Affairs First Deputy Chairperson Alexei Chepa stated that Transnistrian appeals to Russia imply economic assistance and that there is currently no talk of Russia providing Transnistria military assistance.[12] Russia would be challenged to get concrete military assistance to Transnistria in any event because it is landlocked and bordered by Ukraine on one side and Moldova (and beyond that, Romania) on the other. Chepa added that the Transnistrian requests will contribute to "faster decision-making" on Russia's part.[13] Russian Federation Council Committee on International Affairs First Deputy Chairperson Vladimir Dzhabarov stated that the Federation Council will consider providing humanitarian support to Transnistria but that the "political question" (likely referring to the political status of Transnistria) is "out of the equation for now." [14]

The Kremlin can use the outcomes of the Congress of Transnistrian Deputies to justify a range of possible COAs that are not mutually exclusive. The most likely course of action (MLCOA) is that the Kremlin will use the Congress as a springboard to intensify hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and further polarizing Moldova ahead of Moldova-European Union (EU) accession negotiations and the upcoming Moldovan presidential election in June and November 2024, respectively. The most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) is that the Kremlin may decide to formally annex Transnistria in the future in order to justify military intervention against Moldova in the long-term.

- **COA 1: The Kremlin may decide to not take any action immediately following the February 28 congress and allow the status quo between Transnistria and Moldova to continue.** If Putin envisions a particular time frame for the development of Russian intervention in Moldova, and the Transnistrian authorities are attempting to expedite this timeframe with their requests, then Putin may decide that he is unwilling to exploit Transnistrian requests and refuse to take action or even acknowledge the requests in the immediate future. Putin may decide to engage with the requests at a later date, however.
- **COA 2: The Kremlin may place increased diplomatic pressure on Moldova to revoke its recent Customs Code that went into effect on January 1, 2024.** Transnistrian officials have consistently identified Moldova's new customs regulations as the crux of their recent complaints against Moldovan authorities and continue to identify the new customs regulations as part of Moldova's "economic war" against Transnistria as a key issue, including during the February 28 congress.[15] The Kremlin may also choose to provide additional economic support to Transnistria through humanitarian aid, financial aid, or new trade agreements as part of its efforts to further pressure Moldova's economy and force Moldova to capitulate to Transnistrian demands to revoke Moldova's new Customs Code. Moldova's changes to its Customs Code are essential in aligning Moldova with EU regulations as part of Moldova's path towards EU membership.[16]
- **COA 3: The Kremlin may also attempt to send additional military assistance to Transnistrian forces in the future, although it is currently unclear how the Kremlin would hope to transport military equipment or personnel to Transnistria.** If the Kremlin chooses to interpret "defense" in a military sense, Russia could send military assistance in the form of additional Russian "peacekeepers" or military equipment and weapons to Transnistria. It is unclear how Russia would transport this material to Transnistria given that Russia would likely have to fly the materiel through Ukrainian or Romanian (NATO) airspace or attempt a large-scale ground operation through Odesa Oblast, which Russian forces are highly unlikely to conduct as it would draw personnel away from their ongoing offensive efforts in eastern Ukraine and likely fail in any event.
- **MLCOA: The Kremlin may intensify hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing and further polarizing Moldovan politics and society ahead of June 2024 European Union (EU)-Moldova accession negotiations and the November 2024 Moldovan presidential election in order to undermine and delay Moldova's future accession to the EU.** ISW previously assessed that the EU's December 14, 2023 announcement on launching membership talks with Moldova likely triggered the Kremlin's preparations for a possible hybrid operation against Moldova and that the Kremlin will likely intensify information operations accusing the West of

waging an anti-Russian hybrid war against Moldova and/or accusing Moldova of preparing to attack civilians in Transnistria.[17]

- **MDCOA: The Kremlin may decide to formally annex Transnistria in the future in order to justify military intervention against Moldova in the long-term.** The Kremlin previously used similar justifications, particularly the protection of Russian citizens and “compatriots” abroad, to justify military intervention against Georgia and Ukraine.[18] ISW has not observed any clear indications of Russian military preparations to intervene in Transnistria or Moldova.[19] Russian military intervention would be challenging for Russia since Moldova (and Transnistria) is landlocked and only accessible through Romania or Ukraine. ISW previously assessed that the Russian forces currently in Transnistria could threaten the stability of Moldova, but ISW has observed no indicators that they are preparing to do so.[20]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted another strike on a Russian personnel concentration in occupied Donetsk Oblast, once again sparking ire amongst Russian milbloggers and re-surfacing concerns about Ukraine's use of HIMARS systems. A Russian Telegram user who claims to be an employee of an unspecified branch of Russian special services reported that a Ukrainian HIMARS strike hit a gathering of personnel of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) during a military awards ceremony in Olenivka, Donetsk Oblast on the night of February 27. [21] The Russian source claimed that the strike killed 19, including the deputy brigade commander, a major, and a captain, and wounded 12, including brigade commander Colonel Mikhail Gudkov. The Russian source accused the Russian command of being aware of Ukrainian drone reconnaissance activity in the area but ignoring the available information ahead of the strike. Ukrainian forces have conducted two similar HIMARS strikes against Russian troop concentrations over the past week, targeting a training ground near occupied Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast on February 20 and a training ground in occupied Podo-Kalynivka, Kherson Oblast on February 22.[22] One milblogger noted that “these are no longer isolated mistakes,” and suggested that Ukraine is deliberately striking such gatherings of Russian personnel in a “clinical” manner.[23] Russian milbloggers appear increasingly concerned that Ukrainian forces are able to exploit poor Russian operational security practices (such as large gatherings in near-rear areas under Ukrainian aerial reconnaissance) using well-timed and well-targeted HIMARS strikes, which continue to generate discontent in the Russian information space.

Russia continues cracking down on actors it deems “foreign agents” to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March 2024 presidential election. The Russian State Duma adopted a law on February 28 banning Russians from advertising the content of individuals and organizations legally designated as “foreign agents” and from advertising their own content on platforms that these “foreign agents” own. ISW previously assessed that this law, if passed, would impact Russian opposition media’s ability to operate and reliably report in Russia, and at least one Russian opposition journalist has already suspended their work due to the new advertising ban. [24] Russian outlet *RBK* reported that large Russian advertising agencies are already including unilateral termination clauses in their advertising contracts in case the Kremlin designates a client as a foreign agent during the term of their contract.[25] Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on February 28 that the Kremlin has more than doubled its criminal prosecutions of designated foreign agents for violating Russian censorship laws from 2022 to 2023, most commonly for allegedly spreading “fake” information about the Russian military or promoting extremism.[26] Some Russian regional authorities are also increasing efforts to discourage violations of Russian censorship laws; the Krasnodar Krai Legislative Assembly is considering a bill that would deprive Russians convicted of spreading fake information, discrediting the Russian military, or promoting extremism of their ability to vote in Russian elections.[27]

A *Financial Times (FT)* investigation published on February 27, reportedly based on leaked classified Russian military documents from 2008-2014, outlines Russia’s purported criteria for the use of tactical nuclear weapons. *FT* reported that the documents show that Russia has war-gamed avenues for employing tactical weapons and alleged that the files show that Russia has a lower threshold for using nuclear weapons “if the desired result can’t be achieved through conventional means” than Russian officials have ever publicly admitted.[28] *FT* stated that the criteria for a nuclear response vary between “an enemy incursion on Russian territory” to more specific parameters, such as “the destruction of 20 percent of Russia’s strategic ballistic missile submarines.” *FT* noted that unspecified experts have confirmed that the documents remain relevant to Russian nuclear doctrine despite the fact that they are over a decade old. ISW cannot independently verify the legitimacy of the documents but has frequently observed that Russian actors invoke nuclear rhetoric and threats of nuclear weapons use to target the Western information space and instill concern aimed at weakening Western support to Ukraine.[29] It has long been established that Russian nuclear doctrine includes the option to use nuclear weapons in conventional wars at thresholds much lower than Western states.

Turkey and China appear to be pursuing their own negotiation platforms for a settlement in Ukraine, which the Kremlin will likely exploit to further its long-standing narratives regarding negotiations and the war. Chinese Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hiu will visit EU states, Ukraine, and Russia starting on March 2 to conduct a round of shuttle diplomacy regarding a political solution to the war in Ukraine.[30] Russia previously seized on China's approach to a vaguely defined political peace plan for Ukraine to claim that China supports Russia's war effort in Ukraine, as ISW previously reported.[31] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan similarly announced on February 28 that Ankara is prepared to provide another negotiations platform for Russia and Ukraine. [32] The Kremlin will likely weaponize these proposed platforms to further the narrative that Ukraine is the party refusing negotiations. ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is not interested in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine and has no interest in ending the war on anything but Russia's articulated terms.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Pro-Russian Moldovan breakaway region Transnistria held the Seventh Congress of Transnistrian Deputies on February 28 and adopted a series of decisions that likely aim to provide the Kremlin with justifications for a wide range of possible escalatory actions against Moldova — actions the Kremlin can pursue both immediately and over the long-term.
- The Kremlin has yet to signal an immediate route for escalation following the Congress of Transnistrian Deputies, although Russian President Vladimir Putin may respond to the Transnistrian requests during his speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on February 29.
- The Kremlin can use the outcomes of the Congress of Transnistrian Deputies to justify a range of possible COAs that are not mutually exclusive.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted another strike on a Russian personnel concentration in occupied Donetsk Oblast, once again sparking ire amongst Russian milbloggers and re-surfacing concerns about Ukraine's use of HIMARS systems.
- Russia continues cracking down on actors it deems “foreign agents” to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March 2024 presidential election.
- A *Financial Times* (FT) investigation published on February 27, reportedly based on leaked classified Russian military documents from 2008-2014, outlines Russia's purported criteria for the use of tactical nuclear weapons.
- Turkey and China appear to be pursuing their own negotiation platforms for a settlement in Ukraine, which the Kremlin will likely exploit to further its long-standing narratives regarding negotiations and the war.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Svatove, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu inspected the Tula State University's Military Training Center and several defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises in Tula Oblast on February 28.
- Russian occupation authorities are using early voting for the Russian presidential election to cloak Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine in a veneer of fabricated legitimacy.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 27, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 27, 2024, 9:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on February 27. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 28 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces are attempting to exploit tactical opportunities offered by the Russian seizure of Avdiivka and appear to be maintaining a relatively high tempo of offensive operations aimed at pushing as far as possible in the Avdiivka area before Ukrainian forces establish more cohesive and harder-to-penetrate defensive lines in the area. Russian forces temporarily decreased their tempo of operations as they cleared Avdiivka following the Russian seizure of the settlement on February 17, but have since resumed a relatively high tempo of assaults further west and northwest of Avdiivka.[1] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Dmytro Lykhovyi stated on February 27 that Russian forces have recently increased the size of their assault groups in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) from small squad-sized groups to

platoon-sized and even company-sized groups.[2] Russian forces are currently focusing assaults west of Avdiivka in the direction of Berdychi, Orlivka, and Tetenke, where Ukrainian forces established immediate defensive positions to cover their withdrawal from Avdiivka and to receive oncoming Russian offensive operations.[3] Lykhovy and Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that Ukrainian forces have stabilized their defensive lines along the Tetenke-Orlivka-Berdychi line as of February 27.[4] Ukrainian military observers characterized Ukrainian fortifications west of Avdiivka as "disappointing" and "problematic," however.[5] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are struggling to hold defensive positions immediately west of Avdiivka and forecasted that Ukrainian forces will concentrate on a defensive line further west that Ukrainian forces began constructing in November 2023.[6]

Russian forces are likely continuing attempts to advance in order to deprive Ukrainian forces of the respite that would allow Ukraine to establish a more cohesive and harder-to-penetrate defensive line in the immediate vicinity of Avdiivka. The seizure of Avdiivka has allowed Russian forces to press on positions that Ukrainian forces have manned for a shorter period than Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka or further west, and Russian forces are likely sustaining a high operational tempo to try to exploit this tactical opportunity. Russian forces may be able to seize settlements immediately west and northwest of Avdiivka in the coming weeks, but terrain and water features further west of Avdiivka, particularly the body of water that runs between Berdychi-Semenivka-Orlivka, will likely slow the already relatively slow rate of Russian advances in the area. This difficult terrain will likely constrain further Russian tactical gains and allow Ukrainian forces to establish prepared defensive positions that will likely prompt the eventual culmination of the current Russian offensive effort in the area at least until or unless the Russians reinforce their attacking elements.[7]

Russian forces are likely attempting to create an operational maneuver force for the exploitation of recent Russian advances in the Avdiivka direction. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on February 27 that Russian forces have formally transferred responsibility for the Donetsk City-Avdiivka axis to the Russian Central Grouping of Forces and formally transferred the Central Grouping of Forces' previous area of responsibility (AOR) in the Lyman direction to Russia's Western Grouping of Forces.[8] Russia's Western Grouping of Forces (likely comprised almost entirely of elements of the Western Military District [WMD]) assumed responsibility for at least a portion of the Lyman direction in late fall and early winter 2023 after the Russian command transferred the bulk of the committed formations of the Central Grouping of Forces (primarily comprised of elements of the Central Military District [CMD]) to the offensive effort to seize Avdiivka in October 2023.[9] Russian officials have recently praised the Central Grouping of Forces for the seizure of Avdiivka and have notably highlighted CMD Commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev and increasingly identified the Avdiivka direction as the AOR of the Central Grouping of Forces.[10] The Russian command may have decided to codify the *de facto* command structure that has existed in the Avdiivka area since late Fall 2023 to explicitly establish a maneuver force intended to exploit recent Russian advances in the area. The Avdiivka-Donetsk axis is a relatively narrower AOR compared to the AORs of other Russian force groupings in Ukraine, and this focused responsibility suggests that the Russian military command likely intends for CMD elements to continue offensive efforts in the Avdiivka area in the near and medium term.

The Russian command likely hopes that the reorganization of command structures will establish more cohesive Russian grouping of forces throughout the theater in Ukraine. Russian forces recently reorganized the command structure of the Russian grouping of forces in southern Ukraine, abolishing an unnamed grouping of forces that defended against the Ukrainian summer 2023 counteroffensive and distributing its elements between the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces (AOR in Kherson Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast) and the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces (AOR in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and western Donetsk Oblast).[11] The Russian Western Grouping of Forces has launched an ongoing multi-axis offensive operation along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and has designed elements of that operation based on its control over a cohesive force grouping along a wide AOR.[12] Mashovets noted that the transfer of the Avdiivka-Donetsk City axis to the Central Grouping of Forces bisects the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces, which previously had responsibility for the frontline from the Bakhmut direction through the Marinka direction.[13] It is unclear if this bisection will generate further command and control (C2) difficulties for Russian forces near Bakhmut and west and southwest of Donetsk City beyond the pervasive C2 issues that Russian forces already face writ large in Ukraine.[14] This apparent Russian reorganization effort suggests that the Russian command may be attempting to implement lessons it has learned about organizing command structures in areas in which it intends to prioritize offensive efforts as the more cohesive Russian groupings of forces are engaged in more concerted or broader offensive efforts.

Recent developments in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, are unlikely to pose a military threat to Ukraine and will more likely impact Moldova's European Union (EU) integration prospects. Ukrainian officials stated that Russian drones flew into Moldovan

airspace on the night of February 26-27 during a Russian strike series targeting Ukrainian rear areas.

[15] The Moldovan Ministry of Defense (MoD), however, denied that any drones flew over Moldova.

[16] ISW continues to assess that the Russian forces currently in Transnistria are not capable of posing a meaningful military threat to Ukraine without reinforcements, which Russia has no likely way of bringing to Transnistria rapidly or at scale, and ISW has not observed any clear indications of Russian military preparations to intervene in Transnistria or Moldova more generally.[17] The flight of a drone over Moldovan airspace has more direct implications for Moldovan sovereignty than for Ukrainian security.

ISW is amending its warning forecast in light of continued Transnistrian officials' statements that the upcoming Congress of Transnistrian Deputies will discuss Moldovan economic policies, likely related to changes to Moldova's Customs Code that went into effect on January 1, 2024.[18] ISW issued a warning forecast on February 22 and assessed that Transnistrian officials may call for a referendum on annexation to Russia during the Congress of Transnistrian Deputies on February 28 to support Russian hybrid operations intent on politically and socially destabilizing Moldova.[19] The last Congress of Transnistrian Deputies was convened in March 2006, at which Transnistrian deputies decided to hold a referendum on Transnistria's independence and future subsequent annexation into Russia.[20] The 2006 congress similarly occurred a few weeks after Ukraine imposed new customs regulations on Transnistria.[21] While the referendum received overwhelming popular support in 2006, neither Russia nor Transnistria advanced legal mechanisms for annexation at that time.

Moldova's path towards EU membership required Moldova to change to its Customs Code to align with EU regulations.[22] Moldova had previously exempted Transnistrian businesses from paying duties to the Moldovan government for Transnistrian imports from and exports to the EU and instead allowed Transnistrian businesses to pay duties to the Transnistrian government.[23] Transnistria responded to the January 2024 changes requiring that Transnistrian businesses pay required duties to the Moldovan government by increasing taxes on about 2,000 Moldovan businesses in Transnistria, but Transnistrian President Vadim Krasnoselsky stated on February 24 that customs payments to the Transnistrian budget still decreased by 18 percent since the start of 2024.[24]

Major actors in Transnistria have varying economic and political interests. The American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project (CTP) previously assessed that Transnistria is a mafia state run by Viktor Gushan, whose company Sheriff Enterprises controls a majority of the Transnistrian economy and receives large portions of Transnistria's government spending.[25] Gushan's businesses have been heavily oriented towards the EU after Moldova signed a trade deal with the EU in 2014 that guaranteed tariff-free access to EU markets. Gushan's businesses would also benefit from the reestablishment of good Ukrainian-Transnistrian relations, as Transnistria imported and exported most of its goods through Ukraine until Ukraine closed those borders in 2022 due to Russia's full-scale invasion — facts that would give Gushan good reason to oppose Transnistrian annexation into Russia for economic reasons. EU officials have indicated that Moldova could join the EU without Transnistria. [26] Gushan may prefer a Western-oriented Moldova in which Transnistria enjoys special tax exceptions over annexation into Russia or Moldovan EU membership without Transnistria. Moldova, however, is unlikely to reverse its customs code changes given its current commitment to joining the EU. Gushan's calculus, therefore, is complex, and his preferences are unclear at this time. ISW will provide an update following the Congress of Deputies on February 28.

Russia may also hope to exploit a hybrid play in Transnistria taking advantage of recent developments. Gushan likely competes with the Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB), reportedly a "department" of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) that takes orders from the Kremlin.[27] Citizens of both Russian-influenced regions of Moldova — Transnistria and Gagauzia — notably recently protested Moldova's new Customs Code.[28] Russia may attempt to exploit domestic opposition to Moldovan policies to sow instability in Moldova and delay Moldova's accession to the EU.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu continues to highlight recent Russian tactical successes in Ukraine as substantial battlefield victories for political purposes ahead of the upcoming Russian presidential election. Shoigu addressed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) board on February 27 and reported that Russian forces are continuing efforts to improve their positions in the Donetsk (Avdiivka) and Kupyansk (Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area) directions. [29] Shoigu reported that Russian forces have pushed Ukrainian forces out of Lastochkyne and Sieverne (both west of Avdiivka) and Pobieda (southwest of Donetsk City) and claimed that Russian forces have captured about 327 square kilometers of territory since the beginning of 2024. ISW currently assesses that Russian forces have captured closer to 205 square kilometers since January 1, 2024, and Shoigu likely deliberately overstated Russian territorial gains. Shoigu's promotion of the Russian capture of very small settlements of limited tactical significance suggests that the Russian

MoD is trying to emphasize even such small gains to present an image of a constantly advancing Russian military. All three of the settlements that Shoigu chose to prominently highlight are comprised of small semi-urban areas spanning a few blocks, so Russian forces' capture of these settlements was a very tactical endeavor. ISW recently assessed that the Russian MoD is likely trying to play up recent tactical gains to generate positive informational effects before the March 2024 presidential election.

[30]

Shoigu additionally highlighted Russia's Central and Eastern Military Districts (CMD and EMD) to posture against supposed anti-Russian activity in Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

[31] Shoigu discussed security challenges emanating from Central Asia, specifically highlighting threats from Afghanistan, a purported increase in the number of Islamic State fighters in the region, and the spread of "radical ideology and subversive activities" targeted at the southern borders of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Shoigu claimed that the CMD will focus efforts on responding to various "crisis situations" in the Central Asian region through military exercises with CSTO member states. Shoigu also emphasized that the CMD is equipped with Iskander-M ballistic missiles and Tornado-G MLRS systems. Iskander-M and Tornado-Gs are not weapons systems particularly appropriate for responding to terrorist threats. Shoigu was more likely highlighting the capabilities of the CMD in this region to posture and project the impression of Russian military power and tacitly threaten retaliation in the case of any perceived anti-Russian activities in this region. Shoigu also accused the US of fomenting tensions in the Indo-Pacific region and claimed that the EMD is increasing its combat capabilities in response to rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula and around Taiwan. Shoigu also likely intended to project the image of Russian military might into the Indo-Pacific and tacitly threaten the US for its own efforts in this region while also supporting efforts to portray itself as an equal Indo-Pacific security partner for China. The bulk of CMD and EMD personnel, commanders, and military district-level assets are currently heavily committed in Ukraine, and the Russian military command may feel this vulnerability in Russia's ability to protect its southern and eastern flanks or play the role that the Kremlin desires to play in the geopolitics of both regions.

Ukrainian forces have reportedly shot down two Russian Su-34s on February 27, the tenth downed Russian military aircraft within roughly as many days. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces downed two Russian Su-34 fighter jets on February 27, at least one of which was downed in eastern Ukraine.[32] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on February 21 that Ukrainian forces have downed seven Russian Su-34 and Su-35 fighter jets since February 16.[33] The February 27 Su-34 shoot-downs are likely connected with Russian glide bomb strikes in Donetsk Oblast, particularly near Avdiivka as Russian forces use heavy glide bomb strikes in an attempt to exploit gains in the Avdiivka area. Ukraine's downing of a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft on February 23 has likely constrained Russian strategic reconnaissance capabilities. Ihnat stated that Russian forces have not deployed another A-50 over the Sea of Azov since the downing and have increased their use of aerial reconnaissance drones across the theater to compensate.[34]

Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) reported on February 27 that the ongoing Russian information campaign to demoralize Ukrainian society will intensify between March and May 2024.[35] The SBU reported that the information campaign, which they call "Maidan-3," intends to sow panic and discontent among the Ukrainian population and drive a wedge between civilians and military and political leadership. The Ukrainian Presidential Intelligence Committee reported that Russia has spent a total of \$1.5 billion on this information campaign (including \$250 million on information operations on the Telegram messaging app alone) and noted that this spending is on par with Russia's spending on conventional military activities. The SBU noted that the information campaign will intensify from March to May 20, 2024 to exploit the Ukrainian political situation and foment distrust in and discontent with the Ukrainian government. The March to May timeline is significant—if Russia had not illegally invaded Ukraine, the Ukrainian presidential election would have been scheduled to occur on March 31, 2024 and May 20, 2024 is the fifth anniversary of Zelensky's inauguration.[36] Russia appears to be pursuing this extremely costly information campaign to undermine trust in Ukrainian leadership and spread discontent with the aim of weakening Ukrainian society.

Russia likely tested an element of its Sovereign Internet on February 27, likely in an effort to strengthen control over individual aspects of the Russian information space. Russian sources reported several widespread outages of prominent social media platforms on February 27, including Telegram, YouTube, VKontakte (VK), Viber, WhatsApp, and Zoom, and later reported that service has since been restored.[37] Russian sources also reported that Russians were able to access some blocked social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, during the outage. [38] Russian State Duma Committee on Information Policy Deputy Head Anton Tkachev stated that Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor caused the outage while testing and reconfiguring gateways to identify and close "bottlenecks" to prohibited content.[39] BBC Russian Service quoted Russian organization "Network Freedoms" as saying that Roskomnadzor may have been adjusting settings

related to “technical means of countering threats” (TSPU), a set of tools that Russian federal law obligates Russian telecom providers to possess.[40] “Network Freedoms” told *BBC Russian Service* that Roskomnаздор is developing procedures and training specialists to use TSPU to centrally manage the Russian internet and develop a service on state-affiliated social media network VK to better censor content on the site.[41] Russia is likely attempting to expand this centralization to other social media sites that are active in Russia given the Kremlin’s tensions with other social media platforms. Russia has declared Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp parent company Meta as a “terrorist” organization, and Telegram has refused to comply with some of the Kremlin’s more extensive censorship measures.[42]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are attempting to exploit tactical opportunities offered by the Russian seizure of Avdiivka and appear to be maintaining a relatively high tempo of offensive operations aimed at pushing as far as possible in the Avdiivka area before Ukrainian forces establish more cohesive and harder-to-penetrate defensive lines in the area.
- Russian forces are likely attempting to create an operational maneuver force for the exploitation of recent Russian advances in the Avdiivka direction.
- The Russian command likely hopes that the reorganization of command structures will establish more cohesive Russian grouping of forces throughout the theater in Ukraine.
- Recent developments in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, are unlikely to pose a military threat to Ukraine and will more likely impact Moldova’s European Union (EU) integration prospects. ISW is amending its warning forecast in light of continued Transnistrian officials’ statements that the upcoming Congress of Transnistrian Deputies will discuss Moldovan economic policies, likely related to changes to Moldova’s Customs Code that went into effect on January 1, 2024.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu continues to highlight recent Russian tactical successes in Ukraine as substantial battlefield victories for political purposes ahead of the upcoming Russian presidential election. Shoigu additionally highlighted Russia’s Central and Eastern Military Districts (CMD and EMD) to posture against supposed anti-Russian activity in Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific.
- Ukrainian forces have reportedly shot down two Russian Su-34s on February 27, the tenth downed Russian military aircraft within roughly as many days.
- Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) reported on February 27 that the ongoing Russian information campaign to demoralize Ukrainian society will intensify between March and May 2024.
- Russia likely tested an element of its Sovereign Internet on February 27, likely in an effort to strengthen control over individual aspects of the Russian information space.
- Russian forces advanced west of Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements across the theater.
- A Ukrainian official warned that Russia seeks to ramp up force generation efforts in occupied Ukraine following the formal integration of occupied and claimed Ukrainian territories into the Russian Southern Military District (SMD).
- Russian authorities are reportedly systematizing the adoption of deported Ukrainian children in Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 26, 2024

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

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

February 26, 2024, 8pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on February 26. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Sweden will join NATO following Hungary’s formal approval of Sweden’s accession bid on February 26.[1] Hungary was the final NATO member that needed to approve Sweden’s bid, but Sweden’s accession to the alliance has been a major sticking point for the Hungarian Parliament and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.[2] Sweden will now become NATO’s 32nd member upon completing official accession procedures.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees on February 26 that officially re-establish the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, codifying major Russian military restructuring and reform efforts. Putin signed one decree that deprives Russia's Northern Fleet (NF) of its status as an "interservice strategic territorial organization" (a joint headquarters in Western military parlance) and transfers the land of the Northwestern Federal Okrug previously under the NF's command to the newly formed Leningrad Military District (LMD).^[3] Putin signed a second decree that formally re-establishes the LMD and the Moscow Military District (MMD) — with the LMD taking over most of the territory previously under the NF and the MMD taking over most of the territory previously under the Western Military District (WMD).^[4] The second decree also incorporates occupied Ukraine into the Southern Military District (SMD), notably including all of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts (as well as Crimea, which has been part of the SMD since 2014), not just the parts currently under Russian occupation. The inclusion of both the occupied and un-occupied parts of Ukrainian territory further suggests that Russia maintains maximalist objectives in Ukraine and seeks to fully absorb all five of these Ukrainian territories into the Russian Federation.

The formal transfer of regions previously under the responsibility of the Northern Fleet is likely part of a wider Russian effort to re-establish military district commands as the primary headquarters for the Russian ground forces while reassigning naval assets to the Russian Navy, as ISW previously reported.^[5] Russian state media reported in November 2023 that naval assets of all five of Russia's fleets — the Northern, Pacific, Baltic, and Black Sea fleets and the Caspian Flotilla — may return to direct subordination to the Russian Navy, while the ground, aviation, and air defense assets of the fleets will be allocated to military district commands. This information is still unconfirmed, but it appears that the Russian military is trying to reconsolidate ground forces and assets under military districts while consolidating naval forces and assets under the Russian naval chain of command.^[6]

The re-creation of the MMD and LMD supports the parallel objectives of consolidating control over Russian operations in Ukraine in the short-to-medium term and preparing for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO in the long term.^[7] The February 26 decree officially disbands the WMD, which the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) formed in 2010 by merging the MMD and LMD.^[8] The WMD previously covered the Russian border with northeastern Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States, which stretched the WMD's strategic focus between overseeing Russian operations in Ukraine following the 2022 full-scale invasion and posturing against NATO.^[9] The re-separation of the WMD into the MMD and LMD, therefore, is a direct remedy to this issue. The LMD will now run along NATO's northeastern border, and the MMD will border northeastern Ukraine and Poland, which will allow Russia to simultaneously posture against NATO and streamline command and control (C2) for the war in Ukraine. Putin previously claimed that it was necessary to create the LMD after Finland joined NATO in 2023, signaling the Kremlin's clear intent to use the LMD to posture against NATO.^[10]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 25 that Russia is preparing a new offensive that will start in late May or summer 2024, consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces have regained the theater-wide initiative and will be able to pursue offensive operations when and where they choose as long as they hold the initiative.^[11] Zelensky also stated that the Ukrainian military has a clear plan to counter Russian forces. ISW continues to assess that Russian forces regained the initiative across the theater following Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive and that Russia will likely be able to determine the time, location, and scale of future offensive operations in Ukraine if Ukraine conducts an active defense throughout the theater in 2024, thereby ceding the strategic initiative to Russia. Russian forces will have the ability to maneuver reserve concentrations and determine how and where to allocate resources while forcing Ukraine to respond defensively as long as Russia maintains the strategic initiative. Ukrainian forces could deny Russia these opportunities if Ukrainian forces have enough means to challenge the Russian initiative and pursue their own offensive operations in 2024.

Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov is continuing a recent campaign to engage with Russian military personnel following the Russian capture of Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast and reportedly visited a command post of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) in Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on February 26 claiming to show Gerasimov visiting a 58th CAA command post in Ukraine, hearing reports about the operational situation, and presenting medals to Russian servicemen.^[12] The 58th CAA is currently pursuing offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, so the MoD video suggests that Gerasimov visited a command post somewhere in the Zaporizhia Oblast direction. The Russian MoD published footage showing Gerasimov awarding Russian soldiers after the capture of Avdiivka on February 21, which is notably the first public depiction of Gerasimov serving his command duties since December 29.^[13] Gerasimov fired former 58th CAA Commander Major General Ivan Popov in July 2023 following reports that Popov bypassed Gerasimov's command and directly appealed to the Kremlin to complain

about Gerasimov's refusal to rotate 58th CAA troops away from the frontline for rest and reconstitution while they were defending against Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive push in Zaporizhia Oblast. [14] Gerasimov likely visited the 58th CAA command post in part to rebuild his relationship with 58th CAA lower-level commanders and servicemembers following Popov's firing and the criticism generated of Gerasimov.[15] Gerasimov also appears to be engaged in a campaign to present himself as an effective and interested chief of the General Staff, and his recent public appearances on areas of the front where Russian forces are making tactical gains are likely part of this effort to bolster his public image.

Over 20 heads of state, including 15 European Union (EU) leaders met in Paris on February 26 to discuss ramping up ammunition supplies to Ukraine.[16] French President Emmanuel Macron organized the conference and announced the creation of a new coalition to supply Ukraine with longer-range missiles and munitions.[17] Macron also stated that France "will do whatever it takes to ensure that Russia cannot win this war" and that European states should prepare for possible Russian escalations in the coming years.[18] Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas stated that Estonia is providing long-term military aid to Ukraine worth 0.25 percent of Estonia's GDP through 2028 and called on Ukraine's other supporters to make similar commitments.[19]

Germany announced a new military aid package to Ukraine on February 26. The new military aid package includes 14,000 155mm artillery shells, 10 Vector recon drones, four WISENT-1 mine-clearing machines, and other equipment.[20] German outlet *Der Spiegel* reported on February 26 that the Bundeswehr's Ukraine Situation Center Head, Major General Christian Freudig, stated that Germany is looking "all over the world" for artillery ammunition to provide to Ukraine.[21] Unspecified insider sources told *Der Spiegel* that Germany is engaged in "discreet negotiations" to obtain Indian artillery rounds through intermediaries and that "similar negotiations" may be possible with Arab countries.

Transnistrian sources reportedly told Russian independent outlet *Verstka* that Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, is not planning to ask to join Russia during the Congress of Deputies in Tiraspol on February 28. Two unnamed sources close to Transnistrian authorities told *Verstka* that the Congress of Deputies will not discuss integration with Russia and instead focus on discussing economic pressure from Moldova, without taking any "sudden steps." [22] A source involved in preparing for Russian presidential elections in Transnistria claimed that Transnistria did not receive any tasks from the Kremlin aside from preparations for presidential elections. *Verstka* observed that Transnistrian foreign policy department head Vitaly Ignatiev "cooled off" many speculations about Transnistria's possible request to join Russia after claiming on a local TV broadcast that the purpose of the congress is to bring to attention Moldova's latest "economic pressure" on Transnistria. The Moldovan Bureau for Reintegration stated on February 22 that "there is no reason to believe that the situation in [Transnistria] could deteriorate" in response to public discourse regarding the Congress of Deputies in Tiraspol.[23] Ukrainian officials similarly stated that the possibility of a Russian ground attack on Ukraine from Transnistria is low.[24] ISW issued a warning forecast on February 22 and assessed that Transnistrian officials may call for a referendum on annexation to Russia to support Russian hybrid operations intent on politically and socially destabilizing Moldova.[25] It remains noteworthy that Transnistrian authorities have suddenly ordered the convening of the Congress of Deputies for the first time since that body authorized referenda on joining Moldova (that failed) and on seeking Russian annexation (that passed) in 2006. ISW amends its warning in light of these reports, however, and will continue to monitor the situation in Transnistria closely.

Key Takeaways:

- Sweden will join NATO following Hungary's formal approval of Sweden's accession bid on February 26.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees on February 26 that officially re-establish the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, codifying major Russian military restructuring and reform efforts.
- The formal transfer of regions previously under the responsibility of the Northern Fleet is likely part of a wider Russian effort to re-establish military district commands as the primary headquarters for the Russian ground forces while reassigning naval assets to the Russian Navy, as ISW previously reported.
- The re-creation of the MMD and LMD supports the parallel objectives of consolidating control over Russian operations in Ukraine in the short-to-medium term and preparing for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO in the long term.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 25 that Russia is preparing a new offensive that will start in late May or summer 2024, consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces have regained the theater-wide initiative and will be able

- to pursue offensive operations when and where they choose as long as they hold the initiative.
- Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov is continuing a recent campaign to engage with Russian military personnel following the Russian capture of Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast and reportedly visited a command post of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) in Ukraine.
 - Over 20 heads of state, including 15 European Union (EU) leaders met in Paris on February 26 to discuss ramping up ammunition supplies to Ukraine.
 - Germany announced a new military aid package to Ukraine on February 26.
 - Transnistrian sources reportedly told Russian independent outlet Verstka that Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, is not planning to ask to join Russia during the Congress of Deputies in Tiraspol on February 28.
 - Russian forces recently made confirmed gains near Kreminna, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
 - Russia reportedly imported almost 450 million euros (about \$488 million) worth of sanctioned “sensitive” European goods, including weapons technology, between January and September 2023.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 25, 2024

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

Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 25, 2024, 4:30pm ET

Russian officials and state media largely refrained from publicly discussing the two-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely in an effort to avoid addressing Russia's failure to achieve its stated war aims at significant human costs. Russian opposition outlet *Agentstvo Novosti* reported on February 25 that Russian state TV channels *Rossiya 1* and *Channel One (Perviy Kanal)* and Gazprom Media-owned TV channel *NTV* did not mention the two-year anniversary of the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in broadcasts on February 24.^[1] *Agentstvo Novosti* stated that Russian political commentator Mikhail Leontev noted in a February 24 broadcast of the “*Vremya*” program on *Channel One* that it was the two-year anniversary of the start of the war but did not offer further statements on the topic. ISW observed minimal discussion by Russian government officials on the two-year anniversary of the start of Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24.

Russian officials and state-run and state-affiliated TV channels likely refrained from commenting on the two-year anniversary of the start of Russia's full-scale invasion to avoid drawing attention to Russia's failures to achieve its stated strategic goals in Ukraine and its more immediate goals of seizing all of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, while also suffering high personnel losses. A recent Russian opinion poll indicated that Russian sentiments about the war in Ukraine have largely remained unchanged in recent months and that most Russians are largely apathetic to the war, though most do not support a second wave of mobilization.^[2] Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian government officials likely refrained from highlighting the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion in an effort to maintain public apathy toward the war that, in part, allows Russian officials to continue the war without significant public backlash. ISW continues to assess that Putin is likely aware that a second mobilization wave would be widely unpopular and is concerned that such a measure would generate widespread discontent.^[3] Putin may, however, become less concerned about public sentiment after his reelection in March 2024 and determine that Russian force generation requirements outweigh the risks of widespread domestic discontent.

Ukrainian officials discussed Ukraine's goals and priorities for 2024 on February 25 and highlighted the need for continued Ukrainian innovation and Western aid to accomplish Ukraine's objectives. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated that Ukraine is doing everything “possible and impossible” to make a breakthrough along the frontline and that Ukraine has an undisclosed plan for 2024 that will not only bring “hope” but also yield tangible results.^[4] Umerov and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi visited several Ukrainian command posts in the Lyman, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and other directions and noted the importance of protecting Ukrainian personnel from Russian drone and air strikes in certain areas of the front.^[5] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that Ukraine hopes to further reduce Russia's advantage in battlefield artillery systems, currently estimated to be at a 6 to 1 advantage, ahead of future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.^[6] Zelensky warned that Ukraine could continue to lose territory meter by meter if Ukraine does not receive and produce additional artillery systems.^[7] Ukrainian Deputy Commander-in-Chief Colonel Vadym Sukharevskyi highlighted Ukraine's newly-

formed Unmanned Systems Force as an important next step in Ukraine's war effort that is intended to improve Ukrainian efficiency, systematization, and analysis of drone use.[8] Sukharevskyi reiterated that Ukrainian forces are not trying to use drones to replace artillery systems, but rather as additional weapons to defeat the Russian military.[9] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukraine needs significant volumes of long-range weapons from Ukraine's Western allies, and Zelensky expressed confidence in Western provisions of long-range weapons.[10] Umerov noted that there is a critical difference between the allocation and provision of Western aid to Ukraine, and Budanov added that Russia and Ukraine are currently competing to see who will get the "upper hand" on the battlefield.[11] Several Ukrainian officials, including Zelensky, highlighted plans to hold the first Ukrainian Peace Formula Summit in Switzerland this year and emphasized the importance of further developing Ukraine's partnership with NATO in 2024.[12]

Drone footage posted on February 25 shows Russian forces committing apparent war crimes near Bakhmut. The footage shows Russian forces executing nine Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) who had just surrendered near Ivanivske (on the outskirts of Bakhmut).[13] The execution of POWs is a violation of the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of POWs.[14] The February 25 footage is the fourth such instance of video evidence showing Russian forces executing Ukrainian POWs in the past two weeks alone.[15]

The Russian information space continues to be highly sensitive to the recent losses of A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft, suggesting that the issue of deploying and defending these aircraft is of great concern. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces prepared the operation to shoot down the A-50 for two weeks.[16] Budanov stated that Russia has six more A-50s left and cryptically suggested that another A-50 will "fall" and force Russia to stop sortieing the planes "round-the-clock." A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces reported "to the top" (likely meaning to Russian high command) that a Ukrainian Patriot missile shot down the A-50, but the milblogger and others expressed doubt that this version of events was true and criticized the "systemic" problem of Russian personnel only thinking of themselves and their careers out of "self-preservation." [17] Ukrainian media previously reported that sources in the Ukrainian GUR stated that Ukraine downed the A-50 with modified S-200 systems.[18] Another Russian milblogger claimed that the loss of a second Russian A-50 this winter is problematic as Russia already had a shortage of these aircraft before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[19] The milblogger claimed that Russia will not be able to modernize many A-50s into A-50Us for a number of unspecified technical and organizational reasons and offered possible alternatives, including creating inferior "ersatz" airborne and early warning control systems (AWACS) or purchasing similar aircraft from China.

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Russia has not received any long-range missiles from Iran as of February 25.[20] Reuters reported on February 21, citing alleged Iranian sources, that Iran provided Russia hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) in early January 2024.[21] ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of Russian forces using Iranian missiles in Ukraine but has frequently observed increased Russo-Iranian military cooperation over the backdrop of the war.[22]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian officials and state media largely refrained from publicly discussing the two-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely in an effort to avoid addressing Russia's failure to achieve its stated war aims at significant human costs.
- Russian officials and state-run and state-affiliated TV channels likely refrained from commenting on the two-year anniversary of the start of Russia's full-scale invasion to avoid drawing attention to Russia's failures to achieve its stated strategic goals in Ukraine and its more immediate goals of seizing all of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, while also suffering high personnel losses.
- Ukrainian officials discussed Ukraine's goals and priorities for 2024 on February 25 and highlighted the need for continued Ukrainian innovation and Western aid to accomplish Ukraine's objectives.
- Drone footage posted on February 25 shows Russian forces committing apparent war crimes near Bakhmut.
- The Russian information space continues to be highly sensitive to the recent losses of A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft, suggesting that the issue of deploying and defending these aircraft is of great concern.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Russia has not received any long-range missiles from Iran as of

February 25.

- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Krynyk amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on February 25.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to recruit Ukrainian citizens in occupied Ukraine into the Russian military.
- Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets stated on February 25 that Russia is holding over 28,000 Ukrainian citizens captive in Russian prisons.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 24, 2024

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

Ukraine continues to defend against Russian aggression and the Kremlin's attempt to destroy Ukrainian statehood and identity despite growing difficulties two years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Two years ago Russia launched a full-scale war of conquest to overthrow the Ukrainian government and forcibly install a pro-Russian regime firmly under Moscow's control. Russian forces drove on Kyiv from several directions and struck at Kharkiv, Kherson, Mariupol, and other Ukrainian cities. Russian President Vladimir Putin expected Ukrainians to welcome his forces or flee. Instead, Ukrainians fought for their freedom. They stopped the Russian drives on Kyiv and Kharkiv cities, stopped the Russian advance on Mykolayiv and Odesa cities, and fought Putin's troops to a standstill along the rest of the line. Then, armed with experience, courage, determination, and growing Western aid, Ukraine struck back. Ukrainian forces drove the Russians from Kyiv and away from Kharkiv and liberated large swathes of territory in northeastern Ukraine. They liberated Kherson City and forced Russian forces off the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River. They ended the threat to Ukraine's existence for the time.

But the Russians did not abandon their war aims or slacken their military operations. They remained in control of areas strategically and economically vital to Ukraine's survival and of millions of Ukrainians whom they are subjecting to brutal Russification campaigns and deportation schemes.^[1] The Russians launched a missile and drone campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure and cities that continues to this day.^[2] The Russians then ground through the eastern city of Bakhmut, taking losses so devastating that they prompted an armed rebellion against Moscow.^[3] The Russians also prepared themselves for the expected Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive. The excessive hopes for that counteroffensive were not met. The war assumed a positional character, and the expected US assistance has been held up.

The situation today is grave, but it is far from hopeless. Russian forces have regained the initiative across the theater and are attacking and making gains. Those gains thus far are very limited and extremely costly. More Russian soldiers have likely died to seize Avdiivka than died in the entire Soviet-Afghan war.^[4] Ukrainians are weary and worried that American military assistance will cease, but they continue to fight with determination, ingenuity, and skill. Ukraine's air defenders are dropping Russian planes from the sky while Ukrainian drone- and missile operators sink Russian ships.^[5] And Ukrainian soldiers are fighting for their positions against Russian "meat assaults" using drones in novel ways as well as the artillery, tanks, and traditional weapons of war available to them. The Ukrainian Air Force will receive its first F-16s in the coming months, and Ukraine's European allies are racing to make good deficiencies in other war materiel.^[6] American military assistance remains essential—only the United States has the resources to give Ukraine right now what Ukraine most needs.^[7] If the United States, in the end, withholds that aid, then the situation can become very grave indeed.

But the war is far from over. Ukraine has not lost and there is no reason for Ukraine to lose. Russians are adapting for a long war effort in Ukraine, but they are not the Red Army hordes wrapped in the triumphant banners of World War II victories that Putin and his propagandists pretend them to be.^[8] The Russian military suffers from many flaws that Ukraine has learned to exploit.^[9] And the combined economic power of Ukraine's allies is many times that of Russia.

Putin remains a deadly threat to NATO as well as to Ukraine, however. The Kremlin has been setting conditions to conduct hybrid warfare operations in the Baltic States and Finland for months and is currently engaged in such operations against Moldova.^[10] Putin's aims remain the destruction of NATO as an effective alliance, the breaking of the tie between the United States and Europe, and the construction of a new global order in which Russia's voice and power are dominant.^[11] The interests of America, Europe, and America's allies in Asia and around the world are inextricably tied with helping Ukraine defeat Russia.^[12]

Ukraine's European and Canadian partners commemorated the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion by committing additional aid to Ukraine and discussing Ukraine's

integration into the European Union (EU). European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that the European Commission will provide the framework for negotiations of Ukraine's EU accession in mid-March 2024.[13] Von der Leyen also stated that the EU will provide the first tranche of 4.5 billion euros (about \$4.8 billion) of unspecified aid to Ukraine in March as part of the EU's recently announced support package of 50 billion euros (about \$54 billion) for 2024-2027. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that the EU plans to deliver almost 170,000 rounds of artillery ammunition to Ukraine by the end of March.[14] Kuleba stated that Spain is preparing a new military aid package for Ukraine that will include ammunition.[15] The United Kingdom (UK) announced that it will spend £245 million (about \$310 million) throughout 2024 to procure and invigorate supply chains to produce ammunition for Ukraine.[16] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) and UK-based Cook Defense Systems signed contracts to provide tracks for tanks and armored vehicles to aid Ukraine in restoring damaged vehicles. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni signed a security cooperation agreement in which Italy stated that it will continue to provide assistance to Ukraine over 10 years.[17] Zelensky and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also signed a 10-year security cooperation agreement in which Canada allocated three billion Canadian dollars (about \$2.2 billion) in financial and defense aid to Ukraine in 2024.[18]

Russian opposition media estimated that upwards of 75,000 Russian personnel have died in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.[19] Russian opposition outlets *Meduza* and *Mediazona* published a joint report on February 24 wherein they compared *Mediazona*'s ongoing count of confirmed Russian deaths with the Russian Register of Inheritance Cases (RND) and mortality data from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) to estimate the number of Russian military deaths in Ukraine. [20] *Meduza* and *Mediazona* estimated that 66,000 to 88,000 Russian personnel have died in the war between February 2022 and December 2023.[21] *Meduza* and *Mediazona* extrapolated the current monthly rate of Russian military deaths in Ukraine to January and February 2024 and estimated that roughly 83,000 Russian personnel may have died since the start of the full-scale invasion. [22] *Meduza* and *Mediazona* noted that Russian military deaths in Ukraine began to steadily increase following the start of localized Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in October 2023 and added that Russian volunteers have made up the majority of the deaths since mid-2023.[23] US intelligence assessed in December 2023 that Russian forces had suffered 315,000 casualties in Ukraine since February 2022.[24] *Meduza*'s and *Mediazona*'s estimate is consistent with this US assessment, assuming a standard three to one wounded-to-killed casualty rate for Russian forces in Ukraine.

Russian forces are currently sustaining offensive operations in Ukraine despite these heavy losses by relying on crypto-mobilization efforts.[25] Russia is generating new forces roughly at a rate equivalent to current Russian losses, which allows Russian forces to consistently reinforce attacking units and regularly conduct operational-level rotations.[26] It is unclear if Russia would be able to sustain offensive operations in the same way at a higher operational tempo that would generate even greater losses, however.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to highlight Russian Central Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev and Russia's seizure of Avdiivka. The Russian MoD published footage on February 24 of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu meeting with Mordvichev to discuss the Russian capture of Avdiivka at a Russian Central Grouping of Forces command post in occupied Ukraine.[27] Mordvichev claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back by over 10 kilometers during the Russian operation to seize Avdiivka.[28] Russian President Vladimir Putin noted on the evening of February 17 that Russian forces captured Avdiivka under Mordvichev's leadership, and the Russian MoD published footage on February 21 of Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov meeting with Mordvichev to discuss plans for future Russian operations in the Avdiivka direction.[29]

Mordvichev highlighted Russian technological and tactical adaptations in the Russian seizure of Avdiivka in a likely effort to address persistent criticisms of Russian forces in Ukraine. Mordvichev told Shoigu that the effectiveness of Russian forces' reconnaissance-strike complex (RSC) and reconnaissance-fire complex (RFC) has "increased significantly." [30] A Russian RSC system is "designed for the coordinated employment of high-precision, long-range weapons linked to real-time intelligence data and precise targeting provided to a fused intelligence and fire-direction center," and the Russian RFC is the RSC's tactical equivalent using tactical fire systems such as tube artillery, tactical drones, and short-range rockets.[31] Russian forces have yet to employ an operational-level RSC system at scale in Ukraine, however, and Mordvichev is likely applying the operational concept of the RSC alongside the RFC to Russian tactical operations in Avdiivka. ISW has consistently observed reports that Russian forces combine widespread drone reconnaissance data in order to conduct artillery, aviation, and loitering munition strikes. ISW assessed that Russian forces temporarily established limited and localized air superiority during the final days of the Russian seizure

of Avdiivka.[32] Mordvichev notably did not highlight Russian glide bomb strikes, although Mordvichev may consider glide bomb strikes as part of the “RSC and RFC.” Shoigu emphasized the importance of drones and stated that the Russian MoD plans to equip Russian forces with drones “controlled using artificial intelligence,” likely referring to lethal autonomous systems. Mordvichev likely sought to manage expectations about future Russian offensive efforts while highlighting these alleged Russian adaptations and claimed that Ukrainian forces near Avdiivka have not decreased their intensity of indirect fire.[33] Mordvichev’s comment diverges from the triumphalist commentary of other Russian officials, who have seized on Ukrainian ammunition shortages to highlight Russian success in Ukraine and attempt to weaken Ukrainian morale.[34]

Senior Russian military officials likely are attempting to deflect responsibility for high-profile apparent Russian war crimes away from themselves and onto mid- and low-level Russian commanders. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage of Russian Central Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev reporting to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu that Russian forces captured about 200 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) near Avdiivka.[35] Shoigu emphasized the need for Russian forces to treat POWs humanely “as [Russian forces] have always done” to Mordvichev and other Russian officers. Shoigu, like Russian President Vladimir Putin, is likely concerned about international repercussions for his subordinates’ actions regarding apparent Russian war crimes and may have explicitly addressed Ukrainian POWs given recent international attention on Russian atrocities in Ukraine.[36]

A recent Russian opinion poll indicates that Russian sentiments about the war in Ukraine have largely remained unchanged in recent months, but notably suggests that another mobilization wave would be widely unpopular. Independent Russian opposition polling organization *Chronicles* stated on February 24 that data from a survey conducted between January 23 and 29 indicates that respondents who are “consistent” supporters of the war – Russians 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 – increased from 12 percent to 17 percent between October 2023 and January 2024. [37] *Chronicles* previously observed a significant decrease in staunch war support between its October 2023 survey and an earlier poll in February 2023 that found that 22 percent of Russians were “consistent” war supporters.[38] *Chronicles* added that the proportion of “consistent” peace supporters – Russians who expressed opposite positions on the three survey questions – has largely remained the same at 19 percent of respondents in January 2024 compared to 20 percent in February 2023. [39] *Chronicles*’ observations that staunch pro-war and anti-war sentiments comprise a minority of Russian opinion are consistent with other recent independent Russian survey data that suggest that most Russians are largely apathetic to Russia’s war in Ukraine.[40]

Chronicles’ most recent poll also shows that 29 percent of respondents support demobilizing personnel mobilized through Russian President Vladimir Putin’s September 2022 partial mobilization decree, 26 percent favor the current state of Russian force generation efforts, and 17 percent support a new mobilization wave.[41] *Chronicles* added that even the majority of “consistent” war supporters support the status quo regarding mobilization at 34 percent and that only 22 percent of these respondents support another mobilization wave.[42] Putin attempted to address concerns about a new mobilization wave during his “Direct Line” event on December 14, 2023, stressing that there is no need for a subsequent mobilization wave due to the success of ongoing Russian crypto-mobilization efforts. [43] Putin is likely aware that a second mobilization wave would be widely unpopular and likely remains concerned that such a measure would generate widespread discontent. Putin may nevertheless determine in the future that force generation requirements in Ukraine outweigh the risks of domestic discontent, and he may become less concerned about public sentiment after his assured reelection in March 2024.

Ukrainian special services conducted a drone strike on one of Russia’s largest metallurgical plants on the night of February 23-24. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported that sources stated that the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) and the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) organized a drone strike on the Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant (NLMK) in Lipetsk and that damage will stop production at the plant for a long time.[44] Lipetsk Oblast Governor Igor Artamonov claimed that Russian forces intercepted two drones in Lipetsk Oblast and that the plant’s operations were not significantly affected.[45] An NLMK representative claimed that the plant does not supply products to Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, likely in an attempt to downplay the extent of NLMK’s involvement in fulfilling contracts for the Russian government and defense industrial base (DIB).[46] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) reported in July 2023 that NLMK won contracts to supply steel to the Izumrud plant in Vladivostok, which the Russian Federal Agency for State Property Management controls and which produces artillery control systems, drone engines, and systems for dropping explosives from drones.[47] RFE/RL also reported that NLMK supplied steel to

state-owned enterprises involved in the production of nuclear weapons from 2014 to at least 2019. [48] Vladimir Lisin owns NLMK and is one of Russia's top three richest oligarchs.[49]

Ukrainian reporting indicated that the A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft shootdown on February 23 temporarily halted Russian aviation operations elsewhere in the theater. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian forces ordered five Su-35 fighter aircraft to terminate ongoing combat missions following the A-50's destruction and that some of these missions included conducting airstrikes near recently captured Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast. [50] Ukrainian media reported that sources in Ukrainian security services also stated that Ukrainian forces shot down the aircraft with a modernized S-200 air defense system and that all 10 crewmembers of the Russian A-50 died in the crash.[51]

Russian information space actors continued responding to the February 23 A-50 shootdown and largely denied that Ukraine is responsible for the downing of any recent Russian aircraft. Russian milbloggers continued to claim on February 23 and 24 that Russian forces were responsible for shooting down the A-50, but offered many different theories about the shootdown. One prominent milblogger claimed that Russian authorities are investigating a Russian S-400 crew for shooting down the A-50 while trying to intercept Ukrainian missiles targeting the A-50.[52] Another milblogger claimed that a Russian air defense crew purposefully targeted the A-50.[53] Other milbloggers continued to claim that Ukrainian forces could not have shot down the A-50 because the aircraft was out of range of Western-provided Patriot air defense systems and complained that Russian air defenders are so systemically incompetent that they shot down five of their aircraft in February 2024.[54] A prominent Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger dissented, however, expressing disbelief that Russian air defenses are so incompetent as to have shot down so many Russian aircraft in such a short period and attributed the shootdown to Ukrainian forces instead.[55]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine continues to defend against Russian aggression and the Kremlin's attempt to destroy Ukrainian statehood and identity despite growing difficulties two years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion.
- Ukraine's European and Canadian partners commemorated the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion by committing additional aid to Ukraine and discussing Ukraine's integration into the European Union (EU).
- Russian opposition media estimated that upwards of 75,000 Russian personnel have died in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues to highlight Russian Central Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev and Russia's seizure of Avdiivka.
- Mordvichev highlighted Russian technological and tactical adaptations in the Russian seizure of Avdiivka in a likely effort to address persistent criticisms of Russian forces in Ukraine.
- Senior Russian military officials likely are attempting to deflect responsibility for high-profile apparent Russian war crimes away from themselves and onto mid- and low-level Russian commanders.
- A recent Russian opinion poll indicates that Russian sentiments about the war in Ukraine have largely remained unchanged in recent months, but notably suggests that another mobilization wave would be widely unpopular.
- Ukrainian special services conducted a drone strike on one of Russia's largest metallurgical plants on the night of February 23-24.
- Ukrainian reporting indicated that the A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft shot down on February 23 temporarily halted Russian aviation operations elsewhere in the theater.
- Russian information space actors continued responding to the February 23 A-50 shootdown and largely denied that Ukraine is responsible for the downing of any recent Russian aircraft.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on February 24.
- Indian authorities have asked Russian authorities for the "early discharge" of Indian citizens fighting for Russia in Ukraine.
- The Russian government continues efforts to support infrastructure and logistics development in occupied Ukraine likely to support the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and solidify Russian control over occupied areas.

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

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

February 23, 2024, 6:30pm ET

Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft on the night of February 23 – the second such aircraft shot down in 2024. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk and the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Russian A-50 near Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai over the Sea of Azov Coast.^[1] Footage posted on February 23 shows a fixed-winged aircraft falling, and geolocated footage shows a significant fire with secondary detonations near the Trudovaya Farm northwest of Staroderevankovskaya, Kanevskoy Raion in northern Krasnodar Krai (northeast of Primorsko-Akhtarsk).^[2] Additional footage posted on February 23 shows mangled aircraft parts, and it is very unlikely that Russian forces will be able to repair the A-50 or that the crew survived the crash.^[3] Krasnodar Krai authorities reported that an unspecified Russian aircraft crashed near the Trudovaya Farm but did not specify a cause.^[4] Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russian forces use the A-50 aircraft to coordinate Russian air and air defense activity.^[5] The destruction of the Russian A-50 aircraft in mid-January led to a temporary reduction in tactical Russian aviation activity over the Sea of Azov.^[6]

Russian ultranationalists are increasingly attributing the shootdown of Russian aircraft to Russian rather than Ukrainian air defenses. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces mistakenly shot down their own A-50 aircraft and accused the Russian military of systemic issues that it must fix to avoid further friendly fire incidents.^[7] One milblogger noted that A-50 aircraft and its highly specialized crew are scarce resources for Russia that it cannot easily replace.^[8] The milbloggers specifically denied Ukrainian and Russian reporting that Ukrainian forces shot down the A-50 on February 23 and connected this shootdown to their prior denials that Ukrainian forces were responsible for the A-50 and Il-22 shootdowns on January 15.^[9] The milbloggers have also attributed recent Ukrainian downings of Russian Su-34 and Su-35 fighter jets to friendly air defense fire and criticized reports attributing them to Ukraine.^[10] Russian milbloggers may be refusing to attribute any successes to Ukrainian forces as part of wider efforts in the Russian information space to demoralize Ukrainians and convince Russians that victory is assured. Recent Kremlin rhetoric has focused on portraying Russia as able to outlast Ukraine's willingness and ability to fight, including outlasting Western military support for Ukraine, and Russian milbloggers' consistent claims of ineffective Ukrainian air defenses and other battlefield capabilities are congruent with this disinformation campaign.^[11] Ukrainian shootdowns of Russian strategic-level aircraft, especially twice within mere weeks of each other, severely undermine this Russian narrative. The milbloggers' enthusiasm for attributing staggering incompetence to Russia's own air defenders—the only possible explanation for multiple instances of friendly fire taking down the aircraft helping coordinate the air defenders themselves—is odd.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are planning future counteroffensive operations, although delays in Western security assistance will likely continue to generate uncertainty and constraints on these operations. Zelensky stated in an interview with Fox News published on February 22 that Ukrainian forces will prepare for new counteroffensive operations in 2024 but that their primary objective is to continue defending Ukrainian territory.^[12] Zelensky acknowledged that materiel shortages are complicating ongoing Ukrainian operations, particularly in eastern Ukraine.^[13] ABC News reported on February 22 that US officials assess that Ukrainian forces will begin to face critical shortages of ammunition and air defense missiles in late March 2024 and that these shortages will become increasingly significant through the spring and summer of 2024.^[14] Materiel shortages are likely forcing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel, and delays in Western security assistance will likely continue to create uncertainty in Ukrainian operational plans and restrictions on preparations for future counteroffensive operations.^[15] ISW continues to assess that it would be problematic for Ukraine to cede the theater-wide initiative to Russia for longer than is necessary, however, as Ukraine would risk consuming resources it had hoped to conserve for counteroffensive operations on efforts to stop continued Russian attacks.^[16] Continued delays in security assistance and persisting materiel shortages may force Ukrainian forces to make tough decisions about how to allocate resources between potential operationally significant counteroffensive operations and ongoing efforts to hold ground, however.

Ukraine-based open-source organization Frontelligence Insight reported on February 22 that Russian forces are storing missiles and ammunition in previously abandoned facilities near the Russo-Ukrainian border and in occupied Ukraine to shorten and bolster Russian logistics lines.^[17] Frontelligence Insight reported that satellite imagery shows that Russian forces began storing S-300 missiles, artillery shells, and possibly multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) ammunition

at a previously abandoned farm in Voronezh Oblast in late July 2023. Frontelligence Insight stated that the facility is roughly 50 kilometers from the Russo-Ukrainian border and likely serves as a supply facility for Russian air defense units operating in the area. Frontelligence Insight reported that Russian forces have been actively repurposing facilities near the border and in occupied Ukraine since 2022 in order to create more robust and decentralized logistics lines and that improved Russian logistics will support Russian efforts to counter large Ukrainian offensive operations in 2025. Ukrainian forces have previously used Western-provided HIMARS to strike Russian ammunition depots and interdict Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) in occupied Ukraine to set favorable conditions for the Kharkiv counteroffensive in September 2022 and force Russian forces to withdraw from west (right) bank Kherson Oblast in November 2022.[18] These Ukrainian strikes forced Russian forces to array their logistics assets further from the frontline to the detriment of frontline forces, and Ukrainian forces would likely be able to achieve a similar effect with sufficient quantities of weapons systems capable of striking military assets deeper in occupied Ukraine and Russia.[19] Ukrainian officials have repeatedly promised to abide by Western governments' wishes that Ukraine not use Western-provided systems against military targets in Russia's internationally-recognized territory.[20]

Ukrainian officials stated that the probability of a Russian ground attack on Ukraine from Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, is low following reports that Transnistrian authorities may call for or organize a referendum on annexation to Russia on February 28. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated on February 23 that claims that Transnistrian authorities will call for Russian annexation are intended to "shake up" the information space and create socio-political tension.[21] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated on February 22 that information that Transnistrian authorities will call for Russian annexation is "unconfirmed."^[22] Humenyuk stated that Russian forces conducted missile strikes against Odesa City on the night of February 22 to 23 to place additional pressure on the region and the ongoing "stormy situation" in Moldova and that Ukrainian forces have not observed any military activity in Transnistria that could threaten Ukraine.[23] ISW has not observed any indications suggesting that the limited Russian force grouping in Transnistria may attempt to conduct ground operations that could threaten Ukraine, and ISW does not assess that that force grouping is capable of launching a meaningful ground operation against Ukraine. ISW issued a warning forecast on February 22 and assessed that Transnistrian officials may call for a referendum on annexation to Russia to support Russian hybrid operations intent on politically and socially destabilizing Moldova.^[24] ISW's warning reflects threats to Moldova's stability rather than Ukraine's military situation.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia "essentially" froze its participation in the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations. Pashinyan stated in a February 22 interview with French outlet *France 24* that Armenia "essentially" froze its participation in the CSTO because the CSTO "failed to fulfill its obligations in the field of security" to Armenia, particularly in 2021 and 2022.^[25] ISW previously observed that Armenia appeared to be effectively abstaining from participation in the CSTO after Pashinyan and Armenian representatives did not attend several consecutive CSTO events in mid to late 2023.^[26] Pashinyan reiterated the importance of the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration that founded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and recognized the territorial integrity of its 11 signatories, including Russia and Ukraine. Pashinyan stated that "what is happening in Ukraine is a violation of the Alma-Ata Declaration" and that Armenia is "seriously concerned." Pashinyan responded to reports of Russian military police at the 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia detaining a Russian citizen for desertion in December 2023.^[27] Pashinyan stated that Armenian authorities are investigating the incident and that Armenia "cannot tolerate illegal actions on [its] territory." Kremlin newswire TASS claimed that Pashinyan "suspended" Armenia's membership in the CSTO, despite Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's statement that Armenia had not sent an official notification of its suspension of CSTO membership.^[28] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) rejected Pashinyan's statement that the CSTO has failed to fulfill its obligations to Armenia and criticized Armenia for inviting observers from the European Union (EU) instead of the CSTO to Armenia, likely referencing the recent increase in EU observers on the Armenian side of the Armenian-Azerbaijan border.^[29] Several Russian milbloggers criticized Pashinyan's policies and blamed him for deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations.^[30]

The US, United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and the European Union (EU) announced new sanctions packages aimed at constraining Russia's war effort in Ukraine. The US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced that it is sanctioning almost 300 individuals and entities and 500 targets to mark the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[31] OFAC placed sanctions on Russian financial infrastructure supporting the Russian war effort and on Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces (MODAFL) for its role in supplying components for the Russian drone production facility in Alabuga, Republic of Tatarstan.^[32] OFAC also placed sanctions on 26 third-country entities and individuals in 11 countries, including China, Serbia,

and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[33] The UK announced 50 new sanctions measures against elements of Russia's defense industrial base (DIB), Russian importers and manufacturers of machine tools, and oil traders and shipping management firms that have facilitated the transfer of Russian oil below the G7's price cap.[34] Canada announced sanctions against 10 individuals and 153 entities primarily associated with Russia's DIB.[35]

The EU adopted its 13th sanctions package that includes sanctions designations against 106 individuals and 88 entities also primarily from Russia's DIB.[36] The 13th EU sanctions package against Russia places sanctions on 10 Russian entities and individuals involved in the shipping of armaments from North Korea to Russia, a Russian individual and entity heavily involved in sanctions evasion, and 15 individuals and two entities involved in the forced transfer, deportation, and military indoctrination of Ukrainian children.[37] The EU is also placing sanctions on third-country companies that have assisted Russia's DIB, including four Chinese companies and one company each from Kazakhstan, India, Serbia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft on the night of February 23 – the second such aircraft shot down in 2024.
- Russian ultranationalists are increasingly attributing the shootdown of Russian aircraft to Russian rather than Ukrainian air defenses.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces are planning future counteroffensive operations, although delays in Western security assistance will likely continue to generate uncertainty and constraints on these operations.
- Ukraine-based open-source organization Frontelligence Insight reported on February 22 that Russian forces are storing missiles and ammunition in previously abandoned facilities near the Russo-Ukrainian border and in occupied Ukraine to shorten and bolster Russian logistics lines.
- Ukrainian officials stated that the probability of a Russian ground attack on Ukraine from Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway region of Moldova, is low following reports that Transnistrian authorities may call for or organize a referendum on annexation to Russia on February 28.
- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia “essentially” froze its participation in the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.
- The US, United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and the European Union (EU) announced new sanctions packages aimed at constraining Russia's war effort in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces made confirmed advances near Kremenchuk, and Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kremenchuk, Bakhmut, and Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on February 23 that international sanctions are degrading the quality of Russian missiles amid continued Russian efforts to increase missile production.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) provided additional details on February 22 about the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from Ukraine to Belarus.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 22, 2024

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

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

February 22, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on February 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev said that Russia would likely have to seize Kyiv sooner or later while identifying Russia's possible further territorial objectives in Ukraine. Medvedev responded in an interview published on February 22 to a question asking if there will “still be any part of Ukraine left that [Russia] will consider as a legitimate state, whose borders [Russia] will be ready to recognize.”[1] Medvedev stated that Russia must “ensure its interests” by achieving the goals of the “special military operation” as laid out by Russian President

Vladimir Putin – referring to Russian demands for Ukraine’s “demilitarization,” “denazification,” and neutrality. Medvedev reiterated Russia’s intention of changing the in Ukraine, stating that the Ukrainian government “must fall, it must be destroyed, it must not remain in this world.” Medvedev claimed that Russia must create a “protective cordon” in order to protect against “encroachments on [Russia’s] lands,” including shelling and active offensive operations. Medvedev stated that he does not know where Russia should “stop” but that Russia “probably” must seize and occupy Kyiv “if not now then after some time.” Medvedev claimed that Kyiv is historically a “Russian” city from where “international” threats to Russia’s existence currently originate. Medvedev also labeled Odesa a historical “Russian” city. Putin similarly emphasized on January 31 the idea of a “demilitarized” or “sanitary” zone in Ukraine.[2] ISW previously assessed that Putin’s statements about creating a “protective” zone in which Russia’s claimed and actual territories are out of Ukrainian firing range actually mean that Russia cannot accept the existence of any independent Ukraine with the ability to defend itself. [3] Medvedev, however, also claimed that “if … something remains of Ukraine,” then it “probably” has a low chance of survival and reiterated his previous comments about a possible Ukrainian rump state in Lviv Oblast while alluding to the fact that this area was Polish territory earlier in history.[4] Medvedev’s comments continue to indicate that the Kremlin has returned to its domestic narrative that Russia is fighting the war to “liberate its historic lands.”[5]

Medvedev’s mention of Russia’s possible intentions to occupy Odesa may be worth noting in light of recent developments in the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Transnistria in Moldova, the southern tip of which is about 50 kilometers from the city. Transnistrian authorities recently announced that the Transnistrian Congress of Deputies is planning to meet on February 28.[6] ISW forecasts that deputies may initiate a new referendum seeking annexation by Russia or propose or demand action on a 2006 referendum that called for Transnistria’s annexation by Russia.[7] ISW has not observed clear indications of Russian military preparations to intervene in Transnistria or Moldova more generally, and Russian military intervention would be challenging for Moscow since Moldova and Transnistria are landlocked and accessible only through Romanian or Ukrainian territory.[8]

Medvedev also described Russian plans to repress Ukrainian citizens in occupied Ukraine. Medvedev claimed that Ukrainian citizens in occupied Ukraine who “harm” (vredyat) Russia must be “exposed and punished, sent to Siberia … for re-education in forced labor camps.”[9] Stalin-era show trials and repressions starting in the 1920s and 1930s similarly targeted saboteurs (*vrediteli*), particularly in the agricultural sphere.[10] Medvedev’s usage of Stalin-era purge rhetoric is significant. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky also openly discussed – and attempted to defend – the illegal Russian occupation policies, including the forced deportation of Ukrainian citizens who oppose Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and possibly even alluded to Russian occupation forces’ summary executions of Ukrainian citizens.[11]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) leaders and Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov on February 21 and 22. Putin attended the “Games of the Future” in Kazan alongside Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov, Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon.[12] Putin also met with Minnikhanov and former head of Tatarstan Mintimer Shamaiev to discuss the construction of a new unspecified research and development center in Sibur, Tatarstan.[13] CTP-ISW previously reported that Minnikhanov visited Iran, likely to discuss Russo-Iranian defense industrial and military cooperation. [14] Minnikhanov’s visit was particularly noteworthy given his trip to the Esfahan Province, where several prominent Iranian defense industrial and military sites are located and considering that Iran is helping to construct a military drone manufacturing facility in the “Alabuga” Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Tatarstan. Minnikhanov also has previous ties to authorities in Gagauzia, a pro-Russia autonomous region of Moldova (although separate from Transnistria), which is notable given ISW’s February 22 warning forecast about a possible Russian hybrid operation against Moldova.[15]

Ukrainian forces conducted another successful strike against a Russian training ground in occupied Kherson Oblast on February 21 and likely inflicted significant casualties. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk reported on February 22 that a Ukrainian strike killed nearly 60 Russian servicemen at a Russian training ground in occupied Podo-Kalynivka, Kherson Oblast.[16] Humenyuk stated that the targeted Russian assault groups were training to conduct operations near Krynyk.[17] Footage published on February 21 shows the strike, which reportedly killed members of the Russian 328th Airborne Assault (VDV) Regiment (104th VDV Division), 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet), and 81st Self-Propelled Artillery Regiment (likely a reconstituted Soviet-era unit).[18] Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian command for conducting training exercises within the range of Ukrainian drones and HIMARS systems and advocated for updated training policies that account for the threat of Ukrainian strike systems and better protect Russian servicemen.[19] Some Russian milbloggers noted that this strike follows the

February 20 Ukrainian HIMARS strikes against a Russian training ground near Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast, which reportedly killed “dozens” of Russian military personnel.[20]

Ukraine’s European and Western allies continue to ramp up their support for Ukraine. The Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced a new military aid package for Ukraine on February 22 valued at 1.7 billion Danish kroner (\$228 million). This package includes 15,000 155mm shells jointly produced with the Czech Republic, air defense materiel and ammunition, mine clearance equipment, drones, radar, and communication equipment.[21] Denmark also signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement with Ukraine.[22] UK Defense Minister Grant Shapps announced that the UK is sending 200 Brimstone anti-tank missiles to Ukraine.[23] New Zealand also announced a new aid package for Ukraine valued at 25.9 million NZD (\$15.4 million), including humanitarian aid and funding for other international funds that support Ukraine’s weapons acquisition, recovery, and reconstruction.[24] The German Bundestag approved additional military support to Ukraine, including unspecified long-range weapons systems and ammunition, but rejected a bill that called for Germany to provide Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine.[25]

Russian opposition outlet Proekt reported on February 22 that the Russian government has subjected at least 116,000 Russians to criminal and administrative charges since the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s fourth term in office in 2018.[26] *Proekt* reported that Russian authorities pursued criminal charges against 11,442 people for politically motivated charges, including extremism, justifying terrorism, discrediting the Russian military, and spreading “fake” information about Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2018-2023.[27] *Proekt* noted that Russian authorities brought administrative charges against an additional 105,000 people for charges related to speech, conscience, and assembly, including at protests.[28] *Proekt* reported that Russian authorities initiated 5,829 cases for crimes against the state in this time period, including espionage, disclosure of state secrets, cooperation with foreign organizations, and for refusing to participate in the war in Ukraine. [29] *Proekt*’s partner organization *Agenstvo Novosti* noted that Russian authorities have tried 329 people for disclosing state secrets since 2018, more than the Soviet Union did during the entirety of the Cold War.[30] *Proekt* reported that Russian authorities have tried over 13,000 people under criminal statutes introduced due to the war in Ukraine, including spreading fake information and discrediting the Russian military, including roughly 4,500 military personnel punished for new articles related to conduct in the military or on the battlefield.[31] *Proekt* reported that Russian authorities have pursued over 600,000 cases for insubordination against, insulting, and violence against Russian government officials and over 159,000 cases for violating pandemic restrictions in this timeframe. [32] While it is likely that some and even many of these cases are legitimate, the Kremlin has increasingly weaponized the Russian criminal justice system to crack down on domestic dissent against the war and Putin’s autocratic rule to consolidate control over domestic Russian society. [33] *Proekt* noted that the number of political repression-related cases initiated has sharply increased since 2022 and that many of the cases are dubious, either due to officials’ obfuscation of the criminal case itself or because they are prosecutions of a fake or overblown crime to cover up another misdeed.[34]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on February 22 that the Kremlin does not regard Russian military correspondents (*voyenkory*) and milbloggers as participants of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, shortly after the suicide of a prominent Russian milblogger on February 21. Peskov stated that it would be wrong to linearly equate *voyenkory* to Russian servicemen fighting in Ukraine because they do not bear arms.[35] Peskov implied that Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a similar opinion and noted that Russian military correspondents’ contributions to the war effort should be acknowledged in their own distinct category, despite the fact that many Russian milbloggers do in fact bear arms and engage in combat operations, among other tasks that military personnel perform.[36] Peskov’s statement follows the Russian information space’s widespread discussion of the suicide of Russian serviceman and independent milblogger Andrei Morozov (alias Boytsovskiy Kot Murz).[37] Morozov served in the Russian 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People’s Republic’s [LNR] Army Corps) while simultaneously maintaining a Telegram channel with over 100,000 followers — where he avidly criticized the Russian military command and senior Russian political figures — and coordinating aid provisions to Russian frontline forces. Morozov blamed the Russian military command and propagandists for triggering his decision to commit suicide after an abusive Russian military commander ordered him to delete his reports about high Russian personnel losses around Avdiivka. The timing of Peskov’s remarks is notable and may reflect a broader Kremlin campaign to consolidate a monopoly over the Russian military correspondent and milblogger community. The Kremlin has been increasingly collaborating with *voyenkory* who work as frontline correspondents, and ISW observed an increase in reports about persecutions against milbloggers who perform humanitarian or combat operations in addition to maintaining Telegram channels.[38] Russian officials have previously threatened to restrict certain milbloggers from reporting on the frontlines unless they possess Kremlin-issued “press” vests, and the Kremlin may be attempting

to eliminate the independent class of milbloggers and replace them with Kremlin-affiliated *voyenkory*.
[39]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev said that Russia would likely have to seize Kyiv sooner or later while identifying Russia's possible further territorial objectives in Ukraine.
- Medvedev's mention of Russia's possible intentions to occupy Odesa may be worth noting in light of recent developments in the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Transnistria in Moldova, the southern tip of which is about 50 kilometers from the city.
- Medvedev also described Russian plans to repress Ukrainian citizens in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) leaders and Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov on February 21 and 22.
- Ukrainian forces conducted another successful strike against a Russian training ground in occupied Kherson Oblast on February 21 and likely inflicted significant casualties.
- Ukraine's European and Western allies continue to ramp up their support for Ukraine.
- Russian opposition outlet *Proekt* reported on February 22 that the Russian government has subjected at least 116,000 Russians to criminal and administrative charges since the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin's fourth term in office in 2018.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on February 22 that the Kremlin does not regard Russian military correspondents (*voyenkory*) and milbloggers as participants of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, shortly after the suicide of a prominent Russian milblogger on February 21.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- A Russian insider source claimed that Russian officials have postponed creating Rosgvardia's 1st Volunteer Corps from remaining Wagner Group detachments because of an ongoing rotation of former Wagner personnel in Africa.
- Russia continues to export its state policies on systemic religious persecution to occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 21, 2024

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

Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, George Barros, Amin Soltani, Alexandra Braverman, Brian Carter, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 21, 2024, 8:30pm ET

Prominent independent Russian milblogger Andrei Morozov reportedly committed suicide on February 21 after refusing the Russian military command's orders to delete his reports about high Russian casualty rates around Avdiivka.^[1] Morozov (also known under the alias Boytsovskiy Kot Murz) was a sergeant in the Russian 4th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic's [LNR] Army Corps) and an avid critic of the Russian military command and the Ministry of Defense (MoD). Morozov published a lengthy suicide note in which he stated that an unnamed Russian colonel ordered him on February 20 to remove his February 19 report that claimed that 16,000 Russian personnel died in combat during Russian offensive operations in Avdiivka.^[2] The colonel reportedly threatened to cut off ammunition and military equipment supplies to Morozov's unit if he did not delete his reports about the Russian military's heavy losses in seizing Avdiivka and told Morozov that he would not be able to change the current situation on the battlefield and that only presidential elections could trigger some changes. Morozov claimed that the colonel was likely following orders from the Russian military command, political leadership, and Russian propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov, who had sought to eliminate Morozov even prior to full-scale invasion. Morozov proclaimed that he tried to expose the truth about Russian battlefield realities and could no longer serve under this abusive colonel who assumed command over a "decapitated" brigade operating on a critical frontline and whose poor leadership made the situation worse for Russian forces. Morozov also implied that Russian authorities may have conspired to murder or arrest him and noted that he no longer saw the point in continuing his under-resourced fight against the incompetent Russian military bureaucracy.

Morozov used his suicide note to further discuss Russian military failures in Avdiivka and Donetsk Oblast. Morozov accused Russian generals of wastefully sacrificing thousands of servicemen to advance their military careers and implied that most Russian journalists lie about battlefield realities. Morozov also observed that the Russian military command had been increasingly using mobilized

personnel as barrier forces (specialized units that shoot their own forces who retreat or refuse to attack) and amplified a formal complaint from a mobilized Russian serviceman of the 1487th Regiment (a mobilized unit under the command of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic's [DNR] Army Corps), which the Russian military prosecutor's office rejected in early February. The mobilized serviceman complained that the 1487th Regiment was reduced to less than 30 percent of its strength due to the regiment's lack of reinforcements and rotations since the regiment's deployment in mid-January 2023. [3] The serviceman added that the commander of the 1st Army Corps, nicknamed "Krym" (Crimea), transferred 300 servicemen from the 1487th Regiment to the command of the Russian "Veterany" private military company (PMC) in November 2023 – most of whom died or were injured in the Avdiivka direction. The mobilized serviceman accused the "Veterany" PMC – which is reportedly staffed with convicts, drug addicts, and looters – of using mobilized personnel as barrier troops and refraining from participating in assaults. The mobilized serviceman added that his battalion completely lacked grenade launchers, mortars, and vehicles necessary for offensive operations. The mobilized serviceman also observed that Russian military medical staff refused to treat shellshocked servicemen and sent them back to the frontlines without medical examinations and that these issues systematically plague other Russian units.

The Russian information space, apart from select Russian propagandists and Kremlin-controlled milbloggers, largely mourned Morozov's death and blamed various military and political actors for his demise. Russian propagandist Yuliya Vityazeva implied that Morozov's suicide was the fault of his friends who failed to help him and are using his death to throw shade at the Russian MoD to profit off social media attention.[4] One Kremlin-affiliated milblogger acknowledged Morozov's humanitarian aid contributions to the Russian military but noted that Morozov's criticism of the Russian military command was so extremely negative that it helped Ukraine.[5] The milblogger added that it is unfortunate that Russia's enemies and "hostile" Telegram channel networks will use the news of Morozov's death to overshadow the Russian capture of Avdiivka. Wagner Group-affiliated milbloggers accused Solovyov and other propagandists of persecuting Morozov and mocking his death.[6] Supporters of the imprisoned Russian officer and ardent critic of the Russian military command, Igor Girkin, also condemned Morozov's harassment and highlighted his years-long commitment to supplying Russian forces with equipment and exposing Russian military failures. [7] Several milbloggers blamed Morozov's suicide on Russia's inability to value and internalize different opinions in pursuit of the common goal.[8]

Morozov's reported suicide will likely further the Kremlin's and the Russian MoD's efforts to consolidate a monopoly over the Russian information space. Morozov was one of the few remaining independent ultranationalist milbloggers who openly criticized the Russian military command and government after the Kremlin and the Russian MoD began to consolidate control over prominent Russian milbloggers in July 2023. Morozov, for example, previously warned about severely degraded Russian forces that were around Izyum, Kharkiv Oblast, in May-June 2022 – months prior to a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in the area in September 2022.[9] Russian officials have been increasingly targeting radical milbloggers and have arrested several milbloggers who have expressed critiques similar to Morozov's complaints.[10] ISW observed that many Russian milbloggers have drastically suppressed their critiques against Russian military command since the failed Wagner mutiny and reported pressure against Morozov may encourage more critical milbloggers to refrain from discussing Russian military failures. The Kremlin began an effort to co-opt pliant milbloggers in November 2022.[11]

A Ukrainian official denied a recent *New York Times* (NYT) report that Russian forces may have captured "hundreds" of Ukrainian soldiers during Ukraine's withdrawal from Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast.[12] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Dmytro Lykhovyi acknowledged on February 21 that Russian forces did capture some Ukrainian soldiers during Ukrainian forces' withdrawal from Avdiivka, but stated that reports about "hundreds" of Ukrainian soldiers being taken prisoner or otherwise being unaccounted for are false.[13] Lykhovyi suggested that the NYT's February 20 report is an extension of Russian information operations aimed at demoralizing the Ukrainian military and noted that Russian propagandists would have shared footage of large numbers of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) if Russia had actually captured that many Ukrainian soldiers. Lykhovyi noted that Russian media widely shared footage of large numbers of Ukrainian POWs after Russian forces seized Azovstal in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast in 2022.[14] ISW recently noted that "unaccounted for" personnel include those killed, wounded, and missing in action as well as captured, and ISW has still not observed any open-source evidence of Russian forces taking large numbers of Ukrainian forces prisoner.[15] ISW will continue to monitor the information space for evidence and will adjust its assessment as more evidence becomes available.

Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov claimed that Russian forces seized Avdiivka within a "fairly short time." The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage on February 21 of Gerasimov presenting state awards to Russian servicemen who

distinguished themselves during the seizure of Avdiivka and meeting with Russian Central Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev to discuss plans for future Russian operations in the Avdiivka direction.[16] This video is Gerasimov's first public appearance since December 29, 2023.[17] Gerasimov stated during his briefing with Mordvichev that Russian forces seized Avdiivka "in a fairly short time" that was preceded by a "long period of preparation."[18] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu similarly attempted to downplay heavy Russian losses and the difficulty of seizing of Avdiivka during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 20, portraying the seizure of Avdiivka as an astounding success with minimal losses despite the fact that the four-month-long operation resulted in an estimated 16,000 to 47,000 Russian personnel losses.[19] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated on February 21 that Russian forces lost 212 tanks in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) between January 1 and February 20, and a significant portion of Russian tank losses in the Tavriisk direction are likely the result of the Russian operation to seize Avdiivka.[20] Russian Deputy Defense Minister Viktor Goremykin also presented state awards to members of the Russian 90th Tank Division (41st Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) for their role in the seizure of Avdiivka. [21] Putin credited elements of the 90th Tank Division with seizing Avdiivka under Mordvichev's leadership on February 17.[22]

A Ukrainian HIMARS strike against an undefended Russian training ground near occupied Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast likely inflicted significant casualties, triggering a point of neuralgia for the Russian ultranationalist milblogger community. Ukrainian forces struck the Trudivske Training Ground east of Volnovakha on February 20, where at least three companies of the Russian 36th Motorized Rifle Brigade (29th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) had been training.[23] BBC Russian Service reported that the strike killed "dozens" of Russian military personnel and may have killed up to 60 personnel, which is consistent with publicly available photos reportedly documenting the aftermath of the strike.[24] Zabaykalsky Krai Head Aleksandr Osipov, where the 36th Motorized Rifle Brigade is based, claimed that reports of over 60 dead from the strike are "exaggerated." [25] Russian ultranationalist milbloggers reiterated their standard complaints about poor Russian decision-making following the strike, criticizing the Russian military command for concentrating Russian military personnel in a near-rear area despite suffering the consequences of previous Ukrainian strikes against Russian military concentrations within Ukrainian strike range.[26]

Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky openly admitted that Russian authorities are forcibly deporting Ukrainian citizens who oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine or "insult" Russia and possibly alluded to Russian occupation forces' summarily executing Ukrainian citizens. Balitsky stated in an interview published on February 20 that Russian occupation authorities "expelled a large number of families...who did not support the 'special military operation'" or who "insulted" Russia, including the Russian flag, anthem, or [Russian President Vladimir Putin]."[27] Balitsky justified these activities, which would constitute war crimes, claiming that the forcible deportation of Ukrainian families was for their own benefit, as occupation authorities would have had to "deal" with them in an even "harsher" way in the future, or other pro-Russian citizens would have killed them. Balitsky stated that occupation authorities "gave [the deported families] the opportunity to leave" but deported some by force after "giving them a water bottle" at the border. Balitsky also stated that occupation authorities had to make some "extremely harsh decisions that [he] will not be talking about" – a possible allusion to Russian occupation forces conducting summary executions of Ukrainian citizens. ISW has extensively reported on Russia's forced deportation of Ukrainian citizens, including children, and continues to assess that Russia is attempting to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, ethnicity, and identity, including through activities that appear to violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[28] Balitsky's statements about Russian deportations of Ukrainian citizens critical of the Russian occupation indicate that Russian deportation campaigns in part intend to Russify populations in occupied Ukraine through coercion and fear. Balitsky's willingness to openly discuss – and even defend – Russian occupation authorities' unlawful treatment of Ukrainian citizens in a publicized interview highlights the extent to which Russian authorities are supporting and promoting such policies.

Iranian sources told Reuters on February 21 that Iran provided hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) to Russia in early January.[29] The three unspecified Iranian sources said that Iran provided roughly 400 SRBMs to Russia, including the Fateh-110 and the Zolfaghah. The sources said that Iran has sent at least four SRBM shipments to Russia since Iran and Russia concluded a missile sale agreement in late 2023. One Iranian official said that Iran will continue to ship missiles to Russia because Iran is "allowed to export weapons to any country" it wishes, given the October 2023 expiration of UN missile restrictions on Iran under UNSC Resolution 2231. UNSC Resolution 2231 suspended nuclear-related UN sanctions and established sunset dates for missile and other arms-related sanctions on Iran. A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger said on February 21 that Iran began missile shipments to Russia in early January, following the UN missile restrictions expiration.[30]

Iran's arms sales to Russia are part of Iran's efforts to generate revenue to support its deteriorating economy.[31] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran could seek to acquire cash from Russia in return for supplying Russia with missiles.[32] The Prana Network hacker group published documents on February 4 alleging that Russia is paying Iran roughly \$4.5 billion per year to import the Iranian Shahed series drones.[33] Iran's provision of these missile systems could improve Russia's ability to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on February 21 that the acquisition of Iranian missile systems enables Russian forces to hit "remote Ukrainian targets."^[34] The Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat said on February 21 that possible Russian acquisition of the ballistic missiles is a "serious threat for Ukraine."^[35] This Russo-Iranian military exchange is part of the deepening military and security relationship between the two states that CTP has covered extensively.^[36] The expansion of these ties accelerated especially after Iran began providing military support to Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.^[37]

Russian authorities detained a dual US-Russian citizen in Yekaterinburg on suspicion of raising money for the Ukrainian war effort.^[38] Kremlin newswire TASS released footage of the woman in Russian custody, and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) described the woman as a 33-year-old resident of Los Angeles, California.^[39] Western media reported on February 21 that the woman's name is Ksenia Khavana and that Russian authorities may have detained Khavana for donating \$51 to a Ukrainian-American 501(c)(3) charity on February 24, 2022.^[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Prominent independent Russian milblogger Andrei Morozov reportedly committed suicide on February 21 after refusing the Russian military command's orders to delete his reports about high Russian casualty rates around Avdiivka.
- A Ukrainian official denied a recent *New York Times* (NYT) report that Russian forces may have captured "hundreds" of Ukrainian soldiers during Ukraine's withdrawal from Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov claimed that Russian forces seized Avdiivka within a "fairly short time."
- A Ukrainian HIMARS strike against an undefended Russian training ground near occupied Volnovakha, Donetsk Oblast likely inflicted significant casualties, triggering a point of neuralgia for the Russian ultranationalist milblogger community.
- Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky openly admitted that Russian authorities are forcibly deporting Ukrainian citizens who oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine or "insult" Russia and possibly alluded to Russian occupation forces' summarily executing Ukrainian citizens.
- Iranian sources told Reuters on February 21 that Iran provided hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) to Russia in early January.
- Russian authorities detained a dual US-Russian citizen in Yekaterinburg on suspicion of raising money for the Ukrainian war effort.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka, Donetsk City, Robotyne, and Krynyk.
- Belarusian and Kazakh companies are reportedly helping Russia circumvent international sanctions intended to deprive the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) of Western components and machines.
- Russian occupation administrations continue to foster patronage networks with Russian federal subjects.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 20, 2024

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

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 20, 2024, 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 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 2pm ET on February 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine has been defending itself against illegal Russian military intervention and aggression for 10 years.[1] Russia violated its commitments to respect Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and began its now decade-long military intervention in Ukraine on February 20, 2014 when Russian soldiers without identifying insignia (also known colloquially as “little green men” and, under international law, as illegal combatants), deployed to Crimea.[2] The deployment of these Russian soldiers out of uniform followed months of protests in Ukraine against pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych for refusing to sign an association agreement with the European Union (EU) that the Ukrainian Rada had approved.[3] The Yanukovych government killed and otherwise abused peaceful Ukrainian protestors, leading to an organized protest movement calling for Yanukovych’s resignation. This Ukrainian movement — the Euromaidan Movement — culminated in Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity during which the Rada voted to oust Yanukovych who then fled to Russia with the Kremlin’s aid. Russian President Vladimir Putin viewed these events as intolerable and launched a hybrid war against Ukraine as the Euromaidan Movement was still underway with the goal of reestablishing Russian control over all of Ukraine. Russia’s military intervention in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 violated numerous Russian international commitments to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Russia’s recognition of Ukraine as an independent state in 1991 and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia specifically committed not to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty or territorial integrity.[4]

Russia’s grand strategic objective of regaining control of Ukraine has remained unchanged in the decade since its illegal intervention in Ukraine began. Russia’s overarching strategic objective in Ukraine, as first manifested in the 2014 invasion of Crimea and the Donbas, has been and remains the destruction of Ukraine’s sovereignty and the re-establishment of a pro-Russian Ukrainian government subservient to Moscow’s direction. Russia began immediate efforts to dismantle and eradicate Ukrainian identity in Crimea, consolidate its military presence on the peninsula, and forcibly integrate Crimea into the Russian Federation along multiple avenues, all while promoting a parallel political subversion campaign to destroy Ukraine’s ability to resist dominant Russian influence.[5]

Russia worked hard to obfuscate its grand strategic objectives of regaining control of Ukraine between 2014 and the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. The Kremlin successfully employed disinformation to obfuscate Russia’s objectives in Ukraine for many Western leaders. Putin learned valuable lessons from the way the West responded to Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine and tailored Russia’s information operations to mask his grand strategic intent towards Ukraine in the years leading up to the 2022 full-scale invasion. Putin succeeded in convincing many Western leaders that Russia had limited objectives in Ukraine: that Moscow only sought control over Crimea, or that Russia sought only to occupy parts of eastern Ukraine, for example.[6] Russia also obfuscated its true intentions in Ukraine by promulgating the lie that Russia’s actions in Ukraine were aimed at preventing NATO expansion. The Euromaidan Movement and the Revolution of Dignity were never about NATO — they were about Ukraine’s desire to associate with the EU. In the years between 2014 and 2022, however, Russia managed to pollute the global information space with the fallacy that pro-NATO policies in Ukraine forced Russia’s hand. While the mechanisms Russia uses to cloak its intentions in Ukraine have adapted and evolved in the past decade, Russia’s grand strategic objectives of controlling Ukraine and denying Ukrainians their right to choose their own future have persisted and likely will not change until Russia is defeated. The Kremlin continues information operations to persuade Western audiences and leaders that Russia has limited objectives in Ukraine in order to fuel calls for negotiations on terms that would destroy Ukraine’s independence and damage the West.

Russian military intelligence is reportedly learning from its failures in recent years and has renewed efforts against NATO states.[7] The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) published a report on February 20 arguing that Russian special services aim to expand their capacity in several ways that pose strategic threats to NATO members, including rebuilding their recruitment, training, and support apparatus to better infiltrate European countries; adopting the Wagner Group’s former functions and pursuing aggressive partnerships with African countries to supplant Western partnerships; and using Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov to significantly expand Russian influence among Chechen and Muslim populations in Europe and the Middle East to ultimately subvert Western interests.[8] RUSI noted that Russian intelligence services have suffered a slew of intelligence failures in the past several years, including the Russian Federal Security Service’s (FSB) botched poisoning of now-deceased opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the FSB’s overconfident assessment of Russian military capabilities ahead of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the mass expulsion of Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) operatives from embassies across the globe, and *Bellingcat*’s exposure of the Russian Main Military Intelligence Directorate’s (GRU) Unit 29155’s

failed poisoning of defected Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal.[9] RUSI noted that the GRU reformed Unit 29155 and formed a “Service for Special Activities” to increase operational security and data security and is beginning to recruit individuals with no military experience to make it harder for the West to identify them.[10] RUSI reported that Russian Presidential Administration Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko is in charge of creating “special committees” to run information operations against the West, an assessment that is consistent with previous reporting from the *Washington Post* about purported Kremlin documents outlining Kiriyenko’s roll in wide-scale disinformation campaigns.[11]

The Ukrainian Center for Combating Disinformation similarly reported on February 20 that Russian special services have significantly increased their operations in NATO member states and Ukraine as part of large-scale disinformation efforts aimed at demoralizing the Ukrainian military.[12] Estonian Security Police, for example, reported that Estonian security services have detained 10 people for participating in alleged Russian special services activity in Estonia between December 2023 and February 2024.[13] Such subversive control tactics likely support the Kremlin’s near- and medium-term goals of spoiling Western military assistance to Ukraine and rebuilding intelligence capacities in support of long-term objectives against NATO states.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu preened themselves on the Russian seizure of Avdiivka. Shoigu briefed Putin about the seizure of Avdiivka and the wider Russian war effort in Ukraine in a February 20 meeting during which Putin and Shoigu both amplified an information operation that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) began on February 19 that aims to sow resentment and distrust against the Ukrainian command for an allegedly chaotic Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka.[14] Shoigu used the briefing and a subsequent interview with Kremlin newswire TASS to portray the five month long attritional Russian offensive operation to seize Avdiivka as an astounding success with minimal losses, despite the fact that Ukrainian and Russian estimates place Russian losses in the fight for Avdiivka between 16,000 and 47,000. [15] Shoigu argued that the Russian operation to seize Avdiivka was an operational success because Ukrainian forces had long fortified the settlement, but Shoigu did not claim that the seizure of the settlement would provide any specific operational benefits — as he recently claimed about the Russian seizure of other small settlements in Donetsk Oblast.[16] Shoigu also claimed that Russian forces conducted up to 450 high-precision airstrikes per day during the last days of the Russian effort to seize Avdiivka.[17] ISW assesses that Russian forces likely established temporary limited and localized air superiority during this time, and Shoigu is likely attempting to portray this temporary period as a persisting Russian capability.[18] Putin’s and Shoigu’s attempts to establish the seizure of Avdiivka as a major battlefield victory within the Russian information space likely aim to portray the Russian war effort in Ukraine as increasingly successful and portray Putin as a competent wartime president ahead of his assured reelection in March 2024.[19] The Kremlin’s efforts to highlight Russian success in Avdiivka also mutually supports increasing Russian efforts to use the seizure of the settlement to generate panic in the Ukrainian information space and weaken Ukrainian morale.[20]

Shoigu also claimed that Russian forces completely seized Krynyk in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, although available open-source visual evidence and Ukrainian and Russian reporting suggests that Ukrainian forces maintain their limited bridgehead in the area. Shoigu claimed during his briefing with Putin that Russian forces cleared Krynyk, although Putin claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky told him that a handful of Ukrainian personnel remained in the settlement.[21] Shoigu refuted Teplinsky’s claim and portrayed Russian efforts to eliminate the bridgehead as a successfully completed effort and praised unspecified VDV elements and the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade as distinguished units for their role in the operation, a typical Kremlin accolade following the Russian seizure of a tactical objective.[22] ISW has not observed any visual evidence of recent notable Russian advances near the limited Ukrainian bridgehead in and near Krynyk as of the time of this publication, and Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk reported that Ukrainian forces continue to gradually expand their bridgehead in the area. [23] Russian milbloggers claimed that regular positional fighting continued near Krynyk on February 19 and 20 and did not note any Russian success in the area.[24]

The Kremlin likely prematurely claimed the Russian seizure of Krynyk to reinforce its desired informational effects ahead of the March 2024 presidential election, although the Kremlin is likely setting expectations that the Russian military may fail to meet. Humenyuk identified Russian efforts to eliminate the Ukrainian bridgehead as a Russian effort to achieve informational objective ahead of the Russian presidential election, and Shoigu framed the Russian effort in east bank Kherson Oblast as similar to the seizure of Avdiivka.[25] Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have destroyed up to 3,500 Ukrainian personnel in east bank Kherson Oblast since the start of larger-than-usual Ukrainian ground operations in the area in October 2023.[26] Shoigu called the alleged Russian seizure of Krynyk the official end of the Summer 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive.[27] The Kremlin notably has delayed acknowledging the Russian seizure of the theater-wide initiative in

Ukraine, likely out of potential concerns about Russian capabilities to advance, and Shoigu likely formally announced the “end” of the Ukrainian counteroffensive to publicly highlight that Russia has the initiative.[28] The Kremlin’s willingness to rhetorically address the tempo and initiative of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine may be due to increasing Kremlin confidence about Russian prospects and a conscious effort to support Kremlin narratives about the war as the presidential elections approach. The Kremlin may increasingly claim battlefield victories in Ukraine without full assurances of Russian tactical and operational success to support informational efforts that simultaneously glorify Putin and demoralize Ukraine, although such increasing rhetorical confidence may create expectations in the Russian information space that the Russian military cannot meet. Chechen Akhmat Spetsnaz Commander Apty Alaudinov notably claimed that he expects that Russian forces will successfully complete Putin’s Special Military Operation by September 2024, a forecast that is extremely implausible.[29]

The New York Times (NYT) reported that the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka may have left hundreds of Ukrainian personnel “unaccounted” for. The NYT reported on February 20, citing two Ukrainian soldiers, that about 850 to 1,000 Ukrainian personnel “appear to have been captured or are unaccounted for” following the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka.[30] The NYT reported that unspecified senior Western officials stated that the range of apparent Ukrainian personnel losses “seemed accurate.” The NYT reported that some unnamed Western officials stated that Ukrainian forces failed to conduct an orderly withdrawal from Avdiivka on February 16 and 17, which resulted in an apparent “significant number of soldiers captured.” Personnel who are “unaccounted for” include those killed in action, wounded in action, missing in action, and captured. ISW has not yet observed open-source visual evidence of massive Ukrainian personnel losses or the Russian captures of Ukrainian prisoners at such a scale, and the Russian information space customarily displays such evidence when it has it. The lack of open-source evidence does not demonstrate that the NYT’s report is false, however, and ISW continues to monitor the information space for evidence on which to base an assessment of the outcome of the Ukrainian withdrawal. The Kyiv Independent reported on February 20 that some Ukrainian forces conducted a disorderly withdrawal from the Zenit strongpoint south of Avdiivka and experienced high losses.[31] ISW has observed that this Ukrainian position was the only identified tactically encircled position at the time of the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka.

Ukrainian officials launched an investigation into additional apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Conventions on prisoners of war (POWs) in Zaporizhia Oblast.[32] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General stated on February 20 that it launched an investigation into footage published on February 20 showing Russian forces executing three Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne on February 18. [33] The killing of POWs violates Article III of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs. [34] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General previously launched investigations into footage showing a Russian execution of Ukrainian POWs and Russian soldiers using Ukrainian POWs as human shields near Robotyne in December 2023.[35] ISW has recently reported on several such apparent war crimes in Zaporizhia and Donetsk oblasts.[36] Russian President Vladimir Putin made a point of remarking on Russia’s treatment of Ukrainian POWs on February 20, claimed that Russia holds POWs in accordance with international conventions, and declared that Russian forces must act in the same way in Avdiivka, likely in an attempt to deflect responsibility for high-profile apparent Russian war crimes away from himself. Putin is likely concerned about international repercussions for his subordinates’ actions.[37] The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Putin in March 2023, which has likely impeded his ability to travel internationally, and Putin may have explicitly addressed Ukrainian POWs given recent international attention on Russian atrocities in Ukraine in order to protect himself against another such international legal ruling against him.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine has been defending itself against illegal Russian military intervention and aggression for 10 years.
- Russia’s grand strategic objective of regaining control of Ukraine has remained unchanged in the decade since its illegal intervention in Ukraine began.
- Russia worked hard to obfuscate its grand strategic objectives of regaining control of Ukraine between 2014 and the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022.
- Russian military intelligence is reportedly learning from its failures in recent years and has renewed efforts against NATO states.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu preened themselves on the Russian seizure of Avdiivka.
- Shoigu also claimed that Russian forces completely seized Krynyk in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, although available open-source visual evidence and Ukrainian and Russian reporting suggests that Ukrainian forces maintain their limited bridgehead in the area.

- The Kremlin likely prematurely claimed the Russian seizure of Krynyk to reinforce its desired informational effects ahead of the March 2024 presidential election, although the Kremlin is likely setting expectations that the Russian military may fail to meet.
- The *New York Times* (NYT) reported that the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka may have left hundreds of Ukrainian personnel “unaccounted” for.
- Ukrainian officials launched an investigation into additional apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Conventions on prisoners of war (POWs) in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces made a confirmed advance west of Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- The Kremlin continues to promote Russia’s efforts to expand its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Zaporizhia Oblast occupation authorities are expanding public services provision in occupied parts of the oblast to consolidate bureaucratic control and generate dependencies on the occupation administration.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 19, 2024

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

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

February 19, 2024, 7:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on February 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian actors conducted a cyber operation regarding Russia’s seizure of Avdiivka, likely aimed at generating panic in the Ukrainian information space and weakening Ukrainian morale. Ukraine’s State Special Communication Service reported on February 18 that Russian actors hacked well-known Ukrainian media outlets and posted fake information on their social media channels.^[1] Ukrainian outlets *Ukrainska Pravda*, *Apostrophe*, *Liga.net*, and *Telegraf* reported on February 18 that their social media accounts were hacked and that hackers posted disinformation, specifically about the alleged widespread destruction of Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka.^[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued new claims about the Ukrainian withdrawal from Avdiivka on February 19 aimed at sowing resentment and distrust against the Ukrainian command, and other Russian sources amplified this information operation.^[3]

The tempo of Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka has reportedly dramatically slowed following the Russian seizure of Avdiivka. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Dmytro Lykhoviy reported on February 19 that the number of Russian attacks in the Avdiivka direction significantly decreased in the past day and that Russian forces are currently regrouping and conducting clearing operations in Avdiivka.^[4] Lykhoviy noted that Russian shelling and aviation activity has also significantly decreased in the area.^[5] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces have withdrawn to a new line of defense, which Ukrainian forces previously prepared in advance and fortified at “several levels.”^[6] Russian forces will likely have to conduct an operational pause before resuming significant offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction or will have to transfer additional reinforcements from other sectors of the front to the area to prevent operations near Avdiivka from culminating. Russian forces have reserves available for such reinforcement in other sectors, but ISW has observed no indication that the Russian command is moving those reserves toward Avdiivka at this time. Lykhoviy and Ukrainian Khortytsia Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash, on the contrary, stated that the Russian command will likely transfer Russian forces accumulated around Avdiivka to other, unspecified areas of the frontline in the near future.^[7] Yevlash stated that it will likely take Russian forces at least a week to transfer units from Avdiivka into battle in unspecified frontline areas.^[8] ISW has not yet observed any indications of how Russian forces will choose to allocate their manpower currently deployed to the Avdiivka area.

Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two more Russian fighter aircraft, a Su-34 and a Su-35S, in eastern Ukraine on the morning of February 19.^[9] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi reported that the Russian aircraft were striking Ukrainian positions with glide bombs when Ukrainian air defenses destroyed the planes.^[10] Ukrainian forces also shot down two Su-34s and one Su-35 over Donetsk Oblast on February 17 and another Su-34 in eastern Ukraine on February 18.^[11] Russian forces appear to have temporarily established limited and localized air superiority during the final days of their offensive operation to

seize Avdiivka, but Ukrainian air defenders appear to be challenging Russian air operations in eastern Ukraine once again.[12]

The White House is reportedly considering the provision of long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine in the event that Congress passes security assistance for Ukraine. NBC News reported on February 19 that two US officials stated that the White House is working to provide Ukraine with long-range ATACMS missiles in one of the first packages of military aid to Ukraine if Congress approves funding for further security assistance to Ukraine.[13] The US previously provided Ukraine with a limited number of a different type of ATACMS missile that have a shorter range.[14] Ukraine conducted successful ATACMS strikes in October 2023 but did not have enough supplies to sustain a strike campaign with ATACMS that could have presented operational challenges for Russian forces in Ukraine, particularly for Russian aviation operations and for the storage and supply of ammunition. [15] NBC News reported that the US officials also stated that the US has artillery systems and ammunition prepared for immediate transfer to Ukraine if Congress approves funding for US security assistance to Ukraine.[16] Ukrainian long-range strike capabilities allow Ukrainian forces to degrade Russian logistics at depth, and sufficient artillery systems and ammunition are crucial for effective Ukrainian counterbattery fire.

The Russian government eased the requirements for “compatriots” living abroad to apply to resettle in Russia. The Russian government announced on February 17 that it will no longer require “compatriots” abroad to prove their Russian-language proficiency when applying for resettlement in Russia if the individual is a Russian citizen permanently residing abroad; an individual who previously renounced Russian citizenship; an individual who was born or permanently resided in the Soviet Union and had Soviet citizenship; or an individual who has relatives who were born or permanently resided on territory formerly part of the Soviet Union or Russian Empire.[17] The Russian government stated that the changes in the requirements for resettlement in Russia follow a January 1, 2024, Russian presidential decree to “support compatriots from unfriendly countries.” The Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that the *Russkiy Mir* — purposefully vaguely defined as including ethnic Russians, Russian language-speakers, and any territory and people formerly ruled by the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire — includes Ukrainians and that Russia’s invasions of Ukraine were allegedly in defense of “compatriots abroad” in Ukraine.[18] Russian President Vladimir Putin further expanded the definition of the Russian World in a speech in late November 2023 to include “those who consider themselves carriers of the Russian language, history, and culture regardless of their national or religious affiliation.”[19] Putin’s stated goals of “uniting” and maintaining control over the *Russkiy Mir* is part of Russia’s larger imperialist ambitions, and Russia may continue to enact measures in accordance with the purposefully broad Russian World framework to manufacture territorial claims against neighboring states, including NATO members.

Emirati banks reportedly began to limit some transactions with Russian entities and close Russian citizens’ accounts in September 2023 due to the risk of Western secondary sanctions. Russian outlet *Vedomosti* reported on February 19 that three businesspeople working in the UAE and a representative of the Russian “Delovaya Rossiya” organization stated that banks in the UAE are not accepting deposits from or making payments to Russian entities and are closing accounts of companies whose owners are Russian citizens for unclear reasons.[20] *Vedomosti* reported that one of the sources stated that the “purges” began in September 2023. A source close to the Russian Cabinet of Ministers reportedly stated that the Russian government is aware of the problem but considers it “not critical and solvable.” *Vedomosti* sources indicated that the problems with the banks can be solved, for example by using local connections and avoiding any connections with entities under Western sanctions. *Bloomberg* reported in November 2023 that Emirati banks increasingly faced US pressure and began to work to prevent sanctions evasion by rejecting Russian firms.[21] At least two state-owned Chinese banks reportedly ordered reviews of their business with Russian clients in January 2024 and will sever ties with sanctioned Russian entities and entities with ties to the Russian defense industry.[22] Turkish banks have also reportedly started to close Russian companies’ accounts.[23]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan reiterated that Armenia does not support Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian–Armenian relations. Pashinyan stated on February 19 at the Munich Security Conference that “Armenia is not Russia’s ally in the matter of Ukraine.”[24] Pashinyan highlighted the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration that founded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and recognized the territorial integrity of its 11 signatories, including Russia and Ukraine.[25] Kremlin officials and mouthpieces have increasingly promoted narratives about Russia’s alleged continued influence in Armenia and criticized Pashinyan’s policies.[26]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian actors conducted a cyber operation regarding Russia's seizure of Avdiivka, likely aimed at generating panic in the Ukrainian information space and weakening Ukrainian morale.
- The tempo of Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka has reportedly dramatically slowed following the Russian seizure of Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down two more Russian fighter aircraft, a Su-34 and a Su-35S, in eastern Ukraine on the morning of February 19.
- The White House is reportedly considering the provision of long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine in the event that Congress passes security assistance for Ukraine.
- The Russian government eased the requirements for "compatriots" living abroad to apply to resettle in Russia.
- Emirati banks reportedly began to limit some transactions with Russian entities and close Russian citizens' accounts in September 2023 due to the risk of Western secondary sanctions.
- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan reiterated that Armenia does not support Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitri Medvedev claimed on February 19 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has recruited more than 53,000 military personnel since January 1, 2024.
- Russian authorities have reportedly returned Ukrainian children in occupied Ukraine and Russia to relatives in Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 18, 2024

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

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

February 18, 2024, 8pm ET

Ukrainian forces will likely be able to establish new defensive lines not far beyond Avdiivka, which will likely prompt the culmination of the Russian offensive in this area. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on February 18 that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces completely captured Avdiivka, advancing 8.6 kilometers in depth in the area, and that Russian forces continue offensive operations to capture additional territory in Donetsk Oblast.^[1] Several Russian milbloggers claimed on February 18 that Ukrainian forces lack well prepared defensive positions west of Avdiivka and that Russian forces will be able to advance further into western Donetsk Oblast behind "panicked" and "disorganized" Ukrainian forces withdrawing from Avdiivka.^[2] ISW has still not observed footage of disorderly Ukrainian withdrawals to support these Russian claims and would expect to observe such footage if the withdrawal was disorderly on a large scale given the normal patterns of Russian sources with access to such material. One Russian milblogger claimed that a large-scale collapse of the Avdiivka front is "unlikely" as Ukrainian forces withdraw to prepared defensive lines, however, indicating that the Russian understanding (or presentation) of Ukrainian defensive capabilities on this sector of the front differs from source.^[3]

Available imagery, which ISW will not present or describe in greater detail at this time to preserve Ukrainian operational security, does not support claims that Ukrainian forces lack prepared defensive positions west of Avdiivka. The Ukrainian command also recently committed fresh units to the Avdiivka front to counterattack advancing Russian forces and provide an evacuation corridor for Ukrainian units withdrawing from Avdiivka.^[4] These newly committed units are likely able to establish and hold defensive positions against Russian forces, degraded by their assaults on the town, west of Avdiivka. Russian forces, which have suffered high personnel and equipment losses in seizing Avdiivka, will likely culminate when they come up against relatively fresher Ukrainian units manning prepared defensive positions.

Delays in Western security assistance to Ukraine are likely helping Russia launch opportunistic offensive operations along several sectors of the frontline in order to place pressure on Ukrainian forces along multiple axes. Russian forces are currently conducting at least three offensive efforts—along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border, particularly in the directions of Kupyansk and Lyman; in and around Avdiivka; and near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast. After the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Avdiivka and the subsequent Russian claim of control over the entirety of Avdiivka, ISW and several Ukrainian and Western sources assessed that delays in Western security assistance, namely artillery ammunition and critical air defense systems, inhibited Ukrainian troops from defending against Russian advances in Avdiivka.^[5] Critical Ukrainian shortages in

Western-provided equipment and fears of the complete cessation of US military aid have forced Ukrainian troops to husband materiel along the entire front, which has likely encouraged Russian forces to exploit the situation and launch limited offensive operations outside of the Avdiivka area, which they have done along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area since early January 2024 and in western Zaporizhia Oblast over the past 48 hours. These Russian offensive efforts will likely hinder Ukrainian forces from preparing personnel and materiel for renewed counteroffensive operations, emphasizing the operational disadvantages that Ukraine will suffer if it simply digs in and attempts to defend for the rest of 2024 as some Western states and analysts advocate.[6]

Russian forces are likely seeking to take advantage of two windows of opportunity with the recent initiation of their simultaneous offensive operations—the period before the upcoming spring thaw and the nuanced dynamics of Western aid provision. Ukraine is heading into its *rasputitsa* season, the Spring period in which the frozen winter ground thaws and makes mechanized movement more difficult throughout the theater, thereby slowing (but notably not entirely stopping) offensive operations along the frontline. Some Russian milbloggers are already reporting that mud in southern Ukraine is inhibiting Ukrainian forces from bringing new reserves to Zaporizhia Oblast to reinforce against Russian offensive efforts, and these conditions will also likely slow Russian offensive momentum as the weather continues to warm.[7] Russian forces are likely trying to secure tactical advances throughout the theater while the terrain and weather generally favor offensive movement in order to exhaust and attrit defending Ukrainian forces as well as to secure favorable positions for future operations before the *rasputitsa* begins in earnest. The Russian military command, furthermore, likely realizes that security assistance from Ukraine's European partners, particularly promised European deliveries of artillery ammunition, will begin to have effects in the medium term, likely before Fall 2024, and is trying to take advantage of Ukraine's current shell hunger to pressure Ukrainian troops throughout the theater while Ukraine experiences a relative (but likely temporary) artillery disadvantage.[8] The eventual provision of more European security assistance to Ukraine, however, will not fill the gap in critical equipment that the full cessation of US military assistance would create, particularly with advanced air defense systems such as Patriot surface-to-air missiles. The scaling-up of European security assistance is necessary but not sufficient for Ukrainian forces to stabilize the front, let alone to regain the initiative in areas where Russian forces are pressing.

The Russian capture of Avdiivka after four months of intensified offensive operations exemplifies the way that Russian forces pursue offensive operations that do not necessarily set conditions for wider operational gains but still force Ukraine to commit manpower and materiel to defensive operations. Russian forces have been fighting near Avdiivka for most of the full-scale invasion thus far and intensified operations to capture the city in mid-October 2023.[9] In the subsequent four months since October, Russian forces managed to advance nearly nine kilometers in Avdiivka according to Russian estimates.[10] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated on February 18 that during this four month period, Russian forces lost over 47,000 personnel, 364 tanks, 248 artillery systems, 748 armored fighting vehicles, and five aircraft.[11] Russian forces were also unable to complete a full operational encirclement of Avdiivka within that four-month window, and Ukrainian forces appear to have been able to withdraw in mainly good order. A Russian milblogger and volunteer with the 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps [LNR AC]) remarked on the rate of Russian losses compared with the territory gained on February 17, suggesting that even some Russian sources are cognizant of the extremely high price these limited Russian gains have cost.[12] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces suffered 16,000 "irrecoverable losses" (likely those killed in action, whereas Tarnavskyi's estimate may have also included wounded) in the Avdiivka direction since October 2023.[13] The milblogger also sardonically noted that the tank regiments and tank divisions that were operating near Avdiivka "distinguished" themselves by advancing a few kilometers in four months and taking massive personnel losses.[14] By contrast, according to the milblogger, Ukrainian forces suffered far fewer losses and were able to withdraw to prepared defensive positions mostly on their own terms, meaning that exhausted and attrited Russian forces will now have to once again fight Ukrainian troops on new lines. Russian forces succeeded in drawing Ukrainian forces to Avdiivka and away from other areas of the front and forcing Ukrainians to use up already limited Ukrainian stores of critical equipment but did so without securing major operational gains. This outcome is likely to recur in ongoing offensive operations on the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border line and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

Russian forces have not yet demonstrated an ability to secure operationally significant gains or conduct rapid mechanized maneuver across large swaths of territory, and the capture of Avdiivka should not be taken as demonstrating this capability. ISW distinguishes between tactical gains, relevant at the tactical level of war in the near vicinity of the fighting, and operational gains which are significant at the operational level of war and affect large sectors of the entire front line. When ISW assesses that a given advance has or has not made "operationally significant" gains we are referring to this distinction. Since the intensification of Russian offensive

efforts in Avdiivka in October 2023, Russian forces managed to traverse fewer than 10 kilometers through and around Avdiivka. Avdiivka is nearly 60 kilometers from the Donetsk Oblast border, however. Russian forces would need to conduct widespread and competent cross-country maneuvers to reach the borders of the oblast in a period of less than years and would have to go even further and through more fortified territory to reach the Slovyansk-Kramatorsk area in northern Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces have not displayed the capability to conduct such maneuvers, either near Avdiivka or in any other sector of the front. Russian offensive efforts to take Kupyansk could plausibly force Ukrainians to the left bank of the Oskil River, but Russian forces in this area have remained largely impaled on small tactical positions in the Kupyansk direction for months.[15] Russian offensive efforts south of Orikhiv are unlikely to advance past Orikhiv itself or even to reach Orikhiv quickly, given the climatological challenges discussed above.

Ukrainian officials are investigating two instances of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war (POWs) in occupied Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office reported that it is investigating footage published on February 18 showing Russian forces executing six injured Ukrainian POWs near Avdiivka and footage showing Russian forces executing two Ukrainian POWs near Vesele (northwest of Bakhmut).[16] The killing of POWs violates Article III of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs.[17]

Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for failing to recognize 1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps (DNR AC) Commander Lieutenant General Sergei Milchakov and the "Veterany" Assault Brigade (Volunteer Corps) for aiding in the Russian capture of Avdiivka, highlighting continued tension between Russian regular and irregular forces. A prominent Russian milblogger complained that Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Russian Central Grouping of Forces commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev for capturing Avdiivka, but not Milchakov, who the milblogger claimed has led the 1st DNR AC since its previous commander's death in Popasna, Luhansk Oblast.[18] Russian milbloggers also complained that Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu did not credit the "Veterany" Assault Brigade with the Russian capture of Avdiivka, although noted that the Russian MoD later edited its statement to credit the "Veterany" Assault Brigade.[19] The Russian MoD may have edited its statement to credit the "Veterany" Assault Brigade in an effort to prevent wider complaints from spreading in the Russian ultranationalist information space and appeal to Russian volunteer servicemen (*dobrovoltsy*). Tension between Russian regular and irregular forces – especially the 1st DNR Army Corps and DNR-affiliated formations – has continued throughout the war despite, and likely in part because of, ongoing Russian efforts to formalize irregular formations.[20]

The Washington Post reported that the Kremlin has been orchestrating a large-scale effort to spread disinformation in the Ukrainian media since January 2023, corroborating recent Ukrainian official reports about Russian information operations that use fake Telegram channels to infiltrate the Ukrainian information space.[21] The *Washington Post* reported on February 16 that it gained access to more than 100 Kremlin documents obtained by unspecified European intelligence services that show that the Kremlin has been overseeing Russian troll farms that use social media and fake news articles on Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to penetrate Ukrainian media and promote various Kremlin narratives. These narratives include claims about exaggerated Ukrainian losses and how the West intends to replace Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, among many others. Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Kiriyenko reportedly tasked a team of Kremlin officials and political strategists, including Kiriyenko's deputy, Alexander Kharichev, who is reportedly known for "fixing" Russian elections to produce the Kremlin's desired outcome, to oversee these efforts in January 2023. The *Washington Post* reported that Russian trolls were producing over 1,300 texts and 37,000 comments on Ukrainian social media every week by March 2023. The documents reportedly indicate that Kiriyenko identified the effort's four key objectives at a meeting in January 2023: discrediting Ukrainian military and political leadership, splitting the Ukrainian elite, demoralizing the Ukrainian military, and disorienting the Ukrainian population. The documents reportedly showed that officials at nearly weekly meetings highlighted some of the fake posts in Ukrainian media that garnered high numbers of views, including a post alleging that the Ukrainian state is not helping the families of killed Ukrainian military personnel, which received two million views, and a post claiming that former Ukrainian commander-in-chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi could become the next Ukrainian president, which received 4.3 million views. Kiriyenko also reportedly tasked another deputy, Tatyana Matveeva, to oversee a similar effort aimed at spreading disinformation and fake news in European information spaces, including in France and Germany, and the team overseeing the information operations in the Ukrainian media tried to reuse the disinformation spread in European media, including allegations that Zelensky is involved in military procurement corruption schemes.[22] The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation reported on December 21, 2023, that Russian actors planned to promote several information operations aimed at degrading Ukrainian morale through a network of fake Telegram channels disguised as official accounts of Ukrainian regional officials and military brigades that would promote several narratives,

including those about alleged divisions between Ukrainian political and military leadership and allegations of Ukrainian government corruption.[23]

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced on February 18 that Denmark is donating its “entire artillery” to Ukraine.[24] The Danish government had not issued an official statement with details of the announcement at the time of this writing, and it is unclear if Denmark will give Ukraine all of its artillery guns, all of its artillery ammunition stocks, or both.

The US is reportedly turning to India and China to engage Russia about Russia’s reported intent to launch an unspecified anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on February 17 that US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken spoke with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at the Munich Security Conference about the possibility of Russia deploying a nuclear weapon into space that would, if detonated, disrupt American, Chinese, and Indian satellites and affect global communications systems. Blinken reportedly urged Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin about the matter. The NYT reported that Wang reiterated the importance of the peaceful use of outer space for China. The NYT stated that US officials agree that if Russia deployed a nuclear weapon into orbit in space, Russia would likely not detonate it but would keep it in low orbit as a deterrence measure. Reuters reported on February 15, however, that analysts following Russian space programs indicated that Russia is likely trying to deploy a nuclear powered-device to carry out attacks against satellites and not a weapon with a nuclear warhead.[25] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba met with Wang on February 17 to discuss Chinese-Ukrainian trade and the need for stable peace in Ukraine, suggesting that China is hesitant to support Russia’s war in Ukraine at the level Russia desires, as ISW continues to assess. [26]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces will likely be able to establish new defensive lines not far beyond Avdiivka, which will likely prompt the culmination of the Russian offensive in this area.
- Delays in Western security assistance to Ukraine are likely helping Russia launch opportunistic offensive operations along several sectors of the frontline in order to place pressure on Ukrainian forces along multiple axes.
- Russian forces are likely seeking to take advantage of two windows of opportunity with the recent initiation of their simultaneous offensive operations—the period before the upcoming spring thaw and the nuanced dynamics of Western aid provision.
- The Russian capture of Avdiivka after four months of intensified offensive operations exemplifies the way that Russian forces pursue offensive operations that do not necessarily set conditions for wider operational gains but still force Ukraine to commit manpower and materiel to defensive operations.
- Russian forces have not yet demonstrated an ability to secure operationally significant gains or conduct rapid mechanized maneuver across large swaths of territory, and the capture of Avdiivka should not be taken as demonstrating this capability.
- Ukrainian officials are investigating two instances of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war (POWs) in occupied Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for failing to recognize 1st Donetsk People’s Republic Army Corps (DNR AC) Commander Lieutenant General Sergei Milchakov and the “Veterany” Assault Brigade (Volunteer Corps) for aiding in the Russian capture of Avdiivka, highlighting continued tension between Russian regular and irregular forces.
- The *Washington Post* reported that the Kremlin has been orchestrating a large-scale effort to spread disinformation in the Ukrainian media since January 2023, corroborating recent Ukrainian official reports about Russian information operations that use fake Telegram channels to infiltrate the Ukrainian information space.
- Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced on February 18 that Denmark is donating its “entire artillery” to Ukraine.
- The US is reportedly turning to India and China to engage Russia about Russia’s reported intent to launch an unspecified anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space.
- Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance in western Zaporizhia amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on February 18.
- Russian occupation officials continue to use educational programs as means of Russifying occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 17, 2024

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

February 17, 2024, 7:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:40pm ET on February 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Please be advised: An expert analyst called our attention to the fact that we have not been using the doctrinal expression "Close Air Support" (CAS) in connection with Russian air operations around Avdiivka accurately. The analyst rightly pointed out that CAS requires close coordination with the maneuvering ground units, which ISW has not observed and does not assess has occurred. We used the expression (incorrectly) because the glide-bomb attacks were clearly meant to shape and support tactical actions, which is one of the purposes of CAS. But Russian air operations around Avdiivka were not properly CAS, and we were mistaken to use that expression. ISW apologizes for this mistake.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have established “full control” over Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast as Russian forces continued to advance in the settlement on February 17, and Ukrainian forces have likely withdrawn from Avdiivka. Shoigu reported to Russian President Vladimir Putin on the evening of February 17 that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces are completing the capture of Avdiivka and clearing areas where Shoigu claimed Russian forces had trapped Ukrainian forces.[1] Putin credited the 30th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]); 35th, 55th, and 74th Motorized Rifle Brigades (all of the 41st CAA, CMD); 1st, 9th, and 114th Motorized Rifle Brigades and 1454th Motorized Rifle Regiment and 10th Tank Regiment (all of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] Army Corps [AC]); and the 6th, 80th, and 239th Tank Regiments (all of the 90th Tank Division, 41st CAA, CMD) for capturing Avdiivka under the leadership of Russian Center Group of Forces commander Colonel General Andrei Mordvichev.[2]

Geolocated footage published on February 17 shows that Russian forces advanced into northern Avdiivka along the railway line, in the eastern part of the Avdiivka Coke Plant, and in the industrial area near the Avdiivka quarry in northeastern Avdiivka.[3] Additional geolocated footage shows that Russian forces advanced into central Avdiivka from the south and captured the City Administration and Palace of Culture buildings.[4] Russian milbloggers largely claimed that Russian forces captured most of Avdiivka except for some of the western outskirts and advanced up to Lastochkyne (west of Avdiivka), though some prominent milbloggers claimed that pockets of Ukrainian forces remain in the western part of the Avdiivka Coke Plant, in the Khimik Microraiion in southwestern Avdiivka, and in the residential area in southeastern Avdiivka.[5]

Ukrainian officials indicated that Ukrainian forces inflicted heavy losses on Russian forces during the defense of and withdrawal from Avdiivka — the Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Press Service reported that Ukrainian forces inflicted losses of 20,018 personnel, 199 tanks, and 481 armored combat vehicles in the Tavriisk direction (from Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) between January 1 and February 15, with the majority of those losses inflicted near Avdiivka.[6] A Ukrainian soldier reportedly operating near Avdiivka stated that Russian forces lost hundreds of personnel just on February 17 and suffered massive losses on February 16.[7] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that some Ukrainian forces were captured during the withdrawal from Avdiivka but that the withdrawal largely occurred according to plan and that Russian forces did not complete their intended encirclement of Ukrainian forces.[8]

Russian sources largely characterized the Ukrainian withdrawal as disorganized and costly and claimed that Russian forces managed to encircle large Ukrainian groups in Avdiivka, but ISW has observed no evidence supporting these Russian claims. Russian ultranationalist milbloggers largely amplified the same few videos of a handful of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) captured near Avdiivka to claim that Russian forces managed to surround large groups of Ukrainian forces in the settlement.[9] Russian milbloggers also claimed that Ukrainian forces suffered exorbitant losses in Avdiivka due to a disorderly withdrawal, and Shoigu similarly claimed that Ukrainian forces lost over 1,500 personnel in the past 24 hours.[10] Russian milbloggers usually publish and heavily amplify footage of the capture of Ukrainian POWs and footage of war dead during battles of high informational importance, and the footage that Russian milbloggers have amplified thus far is not consistent with Russian claims about Ukrainian casualties and the capture of Ukrainian POWs.[11] The Russian milbloggers also amplified limited footage of a handful of Ukrainian personnel withdrawing under fire to support claims that the withdrawal was disorganized, but this footage alone does not indicate that there were large chaotic Ukrainian withdrawals.[12] Some milbloggers also amplified footage showing Ukrainian forces walking freely in the open while withdrawing.[13]

The lack of footage supporting Russian claims that the withdrawal was not orderly or that Russian forces took many Ukrainian POWs does not by itself disprove the Russian claims, but this lack of such footage is very unusual for the information environment when Russian forces capture a settlement. The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) publishes extensive drone footage of areas in which the 1st DNR Army Corps operates, including the Avdiivka area, and Russian forces tend to publicize extensive Ukrainian losses to demonstrate the scale of their success.[14] Though the current Russian information space does not glorify battlefield horrors as much as Wagner Group affiliated sources did during the captures of Soledar and Bakhmut in winter and spring 2023, Avdiivka is such a prominent area of the front that the lack of filming or amplifying footage of such events is unusual if those events occurred as claimed.[15]

Russian forces appear to have temporarily established limited and localized air superiority and were able to provide ground troops with close air support during the final days of their offensive operation to capture Avdiivka, likely the first time that Russian forces have done so in Ukraine. The spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade operating near Avdiivka stated on February 17 that Russian forces launched 60 KAB glide bombs at Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka over the past day, and a Ukrainian soldier operating in the area stated that Russian forces launched up to 500 glide bombs at Avdiivka in recent days.[16] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces conducted 73 airstrikes in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) on February 14, a record number, as Russian forces intensified their tactical turning movement in Avdiivka.[17] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on February 17 that Russian forces launched 250 FAB glide bombs at one specific area in Avdiivka alone in the past 48 hours.[18] Russian sources widely credited the Russian use of glide bombs with allowing Russian forces to overcome Ukrainian defenses in Avdiivka, and some Russian milbloggers asserted that Russian forces have air superiority in the area.[19]

Russian forces have gradually increased their use of glide bombs throughout the theater since early 2023, but the recent mass use of glide bombs in Avdiivka is the first time that Russian aviation has used these bombs at scale to provide close air support to advancing infantry troops.[20] A Russian Storm-Z instructor claimed that Russian forces have previously struggled to conduct mass airstrikes in close air support operations and expressed hope that Russian aviation operations in Avdiivka will herald a change in Russian operations elsewhere along the frontline.[21] The Russian ability to conduct these mass strikes for several days in the most active part of the frontline suggests that Ukrainian forces were not able to deny them access to the airspace around Avdiivka, and Russian forces likely leveraged this temporary localized air superiority to facilitate the capture of much of the settlement.

Delays in Western security assistance may lead to further significant constraints on Ukrainian air defenses that could allow Russian forces to replicate the close air support that facilitated Russian advances in Avdiivka at scale in Ukraine. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated on February 17 that one of the main lessons learned from the defense of Avdiivka is that Ukrainian forces need modern air defense systems to prevent Russian forces from using glide bombs. [22] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukrainian air defenses need to shoot down the Russian Su-34 and Su-35 attack aircraft that launch the glide bombs in order to stop the strikes.[23] Glide bombs have a range up to 70 kilometers, and Russian forces widely began using the glide bombs in an effort to allow tactical aircraft to conduct strikes from further behind the frontline in order to minimize Russian fixed and rotary wing losses in Ukraine.[24] Ukrainian forces need large numbers of air defense systems that can effectively target Russian aircraft at these ranges. Ukrainian officials have stressed that Ukraine is facing a "critical shortage" of air defense missiles, and the *New York Times* reported on February 9 that American officials assess that Ukrainian air defense missile stocks will run out in March 2024 without further replenishment by Western security assistance.[25]

Limited effective air defense systems, dwindling air defense missile stocks, and continued Russian missile and drone strikes against rear population centers are likely forcing Ukraine to make difficult choices about what areas of the frontline receive air defense coverage.[26] Recurring temporary localized and limited Russian air superiority would likely allow Russian forces to more aggressively pursue operational advances along the frontline. Widespread interrupted air superiority would allow Russian forces to conduct routine large-scale aviation operations and bomb Ukrainian cities beyond the frontline to devastating effect.

Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down three Russian fighter aircraft—two Su-34s and one Su-35—over Donetsk Oblast on February 17, likely having committed scarce air defense assets to help cover the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Avdiivka. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces shot all three of the aircraft down while they were sortied to conduct glide bomb strikes.[27] Russian sources largely disputed the shootdowns, but claims diverged between various Russian milbloggers. Some Russian sources claimed that

Ukrainian sources are lying about the shootdowns, others claimed that the Su-34s returned to their base, but the fate of the Su-35 is unclear, and some others claimed that Russian forces accidentally shot down the Su-35 in a friendly fire incident.[28] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk posted Cospas-Sarat satellite data, however, that apparently shows the locations of the downed planes.[29] Ukrainian forces possess the capabilities to shoot down such high-value aviation assets when modern air defense systems and missiles are available and may have used those systems during the critical period of the withdrawal of Ukrainian ground forces from Avdiivka.[30]

Russian authorities arrested several hundred demonstrators on February 17 amid slightly larger demonstrations responding to imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny's death. Russian opposition news outlets reported that Russian law enforcement has detained at least 350 people in over 30 Russian cities as crowds gathered to lay flowers in honor of Navalny over the last two days, including an estimated 230 people on February 17 alone.[31] Russian opposition sources also published footage of unspecified Russian actors picking up flowers laid at the Solovetsky Stone in Moscow City and other temporary memorials to Navalny throughout Russia on the night of February 16 to 17, attempting to erase any evidence of previous demonstrations.[32] Russian authorities seemed to tolerate smaller public gatherings immediately following the announcement of Navalny's death but appeared less tolerant of and engaged in more concerted efforts to suppress the second day of larger demonstrations.

The US Department of Justice (DoJ) announced on February 17 that the US sent \$500,000 of forfeited Russian funds to Estonia to repair Ukraine's energy infrastructure.[33] The DoJ reported that the US acquired the funds after breaking up an illegal procurement network attempting to import US-made high-precision machine tools to Russia.[34] US Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco stated that this announcement demonstrates the resolve of the US and Estonia in cutting off Russia's access to critical Western technology.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russian forces have established “full control” over Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast as Russian forces continued to advance in the settlement on February 17, and Ukrainian forces have likely withdrawn from Avdiivka.
- Russian sources largely characterized the Ukrainian withdrawal as disorganized and costly and claimed that Russian forces managed to encircle large Ukrainian groups in Avdiivka, but ISW has observed no evidence supporting these Russian claims.
- Russian forces appear to have temporarily established limited and localized air superiority and were able to provide ground troops with close air support during the final days of their offensive operation to capture Avdiivka, likely the first time that Russian forces have done so in Ukraine.
- Delays in Western security assistance may lead to further significant constraints on Ukrainian air defenses that could allow Russian forces to replicate the close air support that facilitated Russian advances in Avdiivka at scale in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down three Russian fighter aircraft—two Su-34s and one Su-35—over Donetsk Oblast on February 17, likely having committed scarce air defense assets to help cover the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Avdiivka.
- Russian authorities arrested several hundred demonstrators on February 17 amid slightly larger demonstrations responding to imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny's death.
- The US Department of Justice (DoJ) announced on February 17 that the US sent \$500,000 of forfeited Russian funds to Estonia to repair Ukraine's energy infrastructure
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to propagandize and militarize Ukrainian youth in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 16, 2024

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

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

February 16, 2024, 8:00pm ET

Ukrainian forces have begun to withdraw from Avdiivka, and Russian forces appear to be focused on complicating or preventing a complete Ukrainian withdrawal. Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated early in the morning Ukrainian time on February 17 that he ordered Ukrainian forces within Avdiivka to withdraw to more favorable defensive positions in order to avoid encirclement and save the lives of Ukrainian personnel.[1] Syrskyi's announcement comes after several confirmed Russian advances on the outskirts of Avdiivka in the past 24 hours. Geolocated footage published on February 16 indicates that Russian forces advanced further south along Hrushevskoho Street on Avdiivka's western outskirts and south of the Avdiivka Coke Plant in northwestern Avdiivka, made marginal gains in dacha areas in northeastern Avdiivka, and captured the Avdiivka City Park in central Avdiivka.[2] The Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces acknowledged earlier on February 16 that Ukrainian forces withdrew from an established fortified position south of Avdiivka and that Ukrainian forces are withdrawing from unspecified positions to new prepared defensive positions.[3] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are transferring reinforcements to the area to stabilize the situation and further degrade attacking Russian forces.[4] It is normal practice to bring in reinforcements to function as a receiving force that can allow withdrawing units to reconstitute behind prepared defensive positions. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces are withdrawing *en masse* and that Ukrainian withdrawals are becoming increasingly chaotic and costly.[5] ISW has not observed any visual evidence of large or chaotic Ukrainian withdrawals, however, and the continued marginal rate of Russian advance in and around Avdiivka suggests that Ukrainian forces are currently conducting a relatively controlled withdrawal from Avdiivka.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also advanced in eastern Avdiivka, up to the southwestern outskirts of Avdiivka, further south along Hrushevskoho Street, and west of Avdiivka in the direction of dirt roads that Ukrainian forces are using to supply positions in eastern and southern Avdiivka.[6] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are close to cutting or have already cut one dirt road connecting Avdiivka with Lastochkyne (west of Avdiivka).[7] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are close to encircling the remaining Ukrainian forces within central, eastern, and southern Avdiivka, with one Russian milblogger claiming that little more than a kilometer separates the Russian positions on the western outskirts of Avdiivka and the Russian positions in southern Avdiivka.[8] ISW currently assesses that roughly three and a half kilometers separate Russian advances in these two areas based on available visual evidence. Russian milbloggers claimed that up to 5,000 Ukrainian personnel remain in Avdiivka and are effectively trapped in the settlement, but Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces have not encircled any Ukrainian units in Avdiivka as of 1300 on February 16.[9] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces are determined to prevent Ukrainian forces from withdrawing from Avdiivka in an organized manner.[10]

Ukrainian forces may have to conduct counterattacks to conduct an orderly withdrawal from Avdiivka, and Russian efforts to complicate or prevent a Ukrainian withdrawal may become increasingly attritional. Ukrainian forces may have to stabilize the frontline by counterattacking in the area where Russian forces are trying to close the encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka in order to conduct an orderly withdrawal. A Ukrainian brigade that recently redeployed to conduct counterattacks within Avdiivka stated on February 16 that it has recently helped Ukrainian forces render elements of the Russian 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) and the 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Donetsk People's Republic [DNR], 1st Army Corps [AC]) combat ineffective.[11] Further Russian gains within Avdiivka aimed at complicating the Ukrainian withdrawal and Ukrainian counterattacks covering withdrawing Ukrainian forces will likely result in further Russian losses. Russian forces would likely struggle to advance west of Avdiivka towards secondary prepared positions to which Ukrainian forces are withdrawing and would likely suffer considerable losses if they decided to frontally attack these Ukrainian positions across open fields. Russian forces likely aim to complicate or prevent the Ukrainian withdrawal in hopes of inflicting operationally significant losses on Ukrainian forces in the area, since the capture of Avdiivka itself would not offer any operationally significant benefits or avenues for operationally significant advances.[12]

Germany and France both signed bilateral security agreements with Ukraine on February 16. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a long-term bilateral security agreement with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 16 providing for bilateral cooperation in the military, political, financial, and humanitarian spheres until 2034.[13] The agreement also states that Germany will provide over €7 billion (\$7.5 billion) in military aid to Ukraine in 2024, including a €1.1 billion (\$1 billion) aid package that is currently being prepared and will include 36 howitzers, 120 thousand artillery shells (including 50,000 155mm artillery rounds), two Skynex air defense systems, missiles for the IRIS-T air-to-air missile system, 66 armored personnel carriers (APCs), several mine-clearing vehicles, and various reconnaissance drone models.[14] Zelensky also met with German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to discuss the launch of joint weapons production.[15] Zelensky later met with French President Emmanuel Macron to sign a bilateral security agreement and reported

that France will provide Ukraine €3 billion (\$3.2 billion) in military assistance over the course of 2024.
[16]

NATO officials are increasingly warning that Russia poses a significant threat to NATO's security. The *Financial Times* (*FT*) reported on February 16 that recent new assessments of Russia's military capabilities and potential threats to NATO states have led Western leaders to recognize Russia's continued military potential and to increase defense investment.[17] *FT* quoted unnamed British military intelligence officials who warned that Russia's aggressive intent has persisted and that Russian air and naval assets are still "largely intact" while Russian land forces have been degraded in Ukraine. The Russian Black Sea Fleet has been badly degraded by Ukrainian strikes, but most of the Russian Navy is stationed outside the Black Sea. *FT* noted that most Western officials expect that Russia would be able to reconstitute its forces "within five to six years" (it is unclear if the officials are referring to 2030 or to a period starting with the end of the war, whenever that is) despite suffering major losses in Ukraine. This observation is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that an end to the war on Russia's terms would allow Russian forces to reconstitute rapidly and restore capabilities that Russia could use to attack NATO states.[18] Several European defense officials quoted by *FT* emphasized that there is a "credible threat" that Russia could attack a NATO country in as few as three to five years. NATO officials' increased warnings about the current state of the Russian threat align with ISW's assessment that a Russia that emerges victorious in Ukraine poses a considerable threat to NATO and European security and that the West's continued support for Ukraine to prevent Russian victory is therefore imperative for NATO's, and America's, vital security interests.[19]

Independent Russian survey data suggests that most Russians are largely apathetic towards Russia's war in Ukraine, particularly Russians who have not personally lost family members in Ukraine and are thus able to avoid thinking about the war entirely. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on February 16 that independent Russian sociological data suggests the overwhelming majority of Russians have come to view the war as a background event that does not affect their daily lives.[20] *Verstka* stated that most Russians avoid thinking about or discussing the war unless they personally experience the loss of a family member.[21] *Verstka* reported that Russians who have lost loved ones and are suffering as a result of the war are the "silent majority" and do not make efforts to influence the general mood of Russian society.[22] *Verstka* noted that there is growing discontent among the family members of mobilized and contact servicemen still serving in Ukraine, but that Russians largely view the concept of "victory" in Ukraine as a benefit for the Russian government and do not expect any personal benefits from Russia's war in Ukraine.[23] The *New York Times* reported on February 15 that the Pentagon estimates that Russia has suffered roughly 60,000 personnel killed and another 300,000 personnel wounded during fighting in Ukraine since February 2022.[24] Russian President Vladimir Putin recently met with family members of deceased Russian servicemen and may be using such meetings to cater to the sizable constituency of people affected by personnel losses in Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 presidential election.[25] *Verstka*'s findings, along with reports about how Russian officials deal with the deaths of servicemembers, suggest that Russian society has largely accepted and internalized the war and that individual instances of resistance to the war are siloed and not transmitted amongst wider communities.

The Russian reaction to the reported death of imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny on February 16 was relatively muted. The Federal Penitentiary Service of Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, where Navalny had been imprisoned, stated on February 16 that Navalny died at the penal colony after going on a walk and feeling unwell.[26] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that the Kremlin did not know anything about Navalny's death and that Putin is aware of the death, though Putin has yet to comment about Navalny.[27] Other senior Russian officials expressed anger at accusations that the Kremlin was somehow involved in Navalny's death and called for people to wait for the results of an investigation into the death and the results of the autopsy.[28] Russians across the country laid flowers and held minor demonstrations near memorials for political prisoners, but Russian law enforcement largely prevented demonstrations from growing too large, and the Moscow Prosecutor's Office warned against participating in an alleged planned large demonstration.[29] A few Russian ultranationalist milbloggers reiterated Kremlin lines criticizing Western accusations of Russian involvement in Navalny's death.[30] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Navalny's death is unimportant compared to the current situation in Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and another milblogger claimed that it was a significant mistake for Russia to imprison Navalny and "let him die there" ahead of the March 2024 presidential election.[31] The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS) expressed fear that Navalny's death in Russian state custody and the detention of many other opposition figures in state custody could leave no one to lead a domestic resistance movement should Russia go to war directly against Western states.[32] Girkin's wife Miroslava Reginskaya expressed concern for Girkin himself but claimed that his health is good.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces have begun to withdraw from Avdiivka, and Russian forces appear to be focused on complicating or preventing a complete Ukrainian withdrawal.
 - Ukrainian forces may have to conduct counterattacks to conduct an orderly withdrawal from Avdiivka, and Russian efforts to complicate or prevent a Ukrainian withdrawal may become increasingly attritional.
 - Germany and France both signed bilateral security agreements with Ukraine on February 16.
 - NATO officials are increasingly warning that Russia poses a significant threat to NATO's security.
 - Independent Russian survey data suggests that most Russians are largely apathetic towards Russia's war in Ukraine, particularly Russians who have not personally lost family members in Ukraine and are thus able to avoid thinking about the war entirely.
 - The Russian reaction to the reported death of imprisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny on February 16 was relatively muted.
 - Russian forces recently made confirmed advances along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line, northwest of Bakhmut, and near Avdiivka.
 - Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to posture himself as an involved and effective wartime leader.
 - Russian-controlled courts in occupied Ukraine continue to pass harsh sentences on Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs).
-

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 15, 2024

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

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

February 15, 2024, 8:35pm ET

Russian forces are conducting a tactical turning movement through Avdiivka likely to create conditions that would force Ukrainian troops to withdraw from their positions in the settlement. Ukrainian forces have yet to fully withdraw from the settlement and continue to prevent Russian forces from making gains that are more significant than the current incremental Russian advances. Geolocated footage published on February 15 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced to the southern outskirts of the Avdiivka Coke Plant in northwestern Avdiivka. [1] Additional geolocated footage published on February 15 indicates that Russian forces captured a Ukrainian fortified position south of Avdiivka that has long been a Russian sub-tactical objective, and Russian milbloggers widely claimed that Russian forces effectively encircled nearby Ukrainian positions south of Avdiivka. [2] Recently geolocated Russian advances indicate that Russian forces have cut the last road in Avdiivka connecting southern and northern Avdiivka, but Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Dmytro Lykhoviy stated that Ukrainian forces are currently using prepared secondary ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to supply Ukrainian forces in southern and eastern Avdiivka. [3] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces made further advances west of Avdiivka in an effort to cut dirt roads that Ukrainian forces are using to supply positions in Avdiivka from Lastochkyne and Sieverne (both west of Avdiivka), although ISW has not yet observed any confirmation of these claimed Russian advances. [4] Lykhoviy acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are withdrawing from unspecified positions in the Avdiivka area but stated that Ukrainian forces also continue to recapture some unspecified positions from Russian forces. [5] The spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade previously deployed to the Bakhmut area stated on February 15 that elements of the brigade redeployed to Avdiivka and are counterattacking Russian positions within the settlement. [6] Russian forces may be able to complete the envelopment of some Ukrainian forces if the Ukrainian forces do not withdraw or conduct successful counterattacks.

The Russian offensive effort to capture Avdiivka underscores the Russian military's inability to conduct a successful operational envelopment or encirclement in Ukraine. Russian forces initially attempted to operationally encircle Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka at the start of the localized offensive effort in October 2023, but gradually shifted towards fighting through the settlement in a turning movement after failing to conduct the rapid maneuver required for envelopment or encirclement. [7] An operational encirclement is a maneuver in which attacking forces completely surround and then destroy an enemy grouping of forces. An operational envelopment is a maneuver wherein attacking forces aim to avoid an enemy's principal defenses to seize objectives behind those defenses that allow the attacking forces to destroy the defenders in their current positions. [8] Russian forces have achieved neither in Avdiivka and have notably repeatedly failed to conduct operations to envelop or encircle Ukrainian forces throughout the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [9] Russian forces

instead have conducted a turning movement in Avdiivka, as they did with their capture of Bakhmut in spring 2023, wherein Russian forces have only sought to avoid Ukraine's principle defensive positions to facilitate tactical gains but have not pursued the wider destruction of a Ukrainian force grouping. [10] The repeated Russian inability to conduct successful operational-level envelopments or encirclements suggests that the Russian military will likely continue to advance through gradual minor tactical advances instead of through these wider maneuvers that could lead to more rapid advances or the destruction of large groups of Ukrainian forces.

The potential Russian capture of Avdiivka would not be operationally significant and would likely only offer the Kremlin immediate informational and political victories. Russian forces have been conducting offensive operations to capture Avdiivka since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Avdiivka has been a notable Ukrainian strongpoint defensive position since the Russian invasion in 2014.[11] Russian forces began a localized offensive operation to capture Avdiivka in October 2023 and only recently began to make tactical progress through the settlement after months of costly infantry assaults and waves of mass mechanized attacks. [12] Avdiivka is a small settlement with a pre-war population of roughly 31,000 people and offers Russian forces limited avenues for future advance.[13] (Bakhmut had a pre-invasion population of 70,000 people, in comparison.) Ukrainian forces have long fortified many of the surrounding settlements, which Russian forces are also struggling to capture, and subsequent Ukrainian positions west and north of Avdiivka are likely similarly fortified.[14] The nearest relatively large settlements in the area are at least 30 kilometers west of Avdiivka, and Russian forces have not shown that they can conduct the rapid mechanized forward movement that would be required to reach these settlements in the near or even medium-term.[15] Russian forces have expended a considerable amount of manpower and materiel on their effort to capture Avdiivka and will likely need to engage in a prolonged period of consolidation, reconstitution, and rest before attempting a further concerted offensive effort in the area.[16] Russian forces would be highly unlikely to make rapid operationally significant advances from Avdiivka if they captured the settlement, and the potential Russian capture of Avdiivka at most would set conditions for further limited tactical gains.

The potential capture of Avdiivka would give the Kremlin a battlefield victory, however tactical, to promote to a domestic audience ahead of the Russian presidential election in March 2024. The Kremlin has reportedly increasingly desired any battlefield victory ahead of the presidential elections and has reportedly set objectives in Ukraine specifically to generate informational effects.[17] Russian ultranationalists, specifically those with ties to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), have long argued that the capture of Avdiivka would push Ukrainian forces out of strike range of Donetsk City and thereby secure the regional center of occupied Donetsk Oblast.[18] Ukrainian forces would be able to continue to strike Russian targets in near rear areas in the vicinity of Donetsk City, both with indirect fire and long-range strike capabilities, regardless of the Russian capture of Avdiivka. Putin will nevertheless likely attempt to sell the potential capture of Avdiivka as a significant victory cementing control over occupied Donetsk City to the Russian ultranationalist community and the wider Russian public.

The Russian command reportedly reorganized the command structures of the Russian grouping of forces in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on February 15 that the Russian command dissolved the "Zaporizhia" Grouping of Forces (the unnamed Russian grouping of forces that has been responsible for western Zaporizhia Oblast since at least the start of the Ukrainian summer 2023 counteroffensive) and transferred elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (Southern Military District) to the "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces under the command of Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky.[19] Elements of the 58th CAA were primarily responsible for manning Russian defensive lines in western Zaporizhia Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive alongside elements of the Russian 7th and 76th VDV Divisions and has since conducted limited counterattacks in the area.[20] ISW has observed indications that the Russian command may view western Zaporizhia Oblast and Kherson Oblast as a single operational axis, and subordinating the 58th CAA to the "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces may be an effort to bring the existing battlefield command structures in line with this vision.[21] Mashovets reported that the Russian command also transferred elements of the 5th, 35th, and 36th CAAs (Eastern Military District), which have generally been responsible for Russian operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area alongside Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) units and various other Russian units, from the "Zaporizhia" Grouping of Forces to the Eastern Grouping of Forces.[22]

Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Dmytro Lykhoviy stated on February 14 that Russian forces are amassing a large grouping of forces in the Orikhiv direction, possibly in preparation for renewed offensive efforts in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[23] Lykhoviy stated that the Russian grouping in the Orikhiv direction is comparable in size to the Russian grouping around Avdiivka, which Lykhoviy recently estimated is comprised of roughly 50,000 personnel.[24] ISW has not observed

recent indicators that Russian forces intend to imminently renew offensive efforts in western Zaporizhia Oblast, although the Russian command is likely interested in efforts to retake territory that Ukrainian forces captured during the summer 2023 counteroffensive.

Russian forces conducted a relatively larger series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of February 14 to 15. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on February 15 that Russian forces launched 12 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles from aircraft based at Engels air base; six Iskander-M ballistic missiles from Voronezh Oblast; two Kalibr cruise missiles from Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai; four Kh-59 guided missiles from occupied Zaporizhia Oblast and Kursk Oblast; and two S-300 guided missiles from Belgorod Oblast at targets in Ukraine.[25] Ukrainian air defenses destroyed a total of 13 missiles, including 8 Kh-101/555/55 missiles, one Iskander-M missile, two Kaliber missiles, and two Kh-59 missiles.[26] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat noted that Russian forces have recently not been using many Kalibr missiles, possibly due to issues transporting Kalibrs or unspecified technical issues with the missiles.[27] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces launched over 10 missiles at Lviv Oblast, striking an infrastructure facility in Lviv City, and conducted another missile strike on Selydove, Donetsk Oblast.[28] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian missiles also damaged civilian infrastructure and residential buildings in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Khmelnytskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts and struck a warehouse in Myrnohrad, Poltava Oblast.[29]

Ukrainian security forces reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against an oil depot in Kursk Oblast. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported on February 14 that the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) conducted a successful drone strike on the Polyova Oil Depot, and Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit stated that a Ukrainian drone strike caused a fire at the oil depot.[30] Russian sources published footage of explosions at the oil depot and reported that the strike caused at least two oil tanks filled with diesel fuel to catch fire.[31] This is the fifth successful Ukrainian drone strike against Russian oil infrastructure in the past month.[32]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to elaborate on an amorphous ideology for Russia to support geopolitical confrontation with the West by attempting to portray Russia as the leader of an international anti-Nazi movement. Putin told Kremlin journalist Pavel Zarubin in an interview on February 14 that “many countries” are supporting an ideology of “the exclusivity of some nations (народ) over others” and that such an ideology is the root of Nazism.[33] Putin claimed that Russia should begin promoting “anti-fascist and anti-Nazi” work and propaganda at a global level and that such work would not be effective at the state level.[34] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin may be intensifying portrayals of an alleged Nazi and fascist West in an attempt to posture for international audiences, particularly those not aligned with the West.[35] Putin continues to fail to clearly define what comprises this “anti-fascist and anti-Nazi” ideology and instead solely frames his anti-Western position as the basis for his envisioned ideological confrontation with the West. Putin’s stated goals of “uniting” and maintaining control over the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) – purposefully vaguely defined as ethnic Russians, Russian language-speakers, and any territory and people formerly colonized by the Soviet Union and Russian Empire – is part of Russia’s larger imperialist ambitions and unrelated to alleged interests in combatting fabricated modern Nazism. Putin is attempting to further both the Russian World framework to justify the war in Ukraine and Russia’s larger imperialistic objectives and the portrayal of Russia as a leader in the international fight against alleged Western Nazism simultaneously but not congruently.

Putin intentionally misrepresented a statement from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in an attempt to promote pseudo-history aimed at denying Ukrainian statehood. Putin purposefully misrepresented Blinken’s statement about his Jewish great-grandfather fleeing the Russian Empire due to pogroms.[36] Putin claimed that Blinken’s great-grandfather was from Poltava Oblast and lived in and left Kyiv City, thus demonstrating, according to Putin, Blinken’s recognition that these areas of Ukraine are “primordially Russian territory.” Putin and other senior Russian officials have routinely misrepresented Western officials’ statements to further Russian information operations.[37]

Russian sources claimed that the Russian military officially removed Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov and replaced him with the BSF’s Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Sergei Pletchuk.[38] A Ukrainian strike on the Russian BSF headquarters in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea in September 2023 likely killed Sokolov.[39] A Russian milblogger claimed that Sokolov, who had been BSF commander since September 2022, prohibited the BSF from installing non-standard devices on vessels for detecting maritime drones and other technologically advanced equipment and claimed that the BSF lost about 20 percent of its strength under Sokolov’s command.[40] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletchuk reported that the BSF had almost 80 pieces of naval combat equipment at the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022 of which 30 to 35 were “heavily armed.”[41] Pletchuk stated that Ukrainian forces have “destroyed” 26 naval combat pieces as of February 15, 2023, and “seriously damaged” another 15.

Pletenckuk also stated that the Russian coast guard (subordinate to the Russian Federal Security Service [FSB]) has up to 20 various vessels.

Select members of the US-led coalition the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein format) formally launched an air defense coalition and agreed to form a drone coalition and demining coalition to support Ukraine following the group's 19th meeting in Brussels on February 14. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius and his French counterpart Sébastien Lecornu signed an agreement to create the Air and Missile Coalition to support Ukraine's air defense capabilities, and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov added that Germany, France, and the United States will lead the coalition of 15 states.[42] Latvia and eight countries, including Ukraine, signed a letter of intent to join the Drone Coalition that aims to deliver one million first person view (FPV) drones to Ukraine.[43] The Latvian MoD announced that Latvia plans to spend at least 10 million euro (about \$10.8 million) over the next year to bring the coalition to the next level, and UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps announced that Ukraine will receive "thousands" of drones from the UK.[44] Shapps also announced that the UK will co-lead the coalition with Latvia. The Lithuanian MoD also announced that it signed a protocol of intent to create a Demining Coalition with 20 other countries, and Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas Anusauskas announced that Lithuania will lead the Demining Coalition with Iceland and will transfer armored personnel carriers to the Ukrainian military and allocate 1.2 million euros (nearly \$1.3 million) to NATO's demining support program for Ukraine.[45] Anusauskas also announced that Lithuania joined the French-led Artillery Coalition, which was launched in Paris on January 18 and will make its first contribution to the coalition by providing 155mm artillery shells to Ukraine on an unspecified date.

European officials also announced additional aid to Ukraine during the Ramstein format. Pistorius announced that Germany recently pledged to transfer 100 million euros worth of military equipment to Ukraine, including small drone bombs, 77 MULTI 1A1 trucks, medical equipment, spare parts for various weapons systems, and equipment repairs.[46] Anusauskas announced that Lithuania will also provide Ukraine with unspecified drones and anti-drone systems as part of its participation in the Drone Coalition and will also deliver another batch of winter equipment to Ukraine. Spanish Defense Minister Margarita Robles announced that Spain is preparing to transfer another batch of an unspecified number of M113 armored personnel carriers, personnel transport vehicles, other vehicles, anti-aircraft defense systems, and other materiel to Ukraine.[47] Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukraine's partners discussed the need to provide Ukraine with long-range weapons and logistics for the transfer of the F-16 fighter aircraft.[48]

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO and Ukraine will create a joint analysis, training, and education center in Poland following the meetings of NATO Defense Ministers in Brussels on February 15.[49] Stoltenberg stated that NATO will open the center in Bydgoszcz, Poland, which will allow Ukrainian forces to share their combat experience with NATO and train alongside their allied counterparts. Stoltenberg also stated that NATO had negotiated contracts with ammunition manufacturers worth \$10 billion and that NATO needs to come out of peace time ammunition production to replenish NATO stocks and support Ukraine.[50] Stoltenberg added that European NATO members for the first time will collectively invest a total of \$380 billion on defense in 2024, which constitutes two percent of all NATO members' collective GDP.[51]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces are conducting a tactical turning movement through Avdiivka likely to create conditions that would force Ukrainian troops to withdraw from their positions in the settlement. Ukrainian forces have yet to fully withdraw from the settlement and continue to prevent Russian forces from making gains that are more significant than the current incremental Russian advances.
- The Russian offensive effort to capture Avdiivka underscores the Russian military's inability to conduct a successful operational envelopment or encirclement in Ukraine.
- The potential Russian capture of Avdiivka would not be operationally significant and would likely only offer the Kremlin immediate informational and political victories.
- The Russian command reportedly reorganized the command structures of the Russian grouping of forces in southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted a relatively larger series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of February 14 to 15.
- Ukrainian security forces reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against an oil depot in Kursk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to elaborate on an amorphous ideology for Russia to support geopolitical confrontation with the West by attempting to portray Russia as the leader of an international anti-Nazi movement.

- Putin intentionally misrepresented a statement from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in an attempt to promote pseudo-history aimed at denying Ukrainian statehood.
- Russian sources claimed that the Russian military officially removed Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov and replaced him with the BSF's Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Sergei Pinchuk.
- Select members of the US-led coalition the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein format) formally launched an air defense coalition and agreed to form a drone coalition and demining coalition to support Ukraine following the group's 19th meeting in Brussels on February 14.
- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO and Ukraine will create a joint analysis, training, and education center in Poland following the meetings of NATO Defense Ministers in Brussels on February 15.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Uralvagonzavod plant in Sverdlovsk Oblast, one of Russia's largest tank producers, on February 15 to promote Russian efforts to expand Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- Head of Ukraine's nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom Petro Kotin stated that the situation at the occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) is becoming more dangerous due to Russian activity near and at the plant.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 14, 2024

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

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

February 14, 2024, 7:50pm ET

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

Ukrainian forces successfully sank another Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) landing ship in the Black Sea off the southern coast of occupied Crimea on the night of February 13 to 14. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) published footage on February 14 showing Ukrainian maritime drones striking the *Caesar Kunikov* Ropucha-class landing ship off the coast of occupied Alupka, Crimea.^[1] The GUR reported that maritime drone strikes caused the ship to sink and stated that Russian search and rescue operations were not successful. The GUR stated that the *Caesar Kunikov* was the largest amphibious landing ship of its project 775 type. Ukrainian forces have destroyed or damaged at least five BSF landing ships since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.^[2] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that only five of 13 BSF landing ships that Russia had at the start of the full-scale invasion remain "in service" and that "four ships are under repair, four are destroyed, and five are still in the ranks."^[3] Ukrainian strikes damaging and sinking BSF landing ships further reduce Russia's ability to conduct amphibious operations, although ISW continues to assess that Russia is unlikely to conduct an amphibious landing operation in Ukraine since Russian naval infantry are deployed across Ukraine and a Ukrainian strike campaign in summer and fall 2023 successfully sequestered the BSF to the eastern part of the Black Sea.^[4]

Ukraine reportedly continues efforts to offset Russian advantages in manpower and materiel by using more advanced systems and equipment, although continued delays in Western security assistance will undermine these efforts. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Ivan Havrylyuk stated in an interview published on February 14 that Ukraine cannot compete with Russia in the number of artillery shells, tanks, and soldiers that Russia can generate but that Ukraine can achieve an advantage on the battlefield by using high-tech weapons.^[5] Havrylyuk stated that Ukrainian forces have proven that a well-trained army with more advanced weapons can defeat an enemy with numerical superiority in manpower and equipment.^[6] Havrylyuk argued that Ukrainian forces have superior strike capabilities that have previously allowed Ukraine to degrade Russian logistics and combat capabilities.^[7] Havrylyuk stressed that Ukraine only has these superior capabilities when it has enough long-range high-precision munitions and enough ammunition for Western-provided artillery systems that have longer ranges and better accuracy than Russian artillery systems.^[8] Havrylyuk specifically highlighted Ukrainian efforts to integrate strike drone capabilities throughout the Ukrainian Armed Forces at scale and noted that Ukraine aims to gradually increase the proportion of machines to people on the battlefield.^[9]

Havrylyuk acknowledged that Ukrainian progress in expanding drone operations does not replace Ukraine's need for advanced artillery systems and other long-range capabilities, however. Havrylyuk stated that the war in Ukraine demonstrates that artillery plays a key role on the battlefield and noted that Ukrainian MLRS and artillery units have caused the majority of Russia's losses in Ukraine. [10] Havrylyuk stated that drones have certain advantages over artillery, specifically in cost, but are more susceptible to external factors such as Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems and natural factors, likely referencing weather. [11] The drones that Ukrainian forces currently possess are not able to generate certain battlefield effects that artillery can achieve, such as the destruction of field fortifications, and most Ukrainian drones cannot reliably destroy Russian armored vehicles as artillery can. Havrylyuk argued that Ukraine needs to focus on combined operations using drones and artillery systems to increase the accuracy of Ukrainian fires and conserve artillery ammunition. [12] Ukraine's ability to conduct such combined operations currently relies on Western provisions of artillery shells, and Havrylyuk acknowledged that shell shortages continue to affect Ukrainian capabilities and force Ukraine to adjust operational plans. [13]

Russia is similarly pursuing battlefield advantages through technological innovation despite its focus on generating manpower and materiel in greater mass than Ukraine. Russia has gradually expanded its defense industrial base (DIB), sourced critical equipment and ammunition from abroad, and established a crypto-mobilization apparatus that has allowed the Russian military to deploy more personnel and materiel in Ukraine than Ukrainian forces. [14] Havrylyuk stated that Russia is focused on advantages in the quantity of military materiel, although this Russian focus on mass has not precluded Russia from pursuing select technological adaptations. [15] Russian forces have particularly focused on deploying EW systems along the frontline and are likewise attempting to expand the use of drones at scale in Ukraine. [16] Russia has not conducted a general mobilization of manpower and materiel and remains unlikely to do so, currently limiting the mass that the Russian military can bring to bear in Ukraine. [17] It remains unclear how much further Russia can mobilize its DIB and generate new forces without taking significant and possibly unpopular actions given Russia's persistent economic and human capital constraints. [18] ISW has previously assessed that if the Russians retain the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine for a long time they may prioritize force generation efforts over the requirements of their current offensive efforts, and the Russian command could also use such prioritization to focus more heavily on technological innovation and adaptation at scale. [19] There are no indications that the Russian command intends to adopt such an approach, however.

Havrylyuk's description of the Ukrainian effort to pursue advantages through the use of more advanced systems echoes former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi's strategy of using technological adaptation and innovation to offset Russian numerical advantages in Ukraine, seize the theater-wide initiative, and restore maneuver to the battlefield. [20] The Russians could in principle also attempt such an approach, but Ukraine appears to be pursuing it in a much more deliberate and concerted effort than Russia. Ukraine is revitalizing its DIB in order to produce and sustain many of these advanced systems on its own or in direct partnership with other countries and to integrate them into Ukrainian tactics, and a premature end to Western security assistance would cede to Russian forces operational advantages before Ukraine could achieve such self-sufficiency. [21] The Ukrainian ability to see such a strategy to fruition is dependent on continued Western support that allows Ukrainian forces to maintain battlefield advantages while providing Ukraine with new advantages over Russian mass.

Russian authorities may be generating enough new forces to sustain losses generated by the current tempo of their offensive operations in Ukraine through 2025. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) reported on February 13 that the Russian military continues to grow despite taking significant casualties in Ukraine and that Russian military recruiters are currently meeting almost 85 percent of their quotas for contract recruits. [22] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may be suffering losses along the frontline in Ukraine at a rate close to Russia's current force-generation rate. [23] RUSI assessed that Russian forces will likely have the manpower and materiel to be able to maintain a steady tempo of assaults throughout 2024 despite the fact that Russian forces' quality is unlikely to increase as long as Ukrainian forces can maintain a sufficient level of attrition across the theater. [24] RUSI noted that Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian assaults and attrit Russian forces is highly dependent on continued Western assistance to Ukraine, which is consistent with ISW's ongoing assessment that the collapse of Western aid at this time would eventually lead to the collapse of Ukraine's ability to defend itself and hold off the Russian military. [25] It is unclear if Russia's ongoing force-generation campaigns would be able to make up for additional losses that Russian forces would sustain by intensifying offensive operations.

RUSI additionally reported that Russian forces typically engage in localized tactical assaults until they have lost up to 30 percent of their manpower, after which they are rotated out and reconstituted. [26] Losses of 30 percent are extremely high. Most units become combat ineffective after taking much

lower losses. The Russians are therefore likely fighting their units past the point at which they have become combat ineffective before rotating them out for reconstitution. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on January 11 that Russian forces withdraw their units to rear areas when they are at 50 percent or less of their intended end strength and return them to the front following recovery and replenishment.[27] The Russian command's willingness to allow a unit to be severely degraded to between 50 and 70 percent of the unit's end strength significantly impacts the unit's combat effectiveness. This approach to force management likely explains the observable pattern of Russian operations on the ground. Localized assaults continue until they stall out, whereupon offensive operations pause while the command rotates and replenishes degraded units. ISW has observed this pattern in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions since January 2024.[28] Russia can likely sustain this approach for a long time but cannot accelerate its progress as long as Ukraine has the materiel necessary to conduct effective defensive operations. Successful Russian operational-level offensives in Ukraine will likely require the Russian command to commit relatively combat effective and well-equipped units and formations to offensive operations at scale, something the Kremlin has generally been unable or unwilling to do.[29]

The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (VLA) stated that the Russian military's ongoing restructuring and expansion effort aims to intensify Russian military posturing against Finland and the wider NATO alliance. The VLA reported on February 13 that the Russian military is forming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) in order to posture against Finland and NATO while also attempting to "partially strengthen its units" in the Baltic region as the war in Ukraine continues.[30] Russian formations garrisoned near the Baltics, such as the 6th Combined Arms Army (Western Military District) and 76th Airborne (VDV) Division, are currently heavily committed to combat operations in Ukraine.[31] Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu have indicated that the Russian military is reforming the LMD to prepare for a potential future conventional war against NATO.[32] The VLA's assessment that the Russian military may be attempting to use these reforms to strengthen its forces along NATO's flank is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russia may be arranging military assets in a way to posture along the border with NATO members in the mid-to-long term.[33] The VLA stated that about 19,000 Russian forces were stationed in the direction of Estonia before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and that the Russian military may double the number of personnel and armored vehicles and increase the number of tanks and artillery systems near the Estonian border when Russia begins to feel confident about the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Russia would likely use an increased military presence on NATO's eastern flank to intensify threats against NATO to further Russia's long-term goal of weakening and containing the alliance.[34]

The Kremlin is conducting information operations against Moldova very similar to those that the Kremlin used before its invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, likely to set conditions to justify possible future Russian escalation against Moldova. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov answered a question after his speech to the Russian State Duma on February 14 about the Transnistria conflict and falsely alleged that the United States and European Union (EU) control the Moldovan government.[35] Lavrov claimed that the West stopped the 5+2 negotiating process in the Transnistria conflict. The 5+2 process included Russia, Ukraine, Transnistria, Moldova, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as mediators and the EU and US as observers. Lavrov claimed that Russia will "do everything" to resume the 5+2 process. Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Serebrian stated on January 28 that Moldova would not return to the 5+2 process as long as Russian-Ukrainian relations did not improve and Russia's war in Ukraine continues.[36] Lavrov claimed that there are about 200,000 Russian citizens in Transnistria and that Russia is "concerned about their fate" and "will not allow them to become victims of another Western adventure." [37] Lavrov further alleged that Moldova decided not to give state budget subsidies to regions such as Gagauzia that oppose Moldovan integration with the EU. Lavrov compared Moldovan actions concerning Gagauzia to the way the West "refused" to give former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych time to review Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU in 2013. Lavrov claimed that the West is issuing similar "ultimatums" to Chisinau about EU integration.

The Kremlin previously accused Ukraine of abandoning and disregarding the Minsk Agreements, which established the post-2014 armistice following the first Russian invasion of Ukraine and involved Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE with France and Germany as mediators, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has regularly claimed that Ukraine's alleged violations of the Minsk Agreements "forced" Russia to invade Ukraine in 2022.[38] The Kremlin has also used the idea of protecting its "compatriots abroad" to justify the fact that Russian troops have occupied Transnistria since 1992 as well as Russia's full-scale invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.[39] The Kremlin has also accused the US of orchestrating the protests that erupted after Yanukovych's withdrawal from the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013 and claimed that the alleged subsequent US-backed "coup" forced Russia to invade Crimea and begin military operations in Donbas in 2014 to protect those that "opposed the coup" and Russian "compatriots abroad." [40]

ISW continues to assess that Kremlin officials and mouthpieces have been attempting to set information conditions to justify possible Russian efforts to destabilize Moldova and prevent its integration into the West, and the fact that Lavrov furthered these narratives — and added additional allegations — suggests that the Kremlin is orchestrating these wider efforts in the information space. [41] Other officials from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), including MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, have previously claimed that Moldovan authorities are trying to economically “strangle” Transnistria, are preventing a diplomatic solution to the Transnistria conflict, and face widespread domestic discontent towards Moldovan government policies.[42] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger has recently seized on the Transnistria issue to consistently promote similar Kremlin narratives as well as claims that Moldova is “militarizing” in order to “forcefully reintegrate” Transnistria into Moldova — an effort for which Russia, the milblogger claimed, must prepare.[43] Moldovan authorities recently accused Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria of conducting exercises and using weapons in the Moldovan security zone in violation of the OSCE Joint Control Commission (JCC) protocols.[44] **The timing of a possible Russian hybrid operation in Moldova is unclear, but the Kremlin is setting informational conditions to make it possible soon.**

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on February 14 that NATO does not see any immediate threat of military attacks on a NATO member but noted that there is a “constant risk” of hybrid attacks. Stoltenberg stated that NATO is working to improve intelligence, intelligence sharing, and collaboration with civil society to combat hybrid threats.[45] ISW has recently observed Kremlin actors, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, setting informational conditions to justify possible Russian hybrid attacks on Moldova as well as the Baltic states, Denmark, and Finland.[46]

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied recent Western reports that Russia recently proposed freezing the conflict in Ukraine.[47] Peskov called Western reporting on the supposed proposal “untrue” and claimed that US involvement in Ukraine will not change the war’s course and that Russia will continue the war until all its goals are achieved.[48] Reuters reported on February 13, citing unnamed Russian sources, that the US rejected a ceasefire proposal from Russian President Vladimir Putin in late 2023 or early 2024.[49] An unnamed US source denied any official contact with Russia and reiterated that the US will not engage in peace negotiations with Russia that do not involve Ukraine.[50] ISW has yet to observe evidence that Russian officials are interested in good-faith peace negotiations with Ukraine but continues to observe signals that Russia may be open to bilateral discussions leading to the US abandonment of Ukraine.[51] Russian officials recently blamed the US for the absence of constructive peace negotiations to end Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to frame the West as the only meaningful negotiating partner in Ukraine and convince the West to accept the Kremlin’s premise that Ukraine has no independent agency. [52] Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (VLA) Director General Kaupo Rosin stated on February 14 that the Kremlin is pushing the false narrative that Russia is interested in peace negotiations in the West in order to undermine Western military support for Ukraine.[53] ISW previously assessed that Russian statements suggesting that Russia is or always has been interested in peace negotiations are very likely efforts to feign interest to prompt preemptive Western concessions regarding Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[54]

Russia reportedly is developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon. US House Intelligence Committee Chair Michael Turner stated on February 14 that he made information about a “serious national security threat” available to all members of Congress and called on US President Joe Biden to declassify all information relating to the threat.[55] Western media reported that two sources stated that the intelligence concerns Russia’s desire to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space to use against satellites, not to launch a nuclear weapon onto Earth.[56] *The New York Times* (NYT) reported that US officials said that the new intelligence was serious but that Russia is still developing the capability and has not deployed it yet.[57] NYT reported that the possible Russian capability does not pose an urgent threat to the US, Ukraine, or America’s European allies. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on February 9 that the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) launched a Soyuz-2.1v launch vehicle from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome with an unspecified classified payload “in the interests of the Russian Ministry of Defense.”[58]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces successfully sank another Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) landing ship in the Black Sea off the southern coast of occupied Crimea on the night of February 13 to 14.
- Ukraine reportedly continues efforts to offset Russian advantages in manpower and materiel by using more advanced systems and equipment, although continued delays in Western security assistance will undermine these efforts.

- Russia is similarly pursuing battlefield advantages through technological innovation despite its focus on generating manpower and materiel in greater mass than Ukraine.
- Russian authorities may be generating enough new forces to sustain losses generated by the current tempo of their offensive operations in Ukraine through 2025.
- The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (VLA) stated that the Russian military's ongoing restructuring and expansion effort aims to intensify Russian military posturing against Finland and the wider NATO alliance.
- The Kremlin is conducting information operations against Moldova very similar to those that the Kremlin used before its invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, likely to set conditions to justify possible future Russian escalation against Moldova.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on February 14 that NATO does not see any immediate threat of military attacks on a NATO member but noted that there is a "constant risk" of hybrid attacks.
- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied recent Western reports that Russia recently proposed freezing the conflict in Ukraine.
- Russia reportedly is developing space-based anti-satellite weapon.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Marinka, and Krynyk amid continued positional fighting along the entire line of contact on February 14.
- Russia continues efforts to expand its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian authorities continue efforts to militarize and culturally indoctrinate youth and students in occupied Ukraine into Russian identity and ideology.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 13, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 13, 2024, 7:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on February 13. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 14 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The US Senate passed a supplemental appropriations bill that would provide roughly \$60 billion of security assistance to Ukraine, the vast majority of which would go to US companies and personnel. The Senate passed a \$95.3 billion aid package for assistance to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, \$60.6 billion of which is for Ukraine, by a 70-29 vote on February 13.[1] Roughly 16 percent of the Ukraine-related appropriations in the bill would go directly to support the Ukrainian government and economy whereas the remaining 84 percent of the appropriations are specifically marked for US manufacturers and US or allied government entities supporting Ukraine.[2]

Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported that Russian forces are attempting to restore maneuver to the battlefield through Soviet deep battle theory but are struggling with implementing Soviet deep battle so far due to current Ukrainian capabilities. Mashovets stated that Russian forces are attempting to implement Soviet deep battle theory for operational planning to rapidly break through Ukrainian defenses but are failing to achieve the effects of Soviet deep battle operations.[3] Deep battle theory is a product of Soviet operational art developed in the 1920s and 1930s that was designed to restore maneuver to battlefield after World War I by engaging the enemy on multiple fronts and in depth at the tactical and operational levels by attacking enemy assets at all echelons with artillery, airstrikes, and attacks against the enemy's rear in concert with frontal attacks to penetrate the enemy's defensive lines.[4] Deep battle theory also posits that successful operational design includes sequenced plans for successive operations to prevent the defender from re-establishing coherent defensive positions following a penetration and its exploitation.[5] Deep battle theory's key operational tenets are still valid in modern war, and the Russian military could restore maneuver to the battlefield and overcome Ukrainian defenses if it could successfully plan and execute operationally sound campaigns using deep battle theory. Ukrainian forces could also use deep battle theory to restore maneuver to the battlefield to their advantage if their Western supporters properly resourced them.

Mashovets, however, noted that Russian forces' current limited capabilities, specifically in conducting effective counterbattery fire, striking targets at operational depth, concealing force concentrations from the enemy, and combating Ukrainian technological parity, are preventing Russian forces from achieving the operational level surprise necessary to break through Ukrainian lines and conduct deep battle operations.[6] Mashovets stated that the Russian military command is failing to implement

certain technological innovations into operational planning, including remote mine laying; large scale drone operations; command-and-control; and communications using modern technology.[7]

The current Ukrainian battlefield capabilities that are denying Russian forces the ability to restore maneuver to the battlefield on Russian terms largely depend on the provision of Western military assistance in key systems, many of which only the US can provide at scale. Ukrainian forces currently have advantages in counterbattery technology and medium-to-long-range strike capabilities due to Western-provided military assistance.[8] Western states have provided NATO 155mm artillery systems and ammunition capable of striking targets at longer ranges than Soviet equipment, and superior counterbattery radar systems that have provided Ukrainian forces with targeting advantages.[9] Western-provided medium- and long-range systems including HIMARS, ATACMS, and Storm Shadow/SCALP missiles have enabled Ukrainian forces to achieve the significant impacts of liberating west bank Kherson Oblast and severely degrading the Russian Black Sea Fleet, among others.[10] Western provided air defense systems have denied Russian forces the air superiority necessary to safely operate aircraft to support Russian offensive operations, including hypothetical deep battle operations.[11]

Ukrainian forces will not be able to retain these advantages and deny Russian forces the ability to restore maneuver to the battlefield on Russian terms without further assistance from the United States and its partner countries in the near and medium term. Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian officials have previously touted their hopes of outlasting Western security assistance to Ukraine on the battlefield, and Russian forces are attempting to develop technology to adapt to current Ukrainian capabilities.[12] Mashovets noted that the Russian military command is learning and currently demonstrating greater operational flexibility than earlier in the war, including by establishing new artillery batteries to increase fire capabilities, bolstering intelligence capabilities, using disinformation to feed false intelligence on Russian force movements, and fragmenting the movements of its larger formations.[13] Mashovets stated that Russian forces are also actively developing their own technology to counter Ukrainian capabilities and develop their own capabilities, including electronic warfare (EW) systems, sea drones, combat control systems. [14] Ukraine will lose its current battlefield advantages if Western states, particularly the United States, prematurely cease security assistance to Ukraine before Ukraine's ongoing defense industrial base (DIB) revitalization efforts render its DIB largely self-sufficient.[15] If the US cuts off military aid now Russian forces may regain battlefield capabilities necessary to restore maneuver to the battlefield on Russian terms and would place Russia in a much better position militarily in the medium to long term.

Russian sources are purposefully exaggerating Ukrainian casualties in a Russian strike near Selydove, Donetsk Oblast on February 13.[16] Other Russian sources claimed that the strike caused far fewer casualties and published footage purportedly of a Russian strike against Tsukuryne (just south of Selydove) that is not consistent with the high number of casualties that other Russian sources claimed.[17] Ukrainian military officials reported on February 13 that Russian sources began purposefully spreading disinformation about Ukrainian losses after the Russian strike near Selydove and stated that Russian forces conducted a multiple rocket launch system (MLRS) strike against Tsukuryne, Donetsk Oblast on February 13 that damaged civilian infrastructure but did not cause any casualties.[18] Kremlin newswire TASS amplified a claim from an alleged unofficial Telegram channel of a Ukrainian brigade confirming Ukrainian personnel losses in the strike.[19] This unofficial Telegram channel later denied its initial claim.[20] The official Ukrainian brigade's Facebook page has not published anything regarding the purported strike at the time of this publication.[21] The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation reported in December 2023 that Russian actors planned to promote information operations aimed at degrading Ukrainian morale through a network of fake Telegram channels disguised as official accounts of Ukrainian regional officials and military brigades. [22]

The Kremlin appears to be asserting the right to enforce Russian Federation law on officials of governments in NATO member states over actions taken in the performance of their official duties within the territories of their own countries. The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) have put dozens of government officials from NATO countries on Russia's wanted list because of alleged violations of Russian federal law committed outside the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation. Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* stated on February 13 that it gained access to the MVD's wanted list and that the Russian MVD put Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Estonian Secretary of State Taimar Peterkop, Latvian Justice Minister Inese Libina-Egnere, Latvian Finance Minister Arvils Aseradens, Latvian Agricultural Minister Armands Krauze, and former Latvian Interior Minister Marija Golubeva on the wanted list for allegedly destroying Soviet monuments in Estonia and Latvia — which Kremlin newswire TASS confirmed.[23] *Mediazona* stated that 59 Lithuanian Seimas deputies, 15 Riga municipal deputies, Lithuanian Mayor of Klaipeda Arvydas Vaitkus, Vaitkus's deputy, 13 members of the Klaipeda city council, six deputies of the Vilnius city council, Polish Mayor of Walbrzych Roman

Szelemy, and Polish Deputy Minister of State Assets Karol Rabenda also appear on the Russian MVD's wanted list in connection with the destruction of Soviet monuments in the Baltic states and Poland.[24] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated the Baltic officials are wanted for "hostile actions against historical memory and Russia." [25] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed that Kallas is "actively pursuing a policy of demolishing monuments and mocking the memory of Soviet soldiers" and that she must be held accountable for "blasphemy." [26] Zakharova called on Russian law enforcement agencies to conduct investigations "within the framework of their powers and responsibilities in accordance with the legislation of Russia." Zakharova claimed that the officials must "answer for their crimes" and that "this is just the beginning." [27]

Article 243 of the Russian Criminal Code states that the destruction or damage of cultural heritage sites and monuments is punishable by up to six years in prison.[28] Russia, however, does not have the legal authority to prosecute foreign citizens for allegedly violating Russian laws in foreign states. Russia has notably used the issue of Soviet monuments to justify hybrid warfare tactics against NATO countries in the past when Russia launched large-scale cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007 after Estonia moved a Soviet World War II war memorial and the remains of Soviet soldiers from central Tallinn to the Tallinn Defense Cemetery.[29] Although it is unclear if the Russian government had planned to publicize its inclusion of the European officials on the list before *Mediazona* disclosed this information, this may be part of ongoing Russian effort to set informational conditions justifying possible Russian escalations against NATO states in the future, as ISW has extensively reported. [30] The Kremlin has also invoked narratives related to the historical memory of World War II to justify and sustain its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[31]

US sanctions are reportedly constraining Russian efforts to skirt the G7 oil cap amid continued indications that India may be rethinking its growing position as a customer of Russian oil. *Bloomberg* reported on February 13 that at least 21 of the 50 oil tankers that the US has sanctioned since October 2023 for carrying Russian crude oil priced above the G7's \$60 price cap have stopped transporting Russian oil and petroleum products.[32] *Bloomberg* also reported that in the past two months roughly half of 14 idling oil tankers carrying Russian oil to India have since turned around from their destination without unloading.[33] Indian government sources have recently reportedly stated that India wants to distance itself from Russia due to the war in Ukraine, limiting Russia's ability to provide India with munitions.[34] Increased energy exports to Indo-pacific states, primarily India and China, and widespread Russian efforts to skirt the G7 price cap through a fleet of oil tankers with obscure ownership and insurance allowed Russia to significantly increase oil revenues in 2023.[35] Russia relied on oil revenues to buoy federal budgets amid increased spending on its war in Ukraine in 2023, and effective US sanctions and Indian reconsiderations of its trade relationship with Russia may complicate this effort in 2024.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- The US Senate passed a supplemental appropriations bill that would provide roughly \$60 billion of security assistance to Ukraine, the vast majority of which would go to US companies and personnel.
- Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported that Russian forces are attempting to restore maneuver to the battlefield through Soviet deep battle theory but are struggling with implementing Soviet deep battle so far due to current Ukrainian capabilities.
- The current Ukrainian battlefield capabilities that are denying Russian forces the ability to restore maneuver to the battlefield on Russian terms largely depend on the provision of Western military assistance in key systems, many of which only the US can provide at scale.
- Ukrainian forces will not be able to retain these advantages and deny Russian forces the ability to restore maneuver to the battlefield on Russian terms without further assistance from the United States and its partner countries in the near and medium term.
- Russian sources are purposefully exaggerating Ukrainian casualties in a Russian strike near Selydove, Donetsk Oblast on February 13.
- The Kremlin appears to be asserting the right to enforce Russian Federation law on officials of governments in NATO member states over actions taken in the performance of their official duties within the territories of their own countries.
- US sanctions are reportedly constraining Russian efforts to skirt the G7 oil cap amid continued indications that India may be rethinking its growing position as a customer of Russian oil.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.

- The British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank stated on February 12 that Russia is likely able to sustain its current rate of vehicle losses for at least two to three years by producing new vehicles and reactivating vehicles from storage.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to solidify control of occupied Ukraine through institutionalizing social benefits and services.

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 Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Ukrainian Defense Industrial Base Efforts
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives
- Significant Activity in Belarus

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 recently advanced west of Kreminna amid continued positional fighting on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on February 13. Geolocated footage published on February 12 shows that Russian forces recently advanced in a field east of Torske (west of Kreminna).[37] A Russian milblogger claimed on February 12 that Russian forces advanced 300 meters further into eastern Bilohorivka (south of Kreminna) and seized a segment of the Shypylivka-Bilohorivka road, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.[38] Positional fighting continued on February 13 northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka and Lake Lyman; southeast of Kupyansk near Tymkivka and Tabaivka; northwest of Kreminna near Nevske; west of Kreminna near Terny and Yampolivka; and near Bilohorivka.[39]

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

Russian forces reportedly advanced west of Bakhmut amid continued positional fighting in the area on February 13. The spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Bakhmut area stated that Russian forces are partially advancing near Bohdanivka (northwest of Bakhmut) and are capturing whole windbreaks or forest areas near the settlement.[40] The Ukrainian spokesperson stated that Russian milbloggers are falsely claiming that Russian forces have advanced within two kilometers of Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut).[41] Russian milbloggers claimed on February 12 and 13 that elements of the 98th Airborne (VDV) Division, including elements of its 331st VDV Regiment, advanced towards Bohdanivka, west of the O0506 (Khromove-Chasiv Yar) highway, and towards Ivanivske (west of Bakhmut).[42] Positional fighting continued northeast of Bakhmut near Bilohorivka and Veselie, northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka, west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske, southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka, and south of Bakhmut near Shumy and Pivdenne.[43] Elements of the Russian 83rd VDV Brigade and the 106th VDV Division are reportedly operating in the Bakhmut direction.[44]

Russian forces reportedly continued to advance within Avdiivka amid continued positional fighting in the area on February 13. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced in northern and central Avdiivka and on the southeastern and southern outskirts of the settlement, although ISW has not yet observed confirmation of further Russian gains within Avdiivka.[45] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced west of Avdiivka near Lastochkyne and southwest of Avdiivka

near Pervomaiske, but ISW has not observed confirmation of these claims either.[46] Positional fighting continued within and near Avdiivka, west of Avdiivka near Tonenke, and southwest of Avdiivka near Nevelske and Pervomaiske.[47] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi stated that Russian forces are intensifying assaults in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast) and conducted their highest number of air and artillery strikes in the area since the start of 2024.[48] Russian milbloggers claimed on February 13 that Russian forces conducted up to 60 glide bomb strikes on Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka over the past day.[49] Elements of the Russian 1st "Slavic" Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk Peoples Republic [DNR] Army Corps [AC]) are reportedly operating in the Avdiivka direction.[50]

Positional engagements continued west and southwest of Donetsk City on February 13. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting continued west of Donetsk City near Horhiivka and southwest of Donetsk City near Pobeda and Novomykhailivka.[51] Elements of the Russian 238th Artillery Brigade (8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and the 5th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st DNR AC) are reportedly operating near Horhiivka and elements of the 14th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff's Main Directorate [GRU]) and the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) are reportedly operating near Novomykhailivka.[52]

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

Positional engagements continued in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on February 13 but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked south of Prechystivka (southeast of Velyka Novosilka) and north of Pryutne (southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[53] Elements of the Russian 29th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) reportedly continue to operate in the Vuhledar direction (east of Velyka Novosilka).[54]

Russian forces recently advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements on February 13. Geolocated footage published on February 12 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced west of Robotyne.[55] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements continued near Robotyne, northeast of Robotyne near Mala Tokmachka and Novoprokovka, east of Robotyne near Verbove, and south of Robotyne near Novoprokopivka. [56] Elements of the Russian 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) reportedly continue to operate near Robotyne.[57]

Positional engagements continued in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near Krynyk.[58] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian Storm-Z, Naval Infantry, Airborne (VDV), and mobilized units conduct two-to-three assaults in left bank Kherson Oblast per day.[59] Humenyuk also reported that Russian forces are increasingly using first-person view (FPV) drones in assaults in left bank Kherson Oblast and that Russian assault units lose up to 70 percent of their personnel in such attacks.

Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign (Russian Objective: Target Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure in the rear and on the frontline)

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of February 12 to 13. The Ukrainian Air Force reported on February 13 that Russian forces launched 23 Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and occupied Cape Chauda, Crimea, and that Ukrainian forces destroyed 16 Shaheds in Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.[60] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces shot down a Russian Kh-59 missile near Odesa City and that Russian forces struck Kirovohrad Oblast with a likely Iskander-K missile.[61] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukrainian forces are using a large number of foreign air defense systems in parallel with Soviet-era S-300 and Buk-M1 air defense systems.[62] Ihnat stated that foreign air defense systems, such as NASAMS, IRIS-T, and Patriot systems, should become the basis of Ukraine's air defense umbrella.[63]

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

The British International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank stated on February 12 that Russia is likely able to sustain its current rate of vehicle losses for at least two to three years by producing new vehicles and reactivating vehicles from storage.[64] IISS estimated that Russia has lost over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles in 2023 and close to 8,000 armored fighting vehicles since February 2022. IISS stated that Russia likely reactivated at least 1,180 main battle tanks and about 2,470 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers pulled from storage in 2023. IISS

stated that Russia has 10 Central Tank Reserve Bases, at least 37 mixed equipment and armaments storage bases, and at least 12 artillery storage bases. Ukrainian military analyst Oleksandr Kovalenko stated on February 11 that Russia's reported tank production numbers in recent years largely reflect restored and modernized tanks drawn from storage rather than new production.[65]

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Russian government to address issues related to Russian military personnel, likely as part of Putin's continued efforts to portray himself as an involved, caring, wartime leader before the March 2024 presidential election. Putin ordered the Russian government to change the process of examining injured military personnel who fought in Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) militias and military formations since May 2014 and to analyze existing frameworks for providing benefits and payment to Russian military personnel.[66]

Russia is trying to nationalize certain defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on February 13 that the Russian Prosecutor General's Office filed a lawsuit with the Sverdlovsk Oblast Arbitration Court to seize the shares of three industrial enterprises of the Chelyabinsk Electrometallurgical Plant, claiming that the privatization of these enterprises from 1993 to 1999 was illegal and required the Russian government's permission.[67] The Prosecutor General's Office claimed that residents of unspecified "unfriendly" states control the enterprises and that the enterprises export products at a reduced cost to the US, France, and the United Kingdom (UK). *Kommersant* reported that the Prosecutor General's Office stated that the enterprises are Russia's largest producers of ferroalloys specifically for high-quality steel for military equipment, heat-resistant aircraft engines, weapon barrels, and armor-piercing projectiles.

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

Nothing significant to report.

Ukrainian Defense Industrial Efforts (Ukrainian objective: Develop its defense industrial base to become more self-sufficient in cooperation with US, European, and international partners)

Ukraine continues efforts to domestically produce drones. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated on February 13 that Ukraine has about 200 private drone production companies.[68] Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov stated on February 12 that Ukraine allocated about \$2.5 million in grants to military tech startups in 2023 and that Ukraine is set to increase this amount by tenfold in 2024.[69]

Ukraine reportedly created a nationwide electronic warfare (EW) system that can disrupt Russian drones' satellite navigation.[70] The "Pokrova" system reportedly jams navigation systems, like the Russian GLONASS, with "spoofing," causing the drones to relay an incorrect location. Ukrainian forces have reportedly used spoofing to down Russian drones at a short range, but Pokrova works on a larger scale. *Forbes* stated that Ukrainian forces may already be using Pokrova to down Russian Shahed drones.[71]

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)

The Kremlin continues efforts to solidify control of occupied Ukraine through institutionalizing social benefits and services. Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a list of instructions on February 12 instructing the Russian government to ensure the extension of preferential mortgage lending programs in occupied Ukraine, to develop health infrastructure in occupied territories through offering medical workers from Russia money, and to guarantee insurance payments to volunteers operating in occupied Ukraine.[72] These instructions notably aim to attract Russian citizens, businesses, and volunteers to occupied Ukraine, likely to permanently change Ukraine's demographics. These measures support longstanding Russian efforts to establish economic and social control over occupied territories while also likely supporting Russian repopulation efforts that seek to bring ethnic Russians to occupied Ukraine as part of the Kremlin's ethnic cleansing campaign.[73]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

US-sanctioned pro-Kremlin Moldovan politician Ilan Shor reiterated boilerplate claims that the US intends to directly interfere in Moldovan politics by finding a "replacement" for current Moldovan President Maia Sandu.[74] Shor is likely attempting to further a common Russian information

operation aimed at portraying any perceived pro-Western political sentiment in post-Soviet countries as Western-manufactured and not endogenously generated.

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)

Nothing significant to report.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 12, 2024

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

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

February 12, 2024, 6:10pm 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 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 1:15pm ET on February 12. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 13 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that elements of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are training Russian drone operators at the Shayrat Air Base in Syria.[1] The GUR stated that LH and IRGC trainers are training Russian operators how to use Shahed-136/-131, Ababil-3, and Qods Raab 85 drones and that LH commander Kamal Abu Sadiq is heading the training effort. Iranian-backed militias and Russian forces are located at Shayrat Air Base, which is the second largest Iranian air base in Syria's Homs Province after the Tiyas T-4 Air Base.[2] The IRGC and LH previously conducted training for Russian forces on Iranian-made drones at the Russian-controlled Palmyra Military Airport, also in Homs Province.[3] The Israeli Air Force notably struck Shayrat Air Base and other Syrian army Iranian-backed militia sites throughout Homs Province on February 7.[4] The GUR report suggests that Russian forces are expanding drone training to Shayrat Air Base utilizing existing Russian military infrastructure and leveraging relationships with LH and other Iranian-backed militant groups.

The Russian State Duma is considering a bill to restrict actors that the Russian government designates as “undesirable” from entering Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to censor opposition media outlets and dismantle ties between Russia and foreign and international non-governmental organizations. Russian State Duma Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Head Vasily Piskarev announced on February 12 that he and other Duma deputies submitted a bill that would allow the Russian government to designate foreign organizations whose founders or participants are allegedly affiliated with foreign governments as “undesirable.”[5] The bill would also prohibit foreign and stateless individuals who are involved in such “undesirable” organizations from entering Russia.[6] This bill will likely prohibit journalists from Russian opposition outlets based outside of Russia and foreign outlets with Russian-language services (such as the UK's BBC and Germany's Deutsche Welle, among others) from entering Russia, thereby restricting their ability to report on domestic Russian affairs, and will likely further block the work of international and foreign non-governmental organizations in Russia. Russian authorities can also bring criminal charges and revoke acquired Russian citizenship from individuals found guilty of participating in a designated “undesirable” organization.[7] Piskarev recently announced that the Duma is considering another bill that will ban Russian citizens and companies from advertising on platforms owned by organizations designated as “foreign agents,” likely in an effort to use financial coercion to censor Russian opposition media and critical Russian ultranationalist milbloggers.[8] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin has been attempting to consolidate control over and stifle dissent in the Russian information

space ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential election, although this bill will likely severely restrict opposition media operations in Russia for the long term.

Boris Nadezhdin, the only openly anti-war Russian presidential candidate, filed two lawsuits in the Russian Supreme Court challenging the Russian Central Election Commission's (CEC) refusal to register him as a candidate as the Kremlin continues efforts to suppress popular opposition while trying to preserve the veneer of legitimacy of Russian presidential elections. Nadezhdin filed lawsuits with the Supreme Court challenging the technicalities the CEC used to deny his registration in the presidential election.[9] Nadezhdin stated that he will likely file a third lawsuit against the CEC before February 16.[10] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin may have reversed its decision to allow Nadezhdin to run after Nadezhdin demonstrated that he might win too many votes for the Kremlin to credibly portray Putin as winning the election by the Kremlin-desired margin, and by extension frame Putin's reelection as an overwhelming referendum on his war effort. [11] The CEC is unlikely to reverse its decision. The Russian Ministry of Justice included the Russian Election Monitor, a European non-governmental organization (NGO) that publishes expert analyses on Russian elections and observations from independent civilian election observers in Russia, on the list of "undesirable" NGOs in Russia.[12] Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Security and Anti-Corruption Vasily Piskarev justified the "undesirable" designation, claiming that a group of unnamed Polish, French, and German "Russophobe" politicians formed the Russian Election Monitor to "prepare foreign audiences to recognize the presidential elections in Russia as illegitimate."[13]

The European Union (EU) is beginning to take concrete steps towards possibly using frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine. The European Council adopted a decision and regulation stating that central securities depositaries (CSDs) holding more than one million euros (\$1.07 million) in assets from the Russian Central Bank must separate any profits generated from the primary accounts. [14] The European Council stated that this decision could allow the European Council to decide to support Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction using these profits in the future. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba "welcomed" the European Council's decision and called for further "ambitious" and "prompt" steps towards using revenues from frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine.[15]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that elements of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are training Russian drone operators at the Shayrat Air Base in Syria.
- The Russian State Duma is considering a bill to restrict actors that the Russian government designates as "undesirable" from entering Russia, likely as part of ongoing efforts to censor opposition media outlets and dismantle ties between Russia and foreign and international non-governmental organizations.
- Boris Nadezhdin, the only openly anti-war Russian presidential candidate, filed two lawsuits in the Russian Supreme Court challenging the Russian Central Election Commission's (CEC) refusal to register him as a candidate as the Kremlin continues efforts to suppress popular opposition while trying to preserve the veneer of legitimacy of Russian presidential elections.
- The European Union (EU) is beginning to take concrete steps towards possibly using frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Donetsk City and in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk and Kreminna.
- South Korean news outlet *Yonhap News Agency* reported on February 12 that North Korea has developed 240mm guided multiple rocket launcher system (MLRS) mortar that North Korea may export to Russia.
- Russian authorities continue to use youth engagement programs to Russify Ukrainian youth.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 11, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Katerina Stepanenko, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 11, 2024, 6:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on February 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk as Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander, replacing current Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi.[1] Zelensky also made several other service head appointments on February 11. Zelensky appointed Lieutenant General Yuriy Sodol as Joint Forces Commander replacing Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev.[2] Zelensky appointed Brigadier General Ihor Skybyuk Air Assault Forces Commander replacing Major General Maksym Myrhorodskyi.[3] Zelensky appointed Major General Ihor Plahuta Territorial Defense Forces Commander replacing Major General Anatoliy Barhylevych, who was appointed Chief of the Ukrainian General Staff on February 10.[4]

Russian forces appear to have constructed a 30-kilometer-long barrier dubbed the “tsar train” in occupied Donetsk Oblast, possibly to serve as a defensive line against future Ukrainian assaults. Satellite imagery dated May 10, 2023, and February 6 and 10, 2024 shows that Russian forces constructed a long line of train cars stretching from occupied Olenivka (south of Donetsk City) to Volnovakha (southeast of Vuhledar and north of Mariupol) over the past nine months.[5] A Ukrainian source reported on February 11 that Russian forces have assembled more than 2,100 freight cars into a 30-kilometer-long train.[6] The source reported that Russian forces began assembling the train in July 2023 and suggested that Russian forces intend to use the train as a defensive line against future Ukrainian assaults.[7] The railway line between Olenivka and Volnovakha is roughly six kilometers from ISW’s current assessed frontline southeast of Novomykhailivka at its closest point and is in an area of the front that was relatively inactive when Russian forces reportedly began construction.[8] Russian forces have recently made marginal territorial gains in this area.[9] The Russians could have assembled the train for other purposes as well.

Ukrainian military observers indicated that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is not as productive as Russian authorities portray it to be, but that the Russian DIB is still capable of sustaining Russia’s war effort. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on February 11 that the Russian Security Council’s own DIB production data for 2023 indicates that the Russian DIB reached a peak output in September 2023 that was 38.9 percent higher than its average 2022 monthly output and has steadily declined in the following months.[10] Mashovets stated that the Russian DIB is struggling to compensate for moderately- and highly-skilled labor shortages and Russia’s inability to obtain the necessary industrial production equipment, spare parts, and servicing to sustain the pace and breadth of DIB production efforts.[11] Mashovets noted that Chinese companies in particular are less willing to provide Russia with equipment and spare parts, as ISW previously reported, and that Russia purchased many industrial production systems from Western states before the full-scale invasion but that Western companies are now unwilling to service or supply parts for these machines due to sanctions.[12]

Ukrainian military analyst Oleksandr Kovalenko stated that Russia’s reported tank production numbers in recent years largely reflect restored and modernized tanks drawn from storage rather than new production.[13] Kovalenko stated that Uralvagonzavod, Russia’s primary tank manufacturer, can produce roughly 60-70 T-90 tanks per year under perfect conditions and assessed that Uralvagonzavod is likely only producing between three and six new T-90 tanks per month. [14] Kovalenko noted that tank manufacturers Uralvagonzavod, Omsktransmash, and the 103rd Armored Tank Repair Plant in Chita, Zabaykalsky Krai are primarily focused on restoring, repairing, and modernizing Russian tanks and that Uralvagonzavod is the only manufacturer producing new tanks.[15] Kovalenko stated that Russia is only modernizing T-54/55 and T-62 tanks and assessed that these may be Russia’s main battle tanks in the future. Kovalenko added that Russian manufacturers very rarely modernize T-72 and T-80 tanks. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitri Medvedev previously stated that Russian forces received 1,600 tanks in 2023, and Kovalenko attributed this number primarily to restored and modernized rather than serially produced tanks.[16]

Russia’s current limited DIB production capacity and insufficient serial tank production lines are not guarantees that Russia will struggle to produce enough materiel to sustain its war effort at its current pace or in the long term. Russia’s ability to modernize and use tanks retrieved from storage still gives Russian forces an advantage on the battlefield in the overall number of available tanks. Mashovets noted that some newly-produced tanks such as the T-14 Armada are poorly produced whereas older tanks such as T-72s (which Russia actively repairs) are more reliable. [17] Russia has consistently attempted to adapt to the limitations resulting from Western sanctions and to circumvent sanctions and will persist in these efforts. Russia’s DIB may struggle in the near term and increasing sanctions evasion measures and partnerships with states including China and North Korea may help compensate for existing DIB shortcomings in the medium to long term.[18]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed Lieutenant General Oleksandr Pavlyuk as Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander, replacing current Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi.
- Russian forces appear to have constructed a 30-kilometer-long barrier dubbed the “tsar train” in occupied Donetsk Oblast, possibly to serve as a defensive line against future Ukrainian assaults.
- Ukrainian military observers indicated that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is not as productive as Russian authorities portray it to be, but that the Russian DIB is still capable of sustaining Russia’s war effort.
- Russia’s current limited DIB production capacity and insufficient serial tank production lines are not guarantees that Russia will struggle to produce enough materiel to sustain its war effort at its current pace or in the long term.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and in western Zaporizhia Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- CNN reported on February 11 that Russia has recruited as many as 15,000 Nepalis to fight in Ukraine, many of whom complained about poor conditions and lack of adequate training before their deployment to the most active frontlines in Ukraine.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to solidify social control over youth and students in occupied Ukraine and to culturally indoctrinate them into Russian identity and ideology.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 10, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mapes, Riley Bailey, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 10, 2024, 6:10pm 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 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 1:15pm ET on February 10 ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Delays in Western security assistance may lead to significant Ukrainian air defense missile shortages that could allow Russian forces to bomb Ukrainian forces or even front-line cities more aggressively. The *New York Times* reported on February 9 that American officials assess that Ukrainian air defense missile stocks will run out in March 2024 without further replenishment by Western security assistance.^[1] Ukrainian officials have recently warned that Ukraine is facing a “critical shortage” of air defense missiles as delays in Western aid continue to force Ukraine to husband materiel.^[2] Russian forces have routinely pressured Ukraine’s limited air defense umbrella through missile and drone strikes integrating Iranian and North Korean weapons with Russian systems against rear Ukrainian areas in an effort to force Ukrainian forces to expend air defense missiles and to draw and fix Ukrainian air defense systems away from the frontline.^[3] Ukrainian forces previously shot down tactical Russian aircraft in Kherson Oblast in December 2023, which had a temporary chilling effect on Russian aviation support for Russian ground operations throughout the theater.^[4] Ukrainian forces also shot down a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft on January 14 which similarly led to a temporary decrease in Russian aviation operations over the Sea of Azov.^[5] The intensification of the Russian strike campaign in recent weeks likely further pressured Ukraine’s air defense umbrella and may have forced Ukraine to redeploy air defenses that were previously able to place constraints on Russian tactical aviation operating along the front and in the Russian rear.

Russian aviation reportedly intensified operations supporting Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in January 2024, particularly near Avdiivka, suggesting that limited Ukrainian air defense missile stocks may be giving Russian aviation more opportunities to attack.^[6] Critical Ukrainian shortages of air defense missiles could permit Russian forces to operate aircraft, especially manned aircraft that generally carry heavier payloads, closer to and beyond the current frontline in Ukraine at scale. **The Russian military has yet to conduct consistent large-scale aviation operations**

supporting Russian ground offensives in Ukraine, and the intensification of Russian aviation operations at scale would represent a significant threat to Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed Major General Anatoliy Barhylevych as Chief of the Ukrainian General Staff, replacing Lieutenant General Serhiy Shaptala.[7] Zelensky noted on February 10 that Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi recommended Barhylevych, and Syrskyi congratulated Barhylevych on his appointment.[8] Zelensky appointed Colonel Vadym Sukharevskyi as the Deputy Commander-in-Chief responsible for unmanned systems and Colonel Andriy Lebedenko as the Deputy Commander-in-Chief responsible for innovation.[9] Zelensky also appointed Brigadier General Volodymyr Horbatiuk as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff responsible for operations, planning, and management; Brigadier General Oleksii Shevchenko as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff responsible for logistics; and Brigadier General Mykhailo Drapatyi as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff responsible for training.[10]

Russian drone footage published on February 9 showed Russian forces executing Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) near Klishchiivka in the Bakhmut direction.[11] The footage shows a Russian soldier executing an unarmed Ukrainian prisoner surrendering with his hands raised and killing a second Ukrainian prisoner after throwing a grenade into a dugout. The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office has started a pre-trial investigation and criminal proceedings. 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 Conflict.[12] Similar previous footage has shown Russian forces executing Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast and near Stepove in the Avdiivka direction in December 2023.[13] The Russian Southern Grouping of Forces is responsible for the Bakhmut and Avdiivka directions, and a separate unnamed Russian grouping of forces is responsible for western Zaporizhia Oblast, indicating that the practice of executing Ukrainian POWs is not limited to a single sector of the front or an area under one Russian grouping of forces.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated several Kremlin narratives aimed at justifying Russia's war in Ukraine and threatening the West at a ceremony honoring Diplomats' Day on February 10. Putin claimed that one of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) priorities is to "unite the multinational and multi-confessional Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) by supporting [Russia's] compatriots abroad."[14] The Kremlin had repeatedly claimed that the Russian World, which is vaguely defined as including ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad, includes Ukrainians and that Russia's invasions of Ukraine were allegedly in the defense of "compatriots abroad" in Ukraine.[15] Putin's calls for the unification of the multinational and multi-confessional Russian World are at odds with Russian authorities' actual persecution of ethnic groups and religions, including some Christian sects, in Russia and occupied Ukraine.[16] Kremlin officials and mouthpieces have also recently invoked the idea of Russia's "compatriots abroad" and intensified rhetorical attacks surrounding Soviet historical monuments in neighboring states to set information conditions to justify possible future Russian aggression abroad.[17] Putin's speech indicates that these efforts will likely remain a Kremlin priority going forward.

Lavrov also spoke on Diplomat's Day and reiterated Kremlin narratives about the emergence of a new multipolar world.[18] Lavrov continued to sharply criticize the West for trying to "impose an unjust unipolar neocolonial model" on the world. Lavrov claimed that the West objects to Russia's support of the principles of international law, especially the principle of the sovereign equality of states, despite the fact that Russia has repeatedly undermined and attacked Ukraine's independence, statehood, and sovereignty, all of which it specifically guaranteed in 1991 and 1994.[19] ISW previously observed Kremlin attempts to appeal to wider audiences that likely do not identify with the ideology of the Russian World, and Lavrov's statements are likely intended for an international audience, especially in those countries that Lavrov listed as having growing ties with Russia, including Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela as well as Iran and North Korea.[20]

Kremlin mouthpieces reiterated ongoing Russian narratives blaming the West, specifically the United States, for the absence of constructive peace negotiations to end Russia's invasion of Ukraine, despite numerous Russian statements indicating that Russia is not interested in good-faith peace negotiations with Ukraine. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov claimed on February 10 that the Kremlin has not seen any indications of America's desire or political will for peace negotiations with Russia.[21] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova similarly claimed that the prospects of dialogue between Russia and the US depend entirely on American willingness to negotiate "on the basis of mutual respect."[22] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin also reiterated Kremlin claims that the West does not want peace in Ukraine and wants to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia.[23] Peskov's and Zakharova's emphasis on negotiations with the United States are part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to frame the West as the only meaningful negotiating partner in Ukraine in order to convince the West to accept the Kremlin's

premise that Ukraine has no independent agency and to gain concessions from the West that undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to further the long-standing Kremlin information operation that falsely asserts that Russia is interested in a negotiated end to its war in Ukraine during a February 8 interview but instead illustrated throughout the interview that Russia has no interest in good faith negotiations, as ISW continues to assess.[24] Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly signaled and at times openly stated that Russia has not abandoned its maximalist objectives in Ukraine, which ISW assesses amount to full Ukrainian and Western capitulation.[25]

The Russian State Duma is considering a bill aimed at further censoring actors designated as “foreign agents,” likely aimed at censoring dissent from opposition media outlets and prominent information space voices. Head of the Russian State Duma Commission on Investigations of Foreign Interference in Internal Affairs Vitaly Piskarev stated on February 10 that the Duma has prepared and is considering a bill that will ban Russian citizens and companies from advertising on platforms owned by entities designated as “foreign agents.”[26] Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin added that Russia should prevent foreign agents from earning any income in Russia.[27] This bill will heavily impact Russian opposition media sources, many of which are legally designated as foreign agents. These media outlets may have to shutter their operations or move primary operations outside of Russia to maintain their sources of income, which may impact their ability to reliably report on news in Russia. Other information space actors, such as opposition-leaning media outlets without the foreign agent label or fringe ultranationalist milbloggers who rely on advertising revenue from their Telegram channels, may further self-censor their content to avoid earning the foreign agent designation and maintain sources of income. The Kremlin is notably cracking down on dissent in and consolidating control over the Russian information space ahead of the March 2024 elections, and this bill likely aims to severely restrict opposition media sources while reinforcing pressures to self-censor in the Russian information space

Key Takeaways:

- Delays in Western security assistance may lead to significant Ukrainian air defense missile shortages that could allow Russian forces to bomb Ukrainian forces or even front-line cities more aggressively.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appointed Major General Anatoliy Barhylevych as Chief of the Ukrainian General Staff, replacing Lieutenant General Serhiy Shaptala
- Russian drone footage published on February 9 showed Russian forces executing Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) near Klishchiivka in the Bakhmut direction.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated several Kremlin narratives aimed at justifying Russia’s war in Ukraine and threatening the West at a ceremony honoring Diplomats’ Day on February 10.
- Kremlin mouthpieces reiterated ongoing Russian narratives blaming the West, specifically the United States, for the absence of constructive peace negotiations to end Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, despite numerous Russian statements indicating that Russia is not interested in good-faith peace negotiations with Ukraine.
- The Russian State Duma is considering a bill aimed at further censoring actors designated as “foreign agents,” likely aimed at censoring dissent from opposition media outlets and prominent information space voices.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Avdiivka.
- The relatives of mobilized Russian soldiers continue to protest throughout Russia despite previous Kremlin efforts to censor similar protests and suppress any possible resurgence of a broader social movement in support of mobilized Russian soldiers.
- Russian and occupation officials continue to set conditions for the deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine through educational and extracurricular schemes.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 9, 2024

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

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

February 9, 2024, 6:40pm ET

The Russian online community noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer any new information in his interview with American media personality Tucker Carlson and simply repeated longstanding Kremlin talking points about Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine for

American audiences. Prominent Russian milbloggers claimed that Putin did not say anything new and framed the interview as a Russian attempt to infiltrate Western mainstream media rather than to make any fundamentally new arguments or to address Russian audiences.[1] One milblogger claimed that Putin's interview aimed to promote Russian foreign policy to Americans who are actively engaged on social media and explained Putin's repetition of tired Kremlin talking points as a summary of Russia's justifications for its invasion of Ukraine for American voters.[2] Sources close to the Russian Presidential Administration similarly told Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* that Putin's interview was not designed for a Russian audience and that the Kremlin intended to generate informational effects and hysteria in the West.[3] One of *Meduza*'s interlocutors added that the interview's secondary objective was to show Russian domestic audiences that Putin can still shape global discourse based on the popularity of the interview but did not offer an assessment of Putin's success in this regard.

Kremlin sources focused on presenting the interview as a massively successful and popular Russian effort to shape the information environment in the West and claimed that the interview demonstrated that Putin is an influential world leader. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that American interest in Putin's interview was "undeniable" and that the Kremlin is interested in the reaction to the interview abroad as it continues to prioritize observing the domestic response to the interview. [4] Russian occupation officials celebrated a claim that the interview surpassed 60 million views and claimed that the world is increasingly interested in Putin's opinion and his "truths." [5]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev noted that Putin told the Western world in the most thorough and detailed way why Ukraine did not exist, does not exist, and will not exist.[6] Medvedev's description of Putin's interview further demonstrates that Russia has not abandoned its maximalist goals of eradicating Ukrainian statehood and that Putin does not intend to negotiate with Ukraine on any terms short of these goals.

Delays in Western aid appear to be exacerbating Ukraine's current artillery shortages and could impact Ukraine's long-term war effort. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on February 9 that Ukraine is struggling with artillery shortages amid delayed US aid and Europe's anticipated failure to meet its March 2024 deadline of providing one million artillery shells to Ukraine.[7] An unnamed senior US military official told *FT* that delayed US aid risks creating an "air bubble" or a "gap in the hose" of Western aid to Ukraine and leaving Ukraine without Western aid for an unspecified period of time. [8] The official stated that the Pentagon is particularly concerned about Ukraine's ability to maintain its air defense systems and ammunition supplies, and a senior European diplomat warned that it will be difficult for Ukraine to even maintain its current positions without Western materiel.[9] **ISW continues to assess that the collapse of Western aid to Ukraine would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to defend itself and hold off the Russian military and could allow Russian forces to push all the way to western Ukraine closer to the borders of NATO member states.** [10] Another European official expressed concern over Europe's ability to substitute the volume of assistance that the US previously provided to Ukraine.[11] Ukrainian Ambassador to the US Oksana Markarova told *Bloomberg* on February 8 that Ukraine is facing a "critical shortage" in military equipment, particularly missiles and interceptors.[12] Ukrainian military officials recently warned that Ukraine is rationing air defense equipment and ammunition while attempting to adapt and respond to large-scale Russian drone and missile strikes.[13]

Newly appointed Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi identified several of his goals as commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Syrskyi stated that his primary agenda is to set clear and detailed plans for the Ukrainian command as well as to facilitate the quick distribution and delivery of necessary materiel to combat units deployed throughout the theater. [14] Syrskyi stated that he intends to balance between having Ukrainian forces conduct combat missions and building Ukraine's combat power by restoring and training Ukrainian units.[15] Syrskyi added that the introduction of new technical solutions and the implementation of lessons learned from successful modern combat experience, specifically with drones and electronic warfare (EW) systems, is a path towards Ukrainian victory, echoing themes from former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi's recent focus on using technological innovation and adaptation to offset Russian forces' numerical advantages.[16] Syrskyi further discussed these goals at a meeting with Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov on February 9 in which the two discussed plans for improving logistics and the quality of training for Ukrainian forces in 2024.[17]

Ukrainian actors reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against two oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai on February 9. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne*, citing its internal sources in the Ukrainian security service (SBU), reported that SBU drones struck the Il'sky and Afipsky oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai on February 9.[18] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukraine launched two drones at Krasnodar Krai, but claimed that Russian air defense intercepted the drones, despite footage showing a fire at the Il'sky oil refinery following apparent drone impacts.[19] SBU sources additionally reported that the SBU conducted a drone strike against the Lukoil refinery in

Volgograd Oblast on February 3.[20] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on February 6 that Russian refineries had to marginally reduce their output due to damage caused by Ukrainian drone strikes, and the *Kommersant* investigation found that Russian refinery output reduced by 4 percent in January 2024 compared to January 2023 and by 1.4 percent in January 2024 compared to December 2023. [21] While the reduction in refinery percentage is not large, it is noteworthy that Ukraine is able to achieve such asymmetrical effects against infrastructure that supports the Russian war effort using a few drones per strike on such high-value targets.

Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are increasing their use of illegal chemical weapons in Ukraine, in an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory.[22] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Ukrainian military has recorded 815 Russian attacks with ammunition equipped with toxic chemicals since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, 229 of which occurred in January 2024 alone.[23] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi noted that Russian forces are increasingly conducting chemical attacks in the Tavriisk operational direction (from Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast).[24] Ukrainian military officials stated that Russian forces most often use K-51 grenades, RGR 60mm irritant hand grenades, and RGO Soviet-era defensive fragmentation hand grenades, likely filled with either chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile (CS) gas or chloropicrin (PS). [25] Both CS gas and PS are considered riot control agents (RCAs), or irritant chemical compounds that are not necessarily lethal but have extremely irritating and harmful effects, especially when inhaled.[26] The CWC - which Russia ratified in 1997 - bans the use of RCAs in warfare.[27] The Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade recently acknowledged in a now-deleted post that elements of the brigade deliberately used K-51 grenades with CS gas on Ukrainian positions near Krynyk in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.[28]

Bloomberg reported on February 9 that Ukraine is considering economic reforms in order to secure funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the event that the US Congress continues to block crucial aid.[29] Bloomberg reported that Ukrainian officials will propose a plan to IMF officials in Kyiv next week to expand Ukraine's domestic bond sales, raise taxes, and cut federal spending. Ukrainian officials hope to assure the IMF that Ukraine can pay back its \$15.6 billion IMF loan without additional Western aid.

Key Takeaways:

- The Russian online community noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer any new information in his interview with American media personality Tucker Carlson and simply repeated longstanding Kremlin talking points about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine for American audiences.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev noted that Putin told the Western world in the most thorough and detailed way why Ukraine did not exist, does not exist, and will not exist.
- Delays in Western aid appear to be exacerbating Ukraine's current artillery shortages and could impact Ukraine's long-term war effort.
- Newly appointed Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi identified several of his goals as commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.
- Ukrainian actors reportedly conducted a successful drone strike against two oil refineries in Krasnodar Krai on February 9.
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are increasing their use of illegal chemical weapons in Ukraine, in an apparent violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), to which Russia is a signatory.
- **Bloomberg reported on February 9 that Ukraine is considering economic reforms in order to secure funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the event that the US Congress continues to block crucial aid.**
- Russian forces advanced near Kreminna, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the frontline.
- Russian paramilitary organization Novorossiya Aid Coordination Center (KCPN) is training drone operators in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near Krynyk.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare for the upcoming Russian presidential elections by creating the appearance of popular support for Russian Vladimir Putin in occupied areas of Ukraine.

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

Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 8, 2024, 10:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET (excluding toplines covering Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin) on February 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to use an interview with American media personality Tucker Carlson published on February 8 to present to a wider Western audience a long-standing Kremlin information operation that falsely asserts that Russia is interested in a negotiated end to its war in Ukraine.^[1] Putin illustrated throughout the interview that Russia has no interest in meaningful or legitimate negotiations, however, and that Putin still seeks to destroy Ukraine as a state. Putin also displayed his overarching hostility towards the West and **falsely accused the West of forcing Russia to attack Ukraine.** Putin repeatedly stressed that Russia is open to negotiations in order to falsely frame Russia as a reasonable actor and "Western ruling elites" as the main obstruction to a negotiation.^[2] Putin also repeatedly reiterated a Russian information operation alleging that Western officials coerced Ukraine to reject an agreement favorable to Russia during negotiations between Ukraine and Russia in Istanbul in March 2022.^[3] Western leaders, in fact, offered to help President Volodymyr Zelensky escape Kyiv in the days immediately following the invasion, and Zelensky responded that he needed "ammunition, not a ride."^[4]

The Kremlin routinely frames the West as the only meaningful negotiating party in Ukraine as part of its effort to gain Western acceptance of its premise that Ukraine has no independent agency in order to secure concessions from the West on Ukraine's behalf that undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and destroy Ukraine's territorial integrity.^[5] The Kremlin has periodically intensified this information operation feigning interest in negotiations to seize on actual Western interest in a negotiated settlement to undermine Western support for Ukraine and degrade Western efforts to send more security assistance to Ukraine.^[6] Putin and the Kremlin have intensified rhetoric in recent weeks indicating that Russia continues to pursue maximalist objectives in Ukraine that ISW assesses would amount to full Ukrainian and Western capitulation.^[7] ISW continues to assess that Putin's negotiating position has not changed: He still seeks the destruction of Ukraine and seeks to use an armistice to set favorable condition for the Russian military to launch a subsequent more successful war against Ukraine.

Putin also attempted to use the interview to absurdly reframe Russia as the wronged party and not the initiator of Russia's unprovoked war of conquest against Ukraine. Putin falsely claimed that Ukrainian "neo-Nazis" started the war in Ukraine in 2014 and that Russia's full-scale invasion is an attempt to bring that war to an end.^[8] Putin repeated tired Russian rhetoric presenting Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a defensive campaign aimed at protecting Russian people and the Russia nation. This ongoing information operation is meant to obfuscate the obvious fact that Russia launched a war of aggression against its neighbor in 2022 in order to confuse Western memories of what actually happened. Putin's revisionism also aims to bolster long-standing Kremlin narratives justifying his maximalist goals in Ukraine.

Putin continued attempts to justify Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as responses to Ukraine's and the West's actions in order to defend his long-standing calls for regime change in Kyiv and Ukraine's "demilitarization," "denazification," and "neutrality." Putin falsely claimed that a US-backed "coup" in Ukraine in 2014 forced Russia to invade Crimea and begin military operations in Donbas in 2014.^[9] Putin falsely claimed that Ukraine initiated a military operation in the Donbas starting in 2014 and that Ukraine failed to implement the Minsk Agreements establishing the armistice that Putin broke in February 2022. Putin accused NATO of exploiting Ukraine in order to build military bases in Ukraine under the guise of training the Ukrainian military. There have not been and still are no NATO military bases in Ukraine. These narratives are aimed at buttressing Putin's long-standing calls for Ukraine's "demilitarization," which are likely aimed at stripping Ukraine of the means to defend itself and allowing Russia to impose its will upon Ukraine through force whenever the Kremlin so chooses. Putin also reiterated that one of Russia's war aims is to "denazify" Ukraine. Putin defined "denazification" as the prohibition of all neo-Nazi movements in Ukraine and the removal of people who support Nazi ideology. Putin specifically highlighted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as an alleged supporter of Nazi ideology, further indication that Putin's calls for Ukraine's "denazification" are in fact demands for the removal of the current elected Ukrainian government and its replacement with one acceptable to the Kremlin, as ISW has long assessed.^[10] Putin continued to

call for Ukrainian “neutrality” and argued that Russia cannot trust any NATO statements about the alliance not allowing Ukraine to become a member.[11] Putin continued to claim that NATO’s 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which promised Ukraine and Georgia paths to membership but took no concrete steps towards opening such paths, violated Ukraine’s 1991 Declaration of Independence that declared that Ukraine is a neutral state. The Russian Federation, however, had committed “to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine,” which include Crimea and Donbas, in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in exchange for Ukraine’s return of the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons on its territory to Russia.[12] The Budapest Memorandum guarantees Ukraine all sovereign rights, which include the right for Ukraine to choose its own alignment.

Putin continued to propagate pseudo-history in an effort to deny Ukrainian statehood and nationhood. Putin reiterated long-standing Russian information operations to deny the existence of Ukrainian statehood and identity. Putin claimed that Ukrainians fundamentally do not exist as a nation and that Ukrainians are truly Russians whom various political actors reinvented as Ukrainians to erode Russia’s ability to control Russia’s borderlands with other Eastern and Central European powers. Putin rewrote centuries of history to this effect. Putin has routinely denied Ukrainian sovereignty, statehood, and identity in order to frame Russia’s full-scale invasion as an attempt to return historically Russian lands to Russia and as a humanitarian effort to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers whom Russia calls “compatriots abroad.”[13]

Putin has also regularly and intentionally misused the definition of “ethnic Russian” to erroneously include Ukrainians in order to promote the larger concept of the wider Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) to justify Russia’s maximalist claims over Ukraine and its people and its larger imperialist ambitions.[14] **None of Putin’s rewriting of history justifies Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The borders of every state in the world have changed over time.**

International law, which Putin claims to seek to uphold, requires the recognition by all states of each other’s sovereign rights in their territories as recognized by other sovereign states. The Russian Federation has explicitly recognized Ukraine’s sovereignty over its current international borders twice—in 1991 and in 1994. Accepting Putin’s argument for Russia’s right to redesign Ukraine’s borders to his liking by force is an invitation to all powerful states with historical grievances to attack and seize the lands of their neighbors that they covet.

Putin also reiterated a quasi-realist world view that defines weakening the West and dismantling NATO as pre-requisites for the Russian-led multipolar world he desires to create. Putin consistently framed NATO’s expansion and existence as threatening to Russia and any future Russian- and Chinese-led global order.[15] Putin claimed that world affairs develop according to “inherent laws” that have not changed throughout history wherein a country grows and becomes large and powerful before leaving the international stage without the prestige it once had. Putin implicitly analogized the current Western-led world order with the Mongol and Roman empires, which he presented as examples of hegemonic powers that were eventually conquered by other rising powers. Putin stated that while it took several hundreds of years for the Roman Empire to fall apart, current processes of change are happening at a faster rate. Putin is increasingly invoking a purposefully broad, vague, and pseudo-realist conception of Russian sovereignty to normalize wars of conquest and justify Russian goals to impose Putin’s will in Ukraine and beyond.[16] Putin has long made demands of NATO that would recreate the alliance into a structure that could not resist future Russian military aggression, whether that be campaigns of conquest or efforts to establish Russian control over countries the Kremlin deems to be within Russia’s sphere of influence.[17]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky replaced General Valerii Zaluzhnyi with Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi as Ukraine’s Commander-in-Chief on February 8, as part of wider military leadership changes.[18] Such changes are normal for states engaged in a protracted war. Zelensky stated that he is also considering Ukrainian Brigadier General Andrii Hnatov (current Chief of Staff and Deputy Commander of the Southern Operational Command), Brigadier General Mykhailo Draptayi (former commander of the Kherson Group of Forces), Brigadier General Ihor Skybiuk (current deputy commander of the Airborne Assault Forces), Colonel Pavlo Palisa (current commander of the 93rd Mechanized Brigade) and Colonel Vadym Sukharevskyi (current commander of the 59th Motorized Infantry Brigade) for leadership positions in the Ukrainian military.[19] Zelensky, Zaluzhnyi, and Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov all acknowledged that the war has dramatically changed between 2022 and 2024 and that new approaches and strategies are necessary.[20] Zelensky stated that he offered Zaluzhnyi an unspecified position on the “management team” for the Ukrainian Armed Forces but did not clarify if Zaluzhnyi accepted.[21] Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President’s Office Mykhaylo Podolyak stated that Zelensky decided to conduct a “systemic renewal of the leadership” of the Ukrainian military, including the commander-in-chief, in order to review the Ukrainian military’s actions in the past year, prevent stagnation on the front, find new functional and technological solutions that will allow Ukraine to maintain and develop the battlefield initiative, and begin the process of reforming the management of the Ukrainian military.[22] Command changes are normal for a state fighting a war over several years.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a routine phone call on February 8 that underscored China's hesitance to support Russia's desired bilateral Russo-Sino relationship while Russia forges deeper partnerships with Iran and North Korea. Putin and Xi exchanged views on the geopolitical situations surrounding Ukraine, Taiwan, and the Middle East and reiterated their commitments to further bilateral trade and foreign policy cooperation.[23] Putin and Xi also reportedly criticized US interference in the internal affairs of other countries and US policies aimed at containing Russia and China.[24] Russian media coverage of the conversation continued efforts to portray Russian-Chinese relations as steadfast and at their "best period in history" despite recent Chinese attempts to avoid fully committing to a "no limits" partnership with Russia in the face of Western sanctions.[25] Bloomberg reported on January 16 that at least two state-owned Chinese banks ordered reviews of their business with Russian clients and will sever ties with sanctioned Russian entities and entities with ties to the Russian defense industry after the US authorized secondary sanctions against financial institutions in December 2023.[26] The Kremlin has recently signaled increased rhetorical support for and economic cooperation with Iran and North Korea as its dependence on both countries for drones, missiles, and ammunition grows.[27] Iran has consistently supplied Russian forces with Shahed-136/-131 drones throughout the course of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and North Korea recently began supplying Russia with domestically produced ballistic missiles and artillery ammunition.[28]

Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a one-to-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange on February 8. Ukrainian and Russian military officials stated that Russia and Ukraine exchanged 100 Ukrainian POWs for 100 Russian POWs.[29] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) helped to facilitate the POW exchange.[30]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it recently conducted a cyberattack against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) preventing Russian forces from automatically operating an unspecified number of likely first-person view (FPV) drones. The GUR reported on February 8 that GUR hackers disabled Russian MoD servers that allowed Russian forces to automatically and remotely control Chinese-brand drones, forcing Russian forces to operate the drones manually.[31] The GUR did not specify the number of drones that the GUR cyberattack affected. ISW has recently observed an increase in reported Ukrainian cyberattacks against Russian targets but has not yet observed Russian sources discussing the aftermath and effects of these attacks.[32]

The Russian Central Election Committee (CEC) refused to register Boris Nadezhdin, the only anti-war Russian presidential candidate, for the March 2024 presidential election likely due to his larger-than-anticipated popularity.[33] The CEC stated that it refused to register Nadezhdin due to the high percentage of alleged fraudulent signatures that he collected in his bid to register as a presidential candidate.[34] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin could have chosen to allow Nadezhdin to run so that Putin could turn his assured reelection into a quasi-referendum on Russia's war in Ukraine, but the Kremlin may have reversed course on letting Nadezhdin participate after Nadezhdin demonstrated that he might gain too many votes.[35] The Kremlin likely waited to use the CEC's valid-signature requirement to end Nadezhdin's campaign in order to continue promoting the masquerade that Russia conducts free and fair elections.

The CEC has approved four presidential candidates to run in the March 2024 election, and CEC Chairperson Ella Pamfilova stated on February 8 that they would be the only four candidates on the ballot.[36] Russians will nominally have a choice to vote for Putin or other controlled opposition candidates: Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) leader Leonid Slutsky, Communist Party member Nikolai Kharitonov, and New People Party member Vladislav Davankov.[37] Putin's controlled reelection is certain and will likely occur by a predetermined large margin.

Some Russian and Ukrainian sources claimed that Russian forces are using Starlink in occupied Ukraine.[38] A Ukrainian-language source claimed that Russian forces purchased Starlink access via Dubai, United Arab Emirates.[39] ISW cannot independently confirm any of these claims. Starlink stated that its operator aerospace company SpaceX does not do business of any kind with the Russian government or Russian military and has never shipped, marketed, or sold Starlink's services or equipment to Russia.[40] Starlink stated that it does not operate in Dubai and "has not authorized any third-party intermediaries, resellers or distributors of any kind to sell Starlink in Dubai."^[41]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to use an interview with American media personality Tucker Carlson published on February 8 to present to a wider Western audience a long-standing Kremlin information operation that falsely asserts that Russia is interested in a negotiated end to its war in Ukraine. Putin illustrated throughout the**

interview that Russia has no interest in meaningful or legitimate negotiations, however, and that Putin still seeks to destroy Ukraine as a state. Putin also displayed his overarching hostility towards the West and falsely accused the West of forcing Russia to attack Ukraine.

- Putin also attempted to use the interview to absurdly reframe Russia as the wronged party and not the initiator of Russia's unprovoked war of conquest against Ukraine.
- Putin continued attempts to justify Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as responses to Ukraine's and the West's actions in order to defend his long-standing calls for regime change in Kyiv and Ukraine's "demilitarization" "denazification," and "neutrality."
- Putin continued to propagate pseudo-history in an effort to deny Ukrainian statehood and nationhood.
- Putin also reiterated a quasi-realist world view that defines weakening the West and dismantling NATO as pre-requisites for the Russian-led multipolar world he desires to create.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky replaced General Valerii Zaluzhnyi with Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi as Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief on February 8, as part of wider military leadership changes. Such changes are normal for states engaged in a protracted war.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a routine phone call on February 8 that underscored China's hesitance to support Russia's desired bilateral Russo-Sino relationship while Russia forges deeper partnerships with Iran and North Korea.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a one-to-one prisoner of war (POW) exchange on February 8.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it recently conducted a cyberattack against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) preventing Russian forces from automatically operating an unspecified number of likely first-person view (FPV) drones.
- The Russian Central Election Committee (CEC) refused to register Boris Nadezhdin, the only anti-war Russian presidential candidate, for the March 2024 presidential election likely due to his larger-than-anticipated popularity.
- Some Russian and Ukrainian sources claimed that Russian forces are using Starlink in occupied Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kremminna and Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kremminna, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional fighting along the entire line of contact on February 8.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proposed a draft bill on February 8 to establish a single maximum age for contract service personnel (*kontraktniki*) during a period of partial mobilization, martial law, or wartime.
- Russian authorities are likely setting conditions to falsify voting results in occupied Ukraine in the March 2024 presidential election.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 7, 2024

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

Karolina Hird, Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 7, 2024, 8:10pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on February 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian forces conducted the second largest combined drone and missile strike of 2024 on the morning of February 7. Ukrainian military sources stated that Russian forces launched 64 drones and missiles at Ukraine: 20 Shahed 136/131 drones; 29 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles; four Kh-22 cruise missiles; three Kalibr cruise missiles; three Iskander-M ballistic missiles; and five S-300 surface-to-air missiles.[1] Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 44 of 64 targets: 26 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles; three Kalibr cruise missiles; and 15 Shahed-131/131 drones.[2] The Kyiv City Administration reported that Russian forces launched at least two dozen of the Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles at Kyiv City and damaged residential infrastructure in several neighborhoods.[3] Ukrainian sources additionally stated that Russian forces hit Kharkiv City with S-300 surface-to-air missiles and Kh-22 cruise missiles and confirmed that two missiles that struck Kharkiv City were North Korean-provided Kn-23 (Hwasong-11 Ga) missiles.[4] Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* reported that its sources in Ukrainian law enforcement

suggested that Russian forces may have additionally launched 3M22 Zircon ship-launched hypersonic cruise missiles at Kyiv City but that they are still working to confirm this information.[5]

The February 7 strike package is emblematic of the constant air domain offense-defense innovation-adaptation race in which Russia and Ukraine are engaged. Ukrainian air defense managed to shoot down the majority of the Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles and Shahed drones, which may suggest that Russian forces fired the Kh-101 series missiles and Shaheds in order to distract Ukrainian air defense. Ukrainian forces did not shoot down any of the Kh-22 cruise missiles, Iskander-M ballistic missiles, or S-300 surface-to-air missiles, by contrast. Russian forces may have specifically designed this strike package to distract Ukrainian air defense with the Kh-101s and Shahed combination with the intention of helping the other missiles make it through to their intended targets. The unconfirmed reports of 3M22 Zircon strikes are also noteworthy as Zircons are typically fired from naval vessels at other vessels or coastal targets, so Russian forces may have had to adapt the Zircon launchers to strike targets so far inland.[6] Russian forces additionally appear to have integrated North Korean missiles into their strike packages, which may have been harder for Ukrainian forces to detect and shoot down. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is experimenting with the strike packages it can launch at Ukraine to achieve the maximum desired effect, and that Ukraine in return continues efforts to adapt and respond to new Russian strike packages.[7]

Russia targeted Kyiv City during the February 7 strike for the third time thus far in 2024, notably coinciding with EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell's visit to Kyiv.[8] Borrell arrived in Kyiv on February 6 to discuss EU military aid and continued support to Ukraine.[9] Russia has previously targeted Kyiv City during high-level foreign visits, such as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's visit in April 2022.[10] The US is also, of course, currently engaged in critical discussions over continued military aid to Ukraine, and Russia has frequently timed such massive missile strikes with international aid discussions to deter continued Western support for Ukraine.[11] Russia likely therefore purposefully conducted this strike series and targeted Kyiv City to achieve informational effects in the EU and the collective West apart from any objectives it was intended to achieve in Ukraine.

Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev continued his nuclear saber-rattling rhetoric likely aimed in part at deterring Western aid to Ukraine. Medvedev claimed on February 7 that Russia has repeatedly "underscored" that its "plans" do not include any conflict "with NATO and EU member states." [12] Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, have recently and consistently rhetorically threatened NATO member states, and Kremlin-affiliated actors appear to be attempting to sow instability and set information conditions for possible future Russian aggressive actions against various European states.[13] Medvedev stated that NATO's military budget and population are significantly larger than Russia's, so that if a war were to break out between Russia and NATO, Russia would have to respond "asymmetrically" by using "ballistic and cruise missiles carrying special warheads" — referring to nuclear warheads — resulting in an "apocalypse." Medvedev posted these claims on his English language X (formerly Twitter) channel and Russian language Telegram channel, suggesting that his statements are meant for both an international and domestic audience. Kremlin officials and pundits have consistently threatened to use nuclear weapons against NATO members, and ISW continues to assess that this nuclear rhetoric is aimed at deterring Western aid to Ukraine.[14] Medvedev's statements about NATO's larger size and military budget relative to Russia are likely aimed at domestically promoting Kremlin narratives that NATO — and the West generally — poses an existential threat to Russia — a claim the Kremlin has used to try to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[15]

The Russian Federation Council approved a bill on February 7 that allows the Russian government to confiscate property from individuals convicted of spreading "fake" information about the Russian military, likely as part of ongoing censorship efforts to limit criticisms of Russia's war effort ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential election.[16] The bill also allows Russian authorities to confiscate property from individuals found guilty of calling for terrorist or extremist activities and advocating for sanctions against Russia.[17] ISW previously observed increasing complaints from the relatives of mobilized Russian servicemen concerning the Russian military's mistreatment of mobilized personnel, and continues to assess that the Kremlin likely wants to silence concerned relatives to maintain appearances of wide support for the war ahead of the presidential election.[18]

Yandex NV — the Dutch holding company of Russian internet technology company Yandex — announced that it will sell all of its Russian assets for 475 billion rubles (about \$5.2 billion) to a purchasing consortium consisting of five Russian companies. Yandex stated in a press release published on February 5 that the purchasing consortium will pay at least half of the considerations in cash using Chinese yuan.[19] Yandex NV will maintain no businesses in Russia but will continue to hold four international businesses. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported that Yandex NV made 95

percent of its revenues between January and September 2023 in Russia.[20] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is likely nationalizing Yandex in order to strengthen control over the Russian information space, especially in preparation for the March 2024 Russian presidential election.[21]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces conducted the second largest combined drone and missile strike of 2024 on the morning of February 7. The February 7 strike package is emblematic of the constant air domain offense-defense innovation-adaptation race in which Russia and Ukraine are engaged.
- Russia targeted Kyiv City during the February 7 strike for the third time thus far in 2024, notably coinciding with EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell's visit to Kyiv.
- Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev continued his nuclear saber-rattling rhetoric likely aimed in part at deterring Western aid to Ukraine.
- The Russian Federation Council approved a bill on February 7 that allows the Russian government to confiscate property from individuals convicted of spreading "fake" information about the Russian military, likely as part of ongoing censorship efforts to limit criticisms of Russia's war effort ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential election.
- Yandex NV — the Dutch holding company of Russian internet technology company Yandex — announced that it will sell all of its Russian assets for 475 billion rubles (about \$5.2 billion) to a purchasing consortium consisting of five Russian companies.
- Russian forces made confirmed gains west of Horlivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated on February 7 that Russia is mobilizing citizens from Syria who come to Russia under the guise of security guard jobs at oil refineries.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to militarize Ukrainian children and youth in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 6, 2024

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

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

February 6, 2024, 9:30pm ET

America's European and Asian allies have significantly ramped up their efforts to support Ukraine. European Council President Charles Michel stated on February 6 that the European Council and Parliament reached a provisional agreement on the creation of a new single dedicated instrument – the Ukraine Facility – to pool the EU's recently announced support package of 50 billion euros (about \$54 billion) for Ukraine for 2024-2027.[1] European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that the EU aims to start payments to the Ukraine Facility in March 2024.[2] German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall stated on February 5 that it plans to send tens of thousands of 155mm artillery shells, dozens of Marder infantry fighting vehicles, 25 Leopard 1A5 tanks, and an unspecified number of Skynex air defense systems to Ukraine in 2024.[3] South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) stated on February 6 that it plans to sign a contract with ammunition producer Poongsan in 2024 to mass produce 155mm shells that have an extended range of 60 kilometers.[4] South Korea reportedly began indirectly supplying artillery shells to Ukraine in early 2023, and these shells may go to European allies for indirect transfer to Ukraine.[5]

The EU and its member states have made available 138 billion euros (about \$148.5 billion) - including its recently announced support package of 50 billion euros (about \$54 billion) - to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.[6] In comparison, the US has appropriated \$113 billion to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion, of which over \$75 billion was directly allocated to Ukraine for humanitarian, financial, and military support.[7] The US government allocated the other \$38 billion to security assistance-related funding, which the US government spent largely in the US and on US companies or personnel.[8]

As European partners continue to increase their support for Ukraine, US aid provision in the near to medium-term remains vital to help Ukraine build its defense industrial base (DIB). ISW continues to assess that the US will not need to send large security assistance packages to Ukraine

indefinitely if Ukraine successfully continues to actively pursue measures aimed at domestically producing its own weapons, building bilateral and international defense industrial partnerships, and creating industrial joint ventures with Western enterprises aimed at co-producing defense materials. [9] The US will need to continue supporting Ukraine for several years as Ukraine builds its own DIB, but Ukraine's international security requirements will decrease in the long run as it builds out its own capabilities to become self-sufficient. The ultimate success of Ukraine's efforts to build its DIB, however, depends on Ukraine's ability to liberate strategically vital areas currently occupied by Russian forces. **US and partner military aid to Ukraine in the near term therefore continues to be crucial as the US remains the main source of sufficiently large quantities of essential military equipment, such as M1 Abrams tanks, armored personnel carriers, advanced air defense systems such as Patriots, and long-range strike systems - equipment which previous US aid packages prioritized.**[10]

The US Army plans to significantly increase US domestic production of 155mm artillery shells and shell components for Ukraine in 2024 and 2025, should the proposed Congressional supplemental appropriations bill pass. US Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology Doug Bush stated on February 5 that the US Army aims to double the US monthly production of 155mm artillery shells from 28,000 shells per month in October 2023 to about 60,000 shells per month in October 2024.[11] Bush stated that the US Army is on track to increase production capacity to 80,000 shells per month using current funding but that additional funding must be appropriated by Congress for it to reach the target production rate of 100,000 shells per month by October 2025. Bush stated that the construction of a new factory in Texas, which will "have an entirely new way" of using technology to make artillery shells, will contribute to the Army's increased production goals. Bush noted that US shell production in part depends on US domestic production of explosive materials. Bush stated that the proposed supplemental bill includes \$600 million for increasing the production of explosives at the Holsten Army Ammunition Plant in Tennessee from five million pounds of explosives a year to 13 million pounds.[12] The proposed bill would also include \$93 million to reestablish the production of M6 propellant (used to fire artillery shells but no longer in production in the US) at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant in Virginia, and \$650 million would go to constructing a facility (likely also at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant) to domestically produce TNT, which the US currently does not produce. Bush stated that the proposed bill also includes \$14 million to construct and recommission a black powder explosive production line in Louisiana. Such investments in US manufacturing are necessary to help support US strategic readiness by rebuilding America's atrophied defense industrial base, separate and apart from the need to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

Russian authorities are reportedly paying Iran roughly \$4.5 billion per year to import Iranian Shahed drones to use in Ukraine. A group of hackers from a hacking organization called the Prana Network claimed to have hacked into the servers of purported Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) front company Sahara Thunder on February 4 and published the costs per drone that Russia purchases from Iran.[13] The leaked documents suggest that Russia pays \$193,000 per Shahed-136 drone in batches of 6,000 drones, which would total about \$1.1 billion for all 6,000 Shahed-136 drones.[14] Russia reportedly pays \$1.4 million per unit for one type of Shahed-238 drone and plans to purchase 677 of these upgraded Shahed drones per year, which would total about \$947 million. [15] Another type of Shahed-238 reportedly cost about \$900,000 per drone, and Russia reportedly plans to purchase 2,310 per year for just under \$2.1 billion.[16] The documents claimed that the reconnaissance and attack Shahed-107 drones cost \$460,000 each and that Russia plans to purchase 2,310, which would total about \$1.5 billion.[17] A Russian milblogger justified the high cost due to the risk that Iran assumes by selling these drones to Russia and noted that the documents indicate that Russia plans to further localize production of Shaheds in Russia, which will reduce acquisition costs over time.[18] ISW is unable to confirm the authenticity of the purported leaked documents, but a milblogger's claim that the documents refer to Iran as a "friendly country" and refer to the Shahed drones in code as "boats" is consistent with previously observed language about Iran and Iranian drone production in Russia.[19] Russian forces routinely use Shahed drones, which serve as both loitering munitions and as decoys to distract Ukrainian air defenses, and the massive expenditure on such systems is noteworthy.

Russia is reportedly unfreezing North Korean assets and helping North Korea evade international sanctions in exchange for missiles and artillery ammunition for Russia to use in Ukraine. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on February 6 that unnamed "US-allied" intelligence officials told the NYT that Russia unfroze \$9 million of \$30 million worth of North Korean assets in an unspecified Russian financial institution, which the intelligence officials assess North Korea will use to buy crude oil.[20] The intelligence official stated that a North Korean front company recently opened a new account at a Russian bank in Russian-occupied South Ossetia that North Korea may use to evade UN sanctions. An unnamed senior US government official told the NYT that Russia is likely unfreezing North Korean assets and helping North Korea evade international sanctions in exchange

for North Korean weapons transfers to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un in Russia in September 2023 and met with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in January 2024.[21] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated that North Korea delivered one million rounds of artillery ammunition to Russia from September to November 2023, and US officials have stated that Russian forces have launched at least nine North Korean ballistic missiles against Ukraine.[22] ISW continues to assess that Russia may be open to financial, technological, and defense cooperation with North Korea in return for the provision of artillery ammunition and ballistic missiles to use in Ukraine. [23] North Korea would also benefit from this cooperation by collecting technical data from its weapons' performance in Ukraine to use in North Korean research and development among other things.

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev emphasized on February 6 that Russia needs to protect its strategic facilities as Russian authorities continue to voice concerns about external and internal threats to Russian infrastructure.[24] Patrushev held a meeting on Russian national security issues in the Ural Federal Okrug on February 6 and emphasized that Russia needs to increase efforts to prevent and respond to natural and man-made emergencies in the okrug, including strengthening counterterrorism protections of "critical and potentially dangerous facilities" and "hazardous production facilities," both of which very likely include Russian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, non-defense industrial enterprises, ports, and other logistics objects. Patrushev emphasized increasing onsite security, Russia's investigative capacity, and awareness of threats to these facilities.[25] Patrushev stated that Russian authorities prevented 23 "terrorist attacks" against objects in the Urals in 2023 but that criminals conducted nine attacks.[26] Patrushev claimed that Ukrainian actors increasingly seek to recruit saboteurs in Russia to conduct these attacks.[27] Other Russian authorities continued to warn of prospective Ukrainian attacks against Russian infrastructure; the Russian Administration of Baltic Sea Ports announced on February 6 that it has introduced a high alert regime for Vyborg, Primorsk, Ust-Luga, and Vysotsk in Leningrad Oblast due to the threat of Ukrainian drone strikes against port infrastructure.[28]

The Kremlin continues to set informational conditions for possible hybrid provocations against the Baltic states and Georgia. The Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian chargés d'affaires to Moscow on February 6 due to an alleged "lack of a proper response" to repeated Russian requests for Baltic authorities to "provide security" to Russian nationals voting in the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential election from abroad in Baltic capitals.[29] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova emphasized that any disruptions at Russian polling stations in Baltic nations will cause "serious protest among Russians" living in Baltic countries because such disruptions would violate the constitutional rights of Russian nationals to vote in Russian elections. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov similarly claimed on February 5 that Western governments have launched "Russophobic" influence campaigns aimed at Russian embassies, consulates, and similar assets abroad and warned that Western provocations abroad increase when polling stations open for Russians to vote in foreign countries.[30] Lavrov's and Zakharova's statements are likely aimed at setting informational conditions to frame essentially any action on the part of foreign authorities, including Baltic states, regarding the Russian presidential election as a direct attack on Russian nationals living in Baltic states. The Kremlin frequently invokes the concept of "compatriots abroad" to claim special privileges for Russian nationals living outside of Russia and to set informational conditions for provocations in the countries where Russian "compatriots" live.[31] The weaponization of the Russian presidential election will allow the Kremlin to stage informational provocations against Baltic governments, which fits into the Kremlin's wider hybrid influence playbook. Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili also stated on February 6 that Russia has launched a "new hybrid war against Georgia, for which it is using all forms and weapons," referencing Russian naval basing projects in the port of Ochamchire, Russian-occupied Abkhazia, and other provocations in the Georgian territories that Russia has occupied since 2008.[32] Hybrid influence campaigns such as information operations surrounding Russian elections in the Baltics and provocations in occupied regions of Georgia destabilize Russia's neighbors.

Russian-Israeli relations are likely to continue to decline against the backdrop of Russia's increasingly anti-Israel stance on the Israel-Hamas war. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) publicly criticized and summoned new Israeli Ambassador to Russia Simona Halperin over an interview she gave with Russian outlet *Kommersant* published on February 4.[33] Halperin stated that it took Russia "some time" to publicly condemn the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, expressed her dissatisfaction at Russian government officials meeting with Hamas officials in January 2024 and questioned why Russia has not included Hamas on its list of terrorist organizations banned in Russia. [34] The Russian MFA claimed that Halperin gave "distorted interpretations and unacceptable assessments" of Russian foreign and domestic policy.[35] The Russian MFA's public criticism and

subsequent summoning of Halperin are indicative of the continued deterioration of Russian-Israeli relations, amid Russia's increasingly anti-Israel position on the Israel-Hamas war.[36]

Key Takeaways:

- America's European and Asian allies have significantly ramped up their efforts to support Ukraine. As European partners continue to increase their support for Ukraine, US aid provision in the near to medium-term remains vital to help Ukraine build its defense industrial base (DIB).
- The US Army plans to significantly increase US domestic production of 155mm artillery shells and shell components for Ukraine in 2024 and 2025, should the proposed Congressional supplemental appropriations bill pass.
- Russian authorities are reportedly paying Iran roughly \$4.5 billion per year to import Iranian Shahed drones to use in Ukraine.
- Russia is reportedly unfreezing North Korean assets and helping North Korea evade international sanctions in exchange for missiles and artillery ammunition for Russia to use in Ukraine.
- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev emphasized on February 6 that Russia needs to protect its strategic facilities as Russian authorities continue to voice concerns about external and internal threats to Russian infrastructure.
- The Kremlin continues to set informational conditions for possible hybrid provocations against the Baltic states and Georgia.
- Russian-Israeli relations are likely continuing to decline against the backdrop of Russia's increasingly anti-Israel stance on the Israel-Hamas war.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- Russian authorities are reportedly paying roughly \$4.5 billion per year to import Iranian Shahed drones to use in Ukraine.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) continues efforts to integrate occupied Ukraine into Russia and to seek international recognition of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 5, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 5, 2024, 8:40pm ET

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

US Senate negotiators unveiled their proposed supplemental appropriations bill on February 4 that — if passed — would provide roughly \$60 billion of security assistance for Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of which would go to American companies and US and allied militaries. The bill provides three main packages of assistance to Ukraine totaling \$48.83 billion: \$19.85 billion for replenishing weapons and equipment from the US Department of Defense (DoD) inventory; \$13.8 billion for the purchase of weapons and munitions for Ukraine from US manufacturers; and \$14.8 billion for continued US support to Ukraine through military training, intelligence sharing, and other support activities.[1] The appropriations bill provides that funds can go to foreign countries that have provided support to Ukraine at the request of the US, but the vast majority of the aid — if approved — would go to US companies and US or allied government entities supporting Ukraine.[2] Roughly 16 percent of the Ukraine-related appropriations in the bill would go directly to Ukraine, including \$7.85 billion of direct budget support for the Ukrainian government and \$1.58 billion for efforts to build a self-reliant Ukrainian economy amid the ongoing Russian invasion. [3] The appropriations bill also provides \$1.6 billion in foreign military financing, which must be used to purchase goods and services from the US, to address Ukraine's and other US partners' air defense, artillery, maritime security, and maintenance requirements.[4] The appropriations bill provides smaller packages of \$300 million to help Ukraine promote the rule of law and protect its borders and \$100 million to support demining, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation programs.[5] The bill provides \$8 million for the DoD Inspector General to exercise oversight over US security assistance to Ukraine.[6]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 4 that Ukraine needs to replace a “series of state leaders” across the Ukrainian government who are “not just in a single sector” such as the Ukrainian military.[7] Zelensky responded to a question from Italian outlet *Rai News* about reports that he may intend to replace Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi by stating that he is considering changing multiple “state leaders” and emphasized that this effort involves replacing multiple unspecified individuals, not just “a single person.”[8] Zelensky emphasized the importance of Ukrainian morale, as the Ukrainian leadership “cannot be discouraged” and must maintain the “right positive energy” in order to win the war.

The Kremlin is intensifying rhetoric pushing for the hypothetical partition of Ukraine by seizing on innocuous and unrelated topics, likely in an attempt to normalize the partition narrative in Western discussions about Ukraine. Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev claimed on February 5 that purported European plans to construct a railway line from Spain to Lviv City are evidence of the West’s acknowledgement that Lviv City would be “the new capital of Ukraine within the borders of [Lviv Oblast],” presumably following the end of Russia’s war in Ukraine. [9] The plan, notably, has nothing to do with Ukrainian borders or an end state to the war in Ukraine and is an independent European infrastructure project. Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian officials have recently reignited the narrative framing the invasion of Ukraine as an historically justified imperial conquest and proposed to a largely Russian-speaking audience in December 2023 that Russia and European powers could partition Ukraine and leave it as “sovereign” rump state within the borders of Lviv Oblast, comments that subsequently gained some attention from a few right-wing nationalist Central European politicians.[10] Medvedev notably posted his February 5 claims on his English-language X (formerly Twitter) account and not on his Russian-language Telegram account, suggesting that his statement was intended for an international audience as opposed to a Russian domestic audience. Medvedev’s statement furthers the Russian information operation that erroneously portrays Ukraine as an artificially constructed state, likely in an effort to reduce Western military support for Ukraine and normalize Western discussions that push Ukraine to cede much of its territory and people to Russia as a legitimate way to end the war. ISW continues to assess that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains his maximalist objectives in Ukraine, which are tantamount to complete Ukrainian and Western capitulation.[11]

Russian ultranationalists continue to support the Kremlin’s maximalist objectives in Ukraine and reject the notion that negotiations would lead to a lasting end to the war. Deputy Head of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Main Directorate of Rosgvardia, Commander of its special rapid response and riot police (OMON and SOBR), and prominent Russian milblogger Alexander Khodakovskiy claimed that a “truce” would not result in peace and that “achieving lasting peace is only possible through war and the victory” of either Russia or Ukraine.[12] Khodakovskiy also claimed that the current period of positional warfare hinders Russian forces from exhausting Ukrainian forces along the entire frontline and argued that Russian forces need to pressure Ukrainian forces and compel Ukraine to commit more resources to battle along the entire frontline. Khodakovskiy’s zero-sum framing of the war is indicative of the wider Russian ultranationalist support for the Kremlin’s maximalist objectives of a complete Ukrainian and Western defeat. This zero-sum framing is also incompatible with any serious negotiations for an armistice or lasting peace.

Delays in Western security assistance continue to exacerbate Ukraine’s shell shortage and undermine Ukraine’s ability to use high-value Western counterbattery systems. Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko stated on February 5 that Russian forces intensified their rate of artillery strikes by nearly 25 percent over the last week and shelled Ukraine over 1,500 times, targeting over 570 settlements.[13] *The New York Times* reported on February 4 that, by contrast, Ukrainian forces in critical areas of the front, such as Avdiivka, are increasingly rationing shells and can therefore only target masses of advancing Russian soldiers, noting that Russian forces have apparently adapted and are now advancing in smaller groups that are harder for Ukrainian artillery to strike.[14] Ukrainian military analyst and retired Colonel Petro Chernyk noted that Ukrainian forces possess relatively better counterbattery capabilities writ large than Russian forces, particularly because they have American AN/TPQ-36, -48, and -50 radars and the German COBRA radar system. [15] Counterbattery radars are effective in that they detect incoming fire and calculate its point of origin so that artillery forces can conduct return fire — for which artillery forces require sufficient artillery ammunition, however. A lack of artillery ammunition thus severely degrades counterbattery systems: AN/TPQ, COBRA, and other Western counterbattery systems are only as effective as the number of shells that Ukrainian forces have at their disposal to pursue the targets that counterbattery radars identify. ISW previously reported that Russian forces are benefitting from the combined dynamic of Ukraine’s ammunition shortage and its subsequent inability to conduct sufficient counterbattery warfare, and this dynamic is likely to become more acute as Ukraine’s period of shell shortages protracts.[16]

The Kremlin may not allow Boris Nadezhdin, the only anti-war Russian presidential candidate, to run in the March 2024 presidential election due to Nadezhdin's larger-than-anticipated popularity. A Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) working group claimed on February 5 that 15 percent of the signatures that Nadezhdin collected to register as an election candidate were fraudulent and that the CEC recommends not registering him as a candidate.[17] Nadezhdin stated in response to the CEC's announcement that his campaign plans to collect the 4,500 valid signatures he needs to run and that he will appeal to the Russian Supreme Court if the CEC refuses to register him as a presidential candidate.[18] Nadezhdin previously claimed to have submitted 200,000 signatures to the Russian CEC on January 31.[19] Russian presidential candidates sponsored by political parties need to submit 100,000 signatures with additional regional requirements in order to run in the presidential election, and no more than five percent of the total submitted signatures can be fraudulent.[20] The CEC stated that it will announce its final decision on February 7, but the CEC is unlikely to allow Nadezhdin to run.[21]

Nadezhdin previously stated that he believes the CEC will have to allow him to run in the March 2024 presidential election due to his widespread popularity and that he wanted as many uncontested signatures as possible so the CEC could not disqualify him. ISW assessed on January 23 that the Kremlin may intend to use the March 2024 election as an unofficial referendum on Russia's war in Ukraine by allowing Nadezhdin to run in an election that portrays Russian President Vladimir Putin (and by extension his war in Ukraine) as overwhelmingly popular, but the CEC's February 5 announcement suggests that the Kremlin may have backtracked from this plan out of concern that Nadezhdin might gain too many votes and reduce Putin's margin of victory below levels the Kremlin is willing to accept.[22] The CEC's valid signature requirement is the logical mechanism for ending Nadezhdin's presidential campaign whether or not the Kremlin was initially willing to tolerate the campaign.

Russian officials and sources have increasingly censored and sought to discredit Nadezhdin after Nadezhdin's campaign gained significant notoriety while collecting signatures.[23] Russian CEC Deputy Chairperson Nikolai Bulaev claimed on February 2 that Nadezhdin's campaign collected dozens of signatures of deceased Russians and questioned the integrity of the Nadezhdin campaign. [24] Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta* recently reported that Nadezhdin's campaign struggled to find a printing house to print copies of Nadezhdin's campaign newsletter, citing a source within the campaign.[25] Nadezhdin previously claimed that Russian state television attempted to censor him and his campaign.[26] A Russian ultranationalist milblogger cryptically suggested on January 30 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) would "meet" with Nadezhdin prior to the election, implying that the FSB would interrogate or imprison him.[27]

The Kremlin is reportedly nationalizing private enterprises in Russia quietly. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* published an investigation on February 5 detailing how the Russian Prosecutor General's Office uses three main schemes to seize and nationalize assets from Russians despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's assurances that there will not be nationalization in Russia. [28] *Meduza* found that Russian courts pursue one scheme through challenging cases regarding the privatization of certain companies that were subject to the widespread privatization efforts of the 1990s. The Prosecutor General's Office reportedly utilizes this scheme to claim that regional authorities exceeded their powers by privatizing a given company and to demand that it be returned to the state. *Meduza* reported that the second scheme is to deem owners of private enterprises "foreign investors," which allows Russian authorities to seize the assets of the private enterprise owners more easily under Russian foreign investment laws.[29] The final avenue for nationalization, according to *Meduza*, is when the Prosecutor General's Office seizes assets from defendants accused of corruption or fraud, charges that courts reportedly used more frequently in 2023.[30] ISW has previously observed Russian courts expanding the prosecution of certain cases to broadly suppress dissent, and the Russian Prosecutor General may be employing a similar prosecution strategy as it pertains to property law in order to nationalize private assets using corruption, fraud, and foreign investment laws.[31]

Key Takeaways:

- US Senate negotiators unveiled their proposed supplemental appropriations bill on February 4 that — if passed — would provide roughly \$60 billion of security assistance for Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of which would go to American companies and US and allied militaries.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 4 that Ukraine needs to replace a "series of state leaders" across the Ukrainian government who are "not just in a single sector" such as the Ukrainian military.
- The Kremlin is intensifying rhetoric pushing for the hypothetical partition of Ukraine by seizing on innocuous and unrelated topics, likely in an attempt to normalize the partition

narrative in Western discussions about Ukraine.

- Delays in Western security assistance continue to exacerbate Ukraine's shell shortage and undermine Ukraine's ability to use high-value Western counterbattery systems.
- The Kremlin may not allow Boris Nadezhdin, the only anti-war Russian presidential candidate, to run in the March 2024 presidential election due to Nadezhdin's larger-than-anticipated popularity.
- The Kremlin is reportedly nationalizing private enterprises in Russia quietly.
- Russian forces made confirmed gains near Kupyansk, Kreminna, Avdiivka, and northeast of Bakhmut amid continued positional fighting along the entire frontline.
- The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) may expand the list of courses available to women at the FSB Academy.
- Russian occupation administrations continue efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian children into Russian culture and nationalism through patronage networks with Russian federal subjects (regions).

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 4, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 4, 2024, 6:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on February 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the February 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia's reported reserve concentrations throughout Ukraine largely align with Russia's assessed priorities along the front, although they are not necessarily indicative of future Russian operations. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces currently have 17 regiments, 16 battalions, and two regiment-battalion level tactical detachments in reserve.^[1] Mashovets stated that there are about 60,000-62,000 total Russian personnel in reserve units, but Russian forces have only equipped about 20,000 tactical and operational-tactical level reserve personnel with weapons and equipment. Mashovets stated that Russia's reserves are concentrated in the greatest numbers in the operational zone of the Southern Grouping of Forces, followed by the Western Grouping of Forces, Dnepr Grouping of Forces, the Zaporizhia Grouping of Forces, the Eastern Grouping of Forces, and the Central Grouping of Forces. The Southern Grouping of Forces is responsible for the Bakhmut and Avdiivka directions, and Mashovets noted that the reserve concentration in this area aligns with the areas where Russian forces are concentrating their offensive efforts. Mashovets observed that it is not surprising that the Dnepr Grouping of Forces — which operates in occupied Kherson Oblast — has the third highest number of reserves given that Russian forces may be concerned over a Ukrainian threat in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian officials have recently indicated that Russian forces have more than 70,000 personnel on the east bank of the Dnipro River in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts, but that many are concentrated deeper in the rear.^[2] The Dnipro Grouping of Forces' reserves would likely be able to easily move to the Zaporizhia direction if circumstances so required. Mashovets assessed that the Central Grouping of Forces, which is responsible for the Lyman direction, has the lowest concentration of reserves due to its smaller operational zone that requires fewer troops.^[3] ISW additionally assesses that the Central Grouping of Forces has a lower concentration of reserves because Russian operations in the Lyman direction are likely meant to support the Western Grouping of Forces' operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, as ISW will soon outline in an upcoming operational analysis of the Russian offensive on the Kharkiv-Luhansk axis. Russian forces will be able to move their reserve concentrations freely between different sectors of the front as long as Russia holds the strategic initiative across the theater. ISW continues to assess that an active Ukrainian defense throughout the theater in 2024 would cede the strategic initiative to Russia allowing Moscow to determine where, when, and at what scale fighting occurs in Ukraine and to allocate Russian resources appropriately while forcing Ukraine to respond.^[4] Ukraine would be able to deny Russia this ability, however, if Ukraine were able to contest the initiative.

The Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is unlikely able to fully support Russia's reserve manpower despite Russia's ability to sustain its current tempo of operations and ongoing efforts to expand the Russian DIB. Mashovets stated that the operational and strategic reserves are generally not combat-ready, yet the Russian command tends to view its reserve component as a "bottomless barrel."^[5] Mashovets stated that the Russian DIB is able to produce about 250-300 "new and thoroughly modernized" tanks per year. Mashovets stated that Russian forces can also overhaul about 250-300 tanks that have been in long-term storage or sustained battlefield damage per year.

Mashovets stated that the situation is similar for armored combat vehicles, suggesting that the Russian DIB can more or less cover Russian forces' annual vehicle losses. Mashovets stated that the Russian DIB, however, cannot produce enough materiel to equip large Russian reserves should the need suddenly arise. The Latvian Defense Ministry's State Secretary Janis Garisons stated on December 13 that Russia can "produce and repair" about 100-150 tanks per month.^[6] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev claimed in March 2023 that Russia's DIB could produce 1,500 main battle tanks in 2023, which suggests an average production of 125 tanks per month.^[7] Even with these higher estimates the Russian DIB remains unlikely able to support a larger mobilization of manpower and would likely need to expand dramatically to support larger offensive operations that would require the use of more manpower reserves. ISW continues to assess that Russia would have the opportunity to expand its DIB and amass resources if it maintains the theater-wide initiative throughout 2024 although not likely to an extent sufficient to supply great masses of mobilized reservists or conscripts this year.^[8]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the frontline near Robotyne, Zaporizhia Oblast and the Ukrainian Eastern Air Command in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on February 4. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskyi and Ukrainian Commander of the Zaporizhia Group of Forces Brigadier General Volodymyr Horbatyuk reported to Zelensky about Ukrainian defensive operations in the Avdiivka direction, the situation near Robotyne and other areas of the front, and the arrangement of Ukrainian defensive lines.^[9] Zelensky also visited the Ukrainian Eastern Air Command and discussed measures to strengthen mobile fire groups and electronic warfare (EW) systems to repel Russian drone strikes, the use of Western and hybrid (Western-Ukrainian) air defense systems, and prospects for strengthening the capabilities of Ukrainian Eastern air defense groups.^[10]

Russian milbloggers continued to criticize Russian authorities' failure to properly equip Russian forces with drones and electronic warfare (EW) systems in response to a recent unsuccessful Russian mechanized assault near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast. Russian milbloggers claimed on February 4 that Russian drone production is poorly managed, limiting Russia's ability to innovate.^[11] One milblogger claimed that poor management leads to unjustified Russian losses and will be the "scourge" of Russia's victory against Ukraine.^[12] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev previously criticized Russia's mass production of drones as leading to the production of a large number of drones that lack the technological adaptations necessary to compete with Ukrainian drones on the battlefield.^[13] Another Russian milblogger responded to the January 30 footage of Ukrainian drones striking advancing Russian armored vehicles and tanks near Novomykhailivka by claiming that it was "negligent" for Russian commanders to allow Russian armored vehicles to go into battle without proper EW equipment.^[14] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces should "abandon" the idea of deep mechanized breakthroughs until Russian forces are adequately equipped with EW systems and should conduct small infantry-led assaults with drone support in the meantime.^[15] Russian milbloggers have recently fixated on this event as indicative of the Russian military's struggle to innovate and break out of the current positional warfare in Ukraine.^[16]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to face the authoritarian's dilemma, whereby his authoritarian regime is itself systematically preventing him from receiving accurate information about military-political realities in Russia. A prominent Russian milblogger — who previously appeared on state media outlets and was temporarily detained in March 2022 — published a rant accusing the Russian bureaucracy and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) of deliberately withholding information from Putin, likely in response to recent Russian propagandists' efforts to conceal Russian military failures near Novomykhailivka.^[17] The milblogger claimed that Russia has a culture in which local authorities closely work with regional media outlets to censor and conceal from the Kremlin any negative reports. The milblogger argued that Putin created a consultative civil society institution called the Russian Civic Chamber in 2004 whose members would monitor local governments' activities in order to provide negative, but accurate, information "to the top," but the chamber failed to do so because the chamber's representatives decided to remain silent — just like the officials that they were elected to monitor. The milblogger observed that Putin then created the All-Russian People's Front in 2011 to target the same problem and that the initiative was successful until representatives began to follow in the Russian Civic Chamber's footsteps. The milblogger argued that the Russian MoD engages in similar, secretive efforts to those of regional officials to conceal its failures from Putin and resents voices that undermine these efforts. The milblogger stated that the Russian MoD made it nearly impossible for milbloggers and government officials to visit frontlines and claimed that there are rumors that the Russian military command deploys generals to Syria if they start to have frequent communication with Putin. The milblogger argued that the Kremlin can only see honest discussions about Russia's battlefield realities from the milblogger and volunteer accounts outlined in its media monitoring reports and noted that the lack of transparency is a systematic problem among Russian government structures. The milblogger later forecasted that bureaucrats will attempt to block Telegram and arrest milbloggers following the Russian presidential election in March 2024 in response to

another milblogger's observation that Russian Telegram channels remain the only source of constructive opposition in Russia.[18]

Putin's recent efforts to address milbloggers' concerns over Russian drone shortages and failures to repel Ukrainian forces from east (left) bank Kherson Oblast indicate that he continues to see value in having milbloggers serve as a constructive opposition that checks Russian government and military officials.[19] Putin's past creations of the All-Russian People's Front and the Russian Civic Chamber, and his relatively lenient treatment of milbloggers throughout the full-scale invasion, indicate that he is unlikely to decisively censor the milblogger and volunteer communities because he likely values the ability to check on his government. Putin is unlikely to pursue a mass censorship campaign against milbloggers on his own unless select factions within the Kremlin successfully convince him that milbloggers pose an immediate threat to his regime's stability. Kremlin officials appear to have been successful in convincing Putin to eliminate and neutralize some milbloggers and information space actors such as former Russian officer Igor Girkin and media networks affiliated with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Kremlin officials, however, have likely been unsuccessful in turning Putin against a vast community of milbloggers that criticizes the bureaucracy while avidly supporting Putin and his war effort in Ukraine.

Key Takeaways:

- Russia's reported reserve concentrations throughout Ukraine largely align with Russia's assessed priorities along the front, although they are not necessarily indicative of future Russian operations.
- The Russian defense industrial base (DIB) is unlikely able to fully support Russia's reserve manpower despite Russia's ability to sustain its current tempo of operations and ongoing efforts to expand the Russian DIB.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the frontline near Robotyne, Zaporizhia Oblast and the Ukrainian Eastern Air Command in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on February 4.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize Russian authorities' failure to properly equip Russian forces with drones and electronic warfare (EW) systems in response to a recent unsuccessful Russian mechanized assault near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to face the authoritarian's dilemma, whereby his authoritarian regime is itself systematically preventing him from receiving accurate information about military-political realities in Russia.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- Kremlin newswire TASS reported on February 4 that Vladimir Oblast will be a patron of the new *Knyaz Pozharsky* Borei-A class nuclear submarine.
- Ukrainian officials continue international efforts aimed at returning Ukrainian citizens whom Russian authorities illegally deported to Russia.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 3, 2024

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

Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Fredrick W. Kagan

February 3, 2024, 7:50pm ET

The Kremlin is doubling down on its support for Iran as the US conducts strikes to preempt attacks by Iranian-back proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen against American and other targets. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) condemned the US retaliatory strikes against Iranian-backed militia positions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen on February 3.[1] The US launched a series of retaliatory airstrikes against targets in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen on February 2 and 3 following a January 28 drone strike by an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia that killed three US servicemembers in northeastern Jordan.[2] Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova condemned the strikes as a "blatant act of American-British aggression" and claimed that they demonstrate US policy's "aggressive nature" and "complete disregard for international law." [3] Zakharova claimed that the US airstrikes are "specifically designed" to further inflame the conflict in the Middle East.[4] Zakharova criticized the United Kingdom (UK) for participating in the strike and claimed that the UK "has yet to answer" for its "zeal" in supporting provocative US policy.[5] Russian state media reported extensively on the strike's aftermath and amplified Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian state reporting and condemnations of the strike.[6] Russia requested a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting in connection with

the US strikes, which is scheduled for February 5.[7] Russia frequently weaponizes its invocation of international law to undermine legitimate US activities in the Middle East.

The Kremlin censored a protest by wives of mobilized soldiers in Moscow on February 3 likely to suppress any possible resurgence of a broader social movement in support of Russian soldiers and against the regime. Members of the Russian “Way Home” social movement laid flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow before holding a protest at the nearby Manezhnaya Square to commemorate the 500th day since Russian President Vladimir Putin began partial mobilization in September 2022.[8] Russian state media outlets largely did not cover the protest but did report that the Moscow Prosecutor’s Office warned against attending an unspecified protest in Moscow on February 3, very likely referring to the Way Home protest.[9] Russian opposition media outlets covered the protest in detail, however, estimating that roughly 200 people attended, and reported that Moscow police detained 27 individuals, most of whom were Russian and foreign journalists.[10] The opposition outlets reported that authorities later released the detained individuals without charges and that some of the Way Home members protested outside of the police station for the release of all detained individuals.[11] Russian police allowed Way Home protestors to later go to Putin’s campaign headquarters and handwrite appeals to Putin to bring mobilized personnel home, but the headquarters only allowed small groups of demonstrators inside and severely limited media access. Russian law enforcement likely deliberately detained journalists rather than protestors to limit reporting of the event while depriving the Way Home organization of a platform on which to martyr itself in the information space over the arrests of its members.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet leadership experienced first-hand the influence that social movements of relatives of Russian soldiers wielded, and the Kremlin likely aims to preemptively censor and discredit similar movements before they could garner similar influence. Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov criticized the Way Home protests on February 3, accusing the wives of lacking the authority to advocate on behalf of frontline Russian soldiers because they are wives of soldiers, not mothers of soldiers, and asked to hear from the “husbands” instead. [12] (One of the main concerns of relatives is that mobilized Russian soldiers consistently lack the ability to communicate with relatives back home and go missing).[13] Solovyov asked whether the “husbands” authorized their wives to advocate on their behalf and asked whether this movement was “another Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers.”[14] The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers (later renamed the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers) was founded in 1989 and advocated for better treatment of Soviet conscripts who were enduring poor living standards and violence — most notably suffering from *dedovshchina*, the ritual hazing of conscripts using physical and sexual violence — during peacetime in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[15] The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers also called for greater transparency within the Soviet military, particularly regarding deaths in the Afghanistan and Chechen wars as well as in peacetime, whereas the Soviet government desired to censor both the deaths and mothers’ movement.[16] The mothers’ movement leveraged public displays of grief and other tactics to pressure Soviet officials into disclosing the number of peacetime military deaths, which exceeded the number of Soviet casualties in Afghanistan in the 1980s.[17] The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers was so effective that it forced the Soviet military to make sweeping changes in the 1990s, including removing and prosecuting corrupt military commanders and officials in the military prosecutor’s office.[18] The legacy of the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers represents the societal destabilization possible from a failed Soviet attempt at complete censorship, and Solovyov’s evocation of this specific organization indicates the depth of the Kremlin’s fear of similar movements only a few decades later.[19]

Putin may have learned from the Soviet Union’s prior failure to completely censor soldiers’ relatives and changed tactics, instead using limited censorship and discreditation to keep these movements from building momentum. The Kremlin has censored other relatives’ movements in support of Russian mobilized personnel since September 2022 and has more recently targeted the Way Home movement in December 2023 and January 2024.[20] Russian authorities compelled the Council of Wives and Mothers, founded in September 2022, to stop operating after designating it as a foreign agent in May 2023 after likely threatening criminal prosecution against its founder in December 2022.[21] Russian opposition outlets reported in late January 2024 that Russian authorities attempted to hack the social media accounts of Way Home members and that Russian law enforcement harassed members at prior demonstrations, both likely to discourage members from continuing their activism.[22] Other Russian sources, including ultranationalist milbloggers, have spread claims that Ukrainian special agents run the Way Home movement or that its leadership is otherwise corrupt. [23] While the degree of social influence that the Way Home movement or other similar Russian movements may hold is unclear, the extent and complexity of the Kremlin’s efforts to limit the rise of relatives’ movements in support of Russian soldiers underscores the Kremlin’s desperation to shut down these movements, particularly ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections and as it prepares for a long-term war effort.

Russian milbloggers continued to fixate on a recent unsuccessful Russian mechanized assault near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast and highlight divisions it caused within the Russian information space, which are indicative of wider issues with the Russian military's ability to adapt in Ukraine. A Russian milblogger claimed on February 3 that "true patriots" responded to the January 30 footage of the unsuccessful assault with criticism and disappointment.[24] The milblogger criticized "traitors and sellouts," including experts who frequent Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov's TV show, who responded to the footage by falsely claiming that Russian forces have adequate supplies of electronic warfare (EW) systems and radios to repel Ukrainian first-person vision (FPV) drones.[25] The milblogger, citing personal conversations with frontline Russian personnel, claimed that such propagandists' claims are not true and that Russian frontline commanders consider donated radio stations more valuable than state-provided tanks and infantry fighting vehicles due to radio equipment shortages.[26] Several milbloggers lamented that the Russian "high office" (likely the Russian high command) is unlikely to read milbloggers' concerns about Ukrainian drone use and warned that many Russian personnel will die because of Ukrainian drone superiority on the frontline, calling the issue "one of [Russia's] biggest problems at the moment."[27] Russian milbloggers' willingness to continually fixate on this particular event is notable, as the milbloggers' concern over Russian forces' failure to adapt is apparently greater than their concern for their own personal safety given the arrests of several critical information space voices and milbloggers in 2023.[28]

Moscow Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev praised Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 2 comment about drones being the Russian forces' "Achilles' heel" and claimed that Putin's comment shows Putin's awareness of what is happening on the front and that he has an understanding of modern warfare.[29] Medvedev claimed that Putin's acknowledgment of Ukrainian drone superiority proves that Putin is not afraid to discuss Russia's "problems" and "mistakes" and that Putin does not believe that constructive criticism of Russian operations in Ukraine is wrong or will prevent a Russian victory of Ukraine.[30] Several Russian milbloggers have seized on the discourse surrounding the January 30 footage of the unsuccessful Russian assault on Novomykhailivka to argue that Russian sources should not have to censor constructive criticism of the Russian military.[31] Putin's February 2 statement appears supportive of the milbloggers' argument against self-censorship. Putin has previously signaled his sensitivity to concern about Russian operations in Ukraine among Russian milbloggers, including during his "Direct Line" forum on December 14 when Putin singled out the tactical and operational situation in Krynyk in the east bank of Kherson Oblast, an area of the front that Russian milbloggers have previously fixated on.[32] Putin's statement suggests that there may be concern within the Russian military and political leadership about the Russian military's ability to adapt and restore maneuver to the battlefield.

Ukrainian actors conducted a drone strike against the Lukoil oil refinery in Volgograd Oblast on February 3. Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* and BBC Russia Service cited internal sources in the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) who claimed that the SBU conducted the strike.[33] A source in Kyiv told *Reuters* that Ukraine used two attack drones to execute the strike.[34] A fire resulting from the strike apparently spread up to 300 square meters at the Lukoil refinery, which Russian emergency services extinguished.[35] Lukoil's Volgograd refinery is one of the largest in Russia and the largest in the Russian Southern Federal District.[36] Russian officials obliquely reported on the strike, claiming that "falling debris" from a drone strike that Russian air defense repelled fell on the refinery and caused the fire.[37] A Russian milblogger criticized Russian authorities for not admitting that Ukrainian drones struck the refinery and called for massive retaliatory strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure to damage Ukraine's battlefield prospects and dissuade Western investment in Ukrainian critical industries.[38]

Ukrainian strikes reportedly temporarily slowed Russia's production of Lancet loitering munitions. *Forbes*, citing Ukraine-based OSINT group *Molfar*, reported on February 1 that a "well-targeted" Ukrainian strike may have hit the Zagorsk Optical-Mechanical Plant (ZOMZ) near Moscow in August 2023.[39] *Forbes* noted that Russian state media denied that explosions at ZOMZ were the result of a drone strike, despite eyewitness reports to the contrary. Ukrainian military analyst Dmytro Snehyrev assessed that ZOMZ may have been producing camera lenses or optical devices for ZALA Aerospace's Lancet loitering munitions.[40] *Forbes* stated that following the August 2023 incident at ZOMZ, Lancet production was "slashed," which is noteworthy because Lancets use several imported components that should in theory be unaffected by explosions at ZOMZ. The *Forbes* investigation concluded that Ukraine may have conducted the strike against ZOMZ, impacting the factory's ability to produce unique domestic components for Lancets, thereby leading to a temporary decrease in Lancet production, which is now on the rise again as of January 2024.

Russian state media confirmed the appointment of two new officials to senior positions in military-adjacent civilian organizations. The Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF) confirmed on February 2 that it unanimously elected Army General Alexander Dvornikov (former Southern Military District commander and failed Russian theater

commander in Ukraine from April-May 2022) as DOSAAF's new chairperson.[41] DOSAAF also noted that it determined its new strategic goals, defined as increasing the number of trained conscripts and developing a training system for drone operators and other specialists.[42] ISW previously reported rumors of Dvornikov's appointment on January 30.[43] DOSAAF is a Soviet relic that funds and promotes military service for Russian youth through military-patriotic programming and military skills programs and sends representatives to military draft boards to allocate conscripts with specific skills into specific military roles.[44] Dvornikov's selection to head DOSAAF suggests that the Russian military leadership may be setting conditions to reconstitute a conscript recruitment pipeline using DOSAAF's educational and recruitment infrastructure. Kremlin newswire TASS also reported on February 3 that Russian President Vladimir Putin replaced Russian Minister of Labor and Social Protection Anton Kotyakov with Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service Head Yuriy Chikhanchin as head of the Kremlin-run "Defenders of the Fatherland" Foundation.[45] The "Defenders of the Fatherland" foundation provides government support to Russian veterans and helps provide rehabilitation and social support to wounded veterans and their families.[46]

In accordance with its policy against speculating about future Ukrainian actions, ISW is not covering reported leaks concerning possible changes in the Ukrainian command structure. ISW will continue to report official statements by Ukrainian government officials and organizations as they are made.

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin is doubling down on its support for Iran as the US conducts strikes to preempt attacks by Iranian-back proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen against American and other targets.
- The Kremlin censored a protest by wives of mobilized soldiers in Moscow on February 3 likely to suppress any possible resurgence of a broader social movement in support of Russian soldiers and against the regime.
- Soviet leadership experienced first-hand the influence that social movements of relatives of Russian soldiers wielded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Kremlin likely aims to preemptively censor and discredit similar movements before they can garner similar influence.
- Putin may have learned from the Soviet Union's prior failure to completely censor soldiers' relatives and changed tactics, instead using limited censorship and discreditation to keep these movements from building momentum.
- Russian milbloggers continued to fixate on a recent unsuccessful Russian mechanized assault near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast and highlight divisions it caused within the Russian information space, which are indicative of wider issues with the Russian military's ability to adapt in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian actors conducted a drone strike against the Lukoil oil refinery in Volgograd Oblast on February 3.
- Ukrainian strikes reportedly temporarily slowed Russia's production of Lancet loitering munitions.
- Russian state media confirmed the appointment of two new officials to senior positions in military-adjacent civilian organizations.
- Russian forces made confirm advances near Bakhmut amid continued positional engagements along the frontline.
- Russian soldiers imprisoned for refusing to fight in Ukraine are reportedly dying in Russian detention.
- Russian authorities continue efforts to militarize Ukrainian youth through the school system.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 2, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Fredrick W. Kagan

Russian President Vladimir Putin evoked a wide Russian social and economic mobilization reminiscent of the Soviet Union's total mobilization during the Second World War during a February 2 speech despite the fact that Russia is undertaking a far more gradual but nonetheless effective mobilization of its defense industrial base (DIB). Putin attended the "Everything for Victory" event at the Tulatochmash plant in Tula Oblast on February 2 and promoted Russian efforts to expand its DIB to an audience of 600 representatives of various professions from across Russia.[1] "Everything for Victory" is a Soviet-era slogan that Soviet authorities first used during

the Russian Civil War and then extensively during the Second World War to promote the widespread mobilization of Soviet industry and society.[2] Putin stated that defense industrial workers in Tula Oblast are currently working under this slogan just as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers did. [3] Putin asserted that modern Russian defense industrial workers have proven themselves worthy of these "ancestors," who won the industrial battle against Nazi Germany and Europe's defense industry to create the Soviet victory of 1945.[4] Putin followed his Soviet predecessors in ignoring the critical role the US defense industry played in facilitating the Soviet victory through the Lend-Lease program. The Kremlin has previously appealed to the mythos of the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) to reassure the Russian public that the Russian war effort will bring to bear overwhelming manpower and materiel for victory in Ukraine as the Soviet Union did for the Red Army against Nazi Germany. [5] Putin's allusion to the Soviet Union's total mobilization during the Second World War does not necessarily indicate that he intends to bring Russia to such a wartime footing, although he may be engaging in such rhetorical overtures to gauge domestic reactions and prepare the Russian public for a wider economic or military mobilization.

Putin claimed that Russia's DIB is significantly expanding and sufficiently supporting the war effort in Ukraine. Putin claimed that 6,000 Russian enterprises and 3.5 million workers are part of Russia's DIB and that 10,000 more enterprises are connected to the DIB in auxiliary or supporting roles.[6] Putin stated that in the previous 16 months, Russia's DIB has created 520,000 new jobs; has increased the production of armored protection for personnel by a factor of 2.5; and has increased the production of armored vehicles and other equipment for combined arms warfare by an unspecified percentage. [7] Putin claimed that Russian enterprises are fulfilling the entirety of the state defense order and that the Kremlin significantly increased and fully funded the 2024 state defense order.[8] Putin also repeatedly stressed that Russia is expanding its DIB with technological innovation and adaptation as a priority, alleging that all of Russia's latest weapons are superior to weapons produced by NATO countries.[9] Putin added that whoever is quicker to find new ways to suppress their enemy's means of destruction, reconnaissance, and suppression will win, echoing sentiments that Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi expressed in his February 1 essay detailing a strategy to seek advantage over the Russian military through technological innovation and adaptation.[10]

Russia has been gradually mobilizing its DIB in an effort to fulfill operational requirements in Ukraine without causing widespread disruptions to Russia's already beleaguered economy.[11] This effort, while well below total mobilization, has addressed many Russian requirements for sustaining Russian operations in Ukraine.[12] The Russian effort has achieved this effect in part through Russia's ability to procure equipment from its partners and retool Russia's economy for military production purposes. [13] Russia has yet to expand its DIB to the point where it will be able to stop relying on partner countries to source critical materiel, however. It remains unclear how much further Russia can mobilize its DIB without taking significant and possibly unpopular actions given Russia's persistent economic and human capital constraints. The longer Russia maintains the battlefield initiative in Ukraine, however, the more the Russian military will have the option to tailor operations to optimize Russia's production and consumption of certain materiel in a sustainable and scalable way. Retaining the battlefield initiative may also allow the Kremlin to choose to expand Russia's DIB over conducting a large-scale offensive effort that would require substantial materiel.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated on February 2 that Russian forces retain the "strategic initiative" along the entire frontline in Ukraine, a notable departure from Shoigu's previous characterization of Russian operations as "active defense."[14] Shoigu claimed during a conference call with the Russian military leadership that Russian forces are advancing and improving their positions along the frontline.[15] Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on January 16 that Russian forces "completely" have the initiative in Ukraine following a failed Ukrainian counteroffensive.[16] Shoigu and Putin consistently downplayed localized Russian offensive operations in October and December 2023, characterizing Russian operations in Ukraine as "active defense." [17] ISW assessed at that time that Russian authorities may have been attempting to temper expectations about the Russian military's ability to make operationally significant advances, particularly around Avdiivka where Russian forces launched a localized offensive in October 2023. [18] Putin's and Shoigu's rhetorical shift suggests that Russian authorities may be gaining confidence in the Russian military's ability to achieve operationally significant advances. Russian authorities could also be rhetorically posturing ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections. ISW continues to assess that Russian forces have regained the initiative throughout most of the Ukrainian theater but have not seized the battlefield initiative in Kherson Oblast.[19]

Open-source investigations indicate that Russian forces are benefitting from Ukraine's ammunition shortage and inability to conduct sufficient counterbattery warfare. Ukraine-based open-source organization Frontelligence Insight stated on February 1 that Russian forces previously established stationary artillery firing positions for long periods of time from late 2022 to early 2023 when ammunition shortages limited Ukrainian counterbattery warfare capabilities.[20] Frontelligence stated that Russian forces began to concentrate their artillery in a similar way in January 2024, suggesting that Ukrainian forces are again running low on artillery ammunition. Frontelligence stated that Ukrainian forces can sometimes strike Russian artillery but overall lack adequate ammunition for effective counterbattery fire. Frontelligence stated that the lack of Ukrainian counterbattery fire allows Russian artillery to largely destroy settlements, making it nearly impossible for Ukrainian forces to defend the settlements. Frontelligence stated that many of Ukraine's FPV drones lack the range to strike the numerous Russian artillery pieces deployed 15 to 24 kilometers from the frontline. Western and Ukrainian officials have recently highlighted Ukraine's need for artillery ammunition.[21] ISW continues to assess that artillery shortages and delays in Western security assistance will create uncertainty in Ukrainian operational plans and likely prompt Ukrainian forces to husband materiel, 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.[22]

US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller reiterated on February 1 that Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly indicated that he has not changed his aims to capture and subjugate Ukraine. Miller dismissed Russian President Vladimir Putin's January 31 suggestion of creating a "demilitarized zone" in Ukraine as disingenuous during a press conference on February 1.[23] Miller stated that it would be "kind of tough" to have a demilitarized zone in Ukraine when Russian forces continue to operate in Ukraine and that Putin has made it clear over and over again" that he has not abandoned his maximalist objects in Ukraine, which ISW assesses are tantamount to complete Ukrainian and Western capitulation. Miller stated that if Russia "really wanted to show interest" in a demilitarized zone in Ukraine, it should begin by demilitarizing the areas of occupied Ukraine where there are currently Russian forces.[24] Putin emphasized the idea of a "demilitarized" or "buffer zone" during a meeting on January 31 and stated that Russian forces' most important goal across the theater is pushing the frontline deeper into Ukraine to place Russian territory – including occupied Ukraine – out of the range of Ukrainian frontline artillery systems and Western-provided long-range systems.[25]

Russian milbloggers and ultranationalist figures continue to present themselves as impartial and constructive critics of the Russian military in juxtaposition to official Kremlin sources in the Russian information space. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on February 2 that Russian authorities should amend the Russian Criminal Code to punish Russian citizens and military personnel who "misinform [Russian] authorities and military command." Former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and Zaporizhia Oblast occupation senator Dmitry Rogozin announced in response that he will prepare a bill to amend the Russian Criminal Code.[26] Russian milbloggers have frequently criticized Russian battlefield commanders for lying to the Russian military command, including by submitting inaccurately positive reports to their superiors, resulting in the Russian military command flaunting false or premature claims of success while routinely committing Russian forces to costly assaults.[27] Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov accused Russian milbloggers on February 2 of highlighting Russian battlefield losses and shortcomings by amplifying footage published on January 30 showing Ukrainian forces destroying a company-sized column of advancing Russian vehicles and tanks near Novomykhailivka, Donetsk Oblast.[28] Several Russian milbloggers criticized Solovyov in response, advocating for milbloggers to be allowed to share constructive criticism of Russian operations in Ukraine in order to prevent unnecessary deaths.[29] The Kremlin has actively censored some Russian milbloggers in recent months for criticizing Russian operations in Ukraine, likely to encourage and enforce self-censorship among Russian sources.[30]

Kremlin affiliates reportedly launched an information campaign wherein prominent social media influencers promote the Russian Orthodox Church. A Russian insider source claimed on February 1 that a recent uptick of young and rich Russian social media influencers promoting the Russian Orthodox Church, its head Patriarch Kirill, and related symbols is part of a dedicated campaign by Igor Sechin, head of the Russian state oil company Rosneft, and former Rosneft Head Eduard Khudainatov, both of whom are affiliated with Russian President Vladimir Putin.[31] Sechin is

reportedly Putin's "de facto deputy" and reportedly leads a Kremlin faction that clashes with a faction led by Russian Security Council Secretary Dmitry Patrushev.[32] A dedicated social media campaign by a Kremlin faction member, if reports are true, aimed at promoting conservative ideals through the Russian Orthodox Church may be an attempt to forward Putin's "Year of the Family" ideology and curry favor with Putin. The Kremlin may also seek to promote the Russian Orthodox Church to Russian youth and young adults to increase its broader control over Russian society. The Kremlin has been using the Russian Orthodox Church to consolidate control over occupied Ukraine and eliminate Ukrainian culture and identity in occupied areas.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin evoked a wide Russian social and economic mobilization reminiscent of the Soviet Union's total mobilization during the Second World War during a February 2 speech despite the fact that Russia is undertaking a far more gradual but nonetheless effective mobilization of its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated on February 2 that Russian forces retain the "strategic initiative" along the entire frontline in Ukraine, a notable departure from Shoigu's previous characterization of Russian operations as "active defense."
- Open-source investigations indicate that Russian forces are benefitting from Ukraine's ammunition shortage and inability to conduct sufficient counterbattery warfare.
- US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller reiterated on February 1 that Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly indicated that he has not changed his aims to capture and subjugate Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers and ultranationalist figures continue to present themselves as impartial and constructive critics of the Russian military in juxtaposition to official Kremlin sources in the Russian information space.
- Kremlin affiliates reportedly launched an information campaign wherein prominent social media influencers promote the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on February 2.
- Russian outlet *Izvestiya* stated on February 2, citing sources within the Russian military, that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is forming air defense units as part of assault units to defend Russian infantry against Ukrainian drones, frontline air strikes, and shelling.
- Ukrainian and Canadian officials announced a new coalition to return Ukrainian children from Russia to Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 1, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and George Barros

February 1, 2024, 7:40pm ET

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

Note: ISW added a new section on Russian air, missile, and drone campaign to track Russian efforts to target Ukrainian rear and frontline areas, grow its drone and missile arsenals, and adapt its strike packages.

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi presented an overarching strategy to seize the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine and retain it to facilitate Ukrainian battlefield victories despite Russia's numerical advantages in manpower and materiel. Zaluzhnyi's strategy aims to offset Ukraine's existing challenges and pursue advantages over the Russian military through widespread technological innovation and adaptation. The Ukrainian Armed

Forces published an essay on February 1 by Zaluzhnyi titled "On the Modern Design of Military Operations in the Russo-Ukrainian War: In the Fight for the Initiative," wherein Zaluzhnyi argued that the requirements for any given war are unique and that these requirements dictate a unique strategy for victory.^[1] Zaluzhnyi identified "decisive conditions" for Ukraine to conduct successful operations, which include achieving absolute air superiority to enable effective Ukrainian fires, logistics, and reconnaissance; seizing the initiative by denying Russian forces the ability to conduct offensive or defensive operations; increasing Ukrainian mobility while limiting Russian mobility; securing safe access to unspecified key lines and important terrain; and denying Russian forces any opportunities to recapture lost positions and increase Russian operational efforts. The decisive conditions that Zaluzhnyi highlighted would effectively give Ukrainian forces the theater-wide initiative and set conditions for Ukraine to conduct operationally significant defensive and offensive operations. Zaluzhnyi argued that the rapid development of new technology changes the means by which Ukraine can achieve these "decisive conditions" and that Ukrainian forces cannot use conventional methods to achieve these conditions given Russia's superior ability to mobilize men. Zaluzhnyi argued that new technological means, such as drones, unmanned systems, systems integration, and other advanced technological systems can allow Ukrainian forces to maximize their combat potential using fewer resources and inflict maximum damage on Russian forces.

Zaluzhnyi argued that Ukrainian limitations and geopolitical challenges are incentivizing Ukraine to pursue the development and institutionalization of these new means. Zaluzhnyi stated that an "unstable political situation around Ukraine" has led to reduced international military support for Ukraine, that Russia will likely try to provoke other conflicts to further draw the West's attention away from Ukraine, and that Ukraine's partners have depleted their missile and artillery ammunition stocks without the means to rapidly produce these weapons. Zaluzhnyi argued that ineffective sanctions allow the defense industrial bases (DIBs) of Russia and its partners to support a positional war of attrition that benefits Russia over Ukraine and that Russia has a significant advantage over Ukraine in the mobilization of human resources. Zaluzhnyi further highlighted imperfect Ukrainian regulatory frameworks to expand Ukraine's DIB, although Ukrainian officials are increasingly prioritizing efforts to remedy this issue.^[2] Zaluzhnyi notably concluded that the uncertain nature of the war in Ukraine makes it difficult for Ukraine's allies to determine specific security assistance priorities for Ukraine.^[3] Zaluzhnyi stated that the "main option for gaining an advantage is to master the entire arsenal of relatively cheap, new, and extremely effective and rapidly developing assets." Zaluzhnyi specifically highlighted unmanned systems as an area where Ukraine can leverage new capabilities since they can provide continuous situational awareness, support round-the-clock fire and strikes in real-time, provide real-time intelligence, and produce accurate targeting information for strikes on the frontline and in rear areas.

Zaluzhnyi called on Ukraine to introduce a new "philosophy" for the preparation and conduct of military operations that would allow Ukrainian forces to cohesively employ these new methods in pursuit of a cohesive objective. Zaluzhnyi stated that new technological means will also expand the types of operations Ukraine can conduct in support of the war, which may include operations to reduce Russia's economic potential, operations aimed at Russia's complete isolation and exhaustion, robotic search and strike operations, robotic operations to control a crisis area, psychological operations, and defensive "contactless" operations. Zaluzhnyi also called on Ukrainian forces to systematically advance separate lines of effort to generate "necessary effects" in developing a coherent "digital field"; controlling the radio-electronic (the cyber-electromagnetic domain) situation along the frontline; combining attacks with unmanned and cyber assets; and improving logistics. Zaluzhnyi specifically suggested that retooling operations to integrate unmanned systems may allow Ukrainian forces to conserve personnel, weapons, and equipment while inflicting massive strikes on Russian military assets and infrastructure.

Zaluzhnyi called on Ukraine to overhaul its war effort to create "a completely new state system of technological reequipment" to master new assets and their operation. Zaluzhnyi advocated for Ukraine to retool state systems to support Ukrainian research, development, scientific support, production and maintenance, personnel training and the generalization of combat experience, the employment of forces, flexible financing, and logistics in order to prioritize the development and employment of rapidly developing technology. Zaluzhnyi added that Ukraine could create the system he envisions, with a sufficient volume of production, within five months. Zaluzhnyi concluded that this new system, alongside a new approach to military operations, can enable Ukraine to stop Russia's current aggression and protect Ukraine in the future.

Ukrainian forces successfully struck and sunk a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel in the Black Sea near occupied Crimea on the night of January 31 to February 1. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) published footage on February 1 showing Ukrainian maritime drones striking the *Ivanovets* Tarantul-class corvette (41st Missile Boat Brigade) near Lake Donuzlav in occupied Crimea.^[4] The Ukrainian Navy reported that the sinking of the *Ivanovets* is a significant

loss to the BSF since the BSF has only three ships of its project 1241.1 (Tarantul) class and noted that Ukrainian forces previously damaged a project 1239 Bora-class corvette in the 41st Missile Boat Brigade.[5] The Ukrainian Navy stated that the *Ivanovets* is usually staffed with 40 personnel, and the GUR stated that Russian search and rescue operations were unsuccessful.[6] ISW continues to assess that successful Ukrainian strikes on BSF vessels and infrastructure have limited the BSF's ability to operate in the western part of the Black Sea.[7] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched 12 Western-provided SCALP or Storm Shadow missiles against occupied Crimea on the night of January 31 to February 1.[8] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces downed five missiles near Belbek Air Base in occupied Sevastopol and six missiles over Yana Kapu, Hvardiske, and northwest of Sevastopol and that one missile struck the ground near Belbek Air Base but did not damage it.[9] Neither Ukrainian nor Russian officials confirmed these claims. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that the January 31 Ukrainian strikes on Belbek Air Base damaged "several objects" but noted that Ukrainian authorities need more satellite imagery to confirm what objects Ukrainian forces struck.[10]

Russian milbloggers continued to voice frustrations about Russian forces' continued tactical blunders during offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast. Several Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command on January 31 and February 1 for failing to account for the "[drone] factor" when planning tactical assaults in response to footage posted on January 30 showing Ukrainian forces striking a column of advancing Russian vehicles and tanks near Novomykhailivka.[11] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger noted that Ukrainian minefields are canalizing Russian routes but argued that the Russian military command still needs to stop attacking in mechanized columns due to consistently taking high equipment losses.[12] The milblogger also criticized the Russian command for failing to account for Ukrainian drone operations and to equip Russian armored vehicles with electronic warfare (EW) systems to counter Ukrainian drones.[13] Another Russian milblogger questioned how Russian commanders can fail to account for Ukrainian drones in attack plans and afford to lose so much equipment and manpower, accusing the Russian commanders of "complete stupidity and incompetence."[14] Other Russian milbloggers seized on the discourse to advocate for continued domestic support for drone and EW production in Russia and to argue that Russian sources should not have to censor themselves if they have constructive criticism for Russian commanders.[15] The Russian military command has actively censored some Russian milbloggers in recent months for criticizing the military likely to encourage and enforce self-censorship among other Russian milbloggers.[16]

Russian milbloggers have previously argued that Russian forces need to improve their planning and coordination at the tactical and operational levels to break out of the current positional warfare in Ukraine.[17] Russian forces in Ukraine have proven capable of successfully learning lessons and adapting while conducting defensive operations and have shown limited offensive adaptation on certain sectors of the front.[18] Russian forces conducted a series of unsuccessful mechanized assaults near Avdiivka in October 2023 after analogous costly mechanized assaults along several different axes over the course of 2022 and 2023, and the recent footage of similar unsuccessful mechanized assaults near Novomykhailivka from January 30, 2024 suggests that Russian forces' success in adapting their tactical planning and execution of assaults varies by unit-to-unit or commander-to-commander, however.[19]

The European Union (EU) unanimously approved a financial support package for Ukraine for 2024 – 2027. European Council President Charles Michel announced on February 1 that all 27 EU member states approved a support package for Ukraine worth 50 billion euros (about \$54 billion), including 33 billion euros (about \$35.8 billion) of loans and 17 billion euros (about \$18.4 billion) in "non-repayable support" that could potentially come from frozen Russian assets.[20] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that continued EU financial support will strengthen Ukraine's long-term economic stability.[21]

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell stated that the European Union (EU) will not be able to send the promised one million shells to Ukraine by March 2024, but is planning to fulfill this promise by the end of 2024. Borrell stated on February 1 that the EU delivered 330,000 rounds of artillery ammunition to Ukraine between March 2023 and January 2024 and that he expects the EU to deliver a total of 524,000 rounds by March 2024.[22] Borrell stated that the EU plans to deliver an additional 630,000 shells to Ukraine by the end of 2024. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that the European defense industrial base (DIB) has increased its production by 40 percent over an unspecified time frame and that the EU member states are working to deliver munitions to Ukraine by drawing from national stockpiles, concluding new orders, or redirecting other orders.[23] Von der Leyen stated that the European Commission will soon present a new defense and industrial strategy that will create greater coherence and coordination throughout the EU from planning to procurement. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview

with CNN that ammunition is “one of the most decisive factors” in the war and that the quantity of rounds is more important than quality.[24]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appointed another one of his children to a senior position in the Chechen government as of January 31. Kadyrov appointed his 24-year-old daughter Khadizhat Kadyrova as First Deputy Head of the Chechen Republic Head’s Administration from her prior post leading the Grozny City Department of Preschool Education.[25] Kadyrov previously appointed his now-26-year-old daughter Aishat Kadyrova and 17-year-old-son Adam Kadyrov to similarly senior positions.[26]

In accordance with its policy against speculating about future Ukrainian actions, ISW is not covering reported leaks concerning possible changes in the Ukrainian command structure. ISW will continue to report official statements by Ukrainian government officials and organizations as they are made.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi presented an overarching strategy to seize the theater-wide initiative in Ukraine and retain it to facilitate Ukrainian battlefield victories despite Russia’s numerical advantages in manpower and materiel. Zaluzhnyi’s strategy aims to offset Ukraine’s existing challenges and pursue advantages over the Russian military through widespread technological innovation and adaptation.
- Ukrainian forces successfully struck and sunk a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel in the Black Sea near occupied Crimea on the night of January 31 to February 1.
- Russian milbloggers continued to voice frustrations about Russian forces’ continued tactical blunders during offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast.
- The European Union (EU) unanimously approved a financial support package for Ukraine for 2024 – 2027.
- EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell stated that the European Union (EU) will not be able to send the promised one million shells to Ukraine by March 2024, but is planning to fulfill this promise by the end of 2024.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov appointed another one of his children to a senior position in the Chechen government as of January 31.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kupyansk, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on February 1.
- Turkish banks have reportedly started closing Russian companies’ accounts due to the threat of US secondary sanctions.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted Russian plans to integrate occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia over the next six years.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 31, 2024

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

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

January 31, 2024, 8:05pm ET

Ukrainian forces struck Russian targets in the vicinity of Belbek airfield in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on January 31. Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk amplified geolocated footage on January 31 showing a Ukrainian strike near the Belbek airfield and thanked Ukrainian forces for striking targets in occupied Crimea.[1] Additional geolocated footage published on January 31 shows large smoke plumes rising from the airfield.[2] ISW has yet to observe evidence indicating what Russian targets Ukrainian forces struck at or near the airfield. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 20 Ukrainian missiles, 17 reportedly on the approaches to Sevastopol and three reportedly elsewhere over occupied Crimea. [3] The Russian MoD claimed that missile fragments fell in Lyubimivka (northwest of Sevastopol), and Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev claimed that missile fragments damaged buildings along Fedorivska Street and the “Ust-Belbek” garden association, both in the vicinity of the Belbek airfield.[4] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces used Storm Shadow cruise missiles in the strikes.[5] Ukrainian forces recently repeatedly targeted the Saky airfield (north of Sevastopol) as part of a multi-day strike campaign against Russian targets in occupied Crimea in early January 2024.[6] Ukrainian forces previously conducted a more extensive strike

campaign against Russian military infrastructure and Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets in the summer of 2023 that pushed Russian naval assets largely out of the western part of the Black Sea and that aimed to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for defensive operations in southern Ukraine.[7]

Russian President Vladimir Putin doubled down on his maximalist and purposefully vague territorial objectives in Ukraine on January 31. Putin stated during a meeting with his election "proxies" that pushing the current frontline deeper into Ukraine is the most important goal for Russian forces across the theater.[8] Putin emphasized the idea of a "demilitarized" or "sanitary" zone in Ukraine that he claimed would place Russian territory – including occupied Ukraine – out of range of both frontline artillery systems and Western-provided long-range systems. Putin's stated goal of pushing the front line so that Russia's claimed and actual territories are outside of Ukrainian firing range is a vague goal that is actually unattainable as long as there is an independent Ukraine with any ability to fight. Putin would likely annex any Ukrainian territories Russia managed to capture in pursuit of this supposed objective (particularly in the four oblasts Russia has already claimed to have annexed but only partially controls), thus bringing the new Russian territories into range of Ukrainian systems in whatever remains of an independent Ukraine. A Russian nationalist milblogger expanded on this dilemma, noting that Russia would also have to capture Mykolaiv and Odesa cities to eliminate the threat of Ukrainian long range strikes against occupied Crimea and that Russian forces would need to capture the Slovyansk-Kramatorsk line in Donetsk Oblast to relieve the current front line.[9] The milblogger notably suggested even further territorial expansion by asking whether Russia wants Slovyansk to "bear the fate of an eternally frontline city."[10] Putin's January 31 statements do not represent significant inflections in Russia's stated war aims or actual military capabilities but are rather likely intended to capitalize on existing narratives in Western media that could block short and long term Western military assistance to Ukraine and compel the West to negotiate with Russia on Russian terms.

Putin also included Kharkiv City, which he has previously described as "Russian," in this hypothesized demilitarized zone, likely to capitalize on discussions surrounding the unlikely possibility of a Russian offensive effort along Kharkiv Oblast's northern border from Belgorod Oblast.[11] Putin may intend to amplify these discussions to divert Ukrainian attention away from the ongoing Russian offensive operation along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis, but ISW continues to assess that Russian forces in Belgorod Oblast can conduct only tactical-level actions that would serve as feints to draw and fix Ukrainian forces along the border.[12] Putin is also likely trying to appeal to resurgent calls from Russian ultranationalists to create a "buffer zone" between Kharkiv and Belgorod oblasts to push Ukrainian MLRS and artillery away from the international border with Belgorod Oblast. Putin previously claimed that he would consider creating such a "buffer zone" during widespread discontent about limited cross border raids by pro-Ukraine forces into Belgorod Oblast in summer 2023, but the Russian military has yet to take any actions that suggest that Putin has seriously considered these calls.[13]

Putin also highlighted the Russian offensive effort near Avdiivka likely to portray that effort as successful to domestic Russian audiences and to further justify the Russian war in Ukraine.[14] Putin claimed that the "Veterany" Assault Brigade (Volunteer Assault Corps) fought ahead of regular Russian forces, broke through Ukrainian lines, and captured 19 houses near Avdiivka, which Putin characterized as one of the most important areas of the frontline. Putin stated that the "Veterany" Brigade "fights properly" and should be "educating young people." Putin also reiterated boilerplate narratives that the Russian war in Ukraine is a struggle for Russian sovereignty that is purging Russian society of those who are against this sovereignty, thus unifying Russian society.[15]

Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a prisoner-of-war (POW) exchange on January 31, exchanging 195 Russian POWs for 207 Ukrainian POWs.[16] Ukrainian officials reported that this was the 50th POW exchange, presumably since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. [17] Russian and Ukrainian officials stated that the United Arab Emirates helped facilitate the POW exchange.[18] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that the POWs on the preliminary list for the POW exchange planned for January 24 and later canceled due to the Il-76 crash in Belgorod Oblast were not part of the January 31 POW exchange.[19]

The European Union (EU) will reportedly fall short of its promise to provide Ukraine with one million artillery shells by March 1, 2024, as European leaders call on EU member states to intensify deliveries of ammunition to Ukraine. Bloomberg reported on January 31 that Western diplomats stated that EU partners will only deliver 600,000 artillery shells to Ukraine by the March 1, 2024 deadline.[20] European Union (EU) Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated on January 20 that the EU will have the capacity to produce one million shells per year by March or April 2024 and will ensure that it delivers the "majority" of the shells to Ukraine.[21] German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte acknowledged that the EU fell short of its

promise to deliver one million shells to Ukraine by March 2024 in a letter published by the *Financial Times* on January 31.[22] The letter noted that new orders for artillery ammunition will not reach the battlefield in Ukraine until 2025 and urged the EU to find ways to accelerate the delivery of promised shells to Ukraine, either through provisions of existing stocks or through joint procurement efforts.[23]

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russian-Chinese relations are at their “best period in their history” in a January 31 call with Chinese Defense Minister Admiral Dong Jun. Shoigu claimed that Russian-Chinese military cooperation is steadily developing and that the Russian and Chinese militaries regularly conduct operational and combat training exercises. [24] Shoigu claimed that Russian and Chinese defense and security cooperation has helped “reduce the potential for conflict.”[25] Shoigu and Dong emphasized a desire to increase Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation, and Dong reported that China provided unspecified “support” to Russia in the war in Ukraine despite continued US and European pressure.[26] Dong also stated that the US and Europe will not be able to interfere with “normal Russian-Chinese cooperation.”[27] Dong’s statement is a more overt rhetorical expression of Chinese support for Russia than statements from previous meetings between senior Russian and Chinese officials. Dong’s rhetorical support for Russia is likely primarily posturing against the West. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev recently made inflammatory comments about Japan likely in an effort to demonstrate Russia’s support of China’s opposition to the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.[28] ISW continues to assess that China is unwilling to establish the no-limits bilateral partnership with Russia that Russia desires.[29]

Kremlin officials and mouthpieces continued rhetorical efforts to prevent Moldova’s integration into the EU and to set information conditions to justify future Russian aggression against Moldova. Moldovan and Ukrainian officials reiterated on January 29 and 30 that Moldova and Ukraine are committed to resolving the Transnistrian conflict through diplomatic means and dialogue with Transnistria.[30] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, who has recently fixated on the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict, continued to claim that Moldova is engaging in military actions that threaten Transnistria, likely as part of efforts to justify future Russian aggression in the area as necessary to protect Transnistria.[31] The milblogger also responded to Ukrainian and Moldovan official statements, claiming that Moldova is only “verbally” interested in diplomatic solutions to the Transnistria conflict and is instead trying to use its economic policies to “blackmail” Transnistria. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on January 31 that Moldova is economically “strangling” regions in Moldova that do not agree with the Moldovan government’s policies – likely referring to both Transnistria and Gagauzia, whose leaders have reportedly complained about Moldovan economic policies recently.[32] Zakharova claimed that the Moldovan government is using increased “Russophobic rhetoric” to divert attention from Moldova’s internal socio-economic and political problems.[33] Another Russian milblogger largely mirrored Zakharova’s claims, alleging that the Moldovan government is blaming Russia for Moldova’s socio-economic problems.[34] Kremlin narratives about alleged socio-economic issues in Moldova are likely aimed at promoting the idea that Moldova’s moves towards Western integration, particularly with the European Union (EU), are hurting Moldova’s economy and generating discontent among its population.

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it recently conducted a cyberattack on a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) communications server. The GUR reported on January 30 that GUR hackers successfully hacked a Russian MoD server used to exchange information between Russian units. The GUR reported that Russia has installed the software on this server on various other strategic objects including military objects and that the GUR’s cyber operation is ongoing.[35] ISW has recently observed an increase in reported Ukrainian cyberattacks against Russian targets.[36]

Estonian Defense Forces Commander General Martin Herem stated that Russia may be behind recent GPS jamming in the Baltic region.[37] Bloomberg reported on January 31 that Herem stated that Russia may be “learning and testing” its jamming capabilities against the backdrop of the risk of future conflict with NATO. Bloomberg stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) previously confirmed the presence of Russian electronic warfare (EW) units in Kaliningrad Oblast, and Herem stated that Russia may also jam signals from ships in the Baltic Sea. Swedish Lieutenant Colonel Joakim Paasikivi previously stated that he believes that high GPS interference levels in December 2023 and January 2024 are a result of “Russian influence activities or so-called hybrid warfare.”[38]

The Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers approved and submitted an updated version of a draft law on mobilization to the Verkhovna Rada on January 30.[39] The Verkhovna Rada withdrew the previous version of the draft law on mobilization for revisions on January 11 after discussions between Ukrainian legislators and political and military leadership.[40] The updated version of the draft law has not amended key provisions concerning the lowering of the mobilization age from 27 to 25 years of age, the discharge of servicemen after 36 months of service, and an effort to systematize Ukrainian mobilization infrastructure.[41] Deputy Chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Digital

Transformation Oleksandr Fedienko stated on January 31 that the Verkhovna Rada will likely consider the updated second draft law no earlier than March 2024.[42]

In accordance with its policy against speculating about future Ukrainian actions, ISW is not covering reported leaks concerning possible changes in the Ukrainian command structure. ISW will continue to report official statements by Ukrainian government officials and organizations as they are made.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces struck Russian targets in the vicinity of Belbek airfield in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on January 31.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin doubled down on his maximalist and purposefully vague territorial objectives in Ukraine on January 31.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces conducted a prisoner-of-war (POW) exchange on January 31, exchanging 195 Russian POWs for 207 Ukrainian POWs.
- The European Union (EU) will reportedly fall short of its promise to provide Ukraine with one million artillery shells by March 1, 2024, as European leaders call on EU member states to intensify deliveries of ammunition to Ukraine.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russian-Chinese relations are at their “best period in their history” in a January 31 call with Chinese Defense Minister Admiral Dong Jun.
- Kremlin officials and mouthpieces continued rhetorical efforts to prevent Moldova’s integration into the EU and to set information conditions to justify future Russian aggression against Moldova.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it recently conducted a cyberattack on a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) communications server.
- Estonian Defense Forces Commander General Martin Herem stated that Russia may be behind recent GPS jamming in the Baltic region.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City amid positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 31.
- Russian forces reportedly formed a “secret” battalion of penal recruits to conduct offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast but are reportedly disbanding the battalion.
- Russian and occupation officials continue efforts to erase Ukrainian cultural and ethnic identity in occupied territories.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 30, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Grace Mapes, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 30, 2024, 7:15pm ET

The anticipated Russian 2024 winter-spring offensive effort is underway in the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on January 30 that the Russian offensive in Ukraine is currently ongoing and that Russian forces aim to reach the Zhrebets River (in the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area) and the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.[1] Budanov forecasted that Russian forces would fail to achieve these objectives, however, and would likely be “completely exhausted” by the beginning of the spring.[2] Budanov’s statements are consistent with ISW’s observation that Russian forces have intensified offensive operations along this axis since the beginning of January 2024.[3] Russian forces have recently made tactical gains southeast of Kupyansk along the critical P07 Kupyansk-Svatove route near Krokhmalne and appear to be increasing assaults northwest and west of Krokhmalne towards the Oskil River.[4] Russian forces will likely be able to secure additional tactical-level gains in the Kupyansk area but are unlikely to be able to translate these tactical gains into wider mechanized maneuvers needed for operationally significant advances that could capture more territory in Kharkiv Oblast and push to the Luhansk and Donetsk oblast administrative borders.[5] ISW has observed that elements of the Western Military District’s 1st Guards Tank Army and 6th Combined Arms Army are active in the Kupyansk area and have been able to pursue infantry-led frontal assaults but have not shown the capacity to conduct large-scale mechanized maneuver since they were deployed to this axis over a year ago. ISW will soon publish a more detailed operational analysis of the situation on this Kharkiv-Luhansk axis.[6]

Ukrainian officials continued to deny rumors about the purported dismissal of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi. Ukrainian Presidential Press Secretary Serhii Nykyforov stated on January 29 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky did not dismiss Zaluzhnyi.[7]

Russian forces appear to be continuing to violate the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to which Russia is a signatory. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported on January 30 that Russian forces are using chemical weapons against Ukrainian positions in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast).[8] Shtupun noted that Russian forces conducted at least five strikes using likely K-51 grenades carrying chloropicrin on January 29 alone. Chloropicrin is primarily used as a soil fumigant that can be fatal when inhaled, and it is sometimes classified as a riot control agent (RCA) due to its harmful and irritant effects.[9] The CWC prohibits the use of RCAs in warfare.[10]

Russian Army General Alexander Dvornikov was reportedly appointed the new chairperson of the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF).[11] Dvornikov had been the commander of the Southern Military District and the first overall theater commander in Ukraine from April to May 2022, and Russian President Vladimir Putin had sidelined Dvornikov without officially firing him following Dvornikov's failure to capture Donbas by May 2022.[12] Dvornikov was reportedly serving as an advisor to the Almaz-Antey Aerospace Concern as of October 2023.[13] Dvornikov's newest appointment demonstrates Putin's preference for rotating his failed generals through positions that are peripheral to combat duty as opposed to outright dismissing them.[14] DOSAAF is a Soviet-era youth movement that promotes military skills and has likely supported Russian youth education aimed at Russifying youth in occupied Ukraine.[15] Russian sources claimed that Dvornikov will need to "resuscitate" the "long-suffering" DOSAAF organization, and Dvornikov's appointment may indicate increased Kremlin attention to military-patriotic youth education.[16]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev made offensive and inflammatory comments about Japan while asserting Russia's rights to the disputed Kuril Islands, likely as part of wider Kremlin efforts to demonstrate Russia's support of China against the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated on January 30 that Japanese sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine will continue but that Japan is interested in resolving its territorial issues with Russia and signing a peace treaty.[17] Japan never signed a formal peace treaty with the Soviet Union after the end of World War II. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev responded to Kishida's statement and claimed that the disputed Kuril Islands are Russian and that the "territorial question" between Russia and Japan about the islands is "closed" according to Russia's constitution – referring to amendments to Russia's constitution in 2020 that banned territorial concessions.[18] Medvedev claimed that Russia will "actively" develop the Kuril Islands and that their "strategic role" will grow as Russia stations new weapons there.[19] Russia has been installing military infrastructure on the Kuril Islands since at least 2015.[20] Medvedev used highly offensive language to imply that Russia would not negotiate with Japan about the islands and to criticize Japan's relations with the United States.[21] Medvedev posted these comments on his English-language X (formerly Twitter) account as opposed to his Russian-language Telegram channel, suggesting that his objective was specifically to offend Japan in the English-speaking world and posture aggressively towards the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. The Russian Pacific Fleet also conducted an anti-submarine exercise in the South China Sea on January 29.[22] Medvedev's claims and the Pacific Fleet exercises are likely aimed at demonstrating that Russia is a strong Pacific power that supports China against the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific, as the Kremlin has routinely stressed in the past.[23]

Senior Russian officials may be intensifying their attempts to frame and justify Russia's long term war effort in Ukraine as an existential geopolitical confrontation with the West by explicitly equating the United States with the Nazis. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated at an international ambassadorial roundtable on "solving the situation in Ukraine" on January 30 that "Napoleon, Hitler, and now the US" have found a new way to attack Russia.[24] Lavrov quoted Nazi *Reichskommissar* (literally "imperial commissar"--the Nazi occupation governor) for Ukraine Erich Koch stating that "Ukraine is for [the Third Reich] only an object of exploitation... and that the population must be used as a second-class people in solving military problems" and claimed that the West today is fighting the war against Russia through Ukraine "with only the goal outlined by *Reichskommissar* Koch." [25] Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian officials have recently started framing the war as an existential geopolitical conflict against an alleged modern Nazi movement in the West, though Lavrov's claim that the West is pursuing the same goals and methods as a specified Nazi official is the most explicit framing yet.[26] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin may have decided that the narrative that Russia and other countries are fighting a geopolitical Western "Nazi" force is a more effective immediate narrative than Putin's attempt to appeal

to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in territories formerly colonized by the Soviet Union and Russian Empire with the “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology.[27] The Russkiy Mir framework is purposefully based on amorphous ethnic identities that are not universally agreed upon and that are at odds with Russia’s multi-ethnic composition. Lavrov’s intensification of portrayals of the United States and West as alleged Nazi actors at an international event is also noteworthy and may suggest that the Kremlin views the Nazi narrative as potentially more successful as a posturing tool with international audiences, particularly those that are not aligned with the United States and the West.

Russian opposition sources suggested that widespread internet outages in Russia on January 30 may be the result of Russian efforts to establish the “sovereign internet” system. Russian media reported that several major Russian entities experienced outages on January 30, including but not limited to Russian telecommunications giants Yandex, Megafon, MTS, Rostelecom, and Beeline; banks VTB, Sberbank, Alfabank; consumer goods companies Avito, Wildberries, Ozon, and Lamoda; and the social media site VK.[28] The Russian Ministry of Digital Transformation reported that a technical issue with the global Domain Name System Security Extensions (DNSSEC) caused the outage with .ru domains and that authorities have since restored service to users on Russia’s National Domain Name System.[29] Russian anti-censorship organization Net Freedoms Project and other opposition outlets noted that Russia has been trying to establish its “sovereign internet” system and connected the DNSSEC failure with attempts to transfer all Russian internet users to a Russian national domain name system (DNS) server separate from the global internet.[30] The Russian “sovereign internet” law, which came into force in November 2019, aims to create an independent Russian internet system protected from external actors and obliges Russian internet service providers to possess the technological means to counter these threats, and the Russian government will likely coopt this technology to increase surveillance and censorship in the Russian information space.[31]

The Kremlin has been intensifying efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space in advance of the March 2024 Russian presidential election, and these efforts support the development of the “sovereign internet” system. Russian state newswire TASS reported that social media site Telegram experienced an outage on January 18; telecom operator Beeline experienced an outage on January 19; and YouTube experienced outages in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Nizhny Novgorod, and Rostov-on-Don on January 23.[32] Russian state censor Roskomnadzor tested blocking all major messaging platforms in the Russian Far East on January 23, and Russian opposition outlet SOTA reported that Roskomnadzor blocked internet access in the Republic of Sakha on January 24 to stymie unrest following an ethnically motivated murder.[33] The Russian Prosecutor General’s Office reported on January 8 that it blocked over 200,000 internet resources for allegedly promoting “fakes” and for “discrediting” the Russian military and that it prepared a bill allowing Roskomnadzor to rapidly block information that fails to comply with Russian censorship laws.[34] The Kremlin is also replacing blocked sites with its own analogs; Russian Wikipedia replacement “Ruviki” left beta testing as of January 15 and internet giant Yandex took an additional step to separate its Russian entity from its international entity on January 23.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- The anticipated Russian 2024 winter-spring offensive effort is underway in the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area.
- Ukrainian officials continued to deny rumors about the purported dismissal of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.
- Russian forces appear to be continuing to violate the Chemical Weapons Convention to which Russia is signatory.
- Russian Army General Alexander Dvornikov was reportedly appointed the new chairperson of the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF).
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev made offensive and inflammatory comments about Japan while asserting Russia’s rights to the disputed Kuril Islands, likely as part of wider Kremlin efforts to demonstrate Russia’s support of China against the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.
- Senior Russian officials may be intensifying their attempts to frame and justify Russia’s long term war effort in Ukraine as an existential geopolitical confrontation with the West by explicitly equating the US with the Nazis.
- Russian opposition sources suggested that widespread internet outages in Russia on January 30 may be the result of Russian efforts to establish the “sovereign internet” system.
- The Kremlin has been intensifying efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space in advance of the March 2024 Russian presidential election, and these efforts support the development of the “sovereign internet” system.

- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Bakhmut and Horlivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 30.
- The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) can produce at least 100 main battle tanks per month and is therefore able to replace battlefield losses, allowing Russian forces to continue their current tempo of operations “for the foreseeable future.”
- Russian authorities are planning to increase the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia in 2024.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 29, 2024

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

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

January 29, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on January 29. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 30 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW added a new section on Russian air, missile, and drone campaign to track Russian efforts to target Ukrainian rear and frontline areas, grow its drone and missile arsenals, and adapt its strike packages.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied rumors about the purported resignation or dismissal of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi on January 29.

[1] Ukrainian People's Deputy Oleksii Honcharenko claimed on January 29 that "Zaluzhnyi announced his resignation, but there is no decree yet." [2] Former Ukrainian People's Deputy Boryslav Bereza claimed that the Ukrainian Presidential Office "dismissed" Zaluzhnyi. [3] Western media amplified Honcharenko's and Bereza's posts, and Russian sources and state media outlets also picked up claims of Zaluzhnyi's dismissal or resignation. [4] The Ukrainian MoD apparently responded to the rumors by saying "no, this is not true," but has not yet offered additional information on the situation as of the time of this writing. [5] ISW cannot independently confirm rumors about Zaluzhnyi's dismissal or resignation at this time. Russian sources are seizing on rumors of Zaluzhnyi's dismissal or resignation to further several information operations about domestic Ukrainian affairs they have been conducting for some time. [6] Veteran Russian propagandist and RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan emphasized that whether or not reports of Zaluzhnyi's removal are true, "chaos ... is useful to [Russia]." [7]

Russia may be retooling aspects of its air defense umbrella in deep rear areas amid continued Ukrainian drone strikes within Russia. Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported on January 29 that the Russian Ministry of Digital Development ordered Russian authorities in Leningrad, Novgorod, and Pskov oblasts to block 4G LTE internet connection until January 30 so that Russian officials can "fine-tune" anti-drone and air defense systems. [8] Leningrad, Novgorod, and Pskov oblasts previously announced disruptions to 4G LTE internet services from January 25 to January 30 in connection with technical adjustments to the "radio frequency spectrum." [9] One of *Kommersant*'s sources stated that Voronezh Oblast is conducting similar efforts that have been "planned at the federal level" and that many other unspecified Russian federal subjects are pursuing these efforts at different paces. [10]

Kommersant stated that Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems and mobile internet providers both operate on frequencies permitted by the Russian State Commission on Radio Frequencies (SCRF), and *Kommersant*'s source stated that indiscriminate EW use can interfere with mobile data. [11] It is unclear what impact internet operations may have on the reorientation of EW systems or the deployment of new capabilities and vice versa. It is equally possible that Russian forces may be testing new EW capabilities and preemptively turned off internet services to avoid sudden disruptions. Russian officials may also be limiting access to the internet to conceal the movement of conventional air defense systems within Russia after Ukrainian drone strikes in Leningrad Oblast on January 18 and January 21 suggested that Russian air defenses in northwestern Russia may be ill-deployed to defend against drones launched from Ukraine. [12] Yaroslavl Oblast Governor Mikhail Yevraev claimed on January 29 that Russian EW systems downed a Ukrainian drone targeting the Slavneft-Yanos oil refinery in Yaroslavl Oblast. [13] Russian sources amplified images of the downed drone at the refinery and claimed that it did not cause any damage. [14] *Kommersant*'s source stated that they believe that the timing of the internet disruptions is also associated with security for Russian President Vladimir Putin's ongoing trip to St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast. [15]

Russia appears to be fueling and seizing on neo-imperialist and nationalist sentiments in Europe in order to drive wedges between Ukraine and its western neighbors. Right-wing Hungarian politician and Our Homeland Movement party leader Laszlo Toroczkai stated on January 27 that Hungary should claim Ukraine's Zakarpattia Oblast in the event of a Ukrainian defeat in the war. [16] Right-wing Romanian politician and Alliance for the Union of Romanians party leader Claudiu Tarziu emphasized on January 29 that Romania needs to "reintegrate" areas of Ukraine neighboring Romania where Romanian populations lived in order to maintain sovereignty. [17] Russian sources amplified Toroczkai's and Tarziu's statements and emphasized these ultranationalist Romanian and Hungarian claims to Ukrainian territory. [18] Russia previously proposed the idea of a "partitioned Ukraine" between Russia and the West prior to the full-scale invasion. [19] Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian officials reignited this narrative in December 2023 by claiming that Ukraine has historical "territorial disputes" with Poland, Romania, and Hungary but could maintain its "sovereignty" if the whole country is comprised of the borders of Lviv Oblast. [20] The Russian ultranationalist framework of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) concept appears to have gained traction among nationalist European factions as applied to their own nationalist ideologies, and Russian information space actors likely seek to leverage this ideological bent to drive a wedge between Ukraine and its European neighbors.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signed a series of economic and technological agreements on January 29 advancing the Kremlin's efforts to further integrate Belarus into the Union State structure. Putin and Lukashenko approved three agreements on the implementation of the Union State Treaty, joint scientific and technological development, and the coordination of both countries' foreign policies during a meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State in St. Petersburg. [21] Putin reiterated claims that Russians and Belarusians are "fraternal peoples," united by a common history and values. [22] Lukashenko highlighted Russian and Belarusian cooperation in Africa, claiming that he coordinated his December 2023 trips to various African countries with Putin, and stated that Russia and Belarus have not yet resolved the issue of creating common markets for gas, oil, and petroleum products under the Union State framework. [23] Lukashenko has previously resisted the Kremlin's efforts to further integrate Belarus into the Union State, but the fallout of the Wagner Group's armed rebellion, which Lukashenko reportedly played a role in mediating, and the death of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may have hindered Lukashenko's ability to resist further Union State integration efforts. [24]

Key Takeaways:

- The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied rumors about the purported resignation or dismissal of Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi on January 29.
- Russia may be retooling aspects of its air defense umbrella in deep rear areas amid continued Ukrainian drone strikes within Russia.
- Russia appears to be fueling and seizing on neo-imperialist and nationalist sentiments in Europe in order to drive wedges between Ukraine and its western neighbors.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signed a series of economic and technological agreements on January 29 advancing the Kremlin's efforts to further integrate Belarus into the Union State structure.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Kreminna and Avdiivka and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.
- Russia reportedly deployed more Rosgvardia troops to occupied Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential election.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 28, 2024

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

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

January 28, 2024, 8:30pm ET

Note: ISW added a new section on Russian air, missile, and drone campaigns to track Russian efforts to target Ukrainian rear and frontline areas, grow its drone and missile arsenals, and adapt its strike packages.

Kremlin officials and mouthpieces continue to set information conditions to destabilize Moldova, likely as part of efforts to prevent Moldova's integration into the EU and the West among other objectives. Alexei Polishchuk, the director of the Second Department of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Countries at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), claimed in an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS published on January 28 that Moldova has begun to "destroy its ties" with CIS member states and the Russia-led CIS organization as a whole and that there are rumors that Moldova plans to leave the CIS by the end of 2024.[1] Polishchuk claimed that this decision would not benefit Moldovan interests or citizens and would be unprofitable for the Moldovan economy. Polishchuk also claimed that the settlement of the Transnistria issue in Moldova is in a "deep crisis" and that Moldova's economic pressure on Transnistria since the beginning of 2024 has "further delayed" any solution.[2] Polishchuk claimed that Russia is ready to fix deteriorating relations between Moldova and Transnistria "as a mediator and guarantor" to the settlement.[3] Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Serebrian stated on January 28 that Moldova would not return to the 5+2 Transnistria negotiating process that included Russia as long as Russian-Ukrainian relations do not improve and Russia's war in Ukraine continues.[4]

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger, who has recently fixated on the Moldova-Transnistria conflict, continued to highlight alleged discontent in Moldova's breakaway and autonomous regions. The milblogger claimed that about 50,000 people in Transnistria participated in a rally protesting against Moldovan economic pressure on Transnistria on January 24.[5] The milblogger also stated that Sergei Ibrishim, the Head of the Main Directorate of Agro-Industrial Complex of Gagauzia, sent a request recently to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for Russia to send fertilizer to Gagauzia as humanitarian aid.[6] Ibrishim also reportedly claimed that Gagauzia's agricultural producers are unable to sell their products to Russia after Moldova's decision in July 2023 to leave the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly and asked Lavrov to abolish excise taxes and customs duties for Russian imports from Gagauzia.[7] Polishchuk's and the milblogger's comments are likely aimed at dissuading Moldova from leaving the CIS and Russia's wider sphere of influence, setting information conditions to create economic discontent within Moldova, and posturing Russia as an economic and security guarantor in Moldova.

Russia notably accused Ukraine of abandoning and disregarding the Minsk Agreements that had largely frozen the conflict after Russia's 2014 invasion in the lead up to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Russia may be setting information conditions to make similar claims against Moldova.[8] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is likely setting information conditions to justify future Russian aggression in Moldova under the guise of protecting its "compatriots abroad" and the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) - concepts that are purposely based on vague definitions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in foreign countries.[9] Russia may attempt to justify its aggression or destabilization efforts in Moldova by claiming that Transnistrian residents are in danger due to Moldova's alleged abandonment of the Transnistria settlement process. ISW recently observed suggestions that the Kremlin may be turning to rhetorical narratives that appeal to a wider audience beyond the "Russian World." [10]

Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin reiterated that the Kremlin is not interested in any settlements short of the complete destruction and eradication of the Ukrainian state, likely in an ongoing effort to justify the long-term and costly Russian war effort to domestic audiences. Naryshkin told Kremlin journalist Pavel Zarubin during a televised "impromptu" interview on January 28 that the Ukrainian state and government have "a very sad fate" and that "Russia will not stop halfway," presumably in its efforts to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.[11] Naryshkin made a similar statement on January 27 during the opening of a memorial to the Soviet victims of Nazi genocide in Leningrad Oblast, claiming that "Russia will not stop halfway" in its fight with the current followers of Nazi ideology.[12] The similarity of both statements suggests that Naryshkin may be using pre-approved Kremlin rhetoric to signal to Russian citizens that the Kremlin is not open to negotiating with Ukraine or compromising in any settlement of the war Russia started, despite recent Western reports to the contrary.[13] Russian officials have consistently reiterated Russia's commitment to its maximalist objectives in Ukraine - which are tantamount to complete Ukrainian and Western capitulation- and statements by Russian officials suggesting that Russia is or has always been interested in peace negotiations with Ukraine are very likely efforts to feign interest to prompt preemptive Western concessions regarding Ukraine's sovereignty or territorial integrity.[14]

Naryshkin was notably involved in setting domestic information conditions in the lead-up to the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including furthering Russian claims that perceived Ukrainian aggression prompted by Ukraine's Western 'puppet masters' forced Russia to invade Ukraine and claims that the Ukrainian government is comparable to Nazi Germany.[15] Russian President Vladimir Putin ostentatiously humiliated Naryshkin during a televised Russian Security Council meeting on February 22, 2022, demanding that Naryshkin "speak plainly" when Naryshkin declared his support for

the independence of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.[16] Putin likely humiliated Naryshkin in February 2022 due to Naryshkin's failure to set the informational conditions to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the Russian domestic and international information spaces that Putin desired.

Naryshkin's return to the Russian information space to further the perception of the Kremlin's commitment to the war in Ukraine could indicate that Putin has given Naryshkin another chance to prove his ability to set informational conditions, this time setting conditions domestically for a long war effort. If this hypothesis is correct, then Naryshkin will presumably be determined not to disappoint Putin again. Zarubin has also previously been involved in a number of Kremlin informational efforts, including filming and conducting interviews wherein Putin threatened Finland and the wider NATO alliance and attempted to portray himself as a gracious leader who cares about the well-being of Russian military personnel and an effective Commander-in-Chief of the Russian armed forces.[17]

The Kremlin also continues to frame and justify a long-term Russian war effort as part of an existential geopolitical confrontation with the West and Nazism. Alexei Polishchuk, the director of the Second Department of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Countries at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), also stated during his interview with TASS that "the West incited neo-Nazi sentiments in Ukraine" and "made [Ukraine] anti-Russia."[18] Putin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Naryshkin, and Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin during the 80th anniversary of the breaking of the siege of Leningrad on January 27 claimed that Russia is fighting "Nazis" in Ukraine and that a number of Western countries have adopted Nazi ideology. [19] Polishchuk's claim that the West incited "neo-Nazi" ideals in Ukraine is likely part of the same coordinated Kremlin informational effort intended to justify geopolitical confrontation with the West and suggests that the Kremlin may increasingly label any perceived adversary and possibly the entire West as "Nazi." [20] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin may have decided that the simple narrative that Russia and other states are fighting a geopolitical "Nazi" force is a more effective immediate narrative than Putin's attempt to appeal to Russian citizens and Russian speakers in the territory of the former Soviet Union and Russian Empire with the ideology of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*), which is based on purposefully amorphous ethnic identities that are not agreed upon and that are at odds with Russia's multi-ethnic composition. [21] Polishchuk also reiterated long-standing Russian claims that the West controls Ukraine and that Russia has "always remained" open to peace negotiations. [22]

Ukrainian Navy Commander Vice Admiral Oleksiy Neizhpapa emphasized the importance of Ukraine's ability to technologically adapt and develop as Russian forces continue to adapt to Ukrainian operations in a January 27 Sky News interview. [23] Neizhpapa's statement is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are adapting and learning on certain sectors of the front. [24] Neizhpapa also reiterated the Ukrainian assertion that Ukrainian forces should be able to use Western-provided systems to strike legitimate military targets in Russia. [25] Neizhpapa stated that the Ukrainian Navy would be "very happy" to accept two UK Type 23 frigates that the UK is considering decommissioning due to a shortage of sailors. [26] The Turkish government announced on January 2 that it would not allow the UK to transport two mine hunting ships to Ukraine via the Turkish Straits citing Article 19 of the Montreux Convention Regulating the Regime of the Turkish Straits, which stipulates that "vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers shall not...pass through the Straits." Turkey would likely continue to use the Montreux Convention to prevent the UK from potentially transferring these two frigates through the Turkish Straits to Ukraine. [27] Turkey has used the Montreux Convention to deny access to Russian warships wishing to pass through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits since February 28, 2022, to Ukraine's benefit. [28]

The Kremlin will likely use the withdrawals of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to continue efforts to expand Russian influence in Francophone Africa. The Malian, Burkinabe, and Nigerien juntas announced their immediate withdrawals from ECOWAS in a joint statement on January 28. [29] ECOWAS stated that it had not received "any direct formal notification" from Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger about their intent to withdraw. [30] Kremlin newswire TASS cited the frustration of these states with ECOWAS' "Western influence" as a reason for their withdrawal. [31] Russian milbloggers also celebrated the announcement as evidence of rapidly decreasing French influence in the Sahel. [32] The first contingent of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps reportedly arrived in Burkina Faso on January 24, and Kremlin officials recently met with Chadian junta officials in Moscow. [33] ISW continues to assess that Russia is attempting to expand its influence in western and central Africa, particularly focusing on Francophone African countries in the Sahel. [34]

Unnamed Indian government sources stated that India wants to distance itself from Russia, its largest arms supplier, because the war in Ukraine has limited Russia's ability to provide India with munitions. [35] The unnamed Indian government sources told Reuters in a January 28 article that India will act carefully in order to avoid pushing Russia closer to China. [36] Indian think tank Observer Research Foundation's Russia expert Nandan Unnikrishnan told Reuters that India is

unlikely to sign "any major military deal" with Russia because it would cross a red line with the United States.[37] Indian government-run think tank Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses Eurasia expert Svasti Rao stated that the war in Ukraine has caused India to question Russia's ability to supply India with spare parts.[38] ISW has routinely observed reports that Russia continues to face challenges repairing aircraft and other equipment and has not been able to produce missiles and artillery ammunition at pre-war levels for its own forces to use, making it highly unlikely that Russia will be able to export military equipment to India or its other customers at pre-war levels any time soon.[39] Russian President Vladimir Putin recently highlighted Russian-Indian economic and military-technical cooperation in a meeting with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar likely in an effort to emphasize positive Russian-Indian relations amid Russian concerns that India is attempting to diversify its defense partners.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Kremlin officials and mouthpieces continue to set information conditions to destabilize Moldova, likely as part of efforts to prevent Moldova's integration into the EU and the West among other objectives.
- Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin reiterated that the Kremlin is not interested in any settlements short of the complete destruction and eradication of the Ukrainian state, likely in an ongoing effort to justify the long-term and costly Russian war effort to domestic audiences.
- The Kremlin also continues to frame and justify a long-term Russian war effort as part of an existential geopolitical confrontation with the West and Nazism.
- Ukrainian Navy Commander Vice Admiral Oleksiy Neizhpapa emphasized the importance of Ukraine's ability to technologically adapt and develop as Russian forces continue to adapt to Ukrainian operations in a January 27 *Sky News* interview.
- The Kremlin will likely use the withdrawals of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to continue efforts to expand Russian influence in Francophone Africa.
- Unnamed Indian government sources stated that India wants to distance itself from Russia, its largest arms supplier, because the war in Ukraine has limited Russia's ability to provide India with munitions.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Kreminna and Avdiivka amid continued positional fighting throughout the theater.
- A Russian source claimed that Rosgvardia is forming the 1st Volunteer Corps with remaining Wagner Group personnel and newly recruited volunteers (dobrovoltsy) following the Kremlin adoption of the law allowing Rosgvardia to form its own volunteer formations in December 2023.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on January 28 that Ukraine and Russia will conduct a prisoner of war (POW) exchange in the near future.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 27, 2024

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

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

January 27, 2024, 5:55pm ET

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and Kremlin officials claimed that Russia is in an existential geopolitical conflict with an alleged modern Nazi movement that extends beyond Ukraine while marking the 80th anniversary of the breaking of the siege of Leningrad. Putin attended the opening of a memorial to the Soviet victims of Nazi genocide in Leningrad Oblast on January 27 and focused heavily on long-standing claims that Russia is fighting "Nazis" in Ukraine.[1] Putin also asserted that select countries have adopted Nazi ideology and methods and tied this assertion to a number of European states promoting "Russophobia as a state policy."[2] Putin declared that Russia will "do everything to suppress and finally exterminate Nazism" and cast Russia as pursuing the "aspirations of millions of people...all over the planet for true freedom, justice, peace, and security."^[3] Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko also attended the ceremony and stated that Belarus and Russia "are again faced with the question of the right to life of our civilization and the preservation of ancestral...[and] cultural values."^[4] Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin stated that Russia will not stop halfway in its fight

against current Nazi followers, and Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin explicitly stated that “fascist ideology is becoming the norm...for leaders of NATO states” and specifically accused US President Joe Biden, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz of sponsoring genocide in Ukraine.[5] Volodin framed this alleged growing fascist movement as a “dangerous path that could lead to a new world war.”[6]

Nazi Germany besieged Leningrad for over two years during the Second World War, causing the deaths of roughly 1.5 million Soviet citizens. Putin was born in Leningrad in 1952, and his grandfather was seriously wounded while defending the city. Putin likely sought to leverage his known if unstated personal connection with the siege and the emotional appeal of one of the most dramatic moments in the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) to expand his overall ideological framing of the conflict with the West to which he has committed Russia.

Putin has long tried to construct an ideology for Russia that he can use to support a geopolitical confrontation with the West reminiscent of the Cold War, and the Kremlin may increasingly use existing rhetoric about fighting Nazism to support this effort. The Kremlin has called for “denazification” in Ukraine as a thinly veiled demand for regime change and has used information operations about Ukrainian “Nazis” to wrap its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in the mythos of the Great Patriotic War.[7] Russian officials have previously applied the label of “Nazism” to Western states and actors outside Ukraine, although Putin’s, Lukashenko’s, Naryshkin’s, and Volodin’s likely coordinated rhetoric on January 27 suggest that the Kremlin may increasingly label any perceived adversary and possibly the entire West as “Nazi.”[8] The Kremlin may have decided that the simple narrative that Russia and other states are fighting a geopolitical Nazi force is a more effective immediate narrative line than Putin’s attempt to appeal to Russian citizens and Russian speakers in the territory of the former Soviet Union and Russian Empire with the ideology of the “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*), which is based on purposefully amorphous ethnic identities that are not agreed upon and that are at odds with Russia’s multi-ethnic composition.[9]

Lukashenko’s participation in this rhetorical posturing suggests that the Kremlin and Lukashenko may believe that this narrative is also easier to coordinate than the Kremlin’s appeals to ethnic Russians and the *Russkiy Mir*. The Kremlin has increasingly sought to cast Russia as a main actor within the “world majority,” which it has defined as “a civilizational and cultural community that objectively opposes” the West (using the word “objectively” in an echo of the Soviet Union’s Communist ideology).[10] The Kremlin’s overtures to non-Western states have yet to acknowledge that these states have cultural, ideological, and political differences and that many of these states are likely unwilling to involve themselves in Russian appeals to the *Russkiy Mir*. The Kremlin may hope that “fighting fascism” will be an easier rhetorical line to coordinate with desired partners within this fictitious “world majority.”

Putin specifically accused the Baltic states of adopting “Nazism,” likely as part of continued Kremlin efforts to set information conditions for future Russian aggression against NATO members.[11] Putin alleged that the Baltic states have declared thousands of people living there “subhuman,” are “depriving” them of their “most basic rights,” and are subjecting them to “persecution.”[12] Although Putin did not specifically claim that the Baltic states are “persecuting” Russians or Russian speakers, Kremlin officials have routinely accused Baltic governments of having “neo-Nazi” policies and of oppressing Russians and Russian speakers.[13] The Kremlin has historically used its concept of “compatriots abroad,” which vaguely includes ethnic Russians and Russian speakers of other ethnicities, to justify Russian aggression in neighboring states.[14] ISW continues to assess that Kremlin officials and mouthpieces may be attempting to set information conditions for possible future Russian aggression in the Baltic states – and other NATO members, such as Finland – under the guise of protecting Russia’s “compatriots abroad.”[15] The Kremlin may also use the pretext of protecting people from alleged “Nazi” policies in the future.

Myanmar banks reportedly connected to the Russian System for the Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) banking system, a Russian analogue for the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) banking system. Russian Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov stated on January 27 that Myanmar banks recently connected to SPFS, which will allow Russian and Myanmar businesses to freely buy and sell products.[16] Russia began developing its SPFS banking system in 2014, following US threats to disconnect Russia from SWIFT in response to Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and roughly 20 countries have joined SPFS in the past 10 years.[17] The *Washington Post* reported that internal Russian Security Council documents show that Kremlin officials are working to undermine the dollar’s role as a world reserve currency and hope to work with China to create a new financial system to bypass Western dominance of global financial transactions.[18] Unnamed European security officials told the *Washington Post* that it is unclear if China has any real interest in this effort.[19]

Russian forces conducted a limited series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on January 26 and 27. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces struck civilian infrastructure in Myrnohrad and Novohrodivka in Donetsk Oblast and Antonivka, Kherson Oblast with nine S-300 missiles and in Slovyansk, Donetsk Oblast with an Iskander-M missile on January 26 and 27.[20] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all four Shahed-136/131 drones that Russian forces launched at Ukraine on January 27.[21] Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk stated on January 26 that Ukrainian forces are improving and strengthening their ability to counter Russian drone adaptations, including adaptations for Shahed drones.[22]

Russian authorities are likely blocking communications in the Sakha Republic for the fourth consecutive day following January 24 protests in support of a Russian citizen allegedly murdered by a naturalized Russian citizen from Tajikistan. Local Sakha Republic outlets reported on January 27 that disruptions to WhatsApp and Telegram services continue following reported outages on the night of January 24.[23] The local news outlets also noted that Sakha Republic Digital Development Deputy Minister Andrei Suslov stated on January 24 that Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor's "preventative work" created communication disruptions, but that no officials have since commented on continued disruptions as of January 27.[24] Former Yakutsk Mayor Sardana Avksenteva and Sakha Party of Business Head Vitaly Obedin stated that all internet connection and communication has slowed, creating difficulties for online commerce and digital document organization.[25] Russian authorities are likely attempting to preemptively stifle a potential resurgence in protests and "strengthen public safety and crime prevention measures" in accordance with Sakha Republic Head Aisen Nikolayev's orders following the protests.[26] Russian sources notably did not report similar widespread communication outages during or following several days of protest in Bashkortostan.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and Kremlin officials claimed that Russia is in an existential geopolitical conflict with an alleged modern Nazi movement that extends beyond Ukraine while marking the 80th anniversary of the breaking of the siege of Leningrad.
- Putin has long tried to construct an ideology for Russia that he can use to support a geopolitical confrontation with the West reminiscent of the Cold War, and the Kremlin may increasingly use existing rhetoric about fighting Nazism to support this effort.
- Putin specifically accused the Baltic states of adopting "Nazism," likely as part of continued Kremlin efforts to set information conditions for future Russian aggression against NATO members.
- Myanmar banks reportedly connected to the Russian System for the Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) banking system, a Russian analogue for the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) banking system.
- Russian forces conducted a limited series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on January 26 and 27.
- Russian authorities are likely blocking communications in the Sakha Republic for the fourth consecutive day following January 24 protests in support of a Russian citizen allegedly murdered by a naturalized Russian citizen from Tajikistan.
- Russian forces made recent confirmed advances near Kupyansk, Kremenna, and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 27.
- UK outlet the *Telegraph* reported on January 26, citing an unnamed Western official, that Russia is spending roughly 40 percent of its GDP on the war in Ukraine, more than Russian national spending on health and education.
- Russian federal subjects continue to establish patronage networks with occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 26, 2024

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Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 26, 2024, 8:10pm ET

The Kremlin and US officials rejected rumors about Russian President Vladimir Putin's willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations amid continued indications from the Kremlin

that Russia seeks nothing less than full Ukrainian and Western capitulation. Bloomberg reported on January 25 that two unspecified sources close to the Kremlin stated that Putin signaled to senior US officials through indirect channels that Putin is open to negotiations, including those that would provide "security arrangements" for Ukraine.^[1] Bloomberg reported that an unidentified intermediary "conveyed signals" to US officials in December 2023 that Putin may be willing to drop his insistence on Ukraine's "neutral status" and even may ultimately abandon his opposition to Ukraine's NATO accession.^[2] This report may refer to the same supposed backchannel communications reported by the New York Times in late December 2023 about Putin's supposed interest in a ceasefire.^[3] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov denied Bloomberg's report on January 26, stating that reports about Russian readiness to give up its demands that Ukraine not join NATO are "incorrect" and "untrue."^[4] Bloomberg reported that US National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson stated that US officials are not aware of these alleged overtures, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on January 19 that he does not see any indication that Putin is serious about looking for a way to end the fighting in Ukraine.^[5]

Putin and Kremlin officials have increasingly stressed in recent weeks that Russia has no interest in negotiating with Ukraine in good faith, that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine remain the same, and that Putin continues to pursue his overarching objective to weaken and dismantle NATO.

[6] Former White House Official Fiona Hill told Bloomberg on January 26 that Russian actors want the West to create the idea of such a channel in order to scare Ukraine and frame the US as the only other relevant actor in Ukraine besides Russia.^[7] Kremlin officials routinely frame the Russian war in Ukraine as a struggle against the West in order to deny Ukraine's agency in potential negotiations and to set conditions that seek to convince the West to ignore centering Ukraine's interests in any negotiations.^[8]

Russian demands for Ukrainian "neutrality" and a moratorium on NATO expansion have always been and continue to be one of Putin's central justifications for his invasion of Ukraine, and any hypothetical concession on these demands would represent a major strategic and rhetorical retreat on Putin's behalf that Putin is extremely unlikely to be considering at this time. Russian calls for Ukrainian "neutrality" are demands that Ukraine amend its constitution to remove commitments to seeking NATO membership and to commit itself permanently not to join NATO or the European Union (EU).^[9] Demands for this "neutral status" are a nested goal within Putin's decades-long effort to demand changes to the NATO alliance that would weaken the alliance to the point where it would be unable to deter or defeat future Russian aggression in eastern Europe.^[10] Putin has long highlighted a permanent moratorium on NATO expansion as one of those goals, which would require a change in NATO's charter that would, in turn, require a new treaty between member states and effectively grant Russia a veto over future NATO membership.^[11] Any Kremlin concessions on these demands would also amount to a significant Russian defeat, as Putin has increasingly used public appearances to reiterate that the invasion's initial objectives remain the same and to frame the war in Ukraine as a larger geopolitical confrontation with the collective West.^[12] These concessions would also be inconsistent with the Kremlin's apparent growing public confidence about Russian prospects in Ukraine and the attainability of Putin's maximalist war objectives.^[13] **Putin is highly unlikely to offer these concessions as he will not stop pursuing his objective to control Ukraine and weaken NATO, barring a decisive defeat.**^[14]

Russian actors may be feigning interest in offering concessions on Ukraine's place in Western institutions in an effort to prompt preemptive Western concessions on Ukraine's territorial integrity. Reports about Putin's openness to negotiations through back channels have not mentioned Russian openness to relinquishing any occupied Ukrainian territory. Russian officials continue to indicate that Putin's maximalist objectives do not exclude Russia's annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories or additional territorial conquests in Ukraine.^[15] Ukraine's accession into the EU and NATO are long processes that would not unfold in the immediate aftermath of any negotiated ceasefire, and Russia may seek to temporarily feign acquiescing on these demands to more immediately solidify control of occupied territories. ISW continues to assess that any ceasefire would benefit Russia, giving it time to reconstitute and regroup for future offensive campaigns in pursuit of the same maximalist objectives and further territorial conquest in Ukraine.^[16] There is no reason to assess that Putin would not renege on any commitment to permit Ukraine to integrate into Western political, economic, and military institutions as long as the Russian military can pursue his objectives to prevent Ukraine from doing so. Putin has already violated Russia's previous commitments not to violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Crimea, made in 1991 and 1994.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated boilerplate Kremlin narratives that blame Ukraine for the war while also highlighting Russian forces in the Soledar direction. Putin continued to claim on January 26 during a meeting with students at the St. Petersburg State Maritime Technical University who fought in the war in Ukraine that Ukraine "refused" to implement the Minsk Agreements, Ukraine committed "genocide" against Russians in "[Russia's] historical territories" in Ukraine, and the

West “deceived” Russia multiple times by expanding NATO – all of which he claimed forced Russia to invade Ukraine in 2022.[17] Putin’s comments continue to indicate that the Kremlin is framing NATO expansion and Ukraine’s existence as an independent, sovereign state as existential threats to Russia that Russia must eliminate with force. Putin further falsely claimed that Russia’s full-scale invasion was a “response to [Ukraine’s] use of armed force” after Ukraine “started the war in Donbas in 2014” and that Russia had to “protect [its] interests.”

Putin highlighted Russian forces fighting in the Soledar direction in Ukraine during a conversation with a veteran who reportedly fought in the area. Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces are unsuccessfully counterattacking from all sides in the Soledar direction and that Russian forces are advancing “almost every day, little by little.” Putin claimed that Russian units in the area work “harmoniously [and] confidently.” The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage of elements of the 106th Airborne (VDV) Division participating in the capture of Vesele in the Soledar direction on January 18, and Putin was likely trying to keep attention on recent Russian successes in the area.[18] Putin’s comment that units in the Soledar direction are “harmonious” is also possibly an attempt to suppress recent claims of mistreatment within the 106th Division’s 119th VDV Regiment and the subsequent allegations that a faction of Putin’s inner circle organized these public claims of mistreatment as part of an ongoing “clan war” with another Kremlin faction.[19]

The circumstances of the January 24 crash of a Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft in Belgorod Oblast remain unclear. Ukrainian officials continued to warn that Russia is attempting to use the Il-76 crash to reduce Western support for Ukraine and noted that Russia has not provided any new evidence from the crash site.[20] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Russian authorities rejected the creation of an international commission to investigate the circumstances of the crash.[21] Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated Russian allegations that Ukrainian authorities knew about the presence of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) on the Il-76 aircraft prior to shooting the plane down and stated that the Russian Investigative Committee will publicize all details of the crash in the coming days.[22] The Russian Investigative Committee stated that its preliminary investigation confirmed initial reports that a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile launched from Liptsy, Kharkiv Oblast, downed the aircraft, and Russian media reported that investigators are decrypting the Il-76’s black boxes.[23] UN Deputy Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo stated on January 25 that the UN cannot verify Russian or Ukrainian reports about the circumstances of the Il-76 crash.[24]

The European Union (EU) will provide Ukraine with an additional five billion euros to meet “urgent military needs” in the near future. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell announced on January 26 that EU member states should reach an agreement to provide an additional five billion euros (\$5.4 billion) from the European Peace Fund to Ukraine in the coming days.[25] Borrell added that the EU will discuss the use of frozen Russian assets to aid Ukraine before the next EU Council on Foreign Affairs meeting in early 2024. The 50 billion euros would reportedly be dispensed over 2024-2027.[26]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues efforts to expand Russia’s influence and subsume previous Wagner Group operations in Africa. The Russian MoD-controlled Africa Corps stated on January 26 that a Russian MoD delegation arrived in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.[27] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the MoD delegation will discuss the rights and powers of the Russian military contingent in Burkina Faso and future cooperation between Burkina Faso and Russia.[28] The milblogger claimed that Burkina Faso will likely become the “main coordination center” between Sahel Alliance members Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali and that the formalization of Russia’s military presence in the Sahel suggests that this relationship will likely last for years.[29] The milblogger also claimed that Russian media is also operating in Burkina Faso to “compete with French media” and “create a loyal information space.”[30]

The Russian Officers’ Union for International Security (OUIS) Director Alexander Ivanov told Kremlin newswire TASS that several hundred Russian military personnel in the Central African Republic (CAR) would be “sufficient and effective.”[31] Ivanov claimed that such a Russian military contingent would strengthen Russia’s position in CAR and the region and would show that cooperation between CAR and Russia is “of a strategic long-term nature.” Ivanov labeled previous claims by a CAR presidential advisor that the Russian military base in CAR could accommodate 10,000 personnel “a clear exaggeration.”[32] Russian Ambassador to CAR Alexander Bikantov told Russian outlet RIA Novosti that the creation of a Russian military base in CAR will protect CAR’s national sovereignty.[33] Bikantov stated that the Russian and Central African Republic MoDs are discussing the base’s location and have yet to determine the timing of the Russian military contingent’s arrival and the number of Russian personnel. The US Treasury Department sanctioned OUIS and Ivanov on January 26, 2023 for acting as a Wagner Group front company operating in CAR, and Ivanov’s statements to

Russian state media about future Russian MoD forces in CAR suggest that the Russian MoD has been successful in co-opting some former Wagner Group structures in CAR.[34]

Russia reportedly imported \$1.7 billion worth of advanced microchips and semiconductors in 2023, primarily from the West, skirting Western sanctions intended to deprive Russia of such technology. Bloomberg reported on January 25 that classified Russian customs service data shows that Russia imported over one billion dollars worth of advanced US and European-produced chips and that more than half of the semiconductors and integrated circuits that Russia imported in early 2023 were manufactured in the US and Europe.[35] Bloomberg's report does not definitively indicate whether Western companies violated sanctions or provide identities of the likely intermediaries that trafficked the technology to Russia. Russia reportedly imported \$2.5 billion worth of Western-made microchips and semiconductors in 2022 and Russia's demand for this technology would have likely increased during 2023, given Russia's ongoing efforts to expand its military equipment and weapons production capabilities, particularly for drone and missile production.[36] Western sanctions are likely the driving force behind Russia's decreased import of microchips and semiconductors despite ongoing Russian efforts to evade such sanctions. ISW previously assessed that China, Iran, Belarus, and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states have likely been heavily involved in various Russian sanctions evasion schemes.[37]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin and US officials rejected rumors about Russian President Vladimir Putin's willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations amid continued indications from the Kremlin that Russia seeks nothing less than full Ukrainian and Western capitulation.
- Russian demands for Ukrainian "neutrality" and a moratorium on NATO expansion have always been and continue to be one of Putin's central justifications for his invasion of Ukraine, and any hypothetical concession on these demands would represent a major strategic and rhetorical retreat on Putin's behalf that Putin is extremely unlikely to be considering at this time.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated boilerplate Kremlin narratives that blame Ukraine for the war while also highlighting Russian forces in the Soledar direction.
- The circumstances of the January 24 crash of a Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft in Belgorod Oblast remain unclear.
- The European Union (EU) will provide Ukraine with an additional five billion euros to meet "urgent military needs" in the near future.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues efforts to expand Russia's influence and subsume previous Wagner Group operations in Africa.
- Russia reportedly imported \$1.7 billion worth of advanced microchips and semiconductors in 2023, primarily from the West, skirting Western sanctions intended to deprive Russia of such technology.
- Russian forces advanced near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements throughout the theater.
- Elements of Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin's alleged personal private military company (PMC) may have deployed to Ukraine.
- Russian opposition media reported on January 26 that Viktor Filonov, a Russian soldier in the 234th Airborne Regiment (76th VDV Division) serving in Ukraine, adopted a Ukrainian child from occupied Donetsk Oblast.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 25, 2024

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

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

January 25, 2024, 9pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on January 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian and Russian authorities opened criminal investigations into the January 24 Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft crash in Belgorod Oblast. The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) announced on January 25 that it opened an investigation to clarify the circumstances of the crash, and the Russian Investigative Committee stated that it opened a criminal case on charges of "terrorism" in

connection with the Il-76 crash after claiming that an initial investigation determined that a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile downed the aircraft.[1] Ukrainian and Western media reported that the UN Security Council (UNSC) held an emergency meeting to discuss the Il-76 crash at Russia's request on the evening of January 25 after Russian sources claimed that France rejected Russia's request for the meeting in France's capacity as rotating UNSC Chair.[2] Ukrainian Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lubinets warned that Russia intends to co-opt the Il-76 crash to destabilize Ukraine domestically and reduce Western support Ukraine.[3] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov noted that Russia has not provided any evidence of Russian claims that Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) were on the aircraft.[4] Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairperson Andrei Kartapolov claimed that Russian authorities gave Ukraine a 15-minute warning before the Il-76 aircraft entered the area where it was shot down.[5] Ukrainian officials continue to deny that they received a written or verbal Russia request to secure the air space around Belgorod City, however.[6] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger insinuated that Russia should not provide any data from the crash site or evidence of the claimed presence of Ukrainian POWs on the aircraft because the international community has previously dismissed Russian evidence, referring to the international investigation into the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by Russian-backed proxies in occupied Donetsk Oblast.[7] Kartapolov stated that Russia will continue POW exchanges because Russia "cannot abandon [its] guys," a notable reversal from Kartapolov's calls for all POW exchanges to pause indefinitely immediately following the[8] ISW continues to offer no assessment of the circumstances of the Il-76 crash at this time and cannot independently verify Russian or Ukrainian statements on the incident.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 24 to 25. Ukrainian military officials reported on January 25 that Russian forces launched 14 Shahed-136/131 drones from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea, four S-300 missiles from Belgorod Oblast, and another S-300 missile from occupied Donetsk Oblast.[9] Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 11 Shaheds.[10] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian air defenses also intercepted a Kh-59 missile over Mykolaiv Oblast.[11] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones struck an enterprise in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast and an industrial facility and residential buildings in Odesa City, and that Russian S-300 missiles struck civilian targets in Rohan, Kharkiv Oblast and Druzhkivka, Donetsk Oblast.[12]

The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reportedly conducted a successful drone strike on a Rosneft oil refinery in Tuapse, Krasnodar Krai on the night of January 24 to 25. Ukrainian outlet *Suspiro* reported on January 25, citing an unspecified source, that the SBU conducted a drone strike on the refinery and that Ukraine will continue to target economically and militarily important objects in Russia.[13] Geolocated footage published on January 24 shows a fire at the Rosneft oil refinery in Tuapse, and additional footage reportedly shows drones operating in the area before and after residents reported explosions at the refinery.[14] Russian sources claimed on January 25 that the refinery had 112 tons of gasoline and 200 tons of fuel oil at the time of the strike.[15] Russian milbloggers claimed that the SBU strike shows that Ukrainian forces are not "suckers" and that rear areas are not "safe place[s]" in modern war.[16]

Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of chemical weapons in Ukraine in continued apparent violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is party. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Center for the Research of Trophy and Prospective Weapons and Military Equipment of the Ukrainian General Staff Captain Andrii Rudyk stated on January 25 that Russian forces began using RG-VO grenades with chloroacetophenone, a type of tear gas used for riot control (also known as a Riot Control Agent [RCA]), in December 2023 and that Ukrainian officials observed 81 instances of Russian forces using the RG-VO grenades in December 2023.[17] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 13 that Russian forces began using a new type of special gas grenade containing CS gas (2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile – also an RCA) on December 14 and that Russian forces have used chemical weapons at least 51 times in the first two weeks of 2024. [18] The Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade previously acknowledged on December 22 that the brigade deliberately uses chemical weapons by dropping K-51 grenades with CS gas from drones onto Ukrainian positions near Krynyk in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[19] Rudyk stated that the RG-VO grenades can kill personnel in a dugout or an enclosed room within five minutes and that a study found that a recently used Russian RG-VO grenade was manufactured in an unspecified but likely Russian factory in 2023.[20] Rudyk added that Russia may be trying to gauge international reactions to the Russian use of chemical weapons in Ukraine in order to expand the type of weapons Russian forces are using.[21] Russia is party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which prohibits the use of RCAs as a method of warfare.[22]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that Russia's war in Ukraine is "directed against the very existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state."[23] Scholz stated at a press conference with Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico on January 24 that Russian President Vladimir Putin "can end

this war at any time" and warned that "if Ukrainians stop defending themselves, it will be the end of Ukraine." Scholz warned against accepting the idea that the lack of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine is prolonging the war, noting that there was "no shortage of discussions" in the run-up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Kremlin officials continue to indicate that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's maximalist objectives — which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender — remain unchanged.[24]

Russian authorities issued prison sentences in a number of high-profile cases on January 25, including that of imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former officer Igor Girkin. A Moscow court sentenced Girkin to four years in prison on "calls for extremism" charges and banned Girkin from administering websites for three years.[25] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovskiy stated that despite his disagreements with Girkin, he "would prefer to see him free" and noted Girkin's "significance for events in Donbas."[26] A volunteer in a Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) brigade similarly claimed that his personal issues with Girkin "in no way undid everything [Girkin] did."[27] A Russian milblogger claimed that there is something "wrong" with the fact that one of the Russian Spring leaders in Donbas from 2014 is in prison and not fighting on the front.[28]

The Second Western District Military Court in St. Petersburg sentenced Daria Trepova to 27 years in prison on charges of commissioning a terrorist attack, illegally trafficking explosive devices, and forging documents in the case of the assassination of Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky).[29] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev claimed that this verdict is a "precedent" that will guide future sentences and that will make "many who want to work with [Ukraine]...wonder if it is worth it."[30] Kremlin newswire TASS stated that the Izmailovsky Court of Moscow sentenced former Penza Oblast Governor Ivan Belozertsev to 12 years in a maximum-security prison colony for taking bribes worth more than 30 million rubles (about \$337,000) from former Russian Senator Boris Shpigel. [31] The court also sentenced Shpigel to 11 years.[32]

The Kremlin is reportedly no longer offering pardons to convict recruits and is significantly changing the terms of their service, likely in response to the reduction of the pool of convicts suitable for recruitment into Russian force generation efforts. The BBC reported that Russian officials likely ended recruitment into "Storm-Z" units in August 2023 and began recruiting convicts into "Storm-V" units based on new contract terms in September 2023.[33] Russian officials previously recruited convicts through promises of pardons and six-month contracts, and "Storm-V" units reportedly provide no promise of pardon or even parole and extend convicts' contracts indefinitely until the end of the war.[34] Russian officials likely extended the contracts on the basis of Russian President Vladimir Putin's partial mobilization order as the Russian military does for mobilized personnel. The BBC reported that Russian military registration and enlistment offices formally release convict recruits in a procedure that is no longer legally equivalent to "parole/conditional release," suggesting that convict recruits are legally still considered prisoners.[35] Russia has heavily relied on convict recruits to maintain a level of force generation that is roughly equivalent to Russian losses in Ukraine, and which is likely helping enable Russian forces to conduct regular operational-level rotations.[36] Russian officials reported that as of October 2023 the Russian prison population was 266,000 people — a notable reduction of 54,000 prisoners from January 2023.[37] The loss of convict recruits to attritional assaults in Ukraine and the relatively short terms of their service contracts may have prompted the Kremlin to enact more restrictive terms of service in order to retain more convict recruits at the front in Ukraine. The contract terms for service in new "Storm-V" units are far less attractive and may dampen efforts to recruit convicts, although Russian officials have routinely used coercive measures to force convicts to sign contracts.[38]

Russian officials may have also changed the status of convict recruits in order to relieve force generation burdens on the Russian federal budget. Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* reported on January 25 that Storm-Z personnel addressed a letter to Putin asking him to resolve a widespread lack of promised payments, payments for injuries, and documents on the expungement of criminal records for Storm-Z personnel.[39] *Vazhnye Istorii* reported that a response from a Russian military prosecutor's office to a Storm-Z fighter stated that Putin's recent decree promising single payments in cases of injury or death do not apply to Storm-Z fighters.[40]

A Russian insider source claimed that the Russian military command recently replaced the Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) and appointed a new SMD Chief of Staff, although ISW cannot confirm this claim. The Russian insider source, who has previously provided accurate reports regarding several other Russian command changes, claimed on January 25 that the Russian command appointed 8th Combined Arms Army Commander (CAA) Colonel General Gennady Anashkin as SMD Chief of Staff and replaced SMD Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Aleksey Zavizion with Lieutenant General Andrey Sychevoy.[41] The change in command positions within the SMD is particularly notable given that several formations of the SMD, particularly elements

of the 8th CAA, are committed to ongoing localized offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast. [42] Changes in command do not necessarily translate to battlefield effects, although such changes may present temporary challenges to Russian command and control (C2). The Russian Command previously dismissed Sychevoy as Western Grouping of Forces Commander in late August 2022, following the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast, and from an unspecified command position in October 2023 and replaced Zavizion as Chief of Staff of the Western Military District (WMD) in late June 2022.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian and Russian authorities opened criminal investigations into the January 24 Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft crash in Belgorod Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 24 to 25.
- The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reportedly conducted a successful drone strike on a Rosneft oil refinery in Tuapse, Krasnodar Krai on the night of January 24 to 25.
- Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of chemical weapons in Ukraine in continued apparent violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is party.
- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that Russia's war in Ukraine is "directed against the very existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state."
- Russian authorities issued prison sentences in a number of high-profile cases on January 25, including that of imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former officer Igor Girkin.
- The Kremlin is reportedly no longer offering pardons to convict recruits and is significantly changing the terms of their service, likely in response to the reduction of the pool of convicts suitable for recruitment into Russian force generation efforts.
- A Russian insider source claimed that the Russian military command recently replaced the Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) and appointed a new SMD Chief of Staff, although ISW cannot confirm this claim.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 25.
- Bloomberg reported on January 24 that labor shortages in Russia have increased wages in civilian sectors enough to compete with relatively lucrative military salaries, likely making military service even less appealing to Russian citizens.
- Crimean occupation head Sergei Aksyonov signed a decree on January 25 that introduces a "special regime" for entry and exit between occupied Crimea and occupied Kherson Oblast reportedly in an effort to "localize threats to the security of the population and military and other facilities" in occupied Crimea.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 24, 2024

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

Nicole Volkov, Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 24, 2024, 8:20pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on January 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft crashed in Belgorod Oblast on January 24. Geolocated footage posted by various Russian sources shows the Il-76 crashing in Yablonovo, Belgorod Oblast (about 50km northeast of Belgorod City).[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the Il-76 was carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) and was en route to a pre-arranged POW exchange at the Kolotylivka border-crossing checkpoint between Russia and Ukraine.[2] The Russian MoD accused Ukraine of hitting the plane with two unspecified missiles, killing the 65 POWs, six Russian crew members, and three Russian military personnel.[3] Senior Russian propagandist and Editor-in-Chief of state-controlled outlet RT Margarita Simonyan published a list of the names of the Ukrainian POWs supposedly on the flight, but several Russian and Ukrainian sources noted that at least one of the alleged POWs had already been exchanged in a previous POW swap on January 3. [4] Ukrainian officials, including Ukrainian Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lubinets and the Ukrainian Coordinating Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, immediately responded to the incident by emphasizing that Ukraine is investigating the crash and urged audiences not to draw

premature conclusions about the crash based on unconfirmed reporting.^[5] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov confirmed that a POW exchange was scheduled to take place on January 24 but that the exchange was no longer taking place and that GUR is investigating the circumstances of the crash.^[6] GUR later stated that Ukraine "does not have reliable and comprehensive information about who exactly was on board the plane."^[7] The Ukrainian General Staff did not directly respond to the incident but emphasized that Russia has conducted 19 missile strikes against Kharkiv Oblast from Belgorod Oblast over the past week and stressed that Ukraine "will continue to take measures to destroy means of delivery" and "control the airspace" in the Kharkiv-Belgorod border area.^[8] Ukrainian outlet *Ukrainska Pravda*, citing unspecified sources in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, claimed that the Il-76 was transporting S-300 air-defense missiles, which Russian forces frequently use in strikes against ground targets in Kharkiv Oblast.^[9] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in his nightly address on January 24 that Ukraine is working to establish "all clear facts" and that GUR is looking into "the fate of all prisoners." **ISW offers no assessment of the circumstances of the Il-76 crash at this time and cannot independently verify Russian or Ukrainian statements on the incident.**

Russian information space actors are seizing on the Il-76 crash to sow domestic discontent in Ukraine and undermine Western will to continue giving military support to Ukraine. Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairperson Andrei Kartapolov claimed that Ukraine deliberately shot down the Il-76 knowing that it contained Ukrainian POWs and called for all POW exchanges to pause indefinitely.^[10] Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev accused Ukrainian "internal political struggles" of contributing to the crash.^[11] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who is currently in New York for UN Security Council (UNSC) meetings, called for an urgent UNSC meeting to address the crash and accused Ukraine of terrorism.^[12] Such Russian accusations are meant in part to sow discontent in Ukraine and galvanize distrust of the Ukrainian government, which is consistent with several other Russian information efforts aimed at weakening Ukraine domestically.^[13] POW exchanges are a sensitive issue in both Russia and Ukraine, and rhetorical invocations of POWs predictably elicit emotional responses. Russian officials additionally made unsubstantiated claims that Ukraine struck the Il-76 with US- or German-provided missile systems, likely in an attempt to discourage Ukraine's Western partners from providing Ukraine with critical air defense systems necessary for Ukraine's continued defense.^[14]

Russian law enforcement authorities are codifying xenophobic profiling methods suggesting that migrants are predisposed to criminal activity against the backdrop of continued conflicts between Russian citizens and naturalized migrants. Russian outlet *RTVI* reported on January 24 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) published a "criminogenic index" detailing which countries' migrants committed the most crimes in Russia in response to a request from Russian State Duma Deputy Mikhail Matveev to determine if "immigrants from certain countries have criminal characteristics."^[15] The MVD report found that crimes committed by migrants from "neighboring countries" declined between 2013 and 2019 but have increased since 2019.^[16] The MVD report also found that citizens of Uzbekistan committed 40 percent of all crimes committed by foreigners from "neighboring countries" between January 2022 and May 2023. Uzbek citizens likely account for the highest percentage of crimes because there are more migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia than migrants from other Central Asian and South Caucasus countries.^[17] Matveev stated that the MVD's report excludes migrants with naturalized Russian citizenship, implying that migrants commit more crimes than reflected in the MVD's official findings.^[18] Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin similarly claimed in September 2023 that the number of serious crimes that foreign citizens committed in Russia increased by 32 percent from 2022 to 2023.^[19] Russian authorities' deliberate attempts to highlight migrant crimes and portray migrants as a danger to Russian society are likely part of an ongoing effort to appease the pro-war Russian ultranationalist community that also routinely expresses xenophobia toward migrant and diaspora communities and to coerce migrants into Russian military service by limiting work opportunities in Russia.

Sakha Republic Head Aisen Nikolaev and other Russian sources claimed that unspecified foreign actors may have incited protests in Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, after a naturalized citizen from Tajikistan allegedly murdered a Russian citizen.^[20] Nikolaev suggested that foreign agents may have encouraged these protests to incite conflict and divide Russian society.^[21] Nikolaev instructed Sakha Republic authorities to monitor migrants and investigate the circumstances under which the murder suspect obtained Russian citizenship.^[22] Nikolaev's response of both condemning the protests as externally conceived and maintaining a harsh stance against a naturalized Russian citizen likely reflects the wider struggle Russian ultranationalists continue to face in attempting to portray non-ethnic Russian diaspora communities as an internal threat to Russian society while the Kremlin continues to portray Russia as a harmonious multiethnic society.

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Ukrainian hackers recently conducted cyberattacks on Russian intelligence and communications

infrastructure. The GUR reported on January 24 that Ukrainian hackers conducted a successful cyberattack against the Russian “Planet” Scientific Research Center of Space Hydrometeorology’s Far East branch, specifically targeting the center’s database, servers, and supercomputers.[23] The GUR reported that the attack destroyed a database that received and processed satellite data and contributed to products for over 50 Russian government agencies, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), General Staff, and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). The GUR noted that the database contained two petabytes (two million gigabytes) of data potentially worth over \$10 million. The GUR reported that the attack also rendered the center’s supercomputers inoperable and unable to be completely restored and brought down the center’s servers and physical infrastructure. The GUR stated that the attack will leave dozens of unspecified strategic defense companies without “critically important information” for a long time. The GUR reported on January 23 that unspecified “cyber volunteers” attacked Russian internet provider Akado-telecom, which services the Russian Presidential Administration, Federal Security Service (FSB), Federal Protective Service, Moscow Oblast governing bodies, Russian state-owned bank Sberbank, and others, causing a large-scale internet failure on January 21 and 22.[24]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated during the 18th Ukraine Defense Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base in Germany that recent Russian missile strikes against Ukraine underscore the need to strengthen Ukraine’s air defenses. Stoltenberg noted on January 23 that NATO has already transferred a variety of air defense systems to Ukraine, including Patriots, IRIS-T, and NASAMS, and that NATO is supplying Ukraine with additional demining equipment, winter equipment, and fuel as part of its Comprehensive Assistance Package.[25] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Press and Information Department Head Illarion Pavlyuk stated that Ukrainian and Western officials discussed increasing the supply of long-range weapons to Ukraine, including adapting Western anti-aircraft missiles to Soviet-era launch platforms and expanding the production and supply of ammunition and artillery systems to Ukraine.[26] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces likely continue to experiment with new strike packages with different means of penetrating Ukrainian air defenses and to pressure Ukrainian air defense deployments following recent Ukrainian adaptations to prior Russian strike packages.[27] ISW continues to assess that Western provisions of air defense systems and missiles remain crucial in defending Ukraine’s growing defense industrial base (DIB) against Russian strikes.[28]

Russian and Chadian officials met in Moscow on January 24, suggesting that Chad may be the Kremlin’s next target among former French colonies on the African continent. Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Chadian junta leader Mahamat Idriss Deby to discuss counterterrorism efforts in Chad and announced an upcoming agreement expanding Russian–Chadian cooperation. [29] Russian Deputy Defense Ministers Colonel General Alexander Fomin and Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov also met with Chadian Minister of the Armed Forces, Veterans Affairs, and War Victims Dago Yacouba to discuss bilateral military and military-technical cooperation and regional security.[30] Fomin and Yevkurov previously met with Nigerien National Defense Minister Major General Saliufou Modi.[31] ISW previously reported that Russia and the Central African Republic (CAR) are in negotiations to construct a Russian military base in CAR.[32] Russia appears to be attempting to expand its involvement with and influence on authoritarian regimes in western and central Africa, particularly focusing on former French colonies in the Sahel such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) controlled Africa Corps published photos on January 24 claiming to show Africa Corps personnel arriving in Burkina Faso.[33] The Africa Corps claimed that 100 Russian personnel will perform executive protection and conduct counterterrorism operations in Burkina Faso and that another 200 personnel will arrive in the country in the near future. [34] ISW previously reported that the Kremlin is likely attempting to expand Russia’s influence in Africa through the Russian MoD and the MoD-controlled Africa Corps and assessed that the Kremlin is likely attempting to expand the Africa Corps’ operations in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.[35] The Kremlin may also eventually set conditions to expand the Africa Corps’ operations in Chad, given January 24 Russian–Chadian government meetings.

NATO announced on January 24 that the Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises have started and will run until May 31, 2024.[36] NATO reported that the exercises will occur in the High North, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe.[37] ISW continues to assess that Russia will attempt to misrepresent these exercises as a threat against Russia despite the exercises’ defensive nature in response to real Russian aggression against Ukraine and overt Russian threats to NATO states.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- A Russian Il-76 military transport aircraft crashed in Belgorod Oblast on January 24.
- Russian information space actors are seizing on the Il-76 crash to sow domestic discontent in Ukraine and undermine Western will to continue giving military support to Ukraine.
- Russian law enforcement authorities are codifying xenophobic profiling methods suggesting that migrants are predisposed to criminal activity against the backdrop of continued conflicts between Russian citizens and naturalized migrants.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Ukrainian hackers recently conducted cyberattacks on Russian intelligence and communications infrastructure.
- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated during the 18th Ukraine Defense Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base in Germany that recent Russian missile strikes against Ukraine underscore the need to strengthen Ukraine's air defenses.
- Russian and Chadian officials met in Moscow on January 24, suggesting that Chad may be the Kremlin's next target among former French colonies on the African continent.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) controlled Africa Corps published photos on January 24 claiming to show Africa Corps personnel arriving in Burkina Faso.
- NATO announced on January 24 that the Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises have started and will run until May 31, 2024.
- Positional engagements continued throughout the theater.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to bolster the reputation of Chechen forces.
- Russian occupation authorities are setting conditions to coerce voter turnout in the upcoming March 2024 presidential elections.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 23, 2024

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

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

January 23, 2024, 8pm ET

Western states reiterated their support for Ukraine and their commitment to the development of Ukraine's defense industrial base (DIB) at the 18th Ukraine Defense Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base in Germany on January 23. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated that Belgium plans to provide Ukraine with 611 million euros (about \$663.4 million) worth of military aid in 2024.^[1] US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reiterated that the US believes that Ukraine is appropriately using military aid and stated that the United States continues to monitor and account for US security assistance delivered to Ukraine. Austin stated explicitly that the US has seen "no credible evidence of the misuse or illicit diversion of American equipment provided to Ukraine."^[2] The US Department of Defense (DoD) Office of the Inspector General published a report on January 11 that stated that the failure to document certain aid provided to Ukraine in a timely manner was largely due to DoD limitations but that did not suggest that any of the material aid had been misappropriated.^[3] Austin reiterated US support for strengthening Ukraine's defense industrial base (DIB).^[4] Umerov stated that Ukraine is ready to co-invest in technologies and joint production with interested companies in order to facilitate breakthroughs on the battlefield with "innovation and significant technological progress."^[5] Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Press and Information Department Head Illarion Pavlyuk stated that Ukraine and unspecified officials discussed ways to increase weapons and ammunition production, the creation of an artillery production coalition, and the development of Ukraine's air force and air defenses.^[6]

NATO concluded contracts on January 23 for the purchase of over 200,000 artillery shells, likely either to allow NATO to send additional aid to Ukraine or to replenish NATO stockpiles. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and General Manager of the NATO Support and Procurement Agency Stacy Cummings signed contracts, reportedly with French company Nexter and German company Junghans Defense, on January 23 for the purchase of about 220,000 155mm artillery shells worth \$1.2 billion.^[7] Stoltenberg stated that the war in Ukraine has become a "battle for ammunition," so it is important that NATO refill its stocks as the alliance continues to support Ukraine. It is unclear if the contracts are meant to allow NATO to send additional ammunition to Ukraine or to fill NATO's own ammunition stockpiles. Western security assistance remains vital for Ukraine as any slow reduction or sudden collapse of Western aid will very likely eliminate Ukraine's ability to defend itself and could lead to the Russian military capturing significantly more territory in Ukraine, bringing Russian forward bases closer to the borders of NATO member states.^[8] The replenishment of NATO stockpiles is also an important endeavor, as ISW also continues to assess that NATO rearmament is

necessary to deter - and if necessary defeat - any future Russian attack on NATO's eastern flank, given that Kremlin officials have increasingly threatened NATO member states, and Kremlin-affiliated actors appear to be attempting to sow instability and set information conditions for possible future aggressive Russian actions against NATO members and other post-Soviet states.[9]

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are struggling to compensate for Ukrainian drone and rear-area strikes at the level necessary to break out of positional warfare. A prominent Russian milblogger stated on January 23 that Russian forces need to figure out how to break out of positional warfare but that Russian forces are unable to concentrate in numbers sufficient to break through Ukrainian lines because Ukrainian forces strike all force concentrations larger than a battalion.[10] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces target Russian force concentrations even in near rear areas. The milblogger reported that Ukrainian forces still target small Russian groups of one-to-two infantry companies and of 10 armored vehicles with drone strikes, preventing Russian forces from even reaching Ukrainian forward defensive lines. The milblogger complained that Russian forces' only solution thus far has been to attack with 10-20 dismounted infantrymen with armored vehicles supporting at an "extreme" distance behind the infantry. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger responded in agreement with the first milblogger, claiming that Ukrainian technological advancements have made it difficult for Russian forces to concentrate several divisions in a discrete geographic area without Ukrainian forces detecting the force concentration.[11] The milblogger emphasized that Russian forces need to both obtain indirect fire superiority over Ukrainian forces and overhaul Russian command-and-control (C2) to break out of positional warfare. The milblogger stressed that Russian forces on the frontline need to be able to quickly communicate to minimize the time between spotting and striking a target and that this change will only occur with a significant change in C2 processes.

The characteristics and problems of positional warfare that Russian milbloggers have identified in recent discussions overlap with many systemic issues in the Russian military that the milbloggers have been complaining about for a long time.[12] Russian milbloggers have complained generally about poor Russian C2 as it pertains to indirect fire, the attrition of Russian forces through unproductive "meat assaults" against Ukrainian positions, poor tactical and operational planning, and the struggle to counter Ukrainian drone operations on the front line and in near rear areas.[13] There are currently no indications that the Russian military command has materially improved on any of these identified issues at the operational level necessary to break through a positional front in one or more areas of the theater. Russian forces have recently proven themselves capable of making marginal tactical advances during intensified offensive efforts even with these systemic issues, however, particularly near Kupyansk in Kharkiv Oblast and Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast.[14]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 22-23 with a new strike package likely meant to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched four S-300/S-400 ground-to-air missiles, 15 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles, eight Kh-22 cruise missiles, 12 Iskander ballistic missiles, and five Kh-59/Kh-31 missiles and that Ukrainian forces shot down all of the Kh-101/555/55 missiles, five Iskander missiles, and two Kh-59 missiles.[15] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces struck Kharkiv, Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Sumy oblasts.[16] This strike package is notably the first time in recent months that a large Russian missile strike series has not included Shahed-136/131 drones, which Russian forces have often used in an effort to overwhelm Ukrainian air defense systems.[17] A Russian source posted footage on January 23 purporting to show a Russian missile releasing decoy flares mid-air, and similar footage emerged of a Russian Kh-101 during a Russian strike in late December 2023.[18] This strike package may have utilized decoys in place of Shahed drones in order to experiment with the effectiveness of using such decoys and preserving Shaheds for other purposes. Ukrainian forces appear to have recently adapted to new Russian strike packages, and Russian forces are likely continuing to experiment with new strike packages with different means of penetrating Ukrainian air defenses and force Ukraine to deploy air defense systems to certain locations. [19] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuri Ihnat stated that Russian forces primarily launched ballistic missiles on January 22-23 and that Ukraine needs additional means to protect against these missiles.[20] ISW continues to assess that Russia is likely attempting to acquire more ballistic missiles from abroad, including from Iran and North Korea, because ballistic missiles may be more successful in striking Ukrainian targets in some circumstances.[21]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Palestinian National Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki as part of efforts to deepen Russian relations with Middle Eastern actors. Lavrov met with Abdollahian and emphasized strengthening mutually beneficial Russian-Iranian cooperation.[22] Both officials reiterated their support for an "early ceasefire" in Gaza.[23] Lavrov and Abdollahian discussed unspecified agreements that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi made during Raisi's December 2023 visit to Moscow.[24] Lavrov also reiterated Russian support for an

"early end to the bloodshed" and "the resumption of the Middle East settlement process" in a meeting with al Maliki.[25]

The Kremlin's domestic policy focus on the "Year of the Family" in 2024 is likely in part meant to address Russia's ongoing demographic crisis. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on January 23 officially defining families with three or more children as "large families" and establishing various social support measures for "large families." [26] Putin also emphasized that the family is the center of Russian "traditional values," echoing his previous statements on the importance of Russian families from his annual New Year's Eve address on December 31, 2023.[27] The Kremlin's focus on 2024 as the "Year of the Family" is likely meant to provide an ideological underpinning to Russian efforts to increase Russian birthrates and remedy Russian demographic issues. Russia has been reckoning with a demographic crisis since the beginning of the 1990s due to declining birthrates, an aging population, low life expectancy (particularly amongst males of working age), and high emigration levels.[28] Russia's war in Ukraine has also impacted some aspects of Russian demographics, particularly as men of reproductive and working age are the main Russian demographic fighting in Ukraine. Between 800 to 900 thousand Russians additionally fled the country after the start of the war in February 2022, including up to 700 thousand after Putin's partial mobilization order in September 2022.[29] A demographic forecast from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) in October 2023 notably forecasted that Russia's population will decrease to 138.77 million people by January 1, 2046 and that the rate of natural population decline will exceed 600,000 people per year between 2024-2032, slowing to 400,000 people per year from 2032-2046. [30] Social support measures for families with three or more children and other pro-natalist policies incentivize Russian women to have more children in order to receive payouts and other benefits from the Russian state, which the Kremlin likely hopes will gradually increase the birth rate in coming generations and slow down the overall pace of Russian population decline.

The Russian Baltic Fleet is conducting a coastal missile exercise likely to posture against ongoing NATO Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises. The Russian Baltic Fleet's Press Service reported on January 23 that Russian Bastion coastal missile defense system crews conducted electronic launches of Onyx missiles against mock adversary ships in the Gulf of Finland and also conducted camouflage and anti-sabotage exercises.[31] About 50 Russian military personnel participated in the exercises and used 10 pieces of specialized military equipment.[32] Russian officials often portray NATO exercises as escalatory against Russia despite routinely threatening NATO member states, and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) called the NATO Steadfast Defender exercises "increasingly provocative and aggressive" after NATO announced the exercises in September 2023.[33] Russia's Baltic Fleet exercises are likely part of Russia's wider effort to posture against the wider NATO alliance in preparation for potential future conflict with NATO, as ISW has previously assessed.[34]

The Kremlin may intend to use the 2024 Russian presidential election as a referendum on Russia's war in Ukraine. Russian opposition politician and presidential candidate Boris Nadezhdin, who Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* and *BBC's Russian Service* described as the only Russian presidential candidate who opposes the Russian war in Ukraine, stated to *Verstka* in an interview published on January 23 that he believes that the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) will have to register him as a candidate due to his broad support among the Russian public. [35] Nadezhdin stated to *Verstka* that his campaign is collecting signatures in support of his candidacy at a growing rate of 7,000 signatures per day but that he struggles to campaign and collect signatures. Nadezhdin's campaign announced on January 23 that Nadezhdin collected over 100,000 signatures - the amount the Russian CEC requires to register an independent candidate in the elections - but that these 100,000 signatures are thus far insufficient for the CEC's requirements.[36] The Russian CEC additionally requires that prospective presidential candidates submit signatures from over half of Russia's federal subjects (regions) by January 25 and that no more than 2,500 signatures from any one federal subject can count towards the 100,000 total.[37] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported, citing an interlocutor in Nadezhdin's campaign, that some of the collected signatures are considered "imperfect" or "defective" and that Nadezhdin wants "perfect" signatures that the Russian CEC cannot contest.[38]

A Russian insider source claimed that the Kremlin has developed a mechanism to funnel all opposition votes to Nadezhdin, which will account for opposition votes to give voters the semblance of choice while ultimately ensuring the reelection of Russian President Vladimir Putin.[39] The insider source claimed that the Kremlin will pay off Nadezhdin in exchange for funneling opposition votes. Nadezhdin claimed to *Verstka* that his struggles to campaign, including censorship on Russian state television, show that he is not a "Kremlin puppet" despite his prior affiliations with the current presidential administration.[40] *BBC Russian Service* noted on January 22 that Nadezhdin's campaign initially struggled for attention but that he gained prominence in recent days, resulting in an influx in signatures.[41] The Kremlin may decide to allow Nadezhdin to run as an anti-war candidate to use

frame Putin's inevitable resurrection as a positive referendum on the war in Ukraine as the Kremlin seeks to prepare for a long-term war effort.

The Russian legal system is expanding the prosecution of extortion cases to broadly suppress sources of dissent. Russian government-affiliated outlet *Lenta* posted an investigation on January 23 detailing how Russian courts are increasingly using Article 163 of the Russian Criminal Code—the article defining extortion—to target various media organizations for perceived dissent. [42] *Lenta* reported that Russian legal experts see the extortion law as a “rubber law,” a deliberately vague law that can have flexible interpretations and that courts can cross-apply to civil cases that they would not typically try under criminal extortion laws.[43] The most severe sentence for extortion can exceed the sentence for murder in some cases.[44] *Lenta* noted that employees of media and public relations companies and journalists are the most vulnerable to the expanded prosecution of extortion cases and reported that Russian courts initiated 19 extortion cases against journalists and bloggers in 2022-2023 alone.[45] A prominent Russian insider source noted that Russian courts continue to “churn out criminal cases” using a “vicious” interpretation of Russian extortion law.[46] ISW has previously reported on similar Russian legislative manipulations aimed at repressing domestic dissent by introducing a fear of criminal liability to cases that would typically be tried on a civil basis.[47]

Key Takeaways:

- Western states reiterated their support for Ukraine and their commitment to the development of Ukraine’s defense industrial base (DIB) at the 18th Ukraine Defense Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base in Germany on January 23.
- NATO concluded contracts on January 23 for the purchase over 200,000 artillery shells, likely either to allow NATO to send additional aid to Ukraine or to replenish NATO stockpiles.
- Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are struggling to compensate for Ukrainian drone and rear-area strikes at the level necessary to break out of positional warfare.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 22-23 with a new strike package likely meant to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Palestinian National Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki as part of efforts to deepen Russian relations with Middle Eastern actors.
- The Kremlin’s domestic policy focus on the “Year of the Family” in 2024 is likely in part meant to address Russia’s ongoing demographic crisis.
- The Russian Baltic Fleet is conducting a coastal missile exercise likely to posture against ongoing NATO Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises.
- The Kremlin may intend to use the 2024 Russian presidential election as a referendum on Russia’s war in Ukraine.
- The Russian legal system is expanding the prosecution of extortion cases to broadly suppress sources of dissent.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 23.
- Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) government chairperson Yevgeny Solntsev announced on January 23 that a branch of the Russian Nakhimov Naval School in occupied Mariupol will start instructing its first cadets on September 1, 2024.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely deliberately misrepresenting population statistics in occupied areas to encourage people to relocate to occupied settlements.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 22, 2024

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

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

January 22, 2024, 6:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:40pm ET on January 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia continues to weaponize its position on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to propagate several long-standing Russian information operations. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke at a UNSC meeting, which Russia convened, on January 22 and blamed the West for the lack of negotiations, claiming that Russia has always been “ready for negotiations.”^[1] Lavrov clarified, however, that Russia is only interested in negotiations that result in the removal of the current Ukrainian government from power, confirming that Russia still officially seeks regime change in Ukraine.^[2] Lavrov continued to deny Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty, falsely claiming that the Ukrainian people have no interests in the war against Russia and that the West has pushed Ukraine to continue the war.^[3] Lavrov advised the West to understand that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s “peace formula” is a “path to nowhere,” claiming that the “sooner [the West] realizes this, the better it will be for both Ukraine and the West.”^[4] Lavrov also claimed that “if Ukraine stops fighting, hundreds of thousands” of Ukrainian lives would be saved.^[5] Lavrov previously made similar comments, suggesting that the Kremlin believes that Russia will be able to occupy more territory as the war continues and that this course of the war will increasingly weaken Ukraine’s negotiating position.^[6]

Lavrov denied Russia’s responsibility for fears that Russia may attack NATO in the future, ignoring the recent Kremlin official statements that have prompted those fears. Lavrov falsely claimed that the West promotes the idea that Russia will attack the Baltic states, Poland, and Finland in the future as a way to “extort money” from Western states for aid to Ukraine.^[7] Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, have sustained consistent threatening rhetoric directed against NATO member states, and Kremlin-affiliated actors appear to be attempting to sow instability and set information conditions for possible future aggressive Russian actions against NATO members and other post-Soviet states.^[8] Lavrov also blamed Ukrainian forces for conducting strikes on Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine, which the Kremlin used to support Russian justifications for its war of conquest in Ukraine.^[9] Lavrov recently claimed that Ukrainian forces are using Western-supplied weapons to strike civilian targets, including in alleged strikes against occupied Donetsk City on January 21, for example.^[10] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), made similar claims on January 21.^[11] The *New York Times* reported on January 21 that it could not independently confirm the actors behind the strike on Donetsk City, and the press service of the Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces stated on January 21 that forces under the control of the Tavriisk Group of Forces did not conduct the strikes.^[12] Lavrov also attempted to downplay the various war crimes and crimes against humanity that Russian occupation forces and occupation administrators are conducting in Ukraine, claiming that Ukrainians and Russians “live in peace and harmony” in occupied Crimea and other Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories.^[13] Lavrov claimed that “Russians and Ukrainians will live exactly like brothers and good neighbors” after Russia achieves its goals in the war in Ukraine — which ISW continues to assess are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.^[14] ISW has routinely documented how Russian forces and occupation administrations have been engaging in large-scale and deliberate ethnic cleansing campaigns; forcibly and illegally deport Ukrainians, including children, to Russia; and are systematically working to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, and ethnicity in areas that Russian forces occupy.^[15]

ISW previously assessed that Russia aims to reinforce the primacy of the UN and to link as many international efforts to the UN as possible in order to capitalize on Russia’s permanent UNSC seat and veto power.^[16] Russia’s request for the January 22 UNSC meeting to discuss arms supplies to Ukraine and Lavrov’s use of this meeting to promote various Kremlin information operations is likely an attempt to legitimize these Kremlin narratives, promote them on a global stage, and convince Ukraine’s international partners to stop sending weapons to Ukraine.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Kyiv on January 22 and announced a new Polish defense package for Ukraine.^[17] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky thanked Tusk for the new Polish defense package and noted that he and Tusk discussed possibilities for the future production of weapons.^[18] Zelensky stated that the package includes a Polish loan for large-scale Ukrainian weapons purchases, but Tusk and Zelensky did not specify additional details about security assistance package provisions or the overall value of the package.^[19] Tusk later stated that Poland joined the Group of Seven (G7) declaration of support for Ukraine and noted that Poland will appoint a commissioner to oversee Polish involvement in Ukrainian reconstruction efforts.^[20]

Footage purportedly showing an altercation between a Russian soldier and Chechen “Akhmat-Vostok” forces in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, reignited criticism of Chechen forces for their lack of contributions to Russian military operations in Ukraine. Footage widely circulated on January 22 purportedly shows Chechen “Akhmat-Vostok” Battalion commander Vakha Khambulatov and other “Akhmat-Vostok” Battalion personnel threatening to kill a Russian soldier at a checkpoint in occupied Melitopol after the Russian soldier stated that Khambulatov had invalid identification documents.^[21] Russian milbloggers criticized the Chechen personnel for having “too clean uniforms and too clean cars” and complained that these personnel receive the same state salary

and social benefits as frontline Russian Airborne (VDV) forces despite contributing less to Russian military operations.[22] A Russian milblogger claimed that this is the fifth altercation between Russian and Chechen military personnel in rear areas.[23] Russian sources have previously criticized Chechen forces for conducting performative actions in Belgorod Oblast after all-Russian pro-Ukrainian forces raided the area, for posturing themselves as a response force during the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023, and for exaggerating their supposed frontline combat contributions around Bakhmut in July 2023.[24] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov has routinely attempted to curry favor with the Kremlin and promote his domestic power through emphasizing Chechnya's contributions to the war in Ukraine, and continued criticism against Chechen forces in Ukraine may degrade the influence Kadyrov has gained through this effort.

An investigation by a Russian opposition outlet suggests that Russian elites may have accepted and internalized the domestic consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine. Russian opposition outlet *Verstka*, citing unnamed interlocutors amongst Russian elites, reported that Russian elites are increasingly complaining that vacations in Russia and abroad in "friendly countries" are becoming more expensive.[25] *Verstka*'s interlocutor noted that many Russian elites who work in military and government affairs want a quick end to the war on the condition that Ukraine recognizes Russia's illegal annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts, and that elites desire Russia to "finish off" Ukraine so that Russia can go about planning for a new future isolated from Europe. *Verstka* cited Russian political scientist Ilya Grashchenkov noting that the upcoming March 2024 Russian presidential election is not galvanizing Russian political elites as the Presidential Administration had hoped because most Russian elites view the outcome of the elections as pre-determined, and do not anticipate much change to their status as a result of Russian President Vladimir Putin's re-election. Grashchenkov noted that "new" elites who came into power as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have realized that they will be unable to gain more influence and "old" elites understand they have limited political control. *Verstka* summarized the sentiments of Russian elites as "apathetic," which suggests that many Russian elites have internalized and accepted the social ramifications of the war. ISW has previously reported on Russian public opinion polls that similarly show a substantial degree of domestic internalization of the war's consequences and support for the war.[26]

Russian officials and information space actors are attempting to further rhetorically justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine by misrepresenting a decree that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed on January 22 concerning discrimination against ethnic Ukrainians in Russia. Zelensky signed a decree titled "On the Territories of the Russian Federation Historically Inhabited by Ukrainians," which accurately stated that Russia has systematically oppressed and continues to oppress Ukrainians living in Russia and eroding their national identity, including on lands historically inhabited by ethnic Ukrainians in modern day Russia's Krasnodar Krai and Belgorod, Bryansk, Voronezh, Kursk, and Rostov oblasts.[27] The decree instructs the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers to develop an action plan for preserving Ukrainian national identity in Russia, documenting the history of Russia's oppression of its Ukrainian communities, countering disinformation about the history of Ukrainians in Russia, and disseminating materials about Ukrainian national state formations in different historical periods. **Zelensky's decree does not establish any territorial demands upon Russia, as select Russian ultranationalists falsely claimed.**[28]

Russian officials purposefully misrepresented the decree to further justify Russia's full-scale invasion and made further genocidal appeals to the destruction of Ukrainian statehood and ethnic identity. Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoyt called the decree a blatant distortion of history and argued that it shows that Russian President Vladimir Putin was correct to invade Ukraine.[29] Starovoyt's response suggests that Russian officials and actors may continue to misrepresent the decree as an ex post facto *casus belli* to falsely assert that Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was defensive in nature. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev responded to the decree and reiterated longstanding Kremlin rhetoric that aims to erase Ukrainian ethnic identity by asserting that ethnic Ukrainians are ethnically Russian.[30] Medvedev also stated that "Malorossiya" (Little Russia) is part of Russia — a pseudo-historical Kremlin talking point that Russian officials routinely invoke to deny Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty.[31] The Kremlin has repeatedly used the concept of "compatriots abroad," which includes ethnic Russian and Russian speakers of other ethnicities, to justify the war in Ukraine and aggression in other neighboring states, and Russian officials and ultranationalists may be primed to view legitimate appeals to protecting compatriots abroad as similar pretexts for aggressive actions.[32]

Russia has historically had a policy to Russify ethnic minorities living within Russian territory, and Zelensky's decree coincides with wider Russian animus towards non-ethnic Russians within Russia that extends far beyond ethnic Ukrainian communities.[33] The Russian ultranationalist community continues to seize on incidents involving migrants and non-ethnic Russians to express growing hostility towards diaspora communities and non-ethnic Russian minorities within Russia.[34] Russian

officials and ultranationalists may attempt to frame states' legitimate concerns about growing Russian domestic animus towards their diaspora communities and Russia's history of discriminatory policies as anti-Russian and inherently escalatory.

Key Takeaways:

- Russia continues to weaponize its position on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to propagate several long-standing Russian information operations.
- Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Kyiv on January 22 and announced a new Polish defense package for Ukraine.
- Footage purportedly showing an altercation between a Russian soldier and Chechen "Akhmat-Vostok" forces in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, reignited criticism of Chechen forces for their lack of contributions to Russian military operations in Ukraine.
- An investigation by a Russian opposition outlet suggests that Russian elites may have accepted and internalized the domestic consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine.
- Russian officials and information space actors are attempting to further rhetorically justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine by misrepresenting a decree that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed on January 22 concerning discrimination against ethnic Ukrainians in Russia. Zelensky's decree does not establish any territorial demands upon Russia, as select Russian ultranationalists falsely claimed.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances south of Avdiivka and west of Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the entire frontline.
- Kyrgyzstan issued a statement against Russia's continued practice of targeting naturalized migrants as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian federal subjects continue to establish ties with areas of occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 21, 2024

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

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

January 21, 2024, 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 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 12:45pm ET on January 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against targets in Leningrad and Tula oblasts, where repeated Ukrainian drone strikes may fix Russian short-range air defense systems defending potentially significant targets along expected flight routes. Ukrainian media, citing unnamed sources within Ukrainian special services, reported that Ukrainian forces conducted drone strikes against the Shcheglovsky Val Plant in Tula City, Tula Oblast and the "Novateka" plant and gas terminal near the port of Ust-Luga, Leningrad Oblast on the night of January 20 to 21.^[1] The Shcheglovsky Val Plant reportedly manufactures Pantsir-S and Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, and the Ust-Luga complex reportedly processes stable gas condensate into light and heavy naphtha, diesel, kerosene, and naval fuel.^[2] Russian sources amplified footage claiming to show explosions in Tula City and Ust-Luga, presumably the results of successful Ukrainian strikes.^[3] Geolocated footage published on January 20 shows additional explosions over Smolensk City, indicating possible Ukrainian strikes in the area.^[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses destroyed five drones over Tula, Oryol, and Smolensk oblasts.^[5] Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a successful drone strike on Russian military facilities in Leningrad Oblast on January 18.^[6]

A Russian insider source claimed on January 21 that Russian air defense coverage over Leningrad Oblast is poor and indicated that Russian air defenses in Leningrad Oblast are likely not arrayed to defend against strikes from the south.[7] Russian air defense systems in Leningrad Oblast are most likely positioned to defend against strikes from the northwest and west, as Russia has historically arrayed its air defense in the area to defend against hypothetical NATO attacks.[8] The Russian military is currently reforming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) with the expressed intent to prepare for a potential future conventional war against NATO and may be arranging military assets in a way to posture along the border with NATO members.[9] Ukrainian strikes in Leningrad Oblast may prompt Russian forces to reposition short-range air defense systems along expected flight routes of Ukrainian drones to defend potential targets of strategic value. Russian forces using short-range systems such as the Pantsir may not be able to cover all important potential targets in Leningrad Oblast without bringing additional systems into the area, and continued Ukrainian strikes in deep rear areas in Russia may thus increase pressure on Russia's air defenses overall.

Moldovan authorities accused Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria of numerous violations, including the improper use of drones, while conducting exercises in late December 2023, prompting an information attack by a pro-Kremlin mouthpiece. Members of the Moldovan delegation to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Joint Control Commission (JCC) demanded during a JCC meeting on January 18 that the JCC conduct an investigation into Russian peacekeepers for using small arms, drones, and imitation weapons during an exercise allegedly repelling a sabotage attack on the peacekeepers' outpost in the Moldovan security zone on December 22, 2023.[10] The Moldovan authorities stated that the Russian peacekeeping forces' presence and use of these weapons inside the security zone violates JCC protocols and that the Russian peacekeeping forces had not properly disclosed some of these weapons and drones as part of their arsenal. A prominent, Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed in response on January 21 that Moldovan authorities have been increasingly pressuring Russian-backed breakaway republic Transnistria by calling for the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers and through economic pressure.[11] The milblogger claimed that the Moldovan government imposed "double" duties on Transnistrian businesses that amount to roughly \$16 million over an unspecified timeframe and that will raise the cost of living in Transnistria. Recent changes to the Moldovan Customs Code require Transnistrian businesses to pay import customs duties to the Moldovan government, whereas previously Transnistrian businesses only paid duties to the Transnistrian government.[12] The milblogger claimed that this pressure supports the "forceful reintegration" of Transnistria into Moldova and that Russia should prepare for further escalation, reminiscent of recent accusations from Transnistrian President Vadim Krasnoselsky.[13] The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger's claims and Krasnoselsky's accusations are likely part of an information operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova, which borders NATO member Romania, and justifying any future Russian escalation in the region.[14]

Russia is likely intensifying relations with North Korea as part of an effort to procure more artillery ammunition from abroad amid Russian munition shortages. The North Korean Foreign Ministry stated on January 20 that Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his willingness to visit North Korea "at an early date" (presumably in 2024) during his recent meeting with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in Moscow.[15] Putin last visited North Korea in 2000, and his renewed interest in deepening Russian–North Korean relations is likely part of increasing Russian efforts to procure munitions from abroad.[16] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated in a January 21 interview that North Korea provided a "significant amount of artillery ammunition," which allowed Russia to "breathe a little." [17] Budanov suggested that Russian forces would likely experience operationally significant artillery ammunition shortages without North Korean–provided ammunition.[18] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitsky stated that North Korea delivered one million rounds of artillery ammunition to Russia from September to November 2023 and that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) can produce in total two million rounds of 122mm and 152mm shells annually, which resulted in a deficit of 500,000 shells in 2023 and will likely result in a similar deficit in 2024.[19]

Key Takeaways:

- **Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted successful drone strikes against targets in Leningrad and Tula oblasts, where repeated Ukrainian drone strikes may fix Russian short-range air defense systems defending potentially significant targets along expected flight routes.**
- **Moldovan authorities accused Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria of numerous violations, including the improper use of drones, while conducting exercises in late December 2023, prompting an information attack by a pro-Kremlin mouthpiece.**

- Russia is likely intensifying relations with North Korea as part of an effort to procure more artillery ammunition from abroad amid Russian munition shortages.
- Russian forces advanced near Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the front.
- Russian opposition outlet *Mobilization News* reported on January 21 that likely Russian military commanders are mistreating troops at a training ground in Volgograd Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects continue to foster patronage networks in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 20, 2024

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

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

January 20, 2024, 4:15pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on January 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW has added a new section on Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) efforts to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to track the development of Ukraine's DIB and the international support for Ukraine's DIB efforts. ISW will be publishing its assessments in this section based on public announcements, media reporting, and official statements.

Russian President Vladimir Putin falsely claimed that Russia supports the “unconditional equality” and “sovereignty” of all states in a January 20 letter to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, contradicting Russia’s official position on its war in Ukraine and its wider imperial ambitions. Putin claimed that Russia rejects “neocolonialist ambitions, double standards, as well as forceful pressure, dictatorship, and blackmail as a means of achieving foreign policy and foreign economic goals.”[1] Russian officials have routinely denied Ukraine’s sovereignty and refused to treat it as an equal. The Kremlin rejects Ukrainian statehood and nationhood by incorporating Ukraine into the ideological and geographic conception of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir), which includes any Russian speakers and “carriers of Russian history and culture” as “compatriots” and includes all of the former territories of Kyivan Rus, the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation.[2] Russia uses the framework of “Russkiy Mir” to justify Russian imperialist expansion and the subjugation of independent, sovereign states and their peoples within a pseudo-cultural and historical context. Russian officials have routinely justified the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by claiming that Russia aims to protect its “compatriots” abroad, again rejecting Ukraine’s sovereignty.[3] Russia also continues to trivialize the sovereignty of other post-Soviet countries and has been setting information conditions to escalate tensions in the Baltics and Moldova under the guise of protecting its “compatriots” abroad.[4] Russia has been in violation of its own commitments to respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity and “inviability of borders” and its agreement to center relations with Ukraine on “non-use of force or threat of force” and “non-interference in internal affairs” undertaken in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum since its initial invasion in 2014.[5] Putin’s false claims that Russia respects “equality” and “sovereignty” are likely intended to cater to states that the Kremlin desires to pull into its wider sphere of influence, much as it initially intended to do with Ukraine before the initial 2014 invasion.

Russian Ambassador to Denmark Vladimir Barbin threatened Denmark, a founding member of NATO, on January 20 in response to a recent US-Danish agreement allowing US forces access to military bases in Denmark. Barbin claimed during an interview with Russian news outlet RIA Novosti that the December 2023 US-Danish agreement “creates new challenges” for Russia’s security in the Baltic Sea region and stated that Russia will determine the “necessary responses” to such actions.[6] The US and Denmark signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement on December 21, 2023, allowing the US to permanently station forces and equipment at military bases in Denmark.[7] Barbin called the agreement a “deliberate course towards further degradation of the military-political situation in the region under the slogans of containing and intimidating Russia.”[8] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger previously claimed that Finland is becoming a “second Ukraine” in response to a similar US-Finnish agreement.[9] Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, have recently threatened Finland, and the Kremlin’s threats against a founding member of NATO that shares no borders with Russia is a notable challenge to the wider alliance.[10] Russian threats made towards a founding member of NATO also undermine Russia’s longstanding information operation that its aggressive actions are in response to NATO expansion.[11]

Russian energy exports to China significantly increased in 2023 amid increasing Russian reliance on oil revenues to manage the fiscal burdens of the war in Ukraine. Kremlin newswire TASS amplified data from the Chinese General Customs Administration on January 20 that shows a 24 percent increase in Russian crude oil exports to China from 2022 to 2023 and a 23 percent increase in Russian exports of Liquified Natural Gas (LNG).^[12] TASS noted that Russia became China's largest oil supplier in 2023.^[13] Increased Russian energy exports to Indo-Pacific states, primarily India and China, and widespread Russian efforts to skirt the G7 price cap on Russian crude oil and petroleum products allowed Russia to significantly increase oil revenues in 2023.^[14]

European Union (EU) Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated on January 20 that the EU will have the capacity to produce 1.3 to 1.4 million artillery shells by the end of 2024 and will ensure that it delivers the “majority” of the shells to Ukraine.^[15] Breton stated that the EU will be able to produce one million shells per year by March or April 2024 and intends to “significantly” increase its shell production capacity in 2025.^[16] NATO announced on January 19 that it plans to announce a major unspecified investment in artillery ammunition on January 23.^[17]

A poll conducted by independent analytical platform VoxUkraine found that 63 percent of Ukrainians who left the country because of Russia's invasion had returned by July-August 2023.^[18] The poll also found that 64 percent of respondents who have not yet returned to Ukraine do have plans to return and that 27 percent will return to Ukraine. At the same time, the war continues as long as there are suitable housing and employment opportunities.^[19] As many as 6.2 million Ukrainians are living abroad due to the war, according to various international estimates.^[20]

Russian forces conducted a limited series of strikes against Ukraine on January 20 amid continued Russian efforts to test and pressure Ukrainian air defenses. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched seven Shahed-136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and three S-300 missiles from occupied Luhansk Oblast.^[21] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted four of the drones and that the S-300 missiles struck Novohrodivka, Donetsk Oblast.^[22] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that recent Russian strike series have attempted to overload Ukrainian air defenses and that Russian forces continue to launch drones and missiles in ways designed to avoid, penetrate, and degrade limited Ukrainian air defense capabilities.^[23] Russian forces will likely continue to adapt missile and drone strike packages in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses and place pressure on Ukrainian air defense deployments.^[24] Ihnat acknowledged that Ukrainian forces have concentrated a considerable amount of air defense near Kyiv to defend against regular Russian strikes and that it will be difficult for Ukrainian forces to disperse these systems as Russia's strike campaign continues.^[25]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin falsely claimed that Russia supports the “unconditional equality” and “sovereignty” of all states in a January 20 letter to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, contradicting Russia's official position on its war in Ukraine and its wider imperial ambitions.**
- **Russian Ambassador to Denmark Vladimir Barbin threatened Denmark, a founding member of NATO, on January 20 in response to a recent US-Danish agreement allowing US forces access to military bases in Denmark.**
- **Russian energy exports to China significantly increased in 2023 amid increasing Russian reliance on oil revenues to manage the fiscal burdens of the war in Ukraine.**
- **European Union (EU) Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated on January 20 that the EU will have the capacity to produce 1.3 to 1.4 million artillery shells by the end of 2024 and will ensure that it delivers the “majority” of the shells to Ukraine.**
- **Russian forces made confirmed advances along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the front.**
- **A Russian Storm-Z instructor claimed on January 16 that Rosgvardia personnel operating in occupied Ukraine have systematic issues with equipment and weapons storage.**
- **Occupation authorities continue preparations for the March 2024 Russian presidential election.**

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January

19, 2024

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

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

January 19, 2024, 8:15pm ET

Russia is conducting an information operation to misrepresent NATO's defensive "Steadfast Defender 2024" exercises – a response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Russian threats directed towards NATO members - as provocative. NATO's Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises begin this week and will continue through May 2024.[1] NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Chris Cavoli stated on January 18 that 90,000 personnel from all 31 NATO member states and Sweden will participate in "Steadfast Defender." [2] The exercises will reportedly include over 50 ships; over 80 fighter jets, helicopters, and drones; and at least 1,100 combat vehicles, including 133 tanks and 533 infantry fighting vehicles.[3] Cavoli stated that NATO "will demonstrate its ability to reinforce the Euro-Atlantic area via trans-Atlantic movement of forces from North America...during a simulated emerging conflict scenario against a near-peer adversary." [4] Chair of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Rob Bauer stated on January 18 that NATO must prepare for a conflict with Russia as NATO cannot take peace as "a given" and must "expect the unexpected." [5] German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated on January 19 that Germany must consider that Putin may try to attack a NATO member in five to eight years, given threats from the Kremlin "almost every day." [6]

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded to the initial announcement of the Steadfast Defender exercises in September 2023 and misleadingly claimed that NATO exercises have been increasingly provocative and aggressive in nature.[7] The Russian MFA claimed that NATO is continuing a "demonstration of force" on Russia's "doorstep." The Russian MFA claimed that Russia had regularly proposed de-escalation initiatives to NATO, called for NATO to abandon its provocative actions, and transferred Russian military exercises to the country's interior. Russian sources claimed that NATO is using exercises to "wind up" and incite the Baltic states to prepare for war with Russia and characterized such exercises as a "series of provocations." [8] Yulia Zhdanova, a member of the Russian delegation at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 1066th plenary meeting, similarly claimed on January 17 that NATO exercises on the Russian and Belarusian borders "provoke a game of nerves" and "compress the spring of escalation even more." [9] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger dismissed Pistorius' comments about a possible future Russian attack on NATO, claiming that European officials regularly make statements about the "concept of the 'Russian threat'" and that few Germans actually agree with these statements.[10] The milblogger implied that the German government is attempting to artificially create a threat from Russia that doesn't actually exist by paying experts to "say the right words."

The Russian information operation aimed at painting defensive NATO actions in response to real Russian aggression on NATO's eastern flank as provocative seeks to deflect from recent aggressive Russian rhetoric and behavior towards NATO. Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, recently threatened Finland and the wider NATO alliance.[11] Putin identified the West as Russia's "enemy" and implied that Russia is fighting in Ukraine in order to defeat the West.[12] Kremlin officials and Kremlin-affiliated actors have also repeatedly attempted to set information conditions for future aggressive action against NATO member states and their neighbors.[13] Russian electronic warfare (EW) exercises in Kaliningrad may have caused unprecedently high levels of GPS jamming across northern and central Poland and the southern Baltic region on December 25-27, 2023 and January 10 and 16, 2024.[14] ISW continues to assess that Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022 not to defend Russia against a nonexistent threat from NATO but rather to weaken and ultimately destroy NATO – a goal he still pursues.[15]

Russian forces will be able to determine the location, tempo, and operational requirements of fighting in Ukraine if Ukraine commits itself to defensive operations throughout 2024 as some US officials are reportedly pressing Kyiv to do. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on January 19 that US officials are advocating for Ukraine to take a more "conservative" operational approach focused on holding current territory and generating materiel and forces in 2024 for future counteroffensive operations in 2025.[16] One US official reportedly argued that a strategy of "active

defense" would allow Ukraine to build out operational requirements and prepare for a counteroffensive in 2025.[17] US military doctrine defines an active defense as the "employment of limited offensive action and counterattacks to deny a contested area or position to the enemy." [18] Ukrainian officials have stated that Ukrainian forces are conducting active defensive operations in areas where Russian forces are engaged in localized offensive efforts.[19] An active defense throughout the theater, however, would require routine and widespread Ukrainian counterattacks and therefore still demand that Ukrainian forces commit considerable offensive capabilities to the front. *FT* reported that US officials believe that Ukrainian forces still could opportunistically exploit weak spots in the Russian defense while conducting a theater-wide active defense.[20] Limited opportunistic counterattacks - especially when not resourced adequately- are unlikely to result in gains commensurate with the resources they will inevitably consume, however.

A theater-wide defensive posture would cede the strategic initiative to Russia and permit Russia to launch major attacks at times of its choosing, forcing Ukraine to burn scarce resources it would supposedly be generating during a period of "active defense." Former Ukrainian Defense Minister Andriy Zahorodnyuk stated to *FT* that focusing on defense without any offensive component would be "a mistake of historic proportions" for Ukraine as it would hand Russian President Vladimir Putin the initiative and allow Putin to double down on ongoing efforts to convince the West and the rest of the world that Ukraine cannot win the war.[21] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov similarly stated that Ukrainian forces need to continue to press Russian forces, particularly through operations that target Russian logistics in occupied Crimea.[22] A Ukrainian "active defense" into 2025 would cede the theater-wide initiative to Russian forces for at least a year and possibly longer, allowing the Russian command to determine where, when, and at what scale fighting occurs over that period. This extended period of theater initiative would also give the Russian command significant control over determining what resources both Ukrainian and Russian forces must bring to bear. The Russian command would therefore have an ample operational window to conduct a series of campaigns of differing intensities across the theater in Ukraine that could be specifically designed to constrain and degrade critical Ukrainian operational capacities needed for a future counter-offensive.

Offensive and defensive operations place similar requirements and constraints on Ukrainian materiel and personnel, and Ukrainian defensive operations do not necessarily present Ukraine with more opportunities to husband materiel and expand reserves for future counteroffensive operations. Russian and Ukrainian forces rely on the same weapons and equipment to conduct both defensive and offensive operations. Equipment such as armored vehicles, artillery, and drones are just as critical for defending positions as they are for capturing positions. Defensive operations do not eliminate manpower requirements or losses, moreover, as holding positions and counterattacking can produce significant force requirements and losses, particularly when the aggressor can set the terms of battle each time. The stability of a defensive line relies in part on the ability of defending forces to conduct sufficient rotations, rapidly reinforce weakened sectors of the frontline, establish physical fortifications, and when necessary, conduct orderly withdrawals from threatened positions, all of which require significant resources and a significant amount of committed and immediately available manpower. Offensive operations have required more materiel and manpower than defensive operations in Ukraine as in most wars, but both Russian and Ukrainian forces have regularly suffered significant losses on the defensive as well.[23]

Just as defensive operations do not guarantee that Ukraine will be able to amass resources for future counteroffensives, offensive operations do not necessarily preclude Russia from continuing efforts to build out stockpiles of equipment and establish operational reserves. ISW currently assesses that the tempo of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine and Russia's ongoing crypto-mobilization campaign is enabling Russian forces to conduct regular operational-level rotations but that Russian forces are unlikely to be able to rapidly establish operational reserves.[24] Russian forces have recently expended considerable amounts of equipment on failed offensive efforts in eastern Ukraine and are currently consuming artillery ammunition far faster than Russia's gradually mobilized defense industrial base (DIB) can produce.[25] Ukrainian officials have indicated that Russian forces are funneling newly produced weapons and ammunition to the frontline for immediate use and not for expanding stockpiles for future operations.[26] These constraints on Russian materiel and manpower are not inevitable characteristics of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine, however. Russian forces could ease these constraints while still conducting offensive operations if the Russian command changed the intensity or tactics of these operations, intensified force generation efforts, or significantly expanded efforts to mobilize Russia's DIB. Granting Russia a year or more of holding the theater-wide initiative would allow the Russian command to choose freely between prioritizing its own offensive efforts and operational requirements, amassing its own resources for future use, and forcing Ukraine to expend the resources Kyiv would be seeking to amass for future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.

Russian forces will likely choose to conduct localized offensive operations as well as larger offensive efforts throughout the theater in order to force Ukraine to commit scarce materiel and manpower to defensive efforts. Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated on January 19 that the entire eastern front from Kupyansk to Bakhmut is active and reported intensified Russian assaults in the Kupyansk-Lyman and Bakhmut directions. [27] Fityo warned that while Ukrainian forces are destroying Russian tanks and armored vehicles, Russian forces have "a large reserve of resources." [28] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Russian forces have recently "switched to the offensive" in certain areas of the Lyman direction, particularly west of Svatove and west and southwest of Kreminna. [29] Mashovets noted that Russian forces are likely preparing for larger-scale actions in the Lyman direction in the near future. [30] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger also claimed that Russian forces have begun a "massive offensive" in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction. [31] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may intensify efforts to capture Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast in the coming weeks. [32] Russian sources have repeatedly acknowledged Russia's intent to continue active operations throughout Ukraine intended to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [33]

FT also reported, citing unspecified Ukrainian officials, that Russian forces are planning to conduct a large-scale offensive in Ukraine in the summer of 2024 and will attempt to capture the rest of the four illegally annexed oblasts (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts). [34] *FT*'s unspecified Ukrainian sources did not rule out the possibility of Russian forces attempting to recapture Kharkiv or Kyiv cities. [35] German outlet *BILD* reported similar Russian plans on December 14, 2023, and ISW noted at the time that Russia's reported plans for the war are generally consistent with ongoing localized offensive operations in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. [36] Russian offensive operations in Ukraine will likely not have to achieve significant territorial advances to force Ukraine to expend valuable and limited resources on defensive efforts. Ukrainian forces will likely be unable to husband materiel and personnel while defending against Russian offensive operations, localized or large-scale, that are meant to prevent them from doing so. **Ukraine would risk consuming resources it hoped to conserve for its own counteroffensive operations in efforts to stop continuing Russian attacks, likely while losing ground, if it went over to the strategic defensive as some US officials are apparently recommending.** The side in war that holds the initiative generally has the advantage, and it is unwise to suggest that Ukraine should cede that advantage to Russia for longer than is absolutely necessary.

US officials reportedly assess that Ukraine will have to fight a long war and continue efforts to secure as much security assistance as possible for Ukraine before 2025 while expecting that positional fighting may continue in Ukraine until 2026. *CNN* reported on January 19 that US President Joe Biden, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines met with US lawmakers on January 17 to urge lawmakers to support additional security assistance to Ukraine. [37] Biden Administration officials highlighted air defense systems and artillery ammunition as key Ukrainian capabilities that could be depleted without additional US aid, ending Ukraine's ability to conduct long-range strikes against occupied Crimea and Russia's Black Sea Fleet. [38] An unspecified US official told *CNN* that getting as much aid to Ukraine approved as possible before 2025 is "on the minds of a lot of folks." [39] *CNN* reported that unspecified US intelligence officials assess that the war will last at least two more years, with some assessing there may be up to five years of fighting. *CNN* reported that unspecified US officials do not believe that a *short-term* "drop-off" in US assistance to Ukraine will have a major battlefield impact, but that a *long-term* lack of US assistance could allow Russia to regain momentum by stockpiling weapons produced domestically and by Iran and North Korea, however. [40] **ISW continues to assess that the positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate and could be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West and Russia and that the collapse of Western aid to Ukraine would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and significant Russian advances further west, likely all the way to the western Ukrainian border with NATO member states.** [41]

Russia is trying to mend its relationship with South Korea to mitigate the impacts of its growing reliance on North Korea. Russian Ambassador to South Korea Georgy Zinoviev stated on January 18 that Russia would "welcome" South Korea into the circle of Russia's "friendly countries" and suggested that South Korean businesses should invest in the restoration of occupied Donbas. [42] Zinoviev claimed that South Korea does not want to see Russia strategically defeated in Ukraine and warned South Korea against supplying military aid to Ukraine. Zinoviev also falsely claimed that Russian-North Korean cooperation is not violating any international sanctions. Recent direct signaling from South Korean officials suggests that South Korea is increasingly at odds with the Kremlin, particularly due to growing Russian cooperation with Pyongyang. South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol stated on September 17, 2023 that Seoul believes that Russian and North Korean military-technical agreements may violate UN Security Council sanctions, and South Korean officials have recently warned that North Korea is increasing weapons and ammunition transfers to Russia.

[43] Ukraine-based open-source organization Frontelligence Insight published a report on January 19 mapping the logistics routes along which North Korea is transferring ammunition to Russia for use in Ukraine, highlighting the dramatic impact of North Korean ammunition deliveries on the Russian war effort.[44] Continued Russian cooperation with North Korea is likely further driving South Korea away from Russia, and the Kremlin likely fears the impacts of these shifting dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.

Protests in support of an imprisoned prominent Bashkort activist continued in the Republic of Bashkortostan, but Kremlin mouthpieces denied reports that the protests are significant in scale. Russian opposition sources reported that anywhere from "hundreds" to 1,500 supporters of imprisoned Bashkort activist Fail Alysnov protested in Bashkortostan's capital Ufa on January 19 and that Russian Special Purpose Mobile Units (OMON) detained at least 10 demonstrators.[45] Russian authorities sentenced Alysnov to four years imprisonment on January 11 for "inciting hatred" and publicized the ruling on January 17, prompting mass protests outside the courthouse in Baymak, Bashkortostan.[46] Footage published on January 19 shows dozens to hundreds of Alysnov's supporters demonstrating in the center of Ufa, and footage published later in the day suggests that the protests concluded for the day.[47] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on January 19 that there were no mass riots in Bashkortostan and that local law enforcement is handling "individual" local demonstrations.[48] A Russian political blogger, who reported on the initial protests and denounced Alysnov as a "separatist" with "neo-fascist" values, claimed that no more than 50 people protested in Ufa and that half had dispersed by midday – a claim inconsistent with footage of the actual protests. [49]

The Russian government continues efforts to codify legal oversight of the activities of migrants living in Russia. The Russian Cabinet of Ministers approved an action plan for the State Concept of Migration Policy, which the Russian government will implement throughout 2024-2025. [50] The action plan includes six sections that address the entry of foreign citizens to Russian territory; the assimilation of foreigners into Russian society; the free movement of students, scientific personnel, and teaching staff between Russia and other countries; and the prevention of violations to Russian migration laws.[51] The action plan also requires the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and Federal Security Service (FSB) to submit proposals by March 20, 2024 to the Cabinet of Ministers on how to strengthen punishments for foreigners who violate Russian laws.[52] The plan also includes several provisions to facilitate the integration of migrants into Russia's domestic sphere including Russian language proficiency assessments and assimilation courses to help foreigners internalize Russian "traditional spiritual and moral values." [53] Migrants will also have to create a "digital profile" by the end of 2024, which will allow the Russian government to track arrivals of those coming from countries that have a visa-free entry regime with Russia, as well as to expand the collection of biometric data of foreigners who arrive at Moscow airports.[54] ISW previously assessed that Russia was using similar digital surveillance technologies to expand its societal control toolkit during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and it appears that the Kremlin is applying such surveillance and control measures to monitor the activities of foreigners in Russia.[55] The Kremlin likely seeks to quickly enact this action plan in order to gain more oversight over foreigners and manage growing tensions with some migrant communities within Russia.[56]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree allocating funds for the search, registration, and legal protection of Russian property abroad, which includes property in former territories of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.[57] The decree directs the Russian Presidential Administration's Foreign Property Management Enterprise and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) with power and funds to search for, register, and legally protect "property," though the exact parameters of what constitutes current or historical Russian property are unclear. The Kremlin may use the "protection" of its claimed property in countries outside of its internationally recognized borders to forward soft power mechanisms in post-Soviet and neighboring states ultimately aimed at internal destabilization.[58] A prominent milblogger responded to the decree by implausibly calling for Russia to start enacting the law in "Alaska" and throughout a significant portion of eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.[59]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russia is conducting an information operation to misrepresent NATO's defensive Steadfast Defender 2024 exercises – a response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Russian threats directed towards NATO members - as provocative.**
- **Russian forces will be able to determine the location, tempo, and operational requirements of fighting in Ukraine if Ukraine commits itself to defensive operations throughout 2024 as some US officials are reportedly pressing Kyiv to do.**
- **US officials reportedly assess that Ukraine will have to fight a long war and continue efforts to secure as much security assistance as possible for Ukraine before 2025 while**

- expecting that positional fighting may continue in Ukraine until 2026.
- Russia is trying to mend its relationship with South Korea to mitigate the impacts of its growing reliance on North Korea.
 - Protests in support of an imprisoned prominent Bashkort activist continued in the Republic of Bashkortostan, but Kremlin mouthpieces denied reports that the protests are significant in scale.
 - The Russian government continues efforts to codify legal oversight of the activities of migrants living in Russia.
 - Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree allocating funds for the search, registration, and legal protection of Russian property abroad, which includes property in former territories of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.
 - Russian forces recently made confirmed advances southeast of Kupyansk, and Ukrainian forces recently regained positions southeast of Kupyansk amid continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact.
 - The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion stated on January 19 that it will resume fighting on the frontlines in Ukraine when the period of positional fighting ends and will "continue to serve" after the war, presumably subordinated to Rosgvardia.
 - Russian occupation authorities continue to leverage the provision of social benefits and healthcare to augment passportization efforts in occupied Ukraine.
-

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 18, 2024

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

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

January 18, 2024, 7:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:00pm ET on January 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW has added a new section on Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) efforts to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to track the development of Ukraine's DIB and the international support for Ukraine's DIB efforts. ISW will be publishing its assessments in this section based on public announcements, media reporting, and official statements.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine remain unchanged and that Russia is not interested in negotiations with Ukraine or the West. Lavrov stated at a press conference on January 18 that Russia "will achieve the goals of its 'special military operation' consistently and persistently."^[1] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) readout of this speech included a link to Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 24, 2022 speech in which Putin outlined Russia's goals of "demilitarizing" and "denazifying" Ukraine and his demand that NATO commit not to admit new members – goals which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.^[2] Lavrov reiterated that these goals are unchanged, claiming that "serious" talks about the "realistic" conditions for ending the war "presuppose [Ukraine's] renunciation of Nazi ideology, Nazi rhetoric, racism towards everything Russian, and entry into NATO."^[3] Lavrov attempted to justify these conditions as necessary for preserving the Ukrainian people's independence and identity, despite the fact that ISW has routinely documented how Russian forces and occupation officials have been engaging in large-scale and deliberate ethnic cleansing campaigns and efforts to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, and ethnicity in areas that Russian forces occupy.^[4] Lavrov also denied Ukraine's agency as a sovereign state, claiming that "it is not Ukraine that will decide when to stop and start talking [with Russia] seriously" about the end of the conflict, but that it is the West that will make this decision. Lavrov dismissed a question about recent media publications about the possibility of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, stating that "rumors are just that - rumors." Lavrov claimed that the West – not Russia – is to blame for the absence of negotiations and threateningly stated that "those [in the West] who refuse [to negotiate] must understand that the longer they wait, the harder it will be to negotiate" and that "there is no hope that Russia will be 'defeated.'" Lavrov made similar statements on December 15, 2023, suggesting that the Kremlin believes that the longer the war continues, the more territory Russia will be able to occupy, and that the course of the war will increasingly weaken Ukraine's negotiating position.^[5]

Lavrov also claimed that support of the war has unified the Russian people and strengthened Russian identity. Lavrov claimed that the war contributed to the "cleansing of people who do not feel involved in" ethnic Russian history and culture and the history and culture of the Russian state.[6] Lavrov claimed that some of these people left Russia at the beginning of the war, but that an "overwhelming part of [Russian] society came together in an unprecedented way." Lavrov's statements are meant to frame Russian society as unified around the war, despite heavy Kremlin efforts to crack down on any dissent and disproportionately amplify factions who support the war. Lavrov's statements also indicate that the Kremlin continues to lack a unified position about the return to Russia of those citizens who previously left, as some Kremlin officials, including Putin, have celebrated the trend of Russians returning from abroad, whereas others have publicly threatened them.[7]

The battlespace in Ukraine continues to be the center of the technological offense-defense race between Russian and Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on January 18 that Russian forces "learn quickly enough" and have completely adapted the Kh-101 air-launched cruise missile compared to the model that Russia used in 2022.[8] Skibitskyi stated that new Kh-101s are equipped with an active electronic warfare (EW) system and "thermal traps" to prevent the missiles from emitting trackable heat signatures.[9] Skibitskyi noted that Ukrainian forces need to innovate and adapt in response to Russian adaptations to "prevent the loss of territories."^[10] The GUR assessment of Russian technological innovation in the air domain is consistent with ISW's previous observations that Russian forces are adapting their methods and means for conducting strikes on Ukraine, and that Ukraine in turn must adapt and innovate with Western support to respond to such strikes.^[11] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrei Medvedev identified similar adaptation-response dynamics in a January 18 post where he discussed the use of drones by both Russian and Ukrainian forces.^[12] Medvedev stated that Russia has opted for the mass production of drones, leading to the production of large numbers of drones that lack the technological adaptations needed to compete with Ukrainian drones based on battlefield experience. Medvedev noted that Ukrainian forces are constantly improving their drones and warned that constant Ukrainian innovation may eventually make Russian mass-produced drones ineffective. Medvedev's discussion of the importance of constant technological adaptation and innovation on the battlefield emphasizes ISW's assessment that Russian and Ukrainian forces are engaged in a technological and tactical offense-defense race.^[13]

Recent widespread GPS disruptions across Poland and the Baltic region are prompting speculation about the potential operation of Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems in the region. Polish outlet *Radio Zet* cited data from the GPSJAM GPS interference tracking site on January 16 that showed unprecedently high levels of GPS jamming across northern and eastern Poland, including across Warsaw and as far south as Łódź.^[14] GPSJAM data also shows similarly high levels of GPS jamming across the southern Baltic Sea and northwestern and central Poland between December 25-27, 2023, and on January 10, 2024.^[15] Polish media outlets suggested that the December 2023 outages may have been caused either by unspecified NATO military exercises in the Baltic region or could be linked to recent Russian EW tests in the Kaliningrad region.^[16] Swedish Military Intelligence and Security Service (MUST) opened a case into the disturbances on January 12 in light of Russian Baltic Fleet EW exercises.^[17] Swedish Lieutenant Colonel Joakim Paasikivi stated on January 6 that he believes that recent GPS interference levels are a result of "Russian influence activities or so-called hybrid warfare," and noted that Russia has previously interfered with GPS signals in northern Europe to protect Russian activities in Murmansk Oblast or disrupt NATO exercises.^[18] Russian media reported that elements of the Russian Baltic Fleet have been training with the Borisoglebsk-2 EW system in Kaliningrad Oblast since mid-December 2023, which some sources linked to the disturbances.^[19] ISW cannot independently verify the cause of the GPS jamming levels at this time, but the suggestion that Russian EW capabilities in Kaliningrad Oblast could so significantly impact Poland and the Baltic region is notable.

The French Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 18 that it launched an "artillery coalition" to strengthen support for Ukraine amid continued Ukrainian statements that Russian forces in Ukraine have superior artillery capabilities.^[20] The French MoD stated that it launched the "Artillery for Ukraine" coalition – one of five "capability" coalitions within the Contact Group for the Defense of Ukraine, which also include coalitions that aim to help support Ukraine with air defense, armored vehicles, air force capabilities, and maritime security.^[21] The French MoD stated the "artillery coalition," which France will co-chair with the US, will provide Ukrainian forces with artillery capabilities in the short term and aims to build out Ukrainian artillery capabilities in the long term through industrial partnerships.^[22] French Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu also announced that France will deliver six Caesar artillery systems to Ukraine in the coming weeks and supply 50 AASM Hammer glide bombs to Ukraine per month starting in January 2024.^[23] Lecornu stated that France can produce 72 Caesar artillery systems for Ukraine in 2024 and will spend 50 million euros (\$54.3 million) to finance the production of 12 of the Caesar systems, but that France will need partner support to finance the 60 other systems.^[24]

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rустем Умеров stated that ammunition shortages are an urgent problem for Ukrainian forces and that Russian efforts to expand Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) have enabled Russian forces to launch tens of thousands of artillery projectiles at Ukrainian positions every day.[25] Umerov stated that Russian artillery fire exceeds Ukrainian artillery fire at ratios between five-to-one and ten-to-one depending on the sector of the front and combat intensity.[26] Ukrainian officials have previously indicated that a combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel.[27] Umerov stated that improved artillery capabilities are a key necessity for winning the war and that Ukraine is pursuing efforts to expand shell production.[28] Ukraine is also currently expanding its production of first-person view (FPV) drones to offset the impacts of artillery ammunition shortages with the goal of producing one million FPV drones in 2024.[29]

Ukrainian partisans and satellite imagery confirmed that Ukrainian strikes against occupied Crimea in late December 2023 sank a Russian Tarantul-class corvette near Sevastopol. The Crimean-based "Atesh" Ukrainian partisan group reported on January 18 that it discovered a sunken Tarantul-class corvette in Hradska Bay, Sevastopol, and satellite imagery of the Atesh-provided coordinates confirms that the corvette sank between December 28 and 31, 2023.[30] Russian and Crimean occupation officials claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian air and naval drone strikes against Sevastopol on December 28 and 30, 2023.[31] This confirmation of a previously unaccounted-for successful Ukrainian strike indicates that Ukraine's recent strike campaign against occupied Crimea may have been more successful than has been confirmed thus far by open sources. [32] Ukrainian forces previously conducted a successful strike campaign against Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets in summer 2023 that forced Russian forces to move ships away from its main base in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea.[33]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a successful drone strike on Russian military facilities in Leningrad Oblast on January 18. A source within the GUR told Ukrainian outlet *Suspilne* on January 18 that there were confirmed strikes against unspecified targets in Leningrad Oblast and noted that Russian military facilities in St. Petersburg are "within reach" of Ukrainian forces.[34] Russian media stated that Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems suppressed two Ukrainian drones over the Gulf of Finland and that Russian forces shot down a third Ukrainian drone near the St. Petersburg oil terminal.[35] A Russian source claimed that this is the first attempted Ukrainian strike on Leningrad Oblast in the course of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [36] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that it intercepted one drone over Leningrad Oblast in the early morning hours of January 18.[37]

Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 17 to 18. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 33 Shahed-136/131 drones at unspecified targets throughout Ukraine and two S-300 ground-to-air missiles in the direction of Kharkiv Oblast.[38] Ukrainian air defenses downed 22 Shaheds and an unspecified number of Shaheds did not strike their intended targets.[39] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Synehubov reported that Russian S-300 missiles struck Chuhuiv in Kharkiv Oblast.[40]

The European Union (EU) Parliament voted to endorse another step in a rule of law procedure that could eventually suspend Hungary's voting rights after Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban vetoed an EU vote for further military assistance to Ukraine. The EU Parliament endorsed both a condemnation of Orban's recent veto of assistance to Ukraine and a nonbinding resolution that calls on EU member states to "take action and to determine whether Hungary has committed serious and persistent breaches of EU values" in accordance with the EU's rule of law framework.[41] The EU rule of law framework establishes a three-step process, including an assessment, recommendation, and follow-up monitoring, to determine and prevent any threats to the rule of law in the EU.[42] The EU notably declared in 2022 that it can no longer consider Hungary a "full democracy" but rather a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy," as Hungary's "respect for democratic norms and standards is absent."[43] *Reuters* noted that a possible deprivation of Hungary's EU voting rights through this procedure in accordance with EU Treaty Article 7 is unlikely to occur quickly and that the EU vote aims to pressure Orban ahead of the EU leaders' summit on February 1, which will include discussions for further assistance to Ukraine.[44]

Russia and the Central African Republic (CAR) are in negotiations regarding Russian military basing in CAR. Russian Ambassador to CAR Alexander Bikantov stated that Russia's and CAR's defense ministries are discussing the creation of a Russian military base in CAR and are currently selecting the base's location.[45] Russian outlet *RBK* reported that the Russian Embassy in CAR stated that Russian and Central African officials have not yet finalized the size of the potential Russian contingent in CAR or the date of its arrival.[46] Kremlin-backed outlet *Africa Initiative* reported on January 16 that CAR Presidential Advisor Fidel Nguandika stated that CAR wants Russia to build a military base in the country and that CAR's government has "already provided a site in Beringo, 80km

from Bangui, where there is an international airport."^[47] The site in Beringo reportedly can accommodate up to 10,000 personnel.^[48] The Kremlin continues efforts to expand Russia's influence in Africa through the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) controlled Africa Corps and is likely attempting to expand the Africa Corps' operations in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and CAR.^[49] The Russian military's apparent ability to negotiate deploying expeditionary forces to the CAR indicates that Russia has offset some of the acute manpower shortages that the Russian military experienced in 2022 and 2023. The Russian military hastily redeployed forces from Russia's (small) foreign bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Armenia, and Syria, to Russia in 2022, likely in response to acute personnel shortages from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.^[50]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine remain unchanged and that Russia is not interested in negotiations with Ukraine or the West.
- The battlespace in Ukraine continues to be the center of the technological offense-defense race between Russian and Ukrainian forces.
- Recent widespread GPS disruptions across Poland and the Baltic region are prompting speculation about the potential operation of Russian electronic warfare (EW) systems in the region.
- The French Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 18 that it launched an "artillery coalition" to strengthen support for Ukraine amid continued Ukrainian statements that Russian forces in Ukraine have superior artillery capabilities.
- Ukrainian partisans and satellite imagery confirmed that Ukrainian strikes against occupied Crimea in late December 2023 sank a Russian Tarantul-class corvette near Sevastopol.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reportedly conducted a successful drone strike on Russian military facilities in Leningrad Oblast on January 18.
- The European Union (EU) Parliament voted to endorse another step in a rule of law procedure that could eventually suspend Hungary's voting rights after Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban vetoed an EU vote for further military assistance to Ukraine.
- Russia and the Central African Republic (CAR) are in negotiations regarding Russian military basing in CAR.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area amid continued positional engagements along the front.
- Russian officials continue to target naturalized migrants as part of ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to restore logistics infrastructure in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 17, 2024

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

Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 17, 2024, 8pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on January 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW has added a new section on Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) efforts to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to track the development of Ukraine's DIB and the international support for Ukraine's DIB efforts. ISW will be publishing its assessments in this section based on public announcements, media reporting, and official statements.

A Ukrainian intelligence official reported that Russian forces lack the necessary operational reserves to conduct simultaneous offensive efforts in more than one direction in Ukraine. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported on January 17 that Russia does not have enough reserves to conduct large-scale offensive operations in several directions at the same time.^[1] Skibitskyi stated that it is impossible for Russian forces to conduct strategically or operationally significant offensive operations without "powerful" reserves and implied that Russia does not have such reserves.^[2] Skibitskyi noted that

mobilization measures are ongoing in Russia, likely referring to the current Russian crypto-mobilization campaign that relies heavily on volunteer recruitment and the coercive mobilization of convicts and migrants.[3] It is unclear if Russia's ongoing crypto-mobilization campaign has provided or would be able to provide the increased number of personnel that an intensified Russian offensive effort would require. Skibitskyi reported on January 15 that Russia recruits about 30,000 personnel per month, which the Russian military uses to replenish losses and form reserve regiments, and that Russia would need to conduct "mobilization" (likely referring to another "partial mobilization" like Russia conducted in September 2022 or a large-scale general mobilization) to establish a "powerful strategic reserve."^[4] Skibitskyi's statements suggest that although the Russian military is able to generate enough manpower to conduct routine operational-level rotations in Ukraine, Russian forces may not necessarily be able to generate manpower at a rate that would allow Russian forces to quickly re-establish the operational reserves necessary for simultaneous offensive efforts in several directions.^[5]

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev reiterated on January 17 that the elimination of Ukrainian statehood and independence remains one of Russia's core war aims. Medvedev claimed that "the presence of an independent state on historical Russian territories" is a "constant reason for the resumption of hostilities" and that Ukraine's very existence as an independent state is therefore "mortally dangerous" for Ukrainians.^[6] Medvedev claimed that an independent Ukraine will never be a legitimate state regardless of who leads the government and that a future conflict for Ukrainian territory is inevitable whether or not it is a new conflict or the continuation of the current Russian war in Ukraine.^[7] Medvedev's January 17 statement is one of many recent signals from senior Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, that Putin and the Kremlin have no interest in good-faith negotiations with Ukraine and that Putin's maximalist war aims in Ukraine remain unchanged.^[8] Medvedev attempted to portray Russia's commitment to these maximalist objectives as unwavering by claiming that Ukrainian accession to the European Union (EU) or NATO will not prevent future conflict.^[9] Medvedev notably did not define what he considers to be historical Russian territories, but Putin has defined historical Russian lands as the territory of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union.^[10] Medvedev's opacity may be intentional, as the Kremlin's loosely defined concept of "historical Russian territories" allows the Kremlin to pursue expansionist objectives wherever and whenever it so determines in a broad area including Central Asia, the Caucuses and parts of Eastern Europe.^[11] Medvedev's emphasis on the destruction of any Ukrainian state on these "historical Russian territories" could indicate that some actors in the Kremlin prioritize expansionist objectives over the identified objective of regime change under calls for the "de-nazification" of Ukraine.

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes largely targeting Odesa and Kharkiv cities on the night of January 16 to 17. The Ukrainian Air Force stated that Russian forces launched two S-300 missiles from Belgorod Oblast towards Kharkiv City and 20 Shahed-136/-131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and that Ukrainian forces shot down 19 of the drones over Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kirovohrad oblasts.^[12] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Russian drones largely targeted Odesa City.^[13] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones and missiles damaged residential buildings in Odesa and Kharkiv cities.^[14]

Ukraine successfully employed a Ukrainian-refurbished hybrid air defense system (FrankenSAM) for the first time. Ukrainian Minister of Strategic Industries Oleksandr Kamyshin stated on January 17 that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian Shahed drone with a hybrid air defense system — referring to the so-called FrankenSAM systems that merge advanced Western air defense missiles with modified Soviet launchers or other missile launchers — for the first time.^[15] Kamyshin noted that the full development of Ukraine's own air defenses will take years, so Ukraine is creating home-made air defense systems using Soviet components and Western missiles. ISW continues to assess that Western provisions of air defense systems and missiles remain crucial as Ukraine develops its defense industrial base (DIB).^[16] Kamyshin also stated that Ukraine has doubled its ammunition production for NATO-caliber artillery systems.^[17] Ukraine began domestically producing 155mm shells, which are a NATO-standard used by Western-supplied guns that Ukraine's defense industrial base (DIB) had never produced before, no later than September 2023.^[18]

Germany and France announced additional military assistance to Ukraine on January 16. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced on January 16 that Germany will provide Ukraine with military goods worth more than seven billion euros (roughly \$7.62 billion) in 2024.^[19] The German government announced that the aid package includes ammunition for Leopard tanks, armored personnel carriers, reconnaissance drones, and Marder infantry fighting vehicles.^[20] Germany provided 5.4 billion euros (\$5.89 billion) worth of military assistance to Ukraine in 2023.^[21] French President Emmanuel Macron announced on January 16 that he would finalize a bilateral security agreement with Kyiv during a visit to Ukraine in February 2024.^[22] Macron also stated that France will

send 40 SCALP long-range missiles and “several hundred” unspecified bombs to Ukraine in the coming weeks.

Western officials highlighted Ukraine’s battlefield successes at the Davos World Economic Forum on January 16 and 17. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan noted that Ukraine has opened a corridor to export grain in the Black Sea, weakened the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF), and liberated more than half of its territory that Russian forces captured since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion.[23] Sullivan also highlighted Ukraine’s efforts to develop its own defense industrial base (DIB).[24] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia is unlikely in the near future — in line with ISW’s long-standing assessment that Russia is not interested in engaging in meaningful, good-faith negotiations with Ukraine.[25] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo and called on them to support Ukraine’s peace formula.[26] Zelensky also met with Polish President Andrzej Duda and discussed bilateral relations, the situation on the battlefield in Ukraine, and Ukraine’s accession to the European Union (EU).[27]

The Russian ultranationalist community will likely concretize xenophobia and insecurities about Russia’s ethnic composition as key shared principles within the community in 2024, as Russian ultranationalists continue to seize on incidents involving migrants and non-ethnic Russian groups to call for anti-migrant policies and express growing hostility towards non-ethnic Russians in Russia. Russian information space actors within the ultranationalist milblogger community have increasingly fixated on singular incidents that implicate migrant communities in acts of violence or resistance in 2023 and have weaponized this rhetoric to call on Russian officials to more widely mobilize migrants to fight in Ukraine, curtail migrants’ access to social and economic opportunities, and substantively change Russia’s existing migration policies.[28] Russian ultranationalists have also increasingly advocated for ethnic Russians to receive more domestic power in Russia and continue to promote hyper-nationalist ideologies that are generating domestic tensions between ethnic minority communities and ethnic Russians.[29] They may malign the nominal rights to autonomy that many non-ethnic Russian communities have through their respective federal Russian republics and are likely to react harshly to discussions centering on the political, economic, and social concerns of non-ethnic Russians.[30]

The Kremlin’s ongoing attempt to court the Russian ultranationalist community will likely generate increasing friction between the Kremlin’s desired rhetoric and policies concerning migration and interethnic relations and those of Russian ultranationalists. Russian officials appear to have tolerated or even endorsed ultranationalists’ increasing anti-migration rhetoric since it likely generated social pressures that have augmented Russian efforts to coerce migrants into military service in Ukraine.[31] The Kremlin now appears to be struggling to reconcile efforts to increase Russian industrial capacity while also coercing migrants into military service and disincentivizing them from working in Russia.[32] Any efforts to appease Russian ultranationalists will likely only exacerbate inconsistent and contradictory Kremlin policies concerning migrants. Hostility towards non-ethnic Russians in Russia directly contradicts Russian President Vladimir Putin’s effort to promote the concept of a wider and ethnically inclusive “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*) that encompasses non-ethnic Russians in both modern Russia and the former territory of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire.[33] The Kremlin continues to rely on the ultranationalist community in its effort to solidify pro-war sentiments, hyper-nationalism, Russian orthodoxy, and “traditional” social values as core tenets of the Russian state.[34] The Kremlin will likely struggle to balance these parallel efforts as Russian ultranationalists display increasing animus to non-ethnic Russians in Russia and in neighboring countries.

Significant protests erupted in Baymak, Bashkortostan Republic, following a Russian court’s guilty verdict for a prominent Bashkort activist, prompting a swift Russian government response as well as backlash from the Russian ultranationalist community. Bashkortostan’s Baymaksky Court found prominent Bashkort activist Fail Alsynov guilty on January 11 of inciting ethnic hatred and sentenced him to four years in prison, which the court announced publicly on January 17 following a closed-door trial.[35] Alsynov allegedly gave a speech on April 28, 2023, that insulted ethnic groups from the Caucasus.[36] Hundreds of Alsynov’s supporters had gathered at the courthouse ahead of his January 17 verdict announcement, and protests involving hundreds to thousands of supporters lasted for hours following the verdict. Some Russian opposition sources reported that 2,000-5,000 people protested in support of Alsynov and that responding Russian authorities detained anywhere from five to several dozen protestors.[37] The reported scale of the Baymak protest appears comparable to if not larger than that of the antisemitic riots in Dagestan in October 2023.[38] Footage shows Russian riot police using tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the protest, two of whom Russian police beat with batons and 20-40 of whom sought medical attention following the protests.[39] Russian law enforcement reportedly detained around 20-40 protestors, and

Alsynov's supporters negotiated with Russian law enforcement to cease protests for the day in exchange for the release of the detained protestors.[40] The protests have dispersed as of this publication, though it is unclear whether activists are planning for further protests on subsequent days. Hundreds to thousands of activists gathered outside the Baymaksky Court in the days leading up to the public announcement of Alsynov's sentence, suggesting that the size of the protests on January 17 was not necessarily spontaneous.[41]

Russian authorities appear to be better equipped to handle the Bashkortostan protests than the October 2023 Dagestan protests. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on January 17 that it is opening a criminal investigation into the protest for the organization of and participation in "mass riots" and for the use of violence against authorities.[42] Multiple Telegram channels that the Bashkort activists reportedly used to coordinate and spread news of the protest became temporarily unavailable on January 17, a possible Russian government censorship attempt to limit the protest from growing or spreading.[43] The Russian ultranationalist community latched onto the Bashkortostan protest in anger despite the swift government response. Some criticized Alsynov's supporters as "extremists" and "wolves in sheep's clothing" who only aim to separate Bashkortostan from Russia.[44] Others amplified footage of military personnel in Bashkortostan's "Minigali Shaimuratov" Battalion disavowing the protesters and Alsynov as "traitors," "extremists," and "separatists." [45] The Russian government and Bashkort military personnel's swift response suggest that the Russian government may intensify efforts to ensure that non-ethnic Russian communities support the war in Ukraine. Russian sources' characterization of the protesters as "separatists" organized by outside forces suggests that Russian ultranationalists will continue to label any notable unrest from non-ethnic Russians as a hybrid warfare attack against Russia.[46]

Widespread Russian milblogger complaints about an Uzbek community leader in Russia prompted the Russian Investigative Committee to open a criminal investigation, suggesting that the Russian government may feel increasing pressure to respond to milblogger demands as the ultranationalist information space coalesces around xenophobic and anti-migrant ideals. The Russian Investigative Committee announced on January 17 that it opened a criminal investigation into Interregional Uzbek Community "Vatandosh" President Usman Baratov for a social media post allegedly "insulting the participants of the special military operation" after unspecified Russian military correspondents appealed to Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin. [47] Russian ultranationalist milbloggers widely criticized Baratov's social media posts and called for Baratov to leave Russia.[48] The Investigative Committee's swift response to milbloggers' requests may prompt them to make future demands of the Russian government. The Investigative Committee's prompt announcement also suggests that the Russian government is monitoring and potentially responding to demands of the Russian ultranationalist community — a subsection of the Russian information space that it routinely attempts to cultivate and co-opt to advance government narratives. Russian milbloggers also widely criticized an allegedly naturalized Russian citizen of Azeri ethnicity against whom the Investigative Committee opened a case for "attempted murder and incitement of hatred based on ethnicity" on January 17.[49] Russian milbloggers increasingly fixate on crimes that non-ethnic Russians reportedly commit, and some milbloggers have claimed that unspecified non-ethnic Russian diasporas control entire sectors of the Russian economy.[50] The Russian ultranationalist community's framing of non-ethnic Russian diaspora communities as an internal threat to Russian security and economic interests are irreconcilable with the Kremlin's portrayal of Russia as a harmonious multiethnic society. The Russian ultranationalist community may increasingly pressure the Russian government to take actions against migrant and non-ethnic Russian diaspora communities, which may exacerbate the fracture between the ultranationalist community and the government.

The Russian military command continues to convict Russian officers in cases associated with Ukrainian strikes as part of a likely effort to improve discipline across the Russian military. Moscow's Second Western District Military Court sentenced the former head of Rosgvardia's maritime department, Colonel Sergei Volkov, to six years in prison on January 16 for allegedly supplying low-quality radar systems to protect the Kerch Strait Bridge in occupied Crimea and a gas pipeline from Krasnodar Krai to occupied Crimea from Ukrainian drone strikes.[51] The court found Volkov guilty of "abuse of office with grave consequences" for his participation in a 400 million ruble (\$4.5 million) corruption scheme involving the acquisition of two radar systems that Volkov reportedly knew could not properly defend against Ukrainian drones.[52] The Second Western District Military Court convicted two Russian air defense officers on December 6, 2023, for negligence in failing to prevent a Ukrainian strike on Russian territory.[53] Russian authorities also previously detained the commander of the 1st Special Purpose Air and Missile Defense Army on corruption and bribery charges, likely for failing to prevent drone strikes against Moscow City in July and August 2023. [54] The Russian military command likely intends to set a precedent across the Russian military concerning possible punishment for failures to defend against Ukrainian strikes — particularly strikes against high-value targets — regardless of whether the cases explicitly allege that these officers

violated Russian rules of combat duty or tangentially associate the officers' dereliction of duties with corruption schemes.[55] The Russian command likely hopes that these precedents will improve discipline writ large among Russian forces in Ukraine, although ISW has not observed such an effect.

The Kremlin continues efforts to expand Russia's influence in Africa through the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the MoD-controlled Africa Corps. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian military is forming squads of "military instructors" to deploy to African countries, likely referring to the Africa Corps, and that Russia is recruiting these squads in Russia and occupied Ukraine, particularly in Crimea.[56] ISW previously reported that the Africa Corps aims to subsume the Wagner Group's operations in Africa after the Russian MoD failed to directly recruit former Wagner personnel.[57] Russian officials have routinely referred to Wagner personnel operating in Africa as "military instructors" and "advisors" since 2018 despite Wagner's combat roles in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali.[58] The GUR reported that Russia is particularly focused on recruiting Russian reservists who specialized in maintaining air defense systems, former sailors, and other specialists and that Russian reservists are attracted to this opportunity due to high salaries and the hope of avoiding fighting in Ukraine.[59] ISW has previously observed the Africa Corps advertising "high salaries" beginning at 110,000 rubles (\$1,240) but stipulating that interested applicants who are currently fighting in the war in Ukraine cannot transfer to serve in the Africa Corps.[60] The Russian MoD announced on January 17 that Russian Deputy Defense Ministers Colonel General Alexander Fomin and Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov met with Nigerien National Defense Minister Major General Salifou Modi to discuss bilateral military and military-technical cooperation.[61] ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin is likely attempting to expand the Africa Corps' operations in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.[62]

The threat of US secondary sanctions is reportedly having a large-scale effect on Turkish-Russian financial ties. Russian outlet *Kommersant* stated on January 17 that Turkish banks have "universally" begun to refuse to work with Russian banks.[63] *Kommersant* reported that sources indicated that Turkish banks' fear of secondary sanctions sharply increased after the United States authorized secondary sanctions on financial institutions on December 22, 2023, that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion and support the Russian war effort in Ukraine. *Bloomberg* reported on January 16 that at least two state-owned Chinese banks ordered reviews of their business with Russian clients and will sever ties with sanctioned Russian entities and entities tied to the Russian defense industry following the US' December 2022 secondary sanctions authorization.[64]

The Russian government likely continues efforts to gain access to data on Russian citizens. Kremlin newswire *TASS* stated on January 17 that a Moscow court fined Amazon Cloud Services more than 200 million rubles (about \$2,256,400) for not having a representative office in Russia.[65] Russian law stipulates that Russian authorities can fine entities that operate in Russia without opening a branch or representative office in Russia a penalty amounting to one-fifteenth to one-tenth of their total revenue for the year. Russia previously fined Google for a similar law that requires foreign internet-based services to localize databases of Russian users as of July 1, 2021. [66] Russia also previously fined Yandex for failing to adhere to Russian laws regarding the disclosure of users' personal data to the Russian government.[67]

Key Takeaways:

- A Ukrainian intelligence official reported that Russian forces lack the necessary operational reserves to conduct simultaneous offensive efforts in more than one direction in Ukraine.
- Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev reiterated on January 17 that the elimination of Ukrainian statehood and independence remains one of Russia's core war aims.
- Ukraine successfully employed a Ukrainian-refurbished hybrid air defense system (FrankenSAM) for the first time.
- Germany and France announced additional military assistance to Ukraine on January 16.
- The Russian ultranationalist community will likely concretize xenophobia and insecurities about Russia's ethnic composition as key shared principles within the community in 2024, as Russian ultranationalists continue to seize on incidents involving migrants and non-ethnic Russian groups to call for anti-migrant policies and express growing hostility towards non-ethnic Russians in Russia.
- The Kremlin's ongoing attempt to court the Russian ultranationalist community will likely generate increasing friction between the Kremlin's desired rhetoric and policies concerning migration and interethnic relations and those of Russian ultranationalists.

- Significant protests erupted in Baymak, Bashkortostan Republic, following a Russian court's guilty verdict for a prominent Bashkort activist, prompting a swift Russian government response as well as backlash from the Russian ultranationalist community.
- Widespread Russian milblogger complaints about an Uzbek community leader in Russia prompted the Russian Investigative Committee to open a criminal investigation, suggesting that the Russian government may feel increasing pressure to respond to milblogger demands as the ultranationalist information space coalesces around xenophobic and anti-migrant ideals.
- The Russian military command continues to convict Russian officers in cases associated with Ukrainian strikes as part of a likely effort to improve discipline across the Russian military.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to expand Russia's influence in Africa through the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the MoD-controlled Africa Corps.
- The threat of US secondary sanctions is reportedly having a large-scale effect on Turkish-Russian financial ties.
- Positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact on January 17.
- Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov confirmed that Russian authorities are increasing the size of the Rosgvardia contingent in occupied Ukraine to strengthen occupational control.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 16, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Nicole Volkov, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 16, 2024, 7:00pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on January 16. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 17 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW has added a new section on Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) efforts to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to track the development of Ukraine's DIB and the international support for Ukraine's DIB efforts. ISW will be publishing its assessments in this section based on public announcements, media reporting, and official statements.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to demonstrate that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine – which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender – remain unchanged. Putin claimed on January 16 during a meeting with Russian municipal heads that "Ukrainian statehood may suffer an irreparable, very serious blow" if the current battlefield situation continues.^[1] Putin also reiterated Kremlin allegations of the prevalence of Nazism in Ukraine and claimed that "such people...cannot win."^[2] Russia's continued calls for Ukraine's "denazification" are thinly veiled demands for the removal of the elected Ukrainian government and its replacement with a government acceptable to the Kremlin.^[3] Putin reiterated the Kremlin narrative that Ukraine – not Russia – is to blame for the absence of negotiations, claiming that Ukraine's "peace formula" is actually a continuation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's ban on negotiating with Russia and amounts to "prohibitive demands" on the negotiation process.^[4] Putin claimed that any negotiation process is an "attempt to encourage [Russia] to abandon gains [it] has made in the past year and a half" and that this is "impossible."^[5]

The Kremlin appears to lack a consistent framing for current Russian offensive operations to present to the Russian public, despite the fact that Putin appears to be – at times – using his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian military as part of his election campaign.^[6] Putin declared that Russian forces "completely" have the initiative in Ukraine following a failed Ukrainian counteroffensive.^[7] This is a notable departure from Putin's claim on December 14, 2023, that almost all Russian forces are in "the active stage of action" and from Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's previous characterization of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine as an "active defense."^[8] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces have regained the initiative throughout most of the Ukrainian theater but have not seized the battlefield initiative in Kherson Oblast.^[9]

Russian President Vladimir Putin notably amplified a longstanding Kremlin effort to set information conditions for future escalations against the Baltic countries, likely as part of his wider effort to weaken NATO. Putin claimed on January 16 that Latvia and other Baltic states are "throwing [ethnic] Russian people" out of their countries and that this situation "directly affects

[Russia's] security.”[10] Previous changes to Latvia’s immigration law stipulated that Russian citizens’ permanent residence permits would become invalid in September 2023 and that Russian citizens would need to follow the general procedure for obtaining EU permanent residence status in Latvia, including passing a Latvian language exam, by November 30, 2023.[11] The Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs stated in December 2023 that Latvia would deport about 1,200 Russian citizens who failed to apply for a new residence permit by the deadline.[12] Putin has long employed an expansive definition of Russia’s sovereignty and trivialized the sovereignty of former Soviet republics, and Russia has long claimed that it has the right to protect its “compatriots abroad,” including ethnic Russians and Russian speakers beyond Russia’s borders.[13] ISW has not observed any indication that a Russian attack against the Baltics is imminent or likely, but Putin may be setting information conditions for future aggressive Russian actions abroad under the pretext of protecting its “compatriots.” Putin recently threatened Finland in mid-December 2023 and reiterated a world view illustrating that he continues to pursue demanded changes to the NATO alliance that would amount to dismantling it.[14]

Putin subsequently tied alleged security threats to Russia in Eastern Europe to NATO’s “Open Door Policy,” a core principle of the alliance enshrined in its charter that allows it the discretion to admit new members. Putin claimed that NATO “open[ed] the doors to Ukraine and Georgia” in 2008 – referring to the Bucharest Declaration in which NATO promised Ukraine and Georgia paths to membership but took no concrete steps towards opening such paths – and claimed that this declaration went against Ukraine’s 1991 Declaration of Independence that stated that Ukraine is a neutral state.[15] Putin did not mention that the Russian Federation committed “to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine,” which included Crimea and occupied Donbas, in 1994 in exchange for Ukraine’s return of the Soviet Union’s nuclear weapons on its territory to Russia.[16] Sovereignty includes the right of self-determination. Putin claimed that NATO’s 2008 declaration “completely changed the situation in Eastern Europe” and affected Russia’s security. ISW previously assessed that Putin did not invade Ukraine in 2022 to defend Russia against a threat from NATO but rather to weaken and ultimately destroy NATO – a goal he still pursues.[17] The Kremlin and Kremlin-affiliated actors have recently promoted information operations and conducted hybrid warfare tactics aimed at destabilizing NATO and may now be setting information conditions for possible future aggressive Russian actions against NATO countries and their neighbors.[18]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated the importance of defeating Russia in Ukraine at the Davos World Economic Forum on January 16. Zelensky emphasized that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not change – referring to Putin’s maximalist war aims – and noted that all attempts to restore peace have failed two years after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion and 10 years since the illegal annexation of Crimea.[19] Zelensky stated that the Ukrainian military is holding Putin back and that it is better to defeat Russia on the battlefield now than later. Zelensky’s statements are consistent with ISW’s longstanding assessment that the Kremlin is very unlikely to engage in good faith, meaningful peace negotiations.[20] European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that Ukraine needs steady funding and supplies of weapons through 2024 and beyond in order to defend and reclaim its territory, indicating that Europe will continue to play an increasingly active role in supporting Ukraine.[21] Von der Leyen stated that Ukraine can win the war but that the West needs to expand Ukraine’s capabilities.[22] Von der Leyen emphasized Ukraine’s successes throughout the war thus far: “Russia has lost roughly half of its military capabilities,” and Ukraine has recaptured half of the territory that Russian forces captured after the full-scale invasion, pushed back the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), and opened a grain corridor in the Black Sea.

Zelensky continued bilateral meetings with world leaders at the Davos World Economic Forum on January 16. Zelensky discussed US-Ukraine defense cooperation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Russian strikes and NATO summit preparations with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the battlefield situation and Ukraine’s defense needs with Luxembourg Prime Minister Luc Frieden, and Ukrainian operations in and corridors through the Black Sea with business representatives.[23] Zelensky also met with Singaporean President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and invited Shanmugaratnam to join the Ukrainian peace formula and global peace summit.[24]

Russian tactical aviation operations are reportedly decreasing near the Sea of Azov, and Russian aviation capabilities may be degraded after Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and caused severe damage to a Russian Il-22 airborne command post aircraft on the night of January 14. Ukrainian Air Force spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on January 16 that Russian tactical aviation presence over the Sea of Azov is currently at a lower level “than ever before.”[25] Ihnat stated that the A-50 and Il-20 aircraft helped Russian forces detect air targets at a range of up to 600 kilometers and transmitted information to Russian control points in Ukraine in real time.[26] Ihnat stated that this monitoring allowed Russian tactical aviation to see Ukrainian aircraft from afar and increased the effectiveness of tactical aviation operations. [27] Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces only had three A-50 and

six modernized A-50U aircraft in service before January 14, 2024, and Ihnat stated that the destruction of one of these few aircraft would reduce Russian operational capabilities to some extent.[28] Ihnat stated that severe damage to the Il-22 aircraft rendered the aircraft inoperable but that Russian forces would likely replace both the destroyed A-50 and damaged Il-22 aircraft.[29] Ihnat clarified that the destruction of these aircraft will not impact the intensity of Russian missile and drone strikes since Russian forces program these missiles and drones with specified routes and targets from ground positions.[30] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on January 16 that Ukraine must gain air superiority just as it gained superiority in the Black Sea following strikes on Russian naval assets in occupied Crimea.[31]

At least two state-owned Chinese banks reportedly ordered reviews of their business with Russian clients and will sever ties with sanctioned Russian entities and entities with ties to the Russian defense industry. Bloomberg reported on January 16 that people familiar with the matter stated that at least two People's Republic of China (PRC)-owned banks ordered reviews of international transactions with Russian clients after the United States authorized secondary sanctions on financial institutions that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion and support the Russian war effort in Ukraine on December 22, 2023.[32] Bloomberg's sources stated that these Chinese banks are auditing clients' business registrations, authorized beneficiaries, and ultimate controllers to determine whether the clients are Russian, conduct business in Russia, or transfer critical items to Russia through a third country.[33] Bloomberg's sources stated that these banks will sever ties with these clients, regardless of the currency or location of the transactions.[34] Bloomberg reported that the PRC's four largest state-owned banks have a history of complying with previous US sanctions against Iran and North Korea.[35] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov refused to comment on Bloomberg's reporting on January 16.[36] Russia has relied on Chinese entities for dual-use goods for use in Ukraine and for component parts in Russian military equipment.[37] ISW previously assessed that China has likely been heavily involved in various Russian sanctions evasion schemes, but it appears that US secondary sanctions may be threatening enough to force China to abandon many of these schemes.[38] The reported Chinese reaction to the US secondary sanctions further indicates that China has reservations concerning the Kremlin's desired "no limits partnership" between the two states.[39]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov thanked North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui for North Korea's support for Russia in the war during Choe's official state visit to Moscow on January 16.[40] Lavrov highlighted his visit to Pyongyang in October 2023 and Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un in Russia in September 2023 as "only the beginning" to comprehensively developing relations between Russia and North Korea. [41] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that Lavrov and Choe met with Putin to discuss new unspecified Russian-North Korean agreements.[42] Russia is likely advancing efforts to procure ammunition and ballistic missiles from abroad amid reported Russian ammunition shortages and missile production constraints. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi reported that North Korea delivered one million rounds of artillery ammunition to Russia from September to November 2023, and Western and Ukrainian officials have stated that Russian forces have launched at least one North Korean ballistic missile against Ukraine. [43]

The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted a law on its second reading to digitalize Ukrainian military records on January 16.[44] The law will improve the register for mobilized personnel, conscripts, and reservists and introduce the possibility of creating a digital military accounting document.[45] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the draft law will also create an electronic services portal for military personnel and conscripts.[46] The Ukrainian MoD also stated that the draft law will allow Ukraine to strengthen its cyber defense, expand its access to unspecified allies' intelligence, develop and deploy new combat systems, and place its IT systems for military cloud storage in NATO member states, thereby allowing Ukrainian air defense systems currently protecting national data centers to cover military and civilian infrastructure.[47]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to demonstrate that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine – which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender – remain unchanged.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin notably amplified a longstanding Kremlin effort to set information conditions for future escalations against Baltic countries, likely as part of his wider effort to weaken NATO.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated the importance of defeating Russia in Ukraine at the Davos World Economic Forum on January 16.

- Russian tactical aviation operations are reportedly decreasing near the Sea of Azov, and Russian aviation capabilities may be degraded after Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and caused severe damage to a Russian Il-22 airborne command post aircraft on the night of January 14.
- At least two state-owned Chinese banks reportedly ordered reviews of their business with Russian clients and will sever ties with sanctioned Russian entities and entities with ties to the Russian defense industry.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov thanked North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui for North Korea's support for Russia in the war during Choe's official state visit to Moscow on January 16.
- The Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada adopted a law on its second reading to digitalize Ukrainian military records on January 16.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kremenna and Bakhmut as positional engagements continued along the entire frontline.
- Russian State Duma deputies from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) proposed a bill on January 16 that would create a legal status for volunteers of the Russian war in Ukraine that would grant them compensation in case of injury or death.
- Russian occupation officials from occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Donetsk oblasts attended a meeting of Russian municipal representatives in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin on January 16.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 15, 2024

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

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

January 15, 2024, 9:00pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30pm ET on January 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Note: ISW has added a new section on Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) efforts to the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to track the development of Ukraine's DIB and the international support for Ukraine's DIB efforts. ISW will be publishing its assessments in this section based on public announcements, media reporting, and official statements.

Ukrainian officials announced that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and severely damaged an Il-22 airborne command post aircraft on the night of January 14.[1] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi posted flight tracking footage indicating that Ukrainian forces struck the A-50 and Il-22 over the Sea of Azov.[2] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Ukrainian forces were able to hit two targets while initially targeting the A-50.[3] Ihnat stated that the Ukrainian strike forced the Il-22 to land in Anapa, that the Il-22 is likely irreparable, and that there were wounded and dead among its crew. Ukrainian and Russian sources posted a photo of the damaged Il-22 at the airfield in Russia.[4] Ukrainian military officials, including Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk, stated that the A-50 directed Russian strikes against Ukrainian targets, such as air defense systems and aviation.[5] Humenyuk stated that the destruction of the A-50 will at least postpone future Russian missile strikes on Ukraine.[6] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on January 3 that Russia began constant sorties of A-50 aircraft due to the threat of Ukrainian strikes against Russian military infrastructure in Crimea, including Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets.[7] Valery Romanenko, a leading researcher at the Ukrainian State Aviation Museum of the National Aviation University, stated that the loss of the A-50 and members of its crew is "very painful" for Russia since a large part of the A-50's crew is highly specialized and must undergo several years of training.[8] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Russia had only three A-50s in service out of a total of six prior to this strike.[9]

The Russian information space largely denied that Ukrainian forces struck the A-50 aircraft and instead strangely claimed that the aircraft was destroyed by friendly fire from Russian air defenses.[10] The A-50 is used to coordinate Russian air and possibly air defense activity, and the claim that Russian air defenses shot down the A-50 would amount to a calamitous failure on the part of Russian forces, if true. A Russian source that focuses on Russian aviation blamed Russian commanders who lack the proper background required for their positions.[11] The current commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, Colonel General Viktor Afzalov, has an extensive background in Russian air defense operations.[12] Whether his lack of experience as a pilot poses any problems for Russian air

operations, which is questionable, his experience as an air defender should have been appropriate to ensure that Russian forces do not shoot down their own airborne control aircraft. A Russian insider source claiming to be an employee of an unspecified Russian security structure claimed that unspecified Russian actors created a “duck” (a Russian term for a false claim) about how Russian forces shot down the A-50 to reassure Russian pilots that missions over the Black Sea and Sea of Azov are still safe and that human error was the cause of the incident.[13] It is unclear why Russian pilots should be more comfortable with the idea that their ground-based air defenders are so incompetent. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that he did not have any information about the downed aircraft and recommended that journalists clarify information about this with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[14] The Russian MoD has not made an official statement about the incidents as of this publication.

A senior Ukrainian intelligence official confirmed that Russian forces can generate forces at a rate equal to Russian monthly personnel losses, which is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are able to conduct routine operational level rotations in Ukraine. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated that Russia recruits about 30,000 personnel per month, which the Russian military uses to replenish losses and form reserve regiments.[15] Ukrainian military analyst Colonel Petro Chernykh similarly assessed that Russia is able to replace about 25,000 to 27,000 personnel per month and has a small ready professional reserve of mechanized, naval infantry, and airborne (VDV) assault units staffed at 10 to 15 percent of its total capacity.[16] Skibitskyi and Chernykh's figures are consistent with the ISW's assessment that Russian forces can conduct operational level rotations in most sectors of the frontline.[17] Chernykh stated that Russia has between 1.5 million and seven million people in its general mobilizable reserve (“personnel mobilization resource” or *zapas*) composed of men that could be mobilized regardless of prior military experience, as distinct from the far smaller ready and professional reserve (“personnel mobilization reserve”) that should, in theory, be more militarily proficient on mobilization.[18] Skibitskyi stated Russia is highly unlikely to conduct any form of official mobilization prior to the March 2024 Russian presidential election.[19] Skibitskyi reported that Russia would need to conduct “mobilization” (likely referring to large-scale mobilization) to establish a “powerful strategic reserve.”[20] Skibitskyi stated that it is too early to comment on whether Russia intends to conduct “mobilization” after the March 2024 Russian presidential election, however.[21]

Skibitskyi indicated that international sanctions are constraining Russian missile and drone production as Russian forces likely continue to adapt their missile and drone strike packages in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. Skibitskyi stated that recent Russian strikes have targeted Ukrainian defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, military headquarters, and military control systems and units on the frontline, consistent with ISW's observations.[22] Skibitskyi reported that Russian forces have recently started launching Shahed drones against frontline areas, whereas Russian forces previously used Shahed drones to target rear DIB enterprises.[23] ISW observed Russian forces using Shahed drones to target frontline areas starting in late December 2023, and Ukrainian forces intercepted a lower number of drones likely due to lower levels of Ukrainian air defense coverage or air defense coverage not optimized for intercepting drones near the frontline.[24] Skibitskyi noted that Russia can produce about 330 to 350 Shahed drones per month but that these numbers largely depend on Russia's ability to acquire electronic components such as microchips and circuits abroad.[25] Skibitskyi reported that Russia is using Chinese-made engines in Shahed drones.[26] Skibitskyi also stated that Russian forces had not included Kh-101 or Kalibr cruise missiles in strike series since mid-September 2023 likely as part of efforts to build up a missile reserve.[27] Skibitskyi reported that the Russian DIB may be able to produce 115 to 130 missiles suitable for strategic strikes against Ukraine per month but that the actual monthly production output varies because Kh-47 Kinzhal ballistic missiles and Kh-101 and Kalibr cruise missiles require many foreign components blocked under international sanctions.[28] Skibitskyi stated that Russia is unable to produce analogues of these foreign components domestically. ISW has assessed that Russia is likely attempting to acquire more ballistic missiles from abroad because ballistic missiles may be more successful in striking Ukrainian targets in some circumstances.[29] Russia may also be intensifying efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad due to increased difficulties in the Russian domestic production of Kh-47 Kinzhal ballistic missiles. Skibitskyi reported that Russia can produce Kh-31, Kh-34, Kh-29, and Kh-59 air-to-air missiles using mainly domestic components and that Russian forces use Kh-31 and Kh-59 missiles to target Ukrainian air defense systems and radar stations during large strike series.[30]

German outlet *BILD* reported on classified German documents describing a hypothetical scenario to prepare for a possible future conflict between NATO and Russia. Developing such scenarios, which are usually classified, is a normal task for professional military staff. *BILD* reported on January 14 that it obtained classified documents from the German Ministry of Defense (MoD) that outline “Alliance Defense 2025,” a scenario of a possible “path to conflict” between Russia and NATO that begins in February 2024.[31] *BILD* stated that the hypothetical

scenario includes Russia's movement of troops and equipment to Kaliningrad Oblast amid claims of an impending NATO attack and artificial Russian-created "border conflicts" and "riots" in states near the Suwalki Gap. A German MoD spokesperson accurately told *BILD* that "considering different scenarios, even if they are extremely unlikely, is part of everyday military business, especially training."

Germany's reported consideration of paths to a possible future conflict with Russia is not unwarranted given recent Russian threats towards NATO and the possibility of faltering Western aid to Ukraine. Russian officials and milbloggers largely dismissed the *BILD* report as rumors.^[32] Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, have recently and consistently threatened NATO, and Kremlin-affiliated actors appear to be attempting to sow instability and set information conditions for possible future aggressive Russian actions against NATO member states and their neighbors, although not on anything like the timeline suggested by the scenario *BILD* described.^[33] **ISW continues to assess that Western aid to Ukraine remains crucial as Ukraine's inability to hold off the Russian military could allow Russian forces to push all the way to western Ukraine along the border with NATO states, which would very likely present NATO with challenging and expensive new defense requirements.**^[34]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Switzerland on January 15 to discuss aspects of the Ukrainian peace plan and support for Ukraine with global leaders at the Davos World Economic Forum from January 15 to 19. The World Economic Forum opened in Davos, Switzerland, on January 15, and Zelensky stated that he will hold bilateral meetings with representatives of NATO and European Union (EU) countries.^[35] Zelensky stated that Ukraine and Switzerland have begun preparations for the Global Peace Summit that could be held in Switzerland and that he wants China to be part of these discussions.^[36] Ukrainian Presidential Office Head Andriy Yermak stated that the Ukrainian delegation to Davos met regarding five aspects of the Ukrainian peace plan: the withdrawal of Russian forces to Ukraine, Russian accountability for its violations of international law, environmental security, prevention of escalation and recurrence of war, and confirmation of the end of the war.^[37] Ukrainian Defense Minister Rostem Umerov proposed on January 14 to create an international working group of defense ministers and national security advisors about a Russian military withdrawal from Ukraine.^[38] The Ukrainian Ministry of Justice announced that Ukraine and Switzerland signed a joint communique on January 15 agreeing that Ukrainian security is an inseparable part of regional and global security and that the international community's goal is to end the war and overcome the crises that the war caused.^[39]

Ukrainian and Swiss officials also discussed reconstruction and repatriation efforts. Zelensky met with Swiss President Viola Amherd and various factional representatives of the Swiss Federal Assembly on January 15 about Swiss support for Ukraine, reconstruction efforts, and the Ukrainian peace plan.^[40] Amherd announced that Switzerland will provide 1.5 billion francs (\$1.75 billion) for Ukrainian reconstruction efforts in 2025-2028.^[41] Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lubinets stated in Davos on January 14 that 517 Ukrainian children and 2,828 adults, including 150 civilians, have returned to Ukraine from Russia and called on the international community to help return all Ukrainians to Ukraine.^[42]

A North Korean delegation including North Korean Foreign Minister Choi Song Hui arrived in Moscow on January 14 for an official state visit to Russia on January 15 to 17.^[43] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that Choi will meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on January 16.^[44] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russia intends to develop a partnership with North Korea in "all areas" and that the Kremlin expects Lavrov's and Choi's negotiations to be fruitful.^[45] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated that Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) cannot produce enough artillery ammunition to sustain Russia's pace of fire and that North Korea delivered one million rounds of artillery ammunition to Russia in September-November 2023.^[46]

Russia and Iran are preparing to sign a Grand Interstate Treaty to further develop Russian-Iranian military-technological cooperation.^[47] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Defense and Iranian Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani reportedly discussed bilateral military and military-technical cooperation during a phone call on January 15, and both sides are reportedly preparing to sign the Grand Interstate Treaty within an unspecified timeframe.^[48] Both sides emphasized their commitment to the fundamental principles of Russian-Iranian relations – including unconditional respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity – which will be confirmed in the upcoming Grand Interstate Treaty. Shoigu noted that Moscow and Tehran are consistently increasing their cooperation in the interest of building a "truly equal multipolar world." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov similarly spoke with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian about the progress of the new interstate agreement and a number of bilateral cooperation topics involving trade, economy, transport, and logistics during a phone call on

January 15.[49] Lavrov and Abdollahian reiterated that Russia and Iran are preparing to codify different fundamental principles of Russian-Iranian relations in the new Grand Interstate Treaty.[50] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated in an interview published on January 15 that Iran wants to increase military-technical cooperation with Russia and hopes to acquire Su-34 fighter aircraft, training aircraft, and radar stations.[51]

The Kremlin is intensifying censorship measures to limit criticism of the Russian war effort in Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 presidential election. Russian State Duma deputies from the ruling United Russia party proposed a draft bill that would allow the Russian government to confiscate property from individuals convicted of spreading “fake” information about the Russian military.[52] Russian opposition media sources reported on Russian investigations and arrests for allegedly spreading “fake” information about the Russian military, including specific cases targeting an opposition journalist and the wife of a mobilized individual.[53] The relatives of Russian mobilized personnel have increasingly complained about the Russian military’s treatment of mobilized personnel, and the Kremlin likely wants to silence concerned relatives to maintain good appearances ahead of the presidential election, as ISW has previously assessed.[54]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials announced that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and severely damaged an Il-22 airborne command post aircraft on the night of January 14.
- A senior Ukrainian intelligence official confirmed that Russian forces can generate forces at a rate equal to Russian monthly personnel losses, which is consistent with ISW’s assessment that Russian forces are able to conduct routine operational level rotations in Ukraine.
- Skibitskyi indicated that international sanctions are constraining Russian missile and drone production as Russian forces likely continue to adapt their missile and drone strike packages in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses.
- German outlet *BILD* reported on classified German documents describing a hypothetical scenario to prepare for a possible future conflict between NATO and Russia. Developing such scenarios, which are usually classified, is a normal task for professional military staffs.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Switzerland on January 15 to discuss aspects of the Ukrainian peace plan and support for Ukraine with global leaders at the Davos World Economic Forum from January 15 to 19.
- A North Korean delegation including North Korean Foreign Minister Choi Song Hui arrived in Moscow on January 14 for an official state visit to Russia on January 15 to 17.
- Russia and Iran are preparing to sign a Grand Interstate Treaty to further develop Russian-Iranian military-technological cooperation.
- The Kremlin is intensifying censorship measures to limit criticism of the Russian war effort in Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 presidential election.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances west of Donetsk City and near Krynyk amid continued positional fighting along the entire line of contact.
- The Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) is reportedly forming a women’s drone operating detachment.
- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Ukrainian resistance forces detonated a Russian military UAZ Patriot vehicle in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, injuring four Russian personnel and killing an unspecified number of personnel.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 14, 2024

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

Angelica Evans, Nicole Volkov, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 14, 2024, 5:30 pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on January 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are preparing to launch a new offensive in the coming weeks once the ground freezes in eastern and southern Ukraine. Russian literary critic and alternative historian Sergey Pereslegin claimed on January 12 that Russian forces will launch a large-scale offensive effort in Ukraine sometime between January 12 and February 2 after the ground freezes and likely after Ukrainian forces grow "exhausted" of defending their positions in Avdiivka and east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.[1] Pereslegin claimed that Russians should be more concerned about Russia launching its offensive at the wrong time or making the same "mistakes" that Ukraine made during its 2023 counteroffensive than of a renewed Ukrainian offensive effort in 2024.[2] Pereslegin also expressed concern that Russia does not have enough manpower to conduct the large-scale offensive effort he is anticipating.[3] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on January 14 that the number of Russian military personnel on the frontline allows Russian forces to conduct localized tactical maneuvers but is unlikely to support operationally significant "breakthroughs." [4] The milblogger claimed that freezing weather is impacting Russian and Ukrainian ground activity and artillery and drone systems throughout the front, particularly in the Kherson direction.[5] A Russian milblogger claimed on January 12 that freezing weather conditions are preventing Russian forces from conducting ground operations and advancing north of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[6] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian aviation is unable to operate in southern Ukraine due to freezing weather conditions.[7] Former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin claimed on January 14 that the frontline in western Zaporizhia Oblast is "buzzing like a bee hive" due to the large number of Ukrainian drones operating, however.[8] Rogozin claimed that Ukrainian forces devote half a dozen drones to striking each valuable target in western Zaporizhia Oblast and that intense Ukrainian drone use is complicating Russian personnel rotations.[9] ISW previously assessed that freezing temperatures in Ukraine are likely currently constraining operations along the front but will likely create more favorable terrain for mechanized maneuver warfare as the ground freezes in the coming weeks.[10] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will likely try to sustain or intensify localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine in an attempt to seize and retain the initiative regardless of winter weather and terrain conditions.[11] ISW also assesses, however, that Russian forces will be unable to make operationally significant breakthroughs.

Russian forces likely continue to experiment and adapt their missile and drone strike packages against Ukraine in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have recently been launching strikes against Ukraine using a variety of missile types, including hypersonic Kh-47 Kinzhal ballistic missiles.[12] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces launched unspecified air decoys and Shahed drones in order to overwhelm Ukrainian air defense systems so that Russian forces could conduct successful missile strikes.[13] ISW has observed Russian forces experimenting with various combinations of drone and missile strikes in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defense systems as Ukrainian forces have adapted to Russian strike patterns.[14] ISW previously assessed that Russia may be intensifying efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad because ballistic missiles may be more successful in striking targets in Ukraine in some circumstances.[15] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on January 14 that sanctions are likely reducing the quality of Russian missiles.[16] The reported decrease in quality of Russian missiles may further hinder Russia's ability to conduct successful strike series against Ukraine.

Representatives from 83 countries met to discuss the implementation of Ukraine's Peace Formula on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 14. [17] Ukrainian Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak also met with Romanian State Secretary Julian Fota to discuss bilateral security guarantees pursuant to the G7's July 2023 joint declaration of support for Ukraine, making Romania the 9th country to begin bilateral security negotiations with Ukraine.[18] Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis and Yermak noted the importance of involving China in peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.[19] Cassis argued that the West "must find a way to include Russia" in the peace process and stated that "there will be no peace if Russia does not have its say." [20] It is unclear what Cassis meant by the call for Russia to "have its say." ISW has long assessed that Putin does not intend to negotiate with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's goals in Ukraine — which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender — remain unchanged.[21]

The Kremlin continues to undertake measures to undermine the Republic of Tatarstan's autonomy within the Russian Federation and cultural heritage despite the republic's sacrifices on behalf of the Russian war in Ukraine. Russian Tatar activist and political scientist Ruslan Aisin reported that Russian officials cut funding for the state program for preservation, study, and development of Tatarstan's state languages by 12.5 percent in 2023.[22] Aisin stated that officials originally planned to spend 126.8 million rubles (around \$1.4 million) on the program but cut the funding by 15.8 million rubles (about \$180,000). Aisin argued that these cuts are likely related to the Kremlin's efforts to finance the war effort in Ukraine and undermine Tatarstan's identity. Aisin observed

that Tatarstan backed away from its state policy on strengthening its identity alongside the country-wide Russian identity in the fall of 2023 and argued that the Kremlin likely had seen an opportunity to save money on Tatarstan's efforts to preserve its culture, language, and identity. Aisin also implied that the Kremlin is favoring an all-Russian identity. The Kremlin directed Tatarstan officials in January 2023 to abolish the title of the republic's president and refer to Tatarstan's leader as "glava" (regional head). [23] Tatarstan has been supporting the Russian war effort by forming and financing the recruitment of regional volunteer battalions, some of which suffered tremendous losses on the battlefield in 2022 and 2023.[24] BBC's Russian Service and independent Russian outlet *Mediazona* also confirmed that at least 922 servicemen from Tatarstan died in Ukraine — a number that is likely significantly higher — as of January 11.[25]

The Russian Investigative Committee will officially open a case into the fire that destroyed a large Wildberries warehouse in St. Petersburg. Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin ordered the Investigative Committee to look into the fire and investigate Wildberries managers for abuse of power and violations of fire safety compliance rules.[26] St. Petersburg-based outlet *Fontanka* reported that Wildberries has been unable to establish contact with at least 66 employees who were at the warehouse during the fire.[27] Russian authorities have otherwise not offered additional information about the circumstances of the fire, which some Russian sources suggested may have broken out the day after a fight between migrant workers and a subsequent mobilization raid on the warehouse.[28]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are preparing to launch a new offensive in the coming weeks once the ground freezes in eastern and southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces likely continue to experiment and adapt their missile and drone strike packages against Ukraine in an effort to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses.
- Representatives from 83 countries met to discuss the implementation of Ukraine's Peace Formula on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on January 14.
- The Kremlin continues to undertake measures to undermine the Republic of Tatarstan's autonomy within the Russian Federation and cultural heritage despite the republic's sacrifices on behalf of the Russian war in Ukraine.
- The Russian Investigative Committee will officially open a case into the fire that destroyed a large Wildberries warehouse in St. Petersburg.
- Positional engagements continued along the Kupyansk-Kremenna line, near Bakhmut and Avdiivka, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Moscow-based international exhibition-forum "Russia" opened the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) "Army of Children" exhibit on January 14 to educate children about the military and careers in the Russian Armed Forces.
- Swedish Defense Materiel Administration announced on January 14 that it had signed an agreement with Nordic Ammunition Company (Nammo) to increase the production and deliveries of 155mm artillery ammunition to support Ukraine's needs.
- The Kremlin is funding select non-profit organizations operating in occupied areas that propagate Kremlin social narratives.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January

13, 2024

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

January 13, 2024, 5:00pm ET

A recent video appeal by a Serbian mercenary addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin has unleashed discussions about an ongoing "clan war" within the Kremlin and the Russian information space against the backdrop of the Russian presidential campaign. Serbian sniper Dejan Beric (also known as "Deka") – who has reportedly fought with Russian forces in Ukraine since Russia's initial invasion in 2014, conducts Russian mercenary recruitment in Serbia, and became a member Putin's election team – published a video appeal on January 8 wherein he accused military commanders of the Russian 119th Guards Airborne (VDV) Regiment (106th Guards VDV Division) of mistreating Serbian mercenaries in the "Wolves" (Volki) detachment.[1] Elements of the 119th Guards

VDV Regiment are currently operating on Bakhmut's southern flank near Klishchiivka.[2] Beric claimed that commanders of the 119th VDV Regiment forced Serbian mercenaries to conduct an assault without sufficient weapons, which prompted the entire detachment to refuse to continue attacks and demand a transfer to the nearby Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz units.[3] Beric stated that Russian military officials and police declared that the Serbian mercenaries were deserters and war criminals, disarmed them, pushed them out of their trenches, and forced them to admit that they were spies.

A Russian political insider source – who routinely discusses specific details of Russian political and military command changes – claimed that Beric's appeal is a direct indication that a “clan war” has broken out among some Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) within Putin's inner circles.[4] The source claimed that Beric's appeal is likely a part of widely discussed informational attacks against a group of Russian milbloggers who are independent and openly critical of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and that these informational attacks are part of an organized campaign against VDV commanders and their patrons. The source claimed that Beric's appeal was part of a retaliatory attack executed on behalf of Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev's and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's respective factions within the Kremlin against the faction of Igor Sechin – Putin's “de facto deputy” and CEO of Russian state oil company Rosneft. The source specified that Tula Oblast Governor Alexei Dyumin is an active member of Sechin's faction and the patron of the 106th VDV Division and assessed that the Beric's public attack against 119th VDV Regiment's command was likely an attempt to undermine Dyumin, 106th VDV Division Commander Major General Vladimir Seliverstov, and Russian VDV and “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky. Dyumin, Teplinsky, and Seliverstov have previously been involved in feuds with the Russian MoD and affiliated themselves with the Wagner Group and opposition to Shoigu.[5] The source implied that Sechin's faction launched public attacks on Patrushev's faction by amplifying problems with Russian egg supplies, which had been inadequately handled by Russian Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev – who is also Patrushev's son.[6] Shoigu's faction had also faced similar public attacks on its inability to deal with the collapse of the communal infrastructure in Moscow Oblast and problems with the Defenders of Fatherland Foundation. Putin notably recently obliquely criticized Dmitry Patrushev and Shoigu for their respective failures.[7] The source implied that factions are attempting to discredit each other in Putin's eyes to ensure that they can secure new positions within the Kremlin following the presidential election. Another insider source claimed that First Deputy of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev approved Beric's appeal to bring Putin's attention to the lack of supplies within the military amidst rumors about Alekseyev's dismissal.[8]

In-fighting and factional dynamics within the Kremlin are not new phenomena and do not indicate the imminent collapse of Putin's regime, particularly because power verticals are the foundation of Putin's regime. ISW has routinely assessed that Putin deliberately creates an environment in which officials within his inner circle must compete for his favor, largely to ensure that his lieutenants remain loyal to him and his regime.[9] ISW also observed that Putin has an affinity for rotating officials and military commanders instead of outright dismissing them to prevent any single individual from amassing too much political influence and to maintain support among competing factions.[10] Putin is unlikely to change this system and eliminate these power verticals as they serve as a foundation of his rule. ISW has also observed numerous instances of Russian officials and commanders using the Russian information space to attract Putin's attention, discredit an opposing faction, and influence changes within Putin's inner circle.[11] Such factional feuds have notable but not dispositive battlefield effects. They can damage cohesion between Russian forces and demoralize Russian personnel but are unlikely to lead to mass conflict within the Russian ranks or wider society. A Russian “Storm-Z” assault unit instructor observed in response to Beric's appeal that numerous Russian detachments and units are facing problems similar to those experienced by the Serbian mercenaries and implied that the Russian military has systematic issues that are prevalent outside of factional dynamics.[12] **Permanent friction among the different factions that play roles in Putin's war in Ukraine can impede Russia's decision-making, however, and limit the Kremlin's ability to bring coherence and efficiency to the Russian military.**

Russian forces launched a medium-sized drone, missile, and air attack against Ukraine on the night of January 12-13 using a strike package similar to the recent Russian strike packages. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 40 long-range munitions at Ukraine from various directions—seven S-300/S-400 anti-aircraft missiles from Belgorod Oblast; three Shahed-131/131 drones from Kursk Oblast; six Kh-47 “Kinjal” aero-ballistic (ostensibly hypersonic) missiles from six MiG-31K aircraft over Tambov Oblast; up to 12 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles from 11 Tu-95MS strategic bombers over the Caspian Sea; six Kh-22 cruise missiles from Tu-22M3 bombers over Bryansk Oblast; two Kh-31P anti-radar missiles from two Su-35 bombers over occupied Kherson Oblast; and four Kh-59 cruise missiles from two Su-34 bombers over Bryansk Oblast.[13] Ukraine's Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defense destroyed seven Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles and one Kh-59 cruise missile.[14] Ukrainian military officials notably stated

that Ukrainian forces also disabled over 20 of the missiles using “active countermeasures by means of electronic warfare,” which may be an inflection in Ukrainian electronic warfare capabilities that are normally credited with disabling Russian drones but not missile systems.[15] ISW previously assessed that Russia’s ongoing strike campaign against Ukraine, and Ukrainian adaptations to counter new Russian strike packages, is part of a wider tactical and technological offense-defense race between long-range strike and air defense capabilities.[16] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that the Russian strike package used on January 13 was similar to the strike package that Russian forces used on January 8 and in previous recent strikes—suggesting that Ukrainian forces may be able to discern patterns in recurring Russian strike packages and innovate and adapt accordingly.[17]

Russian forces are reportedly increasingly using chemical weapons in Ukraine in continued apparent violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is a party. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have used chemical weapons 626 times since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and have used them at least 51 times so far in 2024.[18] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces currently launch chemical weapons at Ukrainian positions up to 10 times a day and that Russian forces typically use drones to drop K-51 grenades filled with irritant CS gas (2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile), a type of tear gas used for riot control (also known as a Riot Control Agent [RCA]), onto Ukrainian positions.[19] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces used a new type of special gas grenade containing CS gas against Ukrainian positions on December 14, 2023.[20] The Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade previously acknowledged on December 22 that the brigade deliberately uses chemical weapons by dropping K-51 grenades from drones onto Ukrainian positions near Krynyk in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[21] Russia is a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which prohibits the use of RCAs as a method of warfare.[22]

A fire destroyed a large warehouse in St. Petersburg belonging to Russia’s largest online retailer Wildberries on January 12.[23] Russian sources claimed that on the night of January 10 to 11 a mass fight broke out between migrant workers at the facility and that this prompted Russian authorities to conduct a raid on the warehouse, during which several migrants received military summonses.[24] Russian law enforcement recently detained 700 migrants at a Wildberries warehouse in Moscow Oblast and issued some military summonses in November 2023.[25] Russian authorities have consistently conducted raids on migrant communities to issue military summonses to naturalized migrants and coerce other migrants into military service.[26] Wildberries appears to be a notable target for these mobilization raids, and the company has previously admitted that such raids have interrupted their operations.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- A recent video appeal by a Serbian mercenary addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin has unleashed discussions about an ongoing “clan war” within the Kremlin and the Russian information space against the backdrop of the Russian presidential campaign.
- In-fighting and factional dynamics within the Kremlin are not new phenomena and do not indicate the imminent collapse of Putin’s regime, particularly because power verticals are the foundation of Putin’s regime.
- Russian forces launched a medium-sized drone, missile, and air attack against Ukraine on the night of January 12-13 using a strike package similar to recent Russian strike packages.
- Russian forces are reportedly increasingly using chemical weapons in Ukraine in continued apparent violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Russia is a party.
- A fire destroyed a large warehouse in St. Petersburg belonging to Russia’s largest online retailer Wildberries on January 12.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kreminna and Avdiivka amid continued positional engagements along the entire front line.
- Russian forces may be forming air assault brigades within combined arms ground formations as part of ongoing large-scale military reforms.
- Russian officials continue to fund social projects in occupied Ukraine in an effort to integrate these territories further into Russia and create the veneer of an active civil society in occupied areas.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 12, 2024

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

January 12, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Ukraine and the United Kingdom (UK) signed an agreement on bilateral security guarantees pursuant to the G7's July 2023 joint declaration of support for Ukraine. UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on January 12 and signed the UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation.^[1] The agreement covers joint efforts supporting Ukraine's future accession to NATO, including comprehensive assistance to Ukraine to protect and restore its territorial integrity, preventing new Russian aggression against Ukraine, and supporting Ukraine's integration into certain Western institutions.^[2] The agreement also states that the UK government will work with its domestic defense industrial base (DIB) to help develop Ukraine's own DIB. The UK is the first country to sign a final agreement with Ukraine on the basis of the G7's July 2023 joint declaration of support for Ukraine, and at least 24 non-G7 countries have joined the declaration.^[3]

Sunak also announced a military assistance package valued at 2.5 billion GBP (roughly \$3.19 billion), which includes long-range missiles, air defense components, artillery ammunition, and maritime security provisions, and at least 200 million GBP of this package is specifically allocated to producing and procuring drones, most of which the UK expects to produce.^[4] Sunak also announced an additional 18 million GBP to support frontline humanitarian efforts and fortify Ukraine's energy infrastructure against Russian strikes. Sunak reiterated the UK's commitment to long-term support for Ukraine and stated that the new UK-Ukraine security pact will last "100 years or more."^[5]

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on January 11 that the US has suspended security assistance to Ukraine and will not resume sending aid to Ukraine until the US Congress approves funding.^[6] Kirby stated that the US provided the last package of aid to Ukraine that the US had enough funding for, which was a \$250 million security assistance package announced on December 27, 2023.^[7]

Ukrainian Digital Transformation Minister Mykhailo Fedorov expressed confidence in Ukraine's ability to produce one million first-person view (FPV) drones in 2024.^[8] Fedorov stated on January 12 that the number of Ukrainian enterprises producing drones increased from seven to 200 between 2022 and the end of 2023.^[9] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 19, 2023, that Ukraine plans to produce one million drones and expand artillery production in 2024.^[10] Production of a million drones per year requires a monthly average production of more than 83,000 FPV drones per month, and Ukraine already produced 50,000 FPV drones per month as of December 2023.^[11]

Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder stated on January 11 that there is no credible evidence of the illegal diversion of US-provided advanced conventional weapons to Ukraine.^[12] Ryder stated that the US has given Ukraine unprecedented access to information regarding US-provided equipment and that Ukraine fully understands and supports the US need to report on defense articles that are accountable to Department of Defense (DoD) standards.^[13] The US DoD Office of the Inspector General published a report earlier on January 11 that stated that DoD limitations were largely responsible for a failure to properly document certain US-provided military assistance to Ukraine.^[14] The DoD Office of the Inspector General report stated that it was not responsible for determining whether US defense articles allocated to Ukraine have been misappropriated and did not attempt to do so.^[15]

The US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) announced on January 11 sanctions against several Russian entities reportedly involved in the transfer of North Korean ballistic missiles to Russia.^[16] OFAC announced sanctions against one (1) employee of the Russian state-owned cargo transport service 224th Flight Unit State Airlines, a weapons testing facility called Ashuluk Firing Range in Astrakhan Oblast, and Russian defense manufacturer Vladimirovka Advanced Weapons and Research Complex in Astrakhan Oblast.^[17] Western and Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russian forces have launched at least one ballistic missile acquired from North Korea at Ukraine.^[18]

Actors in the Russia-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria may be setting information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria as part of wider Kremlin efforts to destabilize Moldova. The Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB) issued a press release on January 12 claiming that Moldovan special forces are training "special combat groups" of more than 60 people to destroy critical facilities, sabotage military installations, and capture or destroy senior

Transnistrian officials and law enforcement officers.[19] ISW previously reported that the MGB is a Russian-dominated organization that is commonly understood to be a "department of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)" that likely takes orders directly from Moscow.[20] The MGB and Transnistrian officials have previously made similar, less escalatory claims likely also as part of the Kremlin's efforts to set informational conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova and justifying any future Russian campaigns in the region by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova.[21]

Russian occupation officials appear to be deliberately censoring information about Ukrainian children whom Russian authorities have illegally removed to occupied

Crimea. A *Reuters* special report published on January 11 details how Russian occupation officials and Russian authorities facilitate the removal and deportation of Ukrainian children from orphanages and children's homes under the direct guidance of Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova.[22] *Reuters* found that Lvova-Belova personally visited a children's home in occupied Henichesk, Kherson Oblast, in early 2023 and encouraged Ukrainian children, many of whom were separated from their parents due to the war or other circumstances but are not officially orphans, to obtain Russian passports so that Russian families can adopt the children.[23] *Reuters* also identified Crimea occupation head Sergey Aksyonov as directly involved in removing Ukrainian children from Kherson Oblast to children's homes in Crimea, consistent with ISW's assessment about the involvement of Russian occupation authorities in the removal and deportation process. [24] According to *Reuters*, an unspecified Crimean occupation official stated that all information about Ukrainian orphans in Crimea is "strictly confidential" on Aksyonov's direct order and that all requests about children are immediately reported to the occupation administration. The suggestion that Russian occupation authorities are deliberately trying to hide information about Ukrainian children from the public is notable—it indicates that Russian authorities are uninterested in repatriating these children, which undermines the Russian information operations that the removal and deportation of children is a temporary humanitarian endeavor and that Russia's ultimate interest is in returning these children to their homes and families.[25]

Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin accused the Kremlin of hesitating to conduct operationally significant offensive operations in Ukraine or a new wave of mobilization in Russia as Ukraine "build[s] up [its] strength" for a future counteroffensive effort. Russian milblogger and serviceman Mikhail Polynkov published a letter reportedly written by Girkin on December 8, 2023 to his Telegram channel on January 11 wherein Girkin claimed that Russia currently has "no plans" for a broad offensive in Ukraine and that Russia's war in Ukraine is developing according to a "very bad" scenario.[26] Girkin writes that the Kremlin's unwillingness to conduct a new wave of mobilization in Russia is prompting the Russian military to fill "holes" in its units with convicts and contract servicemen (*kontraktники*). Girkin claimed that most of the reported 452,000 servicemen who enrolled in the Russian military in 2023 are already serving in Ukraine or "will not get there at all," meaning that without a new wave of mobilization in spring 2024, Russia will not have the manpower required to conduct operationally significant offensive operations later this year. Girkin claimed that the Russian military and the Kremlin are choosing to "wait" until Ukraine "falls apart" or agrees to peace negotiations, while the Ukrainian military is receiving foreign aid and building up strength for future counteroffensive efforts. Girkin warned that Ukraine's ability to learn lessons on the battlefield may make its next counteroffensive operation more successful while the Russian military is still led by "the same morons" who insist on conducting costly frontal infantry assaults to capture settlements.

Key Takeaways:

- Ukraine and the United Kingdom (UK) signed an agreement on bilateral security guarantees pursuant to the G7's July 2023 joint declaration of support for Ukraine.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on January 11 that the US has suspended security assistance to Ukraine and will not resume sending aid to Ukraine until the US Congress approves funding.
- Ukrainian Digital Transformation Minister Mykhailo Fedorov expressed confidence in Ukraine's ability to produce one million first-person view (FPV) drones in 2024.
- Pentagon Spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder stated on January 11 that there is no credible evidence of the illegal diversion of US-provided advanced conventional weapons to Ukraine.
- The US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) announced on January 11 sanctions against several Russian entities reportedly involved in the transfer of North Korean ballistic missiles to Russia.
- Actors in the Russia-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria may be setting information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria as part of wider Kremlin efforts to destabilize Moldova.

- Russian occupation officials appear to be deliberately censoring information about Ukrainian children whom Russian authorities have illegally removed to occupied Crimea.
 - Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin accused the Kremlin of hesitating to conduct operationally significant offensive operations in Ukraine or a new wave of mobilization in Russia as Ukraine “build[s] up [its] strength” for a future counteroffensive effort.
 - Russian forces made confirmed marginal advances northeast of Bakhmut, northwest of Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, west of Verbove, and in (east) left bank Kherson Oblast amid continued positional fighting along the entire front.
 - The Russian State Duma will consider a draft law allowing foreigners with a criminal record to serve in the Russian Armed Forces.
 - Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko confirmed that Russian authorities have deported over 2,100 Ukrainians, including 500 children, to Russia for medical reasons in 2023.
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Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 11, 2024

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

January 11, 2024, 7:25pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1pm ET on January 11. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 12 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The reported concentration of the Russian military's entire combat-capable ground force in Ukraine and ongoing Russian force generation efforts appear to allow Russian forces to conduct routine operational level rotations in Ukraine. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on January 11 that Russian forces have 462,000 personnel in Ukraine and that this represents the entire land component of the Russian military.^[1] Skibitskyi stated that most Russian units in Ukraine are manned at between 92 and 95 percent of their intended end strength and that the size of the Russian grouping in Ukraine allows Russian forces to conduct rotations throughout the theater.^[2] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces withdraw units that are at 50 percent or less of their intended end strength to rear areas and return them to the front following recovery and replenishment.^[3] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev stated on January 11 that the Russian military has successfully replenished Russian forces in Ukraine through an ongoing crypto-mobilization effort that generated over 500,000 new personnel in 2023.^[4]

ISW previously observed routine Russian struggles to conduct operational level rotations from the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 through Ukraine's summer 2023 counteroffensive.^[5] The apparent Russian ability to generate forces at a rate equal to Russian losses likely provides Russian forces the ability to replenish units that the Russian command has withdrawn from the line due to degradation and later return these replenished units to the front.^[6] Russian forces maintain the initiative throughout eastern Ukraine, and the absence of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations likely removes pressure on operational deployments that had previously partially restrained the Russians' ability to conduct rotations.^[7] Russian forces have not seized the battlefield initiative in Kherson Oblast, however, and appear to be degrading units and formations operating near the Ukrainian bridgehead on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River without making apparent efforts to conduct operational level rotations (although they do appear to conduct tactical-level rotations).^[8] Russian forces have conducted several regroupings during localized offensive operations in the Avdiivka, Bakhmut, Lyman, and Kupyansk directions since early October 2023, which likely provided Russian forces time to conduct the rotations Skibitskyi described.^[9] ISW has not observed widespread Russian complaints about a lack of rotations throughout the theater since summer 2023, and the overall tempo of Russian operations is consistent with Skibitskyi's reporting.^[10]

Russia's ability to conduct operational level rotations will likely allow Russian forces to maintain the overall tempo of their localized offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in the near term, but it is unclear if Russian forces will be able to conduct effective rotations in the long term or in the event of intensified Russian offensive efforts or a significant Ukrainian counteroffensive operation. Russian operational rotations in principle mitigate the degradation of attacking Russian forces that over time could cause Russian offensive efforts to culminate. Several other operational factors have previously contributed to the culmination of Russian offensive efforts in

Ukraine, but constraints on available manpower and combat effective formations have often been a primary factor.[11] Russian forces are largely conducting infantry-heavy assaults in Ukraine with assault groups that do not necessarily require large amounts of equipment or high levels of training. [12] The Russian force generation apparatus appears to be replenishing losses in Ukraine with poorly trained and relatively combat ineffective personnel whom the Russian command has deemed to be sufficient for routine attritional frontal assaults.[13] These assaults have yet to result in more than marginal Russian gains in Ukraine since early October 2023, and it is unlikely that Russian forces can continue them indefinitely in a way that will allow the Russians to convert tactical successes into operationally significant results. Successful Russian operational-level offensives in Ukraine will require the Russian command to commit relatively combat effective and well-equipped units and formations to offensive operations at scale, and it is unclear if replenishment through these Russian operational rotations will suffice to maintain these units' combat capabilities. Overall Russian combat capabilities in Ukraine may still degrade over time, therefore, despite the rotations, hindering the Russian military's ability to sustain several significant offensive operations at once.

The Russian military may also incur losses greater than Russia's ability to generate new forces if the Russian command decides to intensify offensive efforts in Ukraine, thereby limiting the manpower available to replenish degraded units and formations. The intensification of Russian offensive efforts would commit more elements to the frontline and place pressure on the number of available forces that could assume control over a degraded unit's area of responsibility while that unit underwent rest and restoration. It is unclear if the current Russian crypto-mobilization campaign, which relies heavily on volunteer recruitment and the coercive mobilization of convicts and migrants, would be able to provide the increased number of personnel required to conduct rotations during an intensified Russian offensive effort.[14]

Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian efforts to expand Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) have yet to fulfill operational requirements in Ukraine and that munitions shortages will continue to prompt Russia to source supplies from abroad. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated that the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) can produce two million rounds of 122mm and 152mm shells annually, which resulted in a deficit of 500,000 shells in 2023 and will likely result in a similar deficit in 2024.[15] Skibitskyi stated that Russia plans to increase its ammunition production in 2024 but lacks the necessary components, qualified personnel, and production capabilities.[16] Skibitskyi noted that Russia has previously purchased shells from Belarus, Iran, and North Korea and assessed that Russia will likely seek to procure additional shells from abroad in 2024 and beyond.[17] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned on January 11 that Russia will use any "pause" or temporary ceasefire agreement to stockpile drones, artillery, and missiles and address its large materiel shortages ahead of future aggression against Ukraine.[18] Zelensky added that Russia is currently negotiating the acquisition of additional missiles and ammunition from other countries and noted that Russia has already received more than one million shells from North Korea.[19] Ukrainian Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin also confirmed recent Western reports that Russian forces have already launched at least one North Korean missile against Ukraine.[20]

Politico, citing a report by the Kyiv School of Economics and Yermak-McFaul International Working Group on Russian Sanctions, reported on January 11 that despite Western sanctions, Russia imported \$8.77 billion worth of goods and components necessary to produce missiles, drones, armored vehicles, and other military equipment between January and October 2023.[21] The report states that Russia's capacity to manufacture missiles and drones appears to have increased in 2023 despite Western sanctions, and *Politico* stated that Russia increased its production of missiles to 115 per month by the end of 2023.[22] The report noted that sanctions have strained Russia's supply chains and have caused "unparalleled losses" in Russia's overall production of military aviation and equipment, however.[23]

Ukrainian and Western sources have previously reported on Russia's sanctions evasion schemes to acquire foreign components and noted that Russia's reliance on foreign components has constrained Russia's domestic production of aircraft, missiles, and drones.[24] An unnamed Russian drone manufacturer also drew Russian President Vladimir Putin's attention to the fact that a "large percentage" of electronics, particularly drones, produced in Russia require foreign components during a campaign event in Russia's Far Eastern Federal District on January 11, prompting Putin to acknowledge the importance of this issue and the need to address Russia's reliance on foreign components.[25] ISW previously assessed that Russia's current 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 due to Russia's ability to produce drones at a much higher rate (roughly 1,400 Shahed-136/131 drones between February and October 2023).[26] The Russian government is likely attempting to develop domestic substitutions for foreign components to sustain and even increase its domestic drone and missile production despite Western sanctions.

Freezing temperatures in Ukraine are likely constraining operations along the front but will likely create more favorable terrain for mechanized maneuver warfare as the ground freezes in the coming weeks. The deputy commander of a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Kupyansk direction stated that Russian forces are using fewer loitering munitions in the Kupyansk direction due to cold weather.[27] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on January 11 that Russian forces did not launch as many drones against Ukraine in the past two nights because ice can freeze drones.[28] A Ukrainian officer in a brigade operating near Bakhmut stated on January 10 that the temperature drops to -18 Celsius (about -1 Fahrenheit) at night, making it "impossible" for personnel to stay at observation posts for more than a few hours.[29] The officer reported that the intensity of Russian infantry assaults decreased in the Bakhmut direction likely due to the freezing temperatures.[30] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the freezing temperatures coupled with the potential for deep snow may limit maneuverability but that the frozen ground will improve "cross-country movement" throughout January and into February.[31] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces will likely try to sustain or intensify localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine in an attempt to seize and retain the initiative regardless of winter weather and terrain conditions.

Latvia and Estonia announced new military aid packages to Ukraine on January 11. Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics stated that Latvia will provide a new aid package to Ukraine, which includes howitzers, 155mm ammunition, anti-tank weapons, rockets, grenades, all-terrain vehicles, helicopters, drones, and other equipment.[32] Estonian President Alar Karis stated that Estonia will provide a military aid package worth 1.2 billion euros (about \$1.32 billion) in 2024 to 2027, amounting to 0.25 percent of Estonia's annual GDP.[33] The Ukrainian Ministry of Strategic Industry and the Estonian Defense and Aerospace Industry Association signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at supporting the development and production of drones and electronic warfare systems.[34]

Russia may be setting information conditions for future escalations against Latvia by threatening to punish Latvia for closing a likely base of Russian informational influence in Latvia. The Latvian parliament adopted a bill on January 11 to transfer the "Moscow House" business and cultural center in Riga, owned by the Russian government, to Latvian state ownership in order to "guarantee Latvia's security."^[35] The Latvian parliament reported that the Russian government has been using the "Moscow House" to support Russian influence operations in Latvia.^[36] The Russian Embassy in Latvia responded to the transfer by claiming that this "hostility" will result in "serious consequences."^[37] The Russian Embassy in Latvia also accused the Latvian government of systematically oppressing "Russian speakers" in Latvia due to a recent Latvian law requiring Russian citizens with Latvian residence permits to pass a Latvian language exam.^[38] The Russian accusation likely deliberately equates all Russian speakers in Latvia with Russian citizens residing in Latvia in an attempt to exacerbate tensions between local Russian speakers and ethnic Russians and Latvian speakers. Russian officials have been increasingly asserting Russia's right to protect "compatriots abroad," intentionally loosely defined as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and not limited to Russian citizens. Russia may be setting conditions aimed at destabilizing Latvia by exacerbating linguistic tensions and framing itself as a protector of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.

European Commission (EC) Defense Industry Spokesperson Johanna Bernsel clarified on January 11 that European Union (EU) member states will be able to produce a million shells per year by spring 2024 but that the delivery of the shells to Ukraine will depend on individual member states.^[39] Bernsel stated that there are no updates on whether EU member states will deliver the promised one million artillery shells to Ukraine by spring 2024. EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated on January 10 that the EU will be able to supply Ukraine with the one million artillery shells by spring 2024.^[40]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) Office of the Inspector General published a report on January 11 that states that the failure to document certain aid provided to Ukraine in a timely manner is largely due to DoD limitations but that does not suggest that any of the material aid has been misappropriated.^[41] The report stated that the DoD's Office of Defense Cooperation-Ukraine (ODC-Ukraine) failed to adequately inventory defense articles within the 90 days required by law due to manpower shortages, the absence of protocols for maintaining a monitoring database in a hostile environment until December 2022, and a lack of internal controls for validating data in the database. DoD Inspector General Robert Storch noted that this report does not mean that these inventories are "not there" or "not being used," and the report noted that Ukrainian forces do provide "raw" numbers to the ODC-Ukraine and that Ukraine is working to implement a system better utilizing the serial numbers.^[42] The report also stated that Ukraine has conducted inventories that have not been uploaded to the designated database.^[43] The report noted that while the DoD's delinquency rate – the rate of US-provided defense articles for Ukraine not properly documented within 90 days of arrival – is still not in compliance with federal regulations, revised protocols for both the DoD and Ukrainian personnel contributed to an improved delinquency rate from February 10, 2023 to June 2,

2023. The report noted that the “diversion” of US military assistance from the Ukrainian military is outside the scope of its report, and that the report offers no evidence that any of the US defense articles allocated to Ukraine have been misused.

The DoD Office of the Inspector General’s report places the onus for ensuring compliance with the DoD’s reporting standards on the ODC-Ukraine, and Ukraine’s struggle to implement these standards appears to be related to manpower and logistics issues rather than malign intent.[44] The Office of the Inspector General’s report noted that Ukrainian personnel only have 10 barcode scanners to record serial numbers - none of which are on the front line - and that Ukrainian personnel sometimes struggle to report losses within the required 90 days due to the serial numbers becoming lost or unreadable from use and battle damage. The report also stated that Ukraine occasionally did not provide written reports of losses in a timely manner due to a difference between Ukraine’s and the DoD’s loss classification standards. The report noted that ODC-Ukraine lacks enough personnel at logistics hubs to ensure compliance with DoD reporting standards due to significant personnel limitations.

Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk announced on January 11 that the Verkhovna Rada withdrew a draft law on mobilization for revisions after discussions between Ukrainian legislators and political and military leadership.[45] Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is prepared to introduce a new version of the draft law that accounts for various unspecified proposals and emphasized the importance of rotations and leave for Ukrainian servicemen.[46] ISW previously reported on several provisions made in the now returned draft law, and it is currently unclear what provisions will be made in the new version.[47]

A Ukrainian official indicated that the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) may struggle to compensate for the loss of base infrastructure after allocating naval assets away from the BSF’s main base of Sevastopol in occupied Crimea.[48] Ukrainian Navy Commander Vice Admiral Oleksiy Neizhpapa stated to *Ukrainska Pravda* in an interview published on January 11 that the Russian naval base in Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, is a poorer base than Sevastopol due to its vulnerability to poor weather conditions and a lack of nearby airfields, large repair facilities, or weapons storage facilities. Neizhpapa noted that Ukrainian strikes have forced Russian forces to reduce their use of Sevastopol as a main naval base, as ISW has recently observed.[49] Neizhpapa stated that Ukrainian strikes are compelling Russian forces to disperse their naval assets to ports in Novorossiysk and in Russian-backed separatist Abkhazia and that Russian forces are also reducing their use of the port of Feodosia, Crimea.[50]

Key Takeaways:

- The reported concentration of the Russian military’s entire combat-capable ground force in Ukraine and ongoing Russian force generation efforts appear to allow Russian forces to conduct routine operational level rotations in Ukraine.
- Russia’s ability to conduct operational level rotations will likely allow Russian forces to maintain the overall tempo of their localized offensive operations in eastern Ukraine in the near term, but it is unclear if Russian forces will be able to conduct effective rotations in the long term or in the event of intensified Russian offensive efforts or a significant Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian efforts to expand Russia’s defense industrial base (DIB) have yet to fulfill operational requirements in Ukraine and that munitions shortages will continue to prompt Russia to source supplies from abroad.
- Freezing temperatures in Ukraine are likely constraining operations along the front but will likely create more favorable terrain for mechanized maneuver warfare as the ground freezes in the coming weeks.
- Latvia and Estonia announced new military aid packages to Ukraine on January 11.
- Russia may be setting information conditions for future escalations against Latvia by threatening to punish Latvia for closing a likely base of Russian informational influence in Latvia.
- European Commission (EC) Defense Industry Spokesperson Johanna Bernsel clarified on January 11 that European Union (EU) member states will be able to produce a million shells per year by spring 2024 but that the delivery of the shells to Ukraine will depend on individual member states.
- The US Department of Defense (DoD) Office of the Inspector General published a report on January 11 that states that the failure to document certain aid provided to Ukraine in a timely manner is largely due to DoD limitations but that does not suggest that any of the material aid has been misappropriated.
- Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk announced on January 11 that the Verkhovna Rada withdrew a draft law on mobilization for revisions after discussions

between Ukrainian legislators and political and military leadership.

- A Ukrainian official indicated that the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) may struggle to compensate for the loss of base infrastructure after allocating naval assets away from the BSF's main base of Sevastopol in occupied Crimea.
- Ukrainian and Russian forces continued positional engagements along the entire front.
- Kremlin newswire TASS reported on January 10 that Russian forces will deploy additional aircraft and vessels and increase the production of hypersonic Kinzhal and Zircon missiles in 2024.
- The Belarusian Ministry of Emergency Situations stated on January 10 that it sponsored a trip for 35 Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Mogilev for the New Year holiday during which soldiers taught children "the basics of life safety" and how to behave in "extreme situations."

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 10, 2024

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

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

January 10, 2024, 6:55pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on January 10. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 11 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The Kremlin's effort to use the mythos of the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) to prepare the Russian public for a long war in Ukraine is at odds with Russia's current level of mobilization and Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetorical attempts to reassure Russians that the war will not have lasting domestic impacts. St. Petersburg outlet *Fontanka* published an interview with Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov on January 9 wherein Kartapolov stated that even in the "victorious years of 1944 to 1945" the Soviet forces faced difficulties, prompting the interviewer to ask Kartapolov if Russia was now figuratively in 1944-1945 (i.e. nearing the end of the war in Ukraine).^[1] Kartapolov attempted to expand the erroneous analogy between the Soviets' fight against Nazi Germany and Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by claiming that Russia is currently figuratively somewhere in December 1943 and moving into 1944.^[2] The Soviet military launched a series of successful offensive operations following its defensive victory at the battle of Kursk in July 1943 and by December 1943 had reached the banks of the Dnipro River and Kyiv in Ukraine. Kartapolov explained his logic by claiming that Ukrainian forces failed in the summer 2023 counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast in a way similar to Nazi Germany's losses in battles in 1943.^[3] Kartapolov's analogy makes little sense, particularly given the fact that the Russian forces have not gained notable ground in recent months as the Soviet forces did in the months before December 1943.^[4] The interviewer asked Kartapolov if his analogy suggests that Russia's war in Ukraine will end in 2024, forcing Kartapolov to admit that Russia's war in Ukraine and the Second World War cannot be literally compared.^[5] Kartapolov nevertheless continued to use allusions to the Second World War to claim that the Russian military would continue the war in Ukraine until it installed a "banner over the Reichstag" (i.e. complete victory in Ukraine that achieves all of Putin's maximalist objectives).^[6]

Kartapolov also alluded to the Second World War in response to a question about demobilization for Russian servicemen called up during Russia's partial mobilization by arguing that mobilized Soviet personnel did not go home in 1942 just because they had been fighting for a year.^[7] Kartapolov characterized Russian calls for demobilization as part of operations by Ukrainian and Western intelligence services.^[8] The interviewer pushed back against Kartapolov's allusion and stated that the entire Soviet Union was mobilized during the Second World War whereas only one percent of the Russian population is mobilized today (likely referencing Putin's December 1 decree alleging that the Russian military has a total of 2.039 million personnel, 1.32 million of whom are combat personnel on a population of roughly 145 million).^[9] The interviewer argued that either Russian officials should mobilize the entire country or mobilized personnel unwilling to sign contracts should be able to conclude their military service.^[10] Kartapolov responded by reiterating the Kremlin's rhetorical line that there is no need for general mobilization now or in the near future.^[11]

This exchange prominently highlights the disconnect between Russian force generation efforts and efforts to gradually mobilize Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and the Kremlin's routine rhetorical reliance on the mythos of the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet Union mobilized roughly 34.5 million people during the Second World War, including roughly 35 percent of its male population, and

committed almost the entirety of Soviet industry not destroyed by Nazi Germany to the war effort. [12] The Russian leadership continues to indicate a deep desire to avoid a wider mobilization and continues efforts to gradually mobilize Russia's DIB in a way that is less disruptive to the Russian economy.[13] Kartapolov was likely attempting to promote a victorious portrayal of events in Ukraine while arguing that the Russian public should be prepared for a longer war effort. The Kremlin has routinely relied on allusions to the Second World War to try to achieve this effect throughout the war in Ukraine.[14]

Kremlin rhetoric casting Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as a long total war for national survival also undermines Putin's efforts to reassure Russians about the domestic impacts of the war and assuage discontent about the Russian state's expectations for Russian service. Putin met with residents in Anadyr, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, on January 10 and attempted to reassure residents that there are no issues with material or financial support for Russian servicemembers in Ukraine.

[15] Putin also promised residents that Russian personnel should have a right to receive leave for a six-month period in which they received no leave as well as for the next six-month period.[16] Putin's focus on providing promised leave is notably at odds with Kartapolov's description of a war effort reminiscent of the Soviet Union's in the Second World War, during which soldiers did not get regular leave. Putin and the Kremlin have routinely tried to assuage Russian concerns that the war in Ukraine will have long term economic impacts, and appeals to Russian economic anxiety appear to be a major aspect of Putin's 2024 presidential campaign.[17] Kartapolov may be purposefully promoting longer-term Kremlin messaging that Putin and other higher-ranking Kremlin officials may want to avoid during Putin's presidential campaign. **There is no indication that erroneous Russian comparisons between the war in Ukraine and the Second World War reflect an intent within the Kremlin to bring Russia to a wartime footing remotely reminiscent of the Soviet Union's full-scale mobilization during the Second World War. Constant Kremlin allusions to World War II are meant in part to create the entirely false impression that Russia today can sweep aside its enemies relying on mass and weight of overwhelming manpower and materiel as the Red Army supposedly did to Nazi Germany.**

The Kremlin may be instructing actors in the Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria to set information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria as part of wider Kremlin efforts to destabilize Moldova. The Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB) issued a press release on January 10 claiming that an "incident" occurred on January 7 during which "two Transnistrian citizens were transferred to the territory of Ukraine" but that authorities are clarifying the circumstances of the "incident." [18] The MGB is a Russian-dominated organization that is commonly understood to be a "department of the Russian FSB (Federal Security Service)" that likely takes orders directly from Moscow.[19] Kremlin newswire TASS published an interview with Transnistrian President Vadim Krasnoselsky on January 9 wherein he claimed that Moldova's "militarization" threatens Transnistria, blamed Moldova for halting negotiations with Transnistria, and emphasized Transnistria's "extensive" cooperation agreements with Russia.[20] Krasnoselsky's interview was likely part of efforts to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova and justifying any future Russian campaigns in the region.[21] The MGB's January 10 press release is likely also part of such Kremlin efforts.

The Kremlin may attempt to use false flag operations in Transnistria as an effort to claim that Russia must protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated on January 10 that it summoned the Moldovan Ambassador to Russia to protest Moldova's "unfriendly actions," including the "politically motivated persecution of Russian and Russian-language media" and "cases of discrimination against Russian citizens entering Moldova." [22] The Russian MFA threateningly stated that if such actions continue, "the Russian side reserves the right to take additional retaliatory measures." The Russian MFA also claimed that there are media reports that Moldova plans to assist NATO in training Ukrainian forces on Moldovan territory, which would amount to Moldova's "direct involvement" in hostilities on the side of Ukraine. Kremlin officials have recently intensified references to "compatriots abroad" and the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*), concepts that Russia often uses to justify its right to defend ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers beyond its borders.[23] Russia notably used similar justifications when it militarily intervened on behalf of separatist Transnistria in 1992.[24]

The Kremlin likely attempted to set information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria in April 2022 and February 2023 but failed in part for economic reasons.[25] CTP previously assessed that the Kremlin was unable to draw Transnistria into its war in Ukraine at the time because Transnistrian businesses – notably those of Moldovan-Russian businessman Viktor Gushan, who effectively controls Transnistria's government and a large part of its economy – benefited from ties with the West and Ukraine.[26] The EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with Moldova allowed Transnistrian businesses registered in Moldova to enjoy tariff-free access to EU markets as long as they followed Moldovan custom checks.[27] Recent

changes to the Moldovan Customs Code that require Transnistrian businesses to pay import customs duties to Moldova may have disrupted these benefits.[28] Moldova has also indicated in recent months its willingness to initially join the EU without Transnistria, which would further deprive Transnistrian businesses of special access to EU markets.[29]

The Kremlin may also be reviving its efforts to leverage Transnistria to create instability in Moldova in order to undermine Ukrainian grain exports along the western coast of the Black Sea. Reuters reported on January 10 that Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta recorded 36 million metric tons of shipped grain in 2023 – a record high - and that about 40 percent of these shipments consisted of Ukrainian grain.[30] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian strikes against Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets forced Russian naval operating patterns to change and forced the BSF to move some ships away from its main base in occupied Sevastopol in western Crimea.[31] Ukrainian strikes against BSF assets have also successfully facilitated the civilian use of Ukraine's Black Sea grain corridor as international support for the corridor continues to increase despite Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and military threats against it. The Kremlin may view a false flag operation in Transnistria as an alternative way to deter countries from participating in Ukraine's grain corridor despite Russia's weakened presence in the western Black Sea.

Iran has reportedly developed a new Shahed drone for Russian forces to use against Ukraine and is “close” to providing Russia with surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and systems. An unspecified security source told Sky News in an article published on January 10 that Iran has developed an “explosive and reconnaissance” Shahed-107 drone and has offered “a few units” to Russia for over \$2 million.[32] The source stated that the Shahed-107 has a range of up to 1,500 kilometers and has a video livestream transmitter.[33] ISW recently observed reports that Russian forces had launched a new Shahed model, the Shahed-238, which is different from the Shahed-107, against Ukraine.[34] Sky News' source also stated that Russia is expecting to receive surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and systems from Iran “sometime soon.”[35] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby reported on January 4 that Russian officials continue efforts to buy ballistic missiles from Iran.[36] ISW assessed that Russia may be intensifying efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad because these missiles appear more effective at striking targets in Ukraine in some circumstances.[37] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement, trade cooperation, the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway in Iran, and the Israel-Hamas war among other topics in a January 9 phone call.[38]

European Union (EU) Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated that the EU will be able to supply Ukraine with one million shells by spring 2024.[39] Breton stated that the EU will need to reduce its ammunition exports to non-EU countries and ensure that EU countries pressure their defense industries to increase production.[40] Breton stated that it is “extremely important” for the EU to have the same weapons production capacity as Russia and that the EU could reach this goal within 18 months to two years.[41] CBC News reported on January 9 that Canada has yet to deliver the NASAMS air defense system that it pledged to send to Ukraine in January 2023.[42] CBC News also reported that one of the two companies building the NASAMS system claimed that it does not have a Canadian contract for the system.[43] Ukrainian military officials recently noted that Ukraine has a shortage of anti-aircraft guided missiles after several recent large Russian missile and drone strikes.[44] Ukrainian forces also reportedly face artillery ammunition shortages on the frontline.[45]

Lithuania announced a new long-term military aid package to Ukraine worth 200 million euros (about \$220 million) on January 10.[46] The World Bank reported that Lithuania's GDP in 2022 totaled \$70.97 billion indicating that this long-term military aid package is equivalent to 0.3 percent of Lithuania's total GDP.[47] The Kiel Institute for the World Economy reported that Lithuania's total bilateral aid to Ukraine totaled 1.4 percent of its GDP as of October 31, 2023.[48] US aid to Ukraine amounted to roughly 0.3 percent of US GDP as of October 2023.[49] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met on January 10 with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, who reaffirmed Lithuania's support for Ukraine joining NATO and stated that Lithuania is forming a “demining coalition” to support Ukraine.[50] The Ukrainian Ministry of Strategic Industry and the Lithuanian Defense and Security Industry Association also signed a memorandum of understanding to support joint defense industry projects.[51] Ukrainian state-owned defense enterprise Ukroronprom signed letters of intent with Lithuanian technology and defense companies RSI Europe, Brolis Semiconductors, DMEXS, and NT Service.[52]

The very characteristics that make the Russian ultranationalist milblogger community popular – its perceived independence from and willingness to criticize the Russian government – likely continue to complicate the Kremlin's efforts to co-opt the community as Kremlin mouthpieces. A group of Russian milbloggers, led by a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, publicized efforts allegedly backed by Russian authorities to censor a smaller group of milbloggers

who have criticized Russian operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.[53] The milbloggers claimed that Russian authorities are attempting to censor any milbloggers and military correspondents who are critical of the Russian military and Russian operations in Ukraine.[54] The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger, whom Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) have previously awarded, also claimed that unspecified Russian officials highlighted his January 9 post about command and communications issues in east bank Kherson Oblast as an example of "discrediting" Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky and the Russian Armed Forces.[55] Russian authorities have previously used the criminal charge of discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces to imprison other critical actors within the Russian information space, although it is unclear if the Kremlin is willing to use this charge against an affiliated and decorated milblogger.[56]

ISW has previously observed a concerted Kremlin campaign following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion in June 2023 and the death of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023 to establish more control of the Russian information space that largely achieved the intended effect of reducing public criticism of how the Russian military is conducting the war in Ukraine.[57] ISW previously assessed that prominent Russian milbloggers likely have a monetary incentive to regularly report information about the war in Ukraine that is uncritical of Russian authorities and Russian milbloggers may benefit from calling attention to censorship efforts targeting their channel, real or otherwise, to dispel the idea that they have become Kremlin mouthpieces.[58]

Russian insider sources continue to discuss the reported removal of First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU), Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev, who was reportedly in charge of the Russian "Volunteer Corps" that was intended to replace the Wagner Group in Ukraine. A Russian insider source claimed on January 10 that Alekseyev continues to fulfill his duties in an unspecified position overseeing unspecified GRU operations in Ukraine.[59] The insider source claimed that Alekseyev has accumulated a lot of control and "compromising evidence" against Russian authorities during his time in the GRU and that the Kremlin has not formally removed Alekseyev due to concerns that Alekseyev's removal could provoke an "uncontrollable" conflict within the Russian military and GRU.[60] The insider source reiterated claims that Major General Denis Barylo "leads" the Russian "Volunteer Corps." [61] Another Russian insider source claimed on January 8 that Russian officials forced Alekseyev to resign in fall 2023.[62]

Key Takeaways:

- The Kremlin's effort to use the mythos of the Great Patriotic War (Second World War) to prepare the Russian public for a long war in Ukraine is at odds with Russia's current level of mobilization and Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetorical attempts to reassure Russians that the war will not have lasting domestic impacts.
- The Kremlin may be instructing actors in the Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria to set information conditions for a possible false-flag operation in Transnistria as part of wider Kremlin efforts to destabilize Moldova.
- The Kremlin may also be reviving its efforts to leverage Transnistria to create instability in Moldova in order to undermine Ukrainian grain exports along the western coast of the Black Sea.
- Iran has reportedly developed a new Shahed drone for Russian forces to use against Ukraine and is "close" to providing Russia with surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and systems.
- European Union (EU) Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton stated that the EU will be able to supply Ukraine with one million shells by spring 2024.
- Lithuania announced a new long-term military aid package to Ukraine worth 200 million euros (about \$220 million) on January 10.
- The very characteristics that make the Russian ultranationalist milblogger community popular – its perceived independence from and willingness to criticize the Russian government – likely continue to complicate the Kremlin's efforts to co-opt the community as Kremlin mouthpieces.
- Russian insider sources continue to discuss the reported removal of First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU), Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev, who was reportedly in charge of the Russian "Volunteer Corps" that was intended to replace the Wagner Group in Ukraine.
- Russian forces advanced southwest of Bakhmut and Donetsk City and in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast amid continued positional engagements along the entire front.
- Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov stated on January 10 that the Russian military plans to reorganize the five existing naval infantry brigades of Russia's fleets into naval infantry divisions and the Caspian Flotilla's naval infantry regiment into a naval infantry brigade in the medium-term.

- Russian authorities continue to deport prisoners from prisons in occupied Ukraine to Russia and are likely using penal colonies as part of widespread efforts to collect data on Ukrainian citizens.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 9, 2024

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

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

January 9, 2024, 7:35pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:10pm ET on January 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Ukrainian public opinion survey on Ukrainian attitudes towards the Ukrainian government and military indicates that Ukrainian society overwhelmingly supports Ukraine's military and its leadership while experiencing tensions typical in a society fighting an existential defensive war. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KMIS) published a survey on December 18, 2023, that it conducted between November 29 and December 9, 2023, that shows that 96 percent of respondents support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, 88 percent trust Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and 66 percent trust Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.^[1] 84 percent of respondents in a previous KMIS poll conducted in December 2022 expressed trust in Zelensky, and trust in many Ukrainian institutions experienced a similar decline between December 2022 and 2023 – an unsurprising development given the protracted war.^[2] The Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), the Ukrainian National Police, and Ukrainian volunteers did not see similar decreases in polled public trust during this time.^[3]

Ukrainian sentiments in December 2022 were likely more optimistic than in November and December 2023 because Ukrainian forces had recently liberated large portions of occupied territory in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts during successful counteroffensive operations in the fall of 2022. Ukraine's successful counteroffensive operations in 2022 liberated the strategic regional capital city of Kherson, pushed the frontline away from several major Ukrainian population centers, and turned these cities into near rear and rear areas, which may have allowed more Ukrainians to focus on domestic issues of local governance throughout 2023 instead of the imminent existential threat of Russian military activity and occupation they faced in 2022.

The KMIS poll also shows that the majority of respondents support both Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi and that only 15 percent held polarized opinions supporting one and not the other.^[4] Russian sources have widely promoted Kremlin information operations alleging a serious rift between Ukrainian military and civilian leadership and have routinely attempted to portray domestic issues in Ukraine as significantly undermining the Ukrainian will to fight.^[5] These Russian information operations aim to break Ukrainians' trust in their leadership and weaken Ukrainian morale while also decreasing Western support for Ukraine by falsely portraying Ukrainian society as demoralized and divided. The KMIS poll suggests that these Russian information operations are far from reality and that the Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine remains highly unlikely to break Ukrainian support for Ukraine's military and civilian leadership and the Ukrainian will to fight.

A new independent poll from the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains strong domestic support for his regime and his war in Ukraine, despite relatively poor economic conditions and living standards in Russia.^[6] The NORC poll surveyed 1,046 Russian adults living in the Russian Federation and Russian-occupied Crimea using data from Russian mobile service providers.^[7] The poll found that 67 percent of participants approve of how Putin has conducted foreign policy and 58 percent approve of his domestic policy, but that 66 percent plan to vote for Putin in the upcoming March 2024 Presidential Election.^[8] Putin's relatively high ratings appear to persevere even though the NORC poll found that Russians are unhappy with rising prices causing a general decline in living conditions.^[9] The NORC poll also noted that 63 percent of participants support the war in Ukraine and that 64 percent of respondents see the war as a "civilizational struggle between Russia and the West."^[10] This result contrasts with other recent independent Russian polling that showed decreased support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.^[11]

Russian ultranationalist vitriolic responses to gender integration in the Ukrainian military highlight Russia's ongoing shift towards a cultural-ideological worldview that seeks to restore rigid and traditional gender roles and exposes gaps between Russia and Ukraine's respective

abilities to mobilize their societies. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated on January 8 that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) purchased 50,000 sets of uniforms specifically for female servicemembers for the first time.[12] Several ultranationalist Russian milbloggers inaccurately took Umerov's statement to mean that Ukraine would be conscripting women, with one saying that the purchase of uniforms for women means "the time has come for everyone to think," and another milblogger claiming that Ukraine is now preparing to "exterminate" 50,000 Ukrainian women.

[13] Ukraine has not been conscripting women, and neither current law nor proposed bills provide for conscripting Ukrainian women.[14] Women have been volunteering to serve in the Ukrainian military, and Umerov's statement instead reflects recent Ukrainian efforts to further increase gender integration in the Ukrainian Armed Forces by developing uniforms and body armor suited to the unique needs of female servicemembers.[15]

The negative Russian responses illuminate not only the ongoing Russian information operation designed to undermine Ukrainians' will to fight, but also the archaic and misogynistic views shaping the worldviews of Russia's leadership and the ultranationalist community. They also reflect the Russians' ongoing failure to understand exactly how broadly and deeply Ukrainian society has mobilized to defend against the Russian invasion. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reported in October 2023 that nearly 43,000 female servicemembers are serving in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, a 21 percent increase in female servicemembers from 2021.[16] The Ukrainian Military Media Center and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Nataliia Kalmykova stated that over 5,000 female servicemembers were actively serving in frontline combat zones as of November 2023.[17]

By contrast, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced in March 2023 that 1,100 Russian women were serving in frontline combat positions of the 39,000 Russian women serving in the Russian Armed Forces, mostly in non-combat roles such as combat medics and cooks.[18] Russian opposition media began reporting in 2023 that Russian authorities were increasingly relying on mass forced recruitment of women from penal colonies to fill force generation requirements, suggesting that recruitment of women in Russia takes place on a much more coercive basis than the voluntarism of Ukraine's female servicemembers.[19] Kremlin officials and Kremlin mouthpieces have recently emphasized the importance of instilling and concretizing traditional gender roles and family values as a fundamental part of Russian domestic policy, with Russian officials calling for the institution of large families with a working father and a stay-at-home mother.[20] Russian President Vladimir Putin defined 2024 as the "Year of the Family" during his New Year's Eve address and has recently placed great weight on the role of Russian women as performing their expected role of "motherhood." [21] The increasing Russian social reliance on traditional gender roles, as defined and encouraged by the state, is likely heavily impacting Russian social expectations for women to fight in the military, thereby impacting Russia's ability to mobilize a significant portion of society, whereas Ukrainian society continues to be galvanized by a popular desire to defend Ukraine strong enough to bring so many Ukrainian women near and onto the battlefield of their own accord.

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Ukraine has a shortage of anti-aircraft guided missiles after several recent large Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine.[22] Ihnat stated that Ukraine has rationed air defense equipment and ammunition and has used a considerable amount of Ukraine's existing air defense missile stockpile in defending against the past three large series of Russian strikes.[23] US Administration officials reported on January 8 that they met with leaders from venture capital firms and technology and defense industries to discuss providing Ukraine with US systems and equipment.[24] The meetings reportedly focused on providing Ukraine with drones, demining equipment, and means to counter Russian drones.[25]

Russian sources continue to complain about persistent command and communication problems that degrade Russian combat capability in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian commanders have less frequently ordered units to conduct attritional assaults in the past two months since Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky replaced Colonel General Oleg Makarevich as the commander of the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces.[26] The milblogger claimed that many problems have persisted and worsened in this area, however. Russian forces operating near Krynyk are reportedly unable to target Ukrainian aircraft and helicopters because the Russian command does not give them timely permission to shoot targets down.[27] Russian commanders also reportedly take several hours to approve artillery strikes and require units to send target coordinates and video or photo confirmation of targets before approving strikes.[28] The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces do not have enough electronic warfare (EW) systems to combat the number of Ukrainian drones operating in the area.[29] Another milblogger called on Russian forces to stop moving equipment to Krynyk and nearby areas because Ukrainian forces destroy up to 90 percent of Russian equipment there.[30] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that elements of the 17th Tank Regiment (70th Motorized Rifle Division, 18th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District), reportedly deployed southeast of Krynyk, are literally "burning with desire" to conduct heavily

attritional attacks, suggesting that the command of this regiment is still relying on attritional frontal assaults as a favored attack tactic.[31] Russian forces, especially elements of the 104th Airborne (VDV) Division, have reportedly suffered significant losses in operations near Krynyk.[32] ISW has consistently observed Russian complaints of inadequate command, inter- and intra-unit coordination, air defense, fire support, and EW since November 2023 but continues to assess that these reported tactical problems do not always translate into significant operational effects.[33]

Russian sources are reviving longstanding calls for a large-scale Russian offensive operation in Kharkiv Oblast to create a “buffer zone” with Belgorod Oblast despite the Russian military’s likely inability to conduct an operation to seize significant territory in Kharkiv Oblast in the near term. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated on January 9 that Russian forces will do everything to prevent Ukrainian indirect fire in Belgorod Oblast.[34] Russian sources seized on Peskov’s comments to call on Russian forces to create a “buffer zone” up to 15 kilometers in depth in Kharkiv Oblast to push Ukrainian MLRS and artillery away from the international border with Belgorod Oblast.[35] Russian ultranationalists routinely called for a similar operation in summer 2023 amid widespread discontent about limited cross-border raids by pro-Ukrainian forces into Belgorod Oblast. [36] A Russian incursion 15 kilometers in depth and several hundred kilometers in width would be a massive operational undertaking that would require a grouping of forces far larger and significantly better resourced than what Russian forces currently have concentrated along the entire international border with Ukraine, least of all in Belgorod Oblast.[37] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may intensify efforts to capture Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast, in the coming weeks and that the Russian grouping in the Kupyansk direction appears more well-suited to conduct an intensified offensive effort than elsewhere in Ukraine or along the international border.[38] The Russian military is likely currently able to conduct only tactical-level actions into Kharkiv Oblast from Belgorod Oblast, which at most would serve as feints to draw and fix Ukrainian forces away from a possible Russian operational effort in the Kupyansk direction.

Recent Kremlin and Russian media rhetoric aimed at threatening Moldova likely continues to embolden pro-Russian separatist leaders in Moldova to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova. Vadim Krasnoselsky, the president of the Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria, claimed in an interview with Kremlin newswire TASS published on January 9 that Moldova’s increased military budget, joint exercises with NATO, and military subsidies and supplies from European states are evidence of Moldova’s “militarization,” which threatens Transnistria. [39] Krasnoselsky claimed that Transnistria does not threaten Moldova and dismissed the idea that Moldova’s force generation efforts stem from a desire to defend itself, despite the fact that Russian troops have occupied Transnistria since 1992 after the Russian Federation intervened on behalf of separatist Transnistria on the pretext of protecting ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations. [40] Krasnoselsky also affirmed in 2018 his commitment to ensuring that Transnistria eventually becomes part of Russia.[41] Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova “treacherously attacked [Transnistria’s] peaceful cities in the past” and has committed “massive” human rights violations. Krasnoselsky blamed Moldova for stopping dialogue with Transnistria and abandoning previously reached agreements. Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova is “consistently following the path of escalation” and threateningly stated that Moldova “bears the responsibility for further inevitable consequences.” ISW previously assessed that Russia is setting information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova and justifying any future campaigns by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova—an approach that closely parallels debunked Russian narratives used to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[42]

Krasnoselsky’s anger with a recent change to the Moldovan Customs Code likely motivated him to further the Kremlin’s efforts to set such information conditions and sow instability in Moldova. CTP has previously assessed that Krasnoselsky is closely related to Moldovan-Russian businessman Viktor Gushan, who effectively controls Transnistria’s government and a large part of its economy.[43] The Kremlin likely conducted a false flag operation in April 2022 intended to draw Transnistria into its invasion of Ukraine, but ultimately failed to win Gushan’s support as Gushan’s businesses benefited from ties to the West and Ukraine.[44] Moldova passed a new Customs Code in March 2023 that went into effect on January 1, 2024, and requires companies in Transnistria to pay import customs duties to Moldova.[45] Krasnoselsky claimed on January 5 that the change came as a “surprise” to Transnistria.[46] Moldovan investigative journalists reported in 2020 that two Transnistrian companies tied to Gushan’s Sheriff Enterprises imported cigarettes worth about \$22 million to Transnistria without paying taxes.[47] Krasnoselsky claimed on January 9 to TASS that Moldova’s introduction of duties starting January 1, 2024, is an “unreasonable” policy that violates the trade agreement between Transnistria and the EU and that Moldova is pushing Moldovan-Transnistrian relations towards “greater confrontation.”[48] Krasnoselsky highlighted that Transnistria is striving to build direct communication with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and emphasized Transnistria’s “extensive” bilateral cooperation frameworks with Russia as means to “help avoid risks provoked by” Moldova’s policy.[49]

Bloomberg reported that officials from Ukraine, the Group of Seven (G7) countries, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other unspecified countries held a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on December 16 to build support for Ukrainian conditions to negotiate with Russia.

[50] Unspecified individuals familiar with the meeting told *Bloomberg* in an article published on January 9 that officials from China, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) did not attend the meeting, although Brazil submitted a written statement.

Key Takeaways:

- A Ukrainian public opinion survey on Ukrainian attitudes towards the Ukrainian government and military indicates that Ukrainian society overwhelmingly supports Ukraine's military and its leadership while experiencing tensions typical in a society fighting an existential defensive war.
- A new independent poll from the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains strong domestic support for his regime and his war in Ukraine, despite relatively poor economic conditions and living standards in Russia.
- Russian ultranationalist vitriolic responses to gender integration in the Ukrainian military highlight Russia's ongoing shift towards a cultural-ideological worldview that seeks to restore rigid and traditional gender roles and exposes gaps between Russia and Ukraine's respective abilities to mobilize their own societies.
- Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Ukraine has a shortage of anti-aircraft guided missiles after several recent large Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine.
- Russian sources continue to complain about persistent command and communication problems that degrade Russian combat capability in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources are reviving longstanding calls for a large-scale Russian offensive operation in Kharkiv Oblast to create a "buffer zone" with Belgorod Oblast despite the Russian military's likely inability to conduct an operation to seize significant territory in Kharkiv Oblast in the near term.
- Recent Kremlin and Russian media rhetoric aimed at threatening Moldova likely continues to embolden pro-Russian separatist leaders in Moldova to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova.
- *Bloomberg* reported that officials from Ukraine, the Group of Seven (G7) countries, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other unspecified countries held a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on December 16 to build support for Ukrainian conditions to negotiate with Russia.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances southwest of Donetsk City, and positional engagements continued along the entire frontline.
- The Russian military is reportedly abusing Serbian nationals whom Russian officials have recruited to serve in Russian formations in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials continue the systematic oppression of residents of occupied Crimea using law enforcement and administrative means.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 8, 2024

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

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

January 8, 2024, 6:30pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on January 8. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 9 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian officials highlighted the need for more air defense systems after another large series of Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 7 to 8. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched a total of 59 missiles and drones against Ukraine including: eight Shahed-136/-131 drones; seven S-300/400 missiles; four Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles; 24 Kh-101/555/55 and eight Kh-22 cruise missiles; six Iskander-M ballistic missiles; and two Kh-31P air guided missiles.[1] Ukrainian military officials reported that the Russian strikes targeted critical and civilian infrastructure, and military facilities in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and Kremenchuk oblasts and that Ukrainian forces downed all eight Shaheds and 18 Kh-101/555/55 cruise missiles.[2] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that the percentage of Russian air targets that Ukrainian forces shot down on the night of January 7 to 8 did not change in comparison to previous, more intense Russian strikes, but that Ukraine needs to

intercept more Russian missiles and drones given the large number of such systems that Russia regularly launches.[3] Ihnat stated that only “specific means,” such as Patriot air defense systems, can down ballistic missiles and that Ukrainian forces have yet to down a Kh-22 cruise missile.[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in a virtual address to Sweden’s annual national Society and Defense Conference on January 8 that Ukraine needs to strengthen its air defense capabilities at the front to better protect Ukrainian positions against Russian strikes and in the rear to protect civilians. [5] Zelensky stated that Ukrainian forces have intercepted over 70 percent of the over 500 Russian missiles and drones launched over the past “several days” thanks to air defenses systems from Western partners but that this current interception rate is insufficient.[6] Zelensky stated that Russian forces will lose their power on the battlefield if Russian forces lose air superiority.[7]

Western provisions of air defense systems and missiles remains crucial for Ukraine as Russian forces attempt to adapt to current Ukrainian air defense capabilities and as Ukraine develops its defense industrial base (DIB). ISW assessed that Russian and Ukrainian forces are currently engaged in a tactical and technological offensive-defense race wherein both sides are constantly experimenting and adapting their long-range strikes and air defenses.[8] The continued and increased Western provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine is crucial as Russian forces continue to experiment with new ways to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. The inclusion of Western-provided air defense systems into Ukraine’s air defense umbrella has been essential to Ukraine’s ability to defend against Russian missiles, particularly ballistic missiles.[9] Western air defense systems and air defense missile provisions to Ukraine in the near- and medium-term are also essential to protecting Ukraine’s growing DIB as Russian forces continue to target Ukrainian industrial facilities.[10] US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller called the provision of US aid to Ukraine “critical” on January 4 because Ukraine is not yet able to defend itself but noted that US aid will not need to continue at previous levels because Ukraine is working to expand its DIB to “stand on its own feet.”[11]

Ukrainian forces are adapting to battlefield difficulties from equipment shortages but are struggling to completely compensate for artillery ammunition shortages and insufficient electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on January 8 that Ukrainian forces are struggling with artillery ammunition shortages on the frontline but that Ukrainian forces are using first person view (FPV) drones to compensate for these shortages until Ukraine receives more ammunition.[12] Ukrainian soldiers near Robotyne, western Zaporizhia Oblast told the WSJ that they are able to strike small Russian vehicles and soldiers transporting supplies with FPV drones and hinder Russian logistics, but that the FPV drones carry smaller payloads so that Ukrainian forces cannot use them to strike Russian field fortifications as they can with artillery. The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on January 7 that Ukrainian forces, particularly in western Zaporizhia Oblast, are struggling to overcome difficulties due to Russian ground attacks, FPV drone strikes, and EW capabilities.[13] A Ukrainian deputy battalion commander told NYT that Ukrainian morale is “all right” but that the soldiers are “physically exhausted.” The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on January 7 that Russian forces have an advantage in EW and are prioritizing the production of strike drones and reiterated the importance of bolstering Ukraine’s EW capabilities to counter Russian drones and missiles.[14] FT noted that Ukraine has heavily invested in its EW capabilities since the start of the full-scale invasion but that Russian forces retain the upper hand due to Russia’s pre-war EW capabilities.

Russian authorities are reportedly illegally deporting Ukrainian civilians to Russia and holding them in penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers without charges, investigations, trials, access to lawyers, or designated release dates. The BBC’s *Russian Service* reported on January 8 that Russian authorities have detained thousands of Ukrainian civilians in penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers in Russia and occupied Ukraine for “opposing the ‘special military operation.’”[15] BBC’s *Russian Service* reported that Russian authorities are holding the Ukrainian civilians without formal records of their detention, without initiating criminal or administrative cases, and without ongoing investigations, so the detainees do not “formally” exist in the Russian penitentiary system and have no access to lawyers. The BBC’s *Russian Service* reported that some former Ukrainian civilian detainees stated that Russian authorities treated them “like subhumans” and tortured them. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly responded to a request about one of the detained civilians, stating that Russian authorities are holding the detainee in accordance with “the requirements of the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.” The BBC noted that the Geneva Convention prohibits the taking of civilian hostages who are non-combatants. [16] The BBC reported that there is currently no mechanism in international law for the release of civilians from captivity, and the Geneva Convention only allows for POWs to be exchanged for other POWs.[17] The BBC’s *Russian Service* stated that the work of third parties, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), that recently helped mediate a prisoner exchange that included the return of Ukrainian civilians, have proven vital for the return of the civilian detainees. The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories stated that there were 4,337 Ukrainians in Russian captivity as of November 2023, including 763 civilians, but the BBC noted that these numbers rely on

data from the Red Cross, which does not always have access to places where Russian authorities hold Ukrainian civilians, including detention centers and penal colonies in occupied territories.

[18] Ukrainian Commissioner for Human Rights Dmitry Lubinets stated that about 25,000 Ukrainian civilians are missing and that Russian forces may have kidnapped a significant number of the missing individuals.[19] The *BBC* quoted the Ukrainian “Find Ours” project as estimating that there may be about 7,500 Ukrainian civilians unlawfully detained in Russia and occupied Ukraine.

[20] The *BBC’s Russian Service* stated that Russian and Ukrainian human rights activists have identified more than 30 penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers in which Ukrainian civilians have been reportedly detained.[21]

A Russian insider source claimed that Russian officials dismissed First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU), Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev, who was reportedly in charge of the Russian “Volunteer Corps” that was intended to replace the Wagner Group. A Russian insider source, which has previously provided accurate information about Russian command changes, claimed in response to a source reportedly affiliated with Russian authorities (*siloviki*), that Russian officials forced Alekseyev to resign in fall 2023.[22] The *siloviki*-affiliated source originally claimed that Alekseyev’s irregular armed formation, the “Volunteer Corps,” was facing similar equipment and shell shortages that Wagner experienced in early 2023.

[23] The *siloviki*-affiliated source claimed that almost all units of the “Volunteer Corps” have been experiencing an acute shortage of fuel and lubricants for the past two months, especially on the Bakhmut and Avdiivka frontlines. The *siloviki*-affiliated source added that the “Volunteer Corps” is struggling with these shortages even though it was integrated into the GRU organizational structure under the 462nd Special Purpose Training Center. The *siloviki*-affiliated source claimed that Alekseyev is assuring his subordinates that such shortages are temporary and that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is delaying weapon and supply provisions to the “Volunteer Corps” - in a similar fashion to his prior efforts to calm now-deceased Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in the spring of 2023. A Russian political blogger (who has an audience of 150,000 followers) argued that the Russian MoD likely is not intentionally failing to provide military equipment and supplies to the Russian “Volunteer Corps” since that irregular formation cannot pose the same political threat to the Kremlin as Wagner and Prigozhin’s mutiny did in June 2023.[24] The blogger argued that the reported shell shortages indicate potential systematic supply shortages across all Russian forces or more likely suggest that the Russian MoD is withholding ammunition from certain units whose functions it deems to be “less relevant.” The blogger observed that elements of the Russian “Volunteer Corps” are primarily engaged in infantry assaults and that Russia is conserving means, such as the use of aircraft, in certain directions.

ISW cannot confirm either Alekseyev’s dismissal in fall 2023 or the reports of shell shortages disproportionately affecting the Russian “Volunteer Corps.” ISW last observed reports of Alekseyev awarding servicemen of the Russian “Hispaniola” Soccer Fan Volunteer Reconnaissance and Assault Brigade on November 30, 2023.[25] *BBC’s Russian Service* reported that Alekseyev was present during the negotiations with Prigozhin after his mutiny, and *Radio Liberty* reported that Wagner channels referred to Alekseyev as “one of the founders” of Wagner.[26] Alekseyev also accompanied Prigozhin around the Russian Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters in Rostov-on-Don during the mutiny and later recorded a video of himself asking Prigozhin to stop the mutiny.[27] *BBC’s Russian Service* reported that Alekseyev was one of the main managers of all “volunteer” irregular formations – including the Redut private military company (PMC).

Russian authorities continue efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March presidential elections. Kremlin newswire TASS stated on January 8 that the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office, Ministry of Digital Development, and Russian federal information monitoring service Roskomnadzor prepared a bill on the rapid blocking of illegal content on the internet using a specialized information system.[28] The Prosecutor General’s Office stated that it sent 555 demands to Roskomnadzor to block “fakes” that “discredit” the Russian Armed Forces and Russian authorities in 2023 and that Russian authorities deleted or blocked over 69,000 internet resources.[29] The Prosecutor General’s Office stated that the topics of these “fakes” included the war in Ukraine, decisions made by government authorities, and violations of the electoral process during the September 2023 elections.

Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on January 8 that recent polling shows decreased domestic support for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections. *Verstka*, citing polling data from independent Russian opposition polling organizations *Chronicles* and the Public Sociology Laboratory and unspecified Kremlin sources, reported that the percentage of Russians who support Russia’s withdrawal from Ukraine “without achieving the [war] goals” exceeded the percentage of Russians who support continuing the war for the first time at the end of 2023.[30] An unnamed source with reported connections to the Russian Presidential Administration told *Verstka* that fewer than 50 percent of respondents in a recent Kremlin-

sponsored poll supported the continuation of Russia's war in Ukraine while more than 30 percent are in favor of peace negotiations.[31] *Verstka* stated that decreased support for the war has not yet led to a vocal anti-war political movement due to continued domestic political support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, however.[32] *Chronicles* stated on November 30, 2023, 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 the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine unless Russia achieves its war aims, and think that Russia should prioritize military spending – decreased from 22 percent to 12 percent between February 2023 and October 2023.

[33] *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.[34] Independent Russian polling organization Levada Center reported on October 31, 2023, that 55 percent of respondents believe that Russia should begin peace negotiations while 38 percent favor continuing to conduct the war, noting that these numbers have largely remained consistent since July 2023.[35] The Levada Center released a poll on December 5, 2023, that showed that the Russian public continues to have questions about the end and outcome of the war as well as mobilization and prospects for peace consistent with increased domestic support for a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine and peace negotiations.[36]

Russian government and media officials recently have died, possibly under mysterious circumstances. Russian authorities found the editor-in-chief of the online editorial office of the Kuban branch of the Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), Zoya Konovalova, and her husband dead in Krasnodar Krai on January 6, and the cause of death is reportedly poisoning.[37] Many Russian milbloggers and war correspondents are associated with VGTRK.[38] Vladimir Egorov, the deputy chairman of the Tobolsk City Duma and member of the United Russia party, died on December 27, 2023, after falling from a third-story window in his home. [39] A Russian source claimed that the most likely cause of death was a heart problem.[40] Russian news outlet *RBK* stated that Egorov was sentenced to correctional labor in 2016 for not collecting rent from businessmen after leasing municipal land, but the charges were dropped due to the statute of limitations.[41]

A Russian state media outlet confirmed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) detained three officers of its Directorate "M" in connection with a high-profile bribery scheme. Kremlin newswire *TASS* cited Russian law enforcement agencies on January 8 as reporting the detention of FSB officer Alexander Ushakov and house arrests of officers Alexei Tsarev and Sergei Manyshev for accepting bribes totaling over five billion rubles (\$55.6 million) and other unspecified crimes.[42] *TASS*'s report confirms part of a claim from a Russian insider source on November 28, 2023, that the FSB detained an "Ushakov," two unspecified Directorate "M" officers, and two unspecified Directorate "T" officers in connection with a five-billion ruble bribery case. [43] *TASS* reported that the FSB's Directorate "M" is responsible for counterintelligence and combating corruption in various Russian government and law enforcement agencies, including the Russian Supreme Court, Prosecutor General's Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), Ministry of Justice, and Investigative Committee.[44]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian officials highlighted the need for more air defense systems after another large series of Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 7 to 8.
- Western provisions of air defense systems and missiles remains crucial for Ukraine as Russian forces attempt to adapt to current Ukrainian air defense capabilities and as Ukraine develops its defense industrial base (DIB).
- Ukrainian forces are adapting to battlefield difficulties from equipment shortages but are struggling to completely compensate for artillery ammunition shortages and insufficient electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.
- Russian authorities are reportedly illegally deporting Ukrainian civilians to Russia and holding them in penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers without charges, investigations, trials, access to lawyers, or designated release dates.
- A Russian insider source claimed that Russian officials dismissed First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU), Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseyev, who was reportedly in charge of the Russian "Volunteer Corps" that was intended to replace the Wagner Group.
- ISW cannot confirm either Alekseyev's dismissal in fall 2023 or the reports of shell shortages disproportionately affecting the Russian "Volunteer Corps."
- Russian authorities continue efforts to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March presidential elections.

- Russian opposition outlet *Verstka* reported on January 8 that recent polling shows decreased domestic support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ahead of the March 2024 Russian presidential elections.
- Russian government and media officials recently have died, possibly under mysterious circumstances.
- A Russian state media outlet confirmed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) detained three officers of its Directorate "M" in connection with a high-profile bribery scheme.
- Russian forces recently made confirmed advances near Donetsk City and Verbove, and positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on January 8 that there are more than 450,000 Russian military personnel in Ukraine as of December 2023.
- Russia continues to forcibly deport children from occupied Ukraine under the guise of vacations.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 7, 2024

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

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

January 7, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on January 7. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 8 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to court Russian servicemen and their families ahead of the March 2024 presidential election during a meeting with family members of deceased Russian servicemen on January 6. Putin met with family members of Russian servicemen who died in Ukraine at his residence in Novo-Ogaryovo to celebrate Orthodox Christmas. [1] Putin highlighted the heroism of the deceased Russian servicemen who "defend[ed] the interests of [Russia]." Putin repeatedly reiterated the Russian government's support for the families of Russian servicemen and delegated responsibility for the continuous support of these families to Russian officials at all levels throughout Russia. Putin has recently attended similar events during which he presented himself as a gracious leader who cares about the well-being of Russian military personnel and paraded his power to fulfill servicemen's requests and deal with issues.[2] Putin is likely using these recurring, publicized meetings as part of his election campaign, as Russian servicemen and their family members comprise a sizable constituency, and their public support for Putin is vital for the Kremlin's ability to present the Russian population as largely in support of the war in Ukraine.

The Kremlin appears to have chosen the families that attended Putin's meeting carefully, likely to minimize the risk that they might say or ask inconvenient things.[3] The Kremlin has shown itself to be sensitive to recent public complaints from family members of Russian servicemen and is continuing its efforts to censor these complaints in the public domain.[4] Russian opposition outlet *Agentstvo Novosti* stated on January 7 that the relatives of five deceased Russian servicemen attended the meeting and that many of those relatives themselves have ties to the Russian government and military.[5] *Agentstvo Novosti* stated that attendees included a former Rosgvardia serviceman's widow, who currently serves as the head of the Committee of Families of Soldiers of the Fatherland in Balashikha and advisor to the head of Balashikha; the widow of a Russian serviceman, who currently works as the head of the Tambov branch of the Kremlin-created Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation; and family members of the former rector of the church at the headquarters of the Russian Strategic Missile Forces, who previously participated in conflicts in Chechnya and Syria and was known as the "paratroopers' priest." *Agentstvo Novosti* stated that all five deceased servicemen whose families attended the meeting posthumously received the Hero of Russia and Order of Courage awards and that two of the children present had also attended an event with Putin on November 4 in Moscow. The Kremlin practice of carefully selecting those who attend public events with Putin and sometimes having the same individuals appear at multiple events seems to be standard Kremlin practice, however.[6] Putin similarly misrepresented a meeting with 18 hand-picked women holding influential positions in the Russian political sphere as an open discussion with mothers of mobilized personnel on November 25, 2022.[7]

Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow stated that Russia cannot reject Russian citizens who "understand they made a mistake" by fleeing Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and now want to return home. Kirill stated during an interview with TASS CEO Andrei Kondrashov on January 7 that it is not necessary to reject "sinners

if they repent" and referenced the biblical story of the prodigal son, in which, Kirill observed, a son wrongs his father by demanding his inheritance early to go out into the world, only to return home after squandering his wealth and opportunity.^[8] Russian President Vladimir Putin called the trend of Russians returning from abroad "very good" and "very important" during a speech on September 12, 2023.^[9] Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin had publicly threatened returning Russians in October and November 2023, however, openly contradicting the Kremlin's position.^[10] Kirill's comment is more in line with the Kremlin's position and indicates that the Kremlin may be more successfully coordinating its narrative regarding returning Russians ahead of the March 2024 presidential election.^[11]

Kirill also emphasized the role of "spiritual strength" and "revival" in Russia's claimed success in Ukraine, echoing Putin's January 6 emphasis on the importance of Russian Orthodoxy and Russia's other "traditional" and "fraternal" faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism) to Russian society.^[12] The Russian government has used the 2016 "Yarovaya Law" to prosecute any religious organizations and churches in Russia, including Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, that are not members of the four "fraternal" faiths.^[13] Kirill denied Western reports that the Russian Orthodox Church carries out Russian state policy abroad, despite sending Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban a holiday greeting on January 7.^[14] Putin added on January 6 that the Russian government "helps... but does not interfere in the affairs" of the Russian Orthodox Church and claimed that the Russian Orthodox Church "wants to be separate from the state."^[15] ISW has previously reported on the Russian Orthodox Church's role in solidifying the Kremlin's control over occupied Ukraine through a systematic campaign of religious persecution against other faith communities and punishing members of the Russian Orthodox Church who do not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine.^[16]

Two Russian government officials defended migrants' continued presence in Russia amid ongoing migrant crackdowns, generating heavy milblogger criticism and indicating that the Russian government likely still lacks a unified policy toward migrants in Russia. Russian Presidential Commissioner for the Protection of Entrepreneurs' Rights Boris Titov stated on January 7 that Russian fears that migrants are taking Russian jobs are "completely unfounded" and claimed that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) statistics show that Russian citizens commit many more crimes than migrants.^[17] Russian outlet *Kommersant* reported that foreign citizens committed two percent of the total number of crimes in Russia from January to November 2023 citing MVD statistics.^[18] Russian milbloggers heavily criticized Titov's statements, called him out of touch with ordinary Russian life, and accused him of wanting to replace the ethnic Russian population of Russia with migrants.^[19] Another milblogger claimed that unspecified "specific diasporas" control entire sectors of the Russian economy and claimed that many migrants who receive Russian citizenship commit crimes and therefore, are not reflected in the low statistic of crimes committed by foreigners in Russia.^[20] Russian milbloggers also attacked the Nizhny Tagil (Sverdlovsk Oblast) Police Department Deputy Head Colonel Taras Bulgakov for claiming that people "made a big deal out of nothing" regarding a December 29 incident wherein two migrant teenagers beat a presumably ethnically Russian child in Nizhny Tagil.^[21] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian authorities should send Bulgakov to fight in Ukraine and claimed that migrants pose a counterintelligence threat since Russia's largest tank production factory, Uralvagonzavod, is in Nizhny Tagil.^[22]

Titov's statement attempting to dispel fears of migrants' involvement in the Russian economy is likely part of an effort to build Russian public support for continued reliance on migrant labor to offset domestic labor shortages induced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia reportedly faced a domestic labor shortage of about 4.8 million people in 2023, likely including both skilled and unskilled labor.^[23] ISW continues to assess that the Russian government is pursuing competing and incoherent efforts to coerce migrants into the Russian military, leverage them to offset Russian labor shortages caused by the war, and restrict them from working in Russia, in part, to appease the xenophobic pro-war Russian ultranationalist community. Titov's statements defending migrants' contributions to the Russian economy likely reflect the view of the parts of the Russian government that seek to sustain the Russian economy through migrant labor. Russian military and security elements - particularly the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), MVD, Rosgvardia, Investigative Committee, and the Federal Security Service (FSB) — appear to be spearheading efforts to coerce migrants into the Russian military. These Russian government organs have consistently conducted raids on migrant communities to issue military summonses to naturalized migrants, recruited migrants from migrant detention facilities, offered Russian citizenship in exchange for military service, and advertised Russian military contract service in Central Asian languages.^[24] The MVD has also submitted laws to the Russian government aimed at restricting migrant labor, likely to coerce them into military service.^[25]

Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 6 to 7. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 28 Shahed-136/131 drones and three S-300 missiles and that Ukrainian forces destroyed 21 of the Shahed drones over Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, Vinnytsia, and Cherkasy oblasts.

[26] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian S-300 missiles struck a civilian building in Rivne, Donetsk Oblast on the evening of January 6, killing 12 people including five children.[27] US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink stated that the strike is a reminder of the daily reality of Russian strikes across Ukraine.[28]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat refuted media reports that the Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) is delaying its first delivery of six F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine for up to six months.[29] Ihnat stated that there are no official announcements on the Danish MoD's websites that would confirm the claimed delays in F-16 provisions. Ihnat urged Ukrainians to only trust official sources and noted that this is a "sensitive" topic for Ukraine given that Ukrainian pilots are undergoing F-16 training in extremely fast time frames.

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to court Russian servicemen and their families ahead of the March 2024 presidential election during a meeting with family members of deceased Russian servicemen on January 6.
- Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill of Moscow stated that Russia cannot reject Russian citizens who "understand they made a mistake" by fleeing Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and now want to return home.
- Two Russian government officials defended migrants' continued presence in Russia amid ongoing migrant crackdowns, generating heavy milblogger criticism and indicating that the Russian government likely still lacks a unified policy toward migrants in Russia.
- Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of January 6 to 7.
- Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat refuted media reports that the Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) is delaying its first delivery of six F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine for up to six months.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances west and southwest of Donetsk City amid continued positional engagements along the front.
- Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on January 7 that Russia has pushed back the deadline for the establishment of the new Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts (MMD and LMD) for at least the second time due to weapons and personnel shortages and bureaucratic issues.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on January 4 that will allow Russia to forcibly grant citizenship to deported Ukrainian children.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 6, 2024

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

Christina Harward, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 6, 2024, time 3:50pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on January 6. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 7 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces are conducting a multi-day strike campaign against Russian military targets in occupied Crimea and have successfully struck several targets throughout the peninsula. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck an administrative building at the Russian airfield in occupied Saky, Crimea with up to four Storm Shadow cruise missiles on the night of January 5 to 6.[1] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces destroyed five Ukrainian drones and four missiles over the Black Sea and Crimea on the night of January 5 to 6 and six Ukrainian Neptune missiles over the northwestern Black Sea on January 6.[2] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk thanked Ukrainian pilots for successfully striking targets at the Saky airfield but did not specify if he was referring to Ukrainian strikes on January 4, 5, or 6.[3] Oleshchuk posted satellite imagery showing the target of the reported successful Ukrainian strike at the Saky airfield, although ISW is currently unable to identify what the target was.[4] The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated on January 6 that the GUR, Ukrainian Air Force, and Ukrainian forces conducted a complex special operation that struck Russian radar positions at the Saky airfield and an equipment depot near Hryshyne (60km northeast of Yevpatoria) on January 4.[5] GUR posted satellite imagery showing damage to the Russian ammunition depot near Hryshyne.[6] Ukrainian officials and sources have reported that Ukrainian forces have also struck an air defense radar system and a communications center in Yevpatoria responsible for coordinating Russian air defense operations in occupied Crimea, ammunition warehouses near Pervomaiske

(82km north of Simferopol), and a Russian command post near Sevastopol in strikes since January 4. [7] Ukrainian and Russian reporting indicates that Ukrainian missiles and drones are penetrating Russian air defenses in occupied Crimea and have successfully struck some intended targets.

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are conducting strikes aimed at degrading the Russian air defense umbrella over occupied Crimea.[8] ISW will not assess the intent of the current Ukrainian strike campaign against Russian rear areas in occupied Crimea at this time. Ukrainian forces conducted a strike campaign against Russian military infrastructure, headquarters, logistics routes, and Black Sea Fleet (BSF) assets in summer 2023 that pushed Russian naval operations out of the western part of the Black Sea and that aimed to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for defensive operations in southern Ukraine.[9]

A Russian milblogger argued that Russian forces need to improve planning and coordination at the tactical and operational levels so that Russian offensive operations can break out of the current positional warfare in Ukraine.[10] The milblogger stated that Russian forces should not concentrate the attacking formations – especially mechanized units – in the intended directions of attack due to the threat of Ukrainian strikes against large force accumulations. The milblogger stated that Russian forces must precede any breakthrough with preparatory artillery fire against both the objective that Russian forces are attacking and Ukrainian artillery firing positions in a wider area within range of the objective. The milblogger emphasized the importance of coordinating the actions of various units, including allocating individual artillery units to cover certain sectors of the front and allocating some ammunition for preparing the battlefield while reserving ammunition for after the assault has begun. The milblogger noted that the attacking Russian units need to maintain uninterrupted communications and be able quickly to exchange intelligence data – coordination that the Russian military units on multiple fronts have struggled with in recent months, as ISW has frequently reported.[11] The milblogger observed that the Russian military command must understand and incorporate the battlefield geography and the array of Ukrainian forces and defenses in the area into battle plans.[12] ISW has not observed any indication that Russian forces have improved their ability to plan and coordinate offensive operations given the ongoing costly and disorderly Russian offensive effort near Avdiivka. Russian forces in Ukraine have proven capable of successfully adapting limited aspects of their operations or defensive efforts in certain sectors of the front, however.[13] It is unclear if the Russian command will be able to improve tactical and operational coordination across larger sectors of the front as the milblogger called for.

Western provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine in the near- and medium-term remain crucial for Ukraine's development of a defense industrial base (DIB) that can sustain Ukraine's war effort against Russia in the long term. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Ivan Havrylyuk stated on January 6 that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) completed the approvals process for about 15 new types of weapons and military equipment, including robotic systems, drones, electronic warfare (EW) systems, engineering equipment, a modernized armored fighting vehicle, and anti-tank guided missiles systems and ammunition, to the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the first week of 2024.[14] This approvals process allows the Ukrainian MoD to make agreements with defense manufacturers and to issue the weapons to the Ukrainian military. Havrylyuk stated that the Ukrainian Armed Forces completed the approvals process for more than 200 types of domestically produced weapons and military equipment in 2023.

US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller stated on January 4 that the provision of US aid remains "critical" because Ukraine is not yet able to defend itself but will not need to continue at current levels because Ukraine is working to expand its defense industry to be able to "stand on its own feet." [15] ISW previously assessed that recent large-scale Russian strikes targeted Ukrainian industrial facilities in an effort to degrade Ukraine's ability to develop its DIB and sustain its war effort against Russia.[16] The configuration of Ukraine's air defense umbrella, including Western-provided air defense systems, in targeted areas have proven vital to Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian missiles, particularly ballistic missiles.[17] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on January 2 that Patriot systems enabled Ukrainian forces to down a record number of 10 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles during Russian strikes on January 1-2.[18] The *New York Times* (NYT) reported on January 6 that White House and Pentagon officials warned that the US will soon be unable to supply Ukraine with Patriot air defense missiles, however.[19]

The Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 6 that it is delaying its first delivery of six F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine for up to six months.[20] Danish officials previously stated that Denmark would deliver F-16s to Ukraine around the start of 2024, and a recent Estonian MoD strategy document identified Denmark as committed to delivering F-16s to Ukraine before the end of 2023.[21]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces are conducting a multi-day strike campaign against Russian military targets in occupied Crimea and have successfully struck several targets throughout the peninsula.
- A Russian milblogger argued that Russian forces need to improve planning and coordination at the tactical and operational levels so that Russian offensive operations can break out of the current positional warfare in Ukraine.
- Western provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine in the near- and medium-term remain crucial for Ukraine's development of a defense industrial base (DIB) that can sustain Ukraine's war effort against Russia in the long-term.
- The Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on January 6 that it is delaying its first delivery of six F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine for up to six months.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact on January 6.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continues efforts to incentivize service with the Russian military by advertising support for housing.
- Russian occupation authorities are struggling to provide basic services to residents of occupied areas of Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 5, 2024

[Click Here to Read the Full Report](#)

Nicole Volkov, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

January 5, 2024, 7:30pm ET

Correction: ISW inaccurately stated that Google's 4.6 billion ruble fine from a Moscow court is equivalent to \$50.3 billion. The fine is actually equivalent to \$50.3 million.

Russian forces may intensify efforts to capture Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast, in the coming weeks and have a grouping of forces in the area that appears to be less degraded than Russian groupings responsible for offensive efforts elsewhere in eastern Ukraine. Russian forces appear to have conditions conducive to intensifying operations in the Kupyansk direction (Kharkiv-Luhansk oblast area) with the intent of making territorial gains in areas that are more operationally significant than other areas that Russian forces are currently attempting to seize. Ukrainian officials have stated that Russian forces aim to capture Kupyansk and Borova (35km west of Svatove) during winter 2024. [1] Russian seizure of those towns would likely force Ukrainian forces off the east bank of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast and set conditions for future Russian offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kremenna line. The tempo of Russian operations in the Kupyansk direction and the apparent configuration of Russian forces in occupied Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts overall does not indicate an impending Russian offensive effort along the entire Kupyansk-Lyman line (Kharkiv-Luhansk-northeastern Donetsk oblast area), similar to the failed Russian offensive effort in northeastern Ukraine in winter-spring 2023. Russian forces likely have not accumulated enough forces in Belgorod Oblast to support launching large-scale offensive operations elsewhere in northern or northeastern Kharkiv Oblast as of this writing.[2]

Ukrainian officials have not publicly reported any sudden buildup of Russian forces in the Kupyansk direction indicating that a large-scale offensive to advance to the Oskil River is imminent. Russian forces appear to have gradually reconstituted units badly degraded during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in September 2022 and Russia's failed winter-spring 2023 offensive, and the Russian command likely intends these relatively well-rested and reconstituted units to intensify localized offensive operations that Russian forces started in the area in October 2023.[3] Russian forces operating in the Kupyansk direction appear not yet to have committed a substantial force to current offensive operations in the area and thus have been able to sustain localized ground attacks without suffering losses similar to those that Russian forces have suffered in operations around Avdiivka and in southern Ukraine.[4] Russian forces operating in the Kupyansk direction, comprised largely of the 1st Guards Tank Army (GTA) and 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (both of the Western Military District [WMD]), have not heavily participated in large offensive operations since the culmination of the Russian winter-spring 2023 offensive in April 2023.[5] 1st GTA and 6th CAA elements have likely reconstituted to a considerable degree through the incorporation of manpower generated by Russia's September 2022 partial mobilization and continued crypto-mobilization efforts.[6] Russian forces may be deploying new forces to the Kupyansk direction at a rate roughly equal to Russian losses in the

area as they have done throughout Ukraine, although these elements are likely poorly trained Storm-Z and Storm-V assault detachments and not more combat-effective regular elements of the 6th CAA and 1st GTA.[7] These elements likely do not need to reconstitute their kit to full doctrinal end strength to support new offensive operations because current Russian offensive operations in the Kupyansk direction rely heavily on dismounted infantry assaults and only sporadically use small mechanized assaults.[8] Russian regular forces in the Kupyansk direction are drawn primarily from the Western Military District and thus benefit from a degree of organizational coherence unlike Russian forces in other parts of Ukraine, which are often thrown together from various military districts and airborne (VDV) units.[9] The relative coherence of the WMD force grouping in the Kupyansk direction likely generates relatively more effective command and control (C2) among these forces, although it remains unclear if these WMD elements are able to conduct large-scale assaults that would be significantly more effective than the disorganized and costly Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka.

UK outlet the *Telegraph* reported on January 4 that an unspecified source "close" to the Ukrainian military stated that Russian forces may conduct a "ground offensive" as early as January 15. [10] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo responded to the *Telegraph* article on January 5 and stated that the Ukrainian military has not observed a change in the composition of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast or in Russia bordering Kharkiv Oblast and that Russian forces continue offensive operations near Synkivka with the aim of capturing Kupyansk.[11] Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Head Oleh Synehubov also responded to the *Telegraph* noting that Russian forces are not concentrating in Kharkiv Oblast in preparation for a large-scale offensive and that the intensity of Russian attacks in the Kupyansk direction has decreased in the past three days due to bad weather conditions.[12] Synehubov noted that Russian forces are using the slower tempo of operations caused by poor weather conditions to deploy reinforcements to the frontline and to train and coordinate units.[13] Fityo and Synehubov's comments are consistent with ISW's assessment that Russian forces may intensify offensive operations, though not launch a full-scale offensive operation, with the existing grouping of forces in the Kupyansk direction. Russian forces may have conducted a gradual buildup of forces since Ukrainian officials reported that the Russian military concentrated over 100,000 personnel in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions as of October 2023.[14]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Russian targets in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai on the night of January 4 to 5. The Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated on January 5 that Ukrainian forces struck Russian ammunition warehouses near Pervomaiske (82km north of Simferopol) in occupied Crimea.[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces downed 36 Ukrainian drones over Crimea, a drone in Krasnodar Krai, and a Ukrainian Neptune missile in the northwestern part of the Black Sea.[16] Saki occupation head Aleksandr Ovdyenko claimed that Russian forces successfully repelled a large Ukrainian drone attack along the Saki-Yevpatoria coast on the evening of January 4.[17] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian drones and missiles targeted Yevpatoria, the Russian airfield in Saki, the Kerch Strait Bridge, and Novorossiysk in Krasnodar Krai.[18] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Ukrainian strikes hitting Russian targets on the night of January 4 to 5. These Ukrainian strikes follow Ukrainian strikes near Uyutne (west of Yevpatoria) and Yevpatoria on January 4, which reportedly struck at least one Russian command post.[19] The Ukrainian Crimean-based "Atesh" partisan group claimed that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian air defense radar system and a communications center in Yevpatoria responsible for coordinating Russian air defense operations in occupied Crimea on January 4.[20]

Russian forces conducted Shahed 131/136 drone strikes and missile strikes against frontline areas in Ukraine overnight on January 5. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched two waves of Shahed drones at frontline areas in Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts and that Ukrainian forces shot down 21 of the 29 drones.[21] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces targeted frontline areas of southern Ukraine, particularly Kherson Oblast, where it is more difficult for Ukrainian forces to intercept the drones.[22] Kharkiv Oblast Military Administration Head Oleh Synehubov stated that Russian forces launched 10 S-300 missiles at Liptsi, Kharkiv Oblast on the night of January 4 to 5.[23]

Germany announced a new military assistance package to Ukraine on January 4.[24] The package includes 10 Marder infantry fighting vehicles, two demining tanks, 30 drone detection systems, 155mm artillery ammunition, missiles for Patriot and IRIS-T air defense systems, and a Skynex air defense system.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will convene on January 10 and discuss Russia's reported use of North Korean ballistic missiles in Ukraine, a likely violation of UNSC resolutions. US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield stated on January 4 that US

officials will raise the issue of the reported ballistic missile use at a January 10 UNSC briefing on Ukraine.[25] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on January 4 that Russian forces launched ballistic missiles acquired from North Korea at targets in Ukraine on December 30, 2023, and January 2, 2024.[26] Ukrainian officials stated on January 5 that Russian forces have used foreign-made ballistic missiles in strikes against Ukraine but that Ukrainian officials have yet to identify the country of origin.[27] North Korea has reportedly begun transferring an unspecified number of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia in recent weeks.[28]

UNSC resolutions on North Korea specifically call for North Korea to suspend all ballistic missile activities and prohibits member states from exporting and importing weapons to and from North Korea. [29] The UNSC resolutions also prohibit any trade with North Korea that can contribute to nuclear, ballistic missile, or weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related activities.[30] Russian Ambassador at Large Oleg Burnistrov stated on October 15, 2023, that Russia "strictly adheres to its international obligations towards [North Korea] through the UNSC." [31] Russia's increasing procurement of ammunition and weapons systems from North Korea materially violates the UNSC resolutions on North Korea, however. UNSC resolutions do not commit member states to enforce any secondary sanctions against third parties trading with North Korea, but the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) has wide sanctions enforcement powers to sanction any entity trading goods or services with North Korea and any foreign financial institution knowingly facilitating transactions with North Korea.[32]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov strangely offered to exchange 20 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) for lifting sanctions against his family members. Kadyrov's oddly public offer to negotiate with the Ukrainian government for personal gain follows indicators that the Kremlin may be engaging in POW negotiations to offset reports of Russian abuses of Ukrainian POWs and posture Russia as interested in operating within the bounds of international law and norms. [33] Kadyrov's proposal undermines this larger Kremlin posturing. Russian milblogger and Kremlin Human Rights Council member Alexander "Sasha" Kots criticized Kadyrov for "dispos[ing] of prisoners [of war] as goods for personal purposes." [34] Kadyrov likely negotiated with the Ukrainian government independently from the Kremlin for personal gain when he claimed to have paid Ukrainian special services for the return of his racehorse, Zazu, in May 2023.[35]

The Moscow Arbitration Court ordered Google to unblock four YouTube channels belonging to Russian state-affiliated channel 5TV on January 5, likely as part of an ongoing effort to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March presidential elections. Moscow's Arbitration Court upheld a previous ruling that Google must unblock 5TV's YouTube channels or pay a 100,000 ruble (roughly \$1,094) fine for each day Google refuses to reinstate the channels.[36] YouTube blocked access to channels associated with Russian state-funded media in February and March 2022 to enforce a policy that "prohibit[s] content denying, minimizing, or trivializing well-documented violent events" including the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [37] The Kremlin has likely been attempting to force Google to cease operations in Russia by imposing increasing fines for failing to comply with Russian censorship and data privacy laws.[38] A Moscow court fined Google 4.6 billion rubles (roughly \$50.3 million) on December 20, 2023, for refusing to comply with Russian censorship laws and remove "fake" information about the Russian war in Ukraine.[39] Reuters reported on January 3 that Russian fines against Google, YouTube, Meta, TikTok, and Telegram "appear to have been settled" as they no longer appear as debtors on the Russian Federal Bailiff Service's database, but the reason for this omission is unclear.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian forces may intensify efforts to capture Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast, in the coming weeks and have a grouping of forces in the area that appears to be less degraded than Russian groupings responsible for offensive efforts elsewhere in eastern Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Russian targets in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai on the night of January 4 to 5.
- Russian forces conducted Shahed 131/136 drone strikes and missile strikes against frontline areas in Ukraine overnight on January 5.
- Germany announced a new military assistance package to Ukraine on January 4.
- The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will convene on January 10 and discuss Russia's reported use of North Korean ballistic missiles in Ukraine, a likely violation of UNSC resolutions.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov strangely offered to exchange 20 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) for lifting sanctions against his family members.
- The Moscow Arbitration Court ordered Google to unblock four YouTube channels belonging to Russian state-affiliated channel 5TV on January 5, likely as part of an

ongoing effort to consolidate control over the Russian information space ahead of the March presidential elections.

- Russian forces made a confirmed advance near Avdiivka as positional engagements continued along the entire frontline.
- International sanctions are reportedly impeding Russia's Su-34 aircraft production.
- The Kremlin continues to solidify federal administrative oversight of local and regional occupation administrations in occupied Ukraine.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 4, 2024

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

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

January 4, 2024, 5:20pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:10pm ET on January 4. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 5 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces struck at least one Russian military target in occupied Crimea, while Russian officials and milbloggers claimed that the Ukrainian strike was unsuccessful. Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated on January 4 that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian command post near Sevastopol in the afternoon.[1] Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk implied that Ukrainian strikes against Sevastopol and Yevpatoria may have targeted the locations of Russian military leaders.[2] Oleshchuk also amplified footage of a smoke plume geolocated to the eastern outskirts of Uyutne and a report by a Crimean source, which stated that a projectile reportedly struck a Russian air defense unit near Uyutne (just west of Yevpatoria).[3] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces shot down 10 Ukrainian missiles over Crimea.[4] Russian sources, including the MoD and Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev, claimed that Russian air defenses repelled the Ukrainian strike.[5]

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on January 4 that Russia has already launched ballistic missiles acquired from North Korea at targets in Ukraine and continues efforts to acquire similar missiles from Iran. Kirby stated that North Korea provided Russia with ballistic missile launchers and an unspecified number of ballistic missiles and that Russian forces launched at least one of the North Korean missiles into Ukraine on December 30, 2023.[6] Kirby also stated that Russian officials continue efforts to buy ballistic missiles from Iran. *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported earlier on January 4 that unspecified US officials stated that Russia could receive Iranian short-range ballistic missiles as early as spring 2024 but that the officials do not believe that Russia and Iran have yet completed a deal.[7]

Russia may be intensifying efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad because these missiles appear to be more effective at striking targets in Ukraine in some circumstances. Russian forces routinely use short-range ballistic missiles to strike Ukrainian cities closer to the frontline, and these missiles appear to be more effective at penetrating or avoiding Ukrainian air defenses. Ukrainian air defenses have intercepted 149 of a reported 166 Russian cruise missiles in intensified attacks since December 29, 2023, but have only intercepted a handful of the ballistic missiles that Russia has launched at Ukraine in the same period, for example.[8] Russian forces have repurposed S-300 and S-400 air defense missiles for conducting strikes against surface targets in Ukraine, and Ukrainian officials have acknowledged that Ukrainian air defenses struggle to intercept these unorthodox missile attacks using their own S-300 and S-400 systems.[9] Ukrainian forces have also appeared to be less successful in intercepting Iskander ballistic missiles during recent strikes, although Ukrainian forces did intercept an Iskander-M missile during a less intense series of Russian missile and drone strikes on December 30.[10] Ukrainian forces reportedly intercepted all Iskander-M or S-300/S-400 missiles that Russian forces launched at Kyiv on December 12.[11] Ukrainian forces reportedly also intercepted all 10 Kinzhal missiles that Russian forces launched at Ukraine on January 2 with Western-provided Patriot systems.[12] The effectiveness of Russian ballistic missiles thus appears to depend in part on the configuration of Ukraine's air defense umbrella in the target area and the strike package of which the missiles are part.

The relative success that Russian forces have had in striking targets in Ukraine with ballistic missiles in combination with cruise missiles and drones may be prompting an intensification of Russian efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad. Russia can reportedly produce roughly 42 Iskander missiles

and four Kinzhal missiles per month, although it is unclear how many S-300/S-400 missiles Russia can produce.[13] Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) likely cannot produce ballistic missiles at the scale required for a persistent strike campaign in Ukraine that relies on regularly expending a large volume of ballistic missiles, and Russia likely has to source ballistic missiles from abroad if it wishes to maintain large-scale missile strikes against Ukraine.

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby dismissed recent Western reporting of Russian President Vladimir Putin's willingness to engage in peace negotiations with Ukraine as "ballyhoo" during a press conference on January 3.[14] Kirby stated that Putin "sure doesn't act like a guy who's willing to negotiate," referring to Russia's recent large-scale strikes against Ukraine from December 29, 2023, to January 2.[15] Kirby added that Putin is doing everything possible to put Ukraine in a disadvantageous position and reiterated the importance of continued Western support for Ukraine.[16] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated during an interview with CNN on January 3 that Ukraine is confident that Western aid to Ukraine will continue and that Ukraine does not have a "plan B."[17] Kuleba noted that a theoretical Russian victory in Ukraine would embolden other world leaders with predatory expansionist objectives and cited recent Russia's missile strikes against Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities as a clear indication of Putin's unwillingness to negotiate with Ukraine. [18] ISW has long assessed that Putin does not intend to negotiate with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia's goals in Ukraine — which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender — remain the same.[19]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree strengthening procedures for granting foreign citizens Russian citizenship in exchange for Russian military service in Ukraine, likely as part of ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into the Russian military. The January 4 decree grants Russian citizenship to foreign citizens who have signed at least a year-long contract with the Russian military or "military formations," likely referencing volunteer formations and private military companies (PMCs), during periods of "special military operations." [20] The decree also grants Russian citizenship to the spouses, children, and parents of the foreigners serving with the Russian military. [21] The decree reduces the time it takes for these foreigners to receive and be considered for Russian citizenship from three months to one month. [22] Putin previously signed a decree in September 2022 simplifying the process of obtaining Russian citizenship and dropping some prerequisites for foreigners who signed contracts with the Russian military. [23] The January 4 decree likely aims to further streamline and simplify the citizenship application process while formalizing migrant recruitment efforts following increased raids on migrant communities since summer 2023 in which Russian officials have issued military summonses to migrants with Russian citizenship. [24]

Russian State Duma's Information Policy Committee Head Alexander Khinshtein noted that the January 4 decree would "solve the problem" of foreign countries' extradition requests for their citizens who fought in Ukraine. [25] Khinshtein prevented the deportation of an Uzbek citizen who allegedly fought in the Wagner Group and successfully requested that Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) grant the Uzbek citizen asylum in Russia in December 2023. [26] Russian authorities have routinely offered Russian citizenship to migrants in exchange for Russian military service in Ukraine and have threatened to revoke Russian citizenship from naturalized migrants if they refuse to serve in the Russian military. [27] 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 them working in Russia, coerce them into the Russian military, and leverage them to offset Russian labor shortages caused by the war. Putin's January 4 decree suggests that the Kremlin may be prioritizing coercing migrants into the military over relying on migrants to offset domestic labor shortages.

Kyrgyzstan sentenced a Kyrgyz citizen to five years in prison for participating in the war in Ukraine as a member of the Wagner Group. A court in Kyrgyzstan announced on January 4 that it sentenced Beknazar Borugul uulu, a Kyrgyz citizen, to five years in prison on December 7, 2023, under the article for participation "in armed conflicts or military operations on the territory of a foreign state or undergoing training to commit a terrorist act." [28] Wagner reportedly recruited Borugul uulu while he was in a Russian prison. Kyrgyzstan previously sentenced another Kyrgyz citizen who joined a Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) military unit to 10 years in prison on charges of mercenarism in May 2023, and the case was sent to a retrial in August 2023 after an appeal to replace the mercenarism charge with charges of participating in a military conflict in a foreign country. [29] Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have also recently sentenced some of their citizens on mercenarism charges after those citizens fought with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Wagner forces in Ukraine. [30] ISW previously assessed that Russia's continued use of Central Asian populations in Central Asia and Russia for force-generation purposes will likely create friction between Russia and its Central Asian neighbors. [31] Central Asian countries are charging and detaining their citizens for fighting in Ukraine upon their return to Central Asia, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's decree

granting foreigners expedited Russian citizenship in exchange for Russian military service may be aimed at combatting this issue.

Russia has begun negotiations with Algeria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia to open Russian cultural centers (*Russkii dom*) abroad, likely aimed at increasing Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*) Deputy Head Pavel Shevtsov told Kremlin newswire *Tass* on January 4 that Russia has begun similar negotiations with other unnamed countries and noted that he is confident that the agreements will be completed “quickly enough” due to mutual interest between parties. [32] Russian media previously reported that Russia is also in negotiations to open additional *Russkii dom* centers in Brazil, South Africa, Angola, and Mali by 2025.[33] Russia currently has over 80 *Russkii dom* centers concentrated in Europe, Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia aimed at promoting Russian culture, strengthening the influence of the Russian language, supporting “compatriots abroad,” and preserving historical sites abroad with significance to Russia.[34] Moldovan and Ukrainian officials have previously warned that Russian officials use *Russkii dom* centers to promote Russian propaganda and conduct “subversive work” abroad.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces struck at least one Russian military target in occupied Crimea, while Russian officials and milbloggers claimed that the Ukrainian strike was unsuccessful.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on January 4 that Russia has already launched ballistic missiles acquired from North Korea at targets in Ukraine and continues efforts to acquire similar missiles from Iran.
- Russia may be intensifying efforts to source ballistic missiles from abroad because these missiles appear to be more effective at striking targets in Ukraine in some circumstances.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby dismissed recent Western reporting of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s willingness to engage in peace negotiations with Ukraine as “ballyhoo” during a press conference on January 3.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree strengthening procedures for granting foreign citizens Russian citizenship in exchange for Russian military service in Ukraine, likely as part of ongoing efforts to coerce migrants into the Russian military.
- Kyrgyzstan sentenced a Kyrgyz citizen to five years in prison for participating in the war in Ukraine as a member of the Wagner Group.
- Russia has begun negotiations with Algeria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia to open Russian cultural centers (*Russkii dom*) abroad, likely aimed at increasing Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kremenna and Avdiivka as positional engagement continued along the entire frontline.
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian authorities are planning to mobilize Ukrainian teenagers living in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on January 4 streamlining the process for certain Ukrainians to receive Russian citizenship.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 3, 2024

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

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

January 3, 2024, 5:45pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:15 pm ET on January 3. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 4 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia and Ukraine conducted a prisoner of war (POW) exchange on January 3 in what was the largest POW exchange of the war to date and the first official POW exchange since August 2023. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that over 200 Ukrainian soldiers and civilians returned to Ukraine from Russian captivity, including personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, National Guard, Navy, and State Border Guard Service.[1] Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada

Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lubinets later clarified that 230 Ukrainian personnel returned to Ukraine in the 49th POW exchange since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [2] Lubinets and Zelensky noted that many of the Ukrainian POWs fought and were captured on Snake Island and in Mariupol, suggesting that these soldiers had been in Russian captivity for nearly two years.[3] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), in turn, stated that 248 Russian military personnel returned to Russia as part of the exchange, and notably thanked the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for its role in mediating the exchange.[4] Russian sources disagreed on the exact number of Ukrainians returned in the exchange, with some claiming that it was 173 and others claiming that it was "up to 230." [5] Russian milbloggers generally praised the Russian MoD for securing the return of a greater ratio of Russian POWs to Ukrainian POWs, which Russian sources claimed was long overdue following a deeply unpopular POW exchange in September 2022 that swapped 215 Ukrainian POWs, including captured leaders of the Azov Regiment whom Russia had initially pledged to imprison at least until the end of the war, for 55 Russian POWs and political prisoners including Putin's personal friend, pro-Russian Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk.[6]

The timing of Russia's apparent willingness to participate in the largest POW exchange since the beginning of the war, and the first exchange in nearly five months, is noteworthy. Representative of the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War Petro Yatsenko stated on November 17, 2023, that Russia implemented a freeze on POW exchanges over summer 2023 for an unspecified reason.[7] As ISW has recently reported, there have been several incidents over the past few weeks of Russian forces using Ukrainian POWs in apparent violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs, including using a battalion of former Ukrainian POWs in active combat, using Ukrainian POWs as human shields, and summarily executing surrendered Ukrainian POWs who were clearly *hors de combat*. [8] The Russian leadership may have chosen to engage in such a large POW exchange at this time to undermine reports of Russian abuses of Ukrainian POWs and posture Russia as interested in operating within the bounds of international law and norms. ISW has frequently assessed that senior Russian officials are often very invested in portraying Russia as adhering to humanitarian and other legal guidelines, and the timing of this POW exchange may be part of this wider informational effort.[9]

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated on January 3 that Ukraine plans to increase its defense industrial base (DIB) output six-fold in 2024.[10] Shmyhal reiterated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's December 27 statement that Ukraine's DIB production capacity tripled in 2023 compared to 2022 and highlighted the importance of additional drones, shells, ammunition, and armored vehicles for Ukrainian forces.[11] Shmyhal stated that the Ukrainian government has allocated more than 760 billion hryvnia (roughly \$20 billion) for payments to military personnel and more than 265 billion hryvnia (roughly \$7 billion) for the purchase, production, and repair of weapons in 2024.[12] Shmyhal also advocated for the reported Western plan to use frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine's future reconstruction.[13] Shmyhal's comments come after several days of large-scale Russian strikes that reportedly primarily targeted Ukrainian DIB facilities and military infrastructure. [14] ISW previously assessed that reported Russian strikes against Ukrainian industrial facilities likely aim to prevent Ukraine from developing key capacities to sustain operations for a longer war effort.[15]

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced on January 3 that the NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) will hold an emergency meeting in response to Russia's recent mass air strikes against Ukraine.[16] Kuleba called the upcoming meeting a "sign of Euro-Atlantic unity in the face of Russian terror" and noted that strengthening Ukraine's air defense will be one of the meeting's key topics.[17] The NUC met for the first time on November 29, 2023, to discuss the roadmap to full Ukrainian interoperability with NATO and steps to increase weapons and ammunition production.[18]

NATO member states continue initiatives to support Ukrainian operations in the air domain. Norwegian Defense Minister Bjørn Arild Gram announced on January 3 that Norway is providing two F-16 fighter jets and 10 instructors to train Ukrainian military personnel in Denmark. [19] Gram stated that Ukraine's partners will work "day and night" to establish a lasting and modern Ukrainian air force.[20] NATO also announced in a statement on January 3 that NATO's Support and Procurement Agency will support a coalition of member states, including Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and Spain to purchase up to 1,000 Patriot missiles to strengthen the member states' air defenses, additionally noting that NATO partners have previously supplied Ukraine with Patriot systems.[21] It is unclear if Ukraine will receive any of the 1,000 Patriot missiles, or on what timeline. The \$5.5 billion contract will support the establishment of a Patriot missile production facility in Germany, increasing the available supply of Patriot missiles and replenishing member states' stockpiles.[22] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on January 2 that Western-provided Patriot systems enabled Ukrainian forces to down a record number of 10 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles during Russian strikes overnight on January 1-2 and during the day on January 2. [23]

Kremlin-affiliated mouthpieces may be setting information conditions to blame the West for a potential future conflict in the Arctic. A prominent Russian milblogger, whom the Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) have recently rewarded for service to the Russian Armed Forces and whose channel has recently fixated on the Arctic region, amplified a post wherein another milblogger responded to comments from the Danish Foreign Ministry about how Denmark's chairmanship of the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO) will focus on Arctic security after reports from the Danish Defense Intelligence Service and NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept listed Russian activity in the region as a possible cause of future regional instability.[24] The milblogger claimed that despite Danish statements about Denmark's hopes to keep the Arctic a region of low tension, Denmark views Russia as the main threat in the Arctic, suggesting that the milblogger views Denmark's response to Russian actions in the Arctic as unnecessary and inconsistent with other Danish signaling. Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov claimed on December 21, 2023, that Russia deployed forces to the Arctic not as a demonstration of military force but to ensure Russian economic development in the region, whereas Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, have increasingly blamed Western countries for preparing Arctic countries for a confrontation against Russia and claimed that Russia has been forced into responding by reforming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) in Russia's northwest to counter supposed threats from Finland and other NATO states.[25] Recent Kremlin and MoD statements and the Russian MoD-affiliated milblogger's post may be part of Kremlin efforts to set information conditions for Russia to blame Denmark and other Western Arctic countries for any future conflicts with Russia in the Arctic. These narratives are in line with Putin's declaration on January 2 that the West is Russia's "enemy" and his further implication that the war in Ukraine is an existential war for Russia against the West.[26]

Efforts driven by Kremlin mouthpieces to set such information conditions may be permeating the larger Russian information space. Another prominent Russian milblogger, who has previously amplified Kremlin narratives about Russia's maximalist goals of imperial reconquest in Ukraine, amplified a post claiming that the next regional "flare up" will be the Baltics and Nordic countries.[27] The post vaguely claimed that an unspecified actor, possibly the West, is preparing the Baltic and Nordic peoples for a confrontation with Russia and that the Baltic and Nordic countries have lacked sovereignty for a long time - echoing Kremlin narratives about how states that are not great powers - like Ukraine - do not have full sovereignty.[28] These informational lines are disturbingly similar to the justifications the Kremlin used to invade Ukraine in 2022 and to continue the invasion. There are no indications that Russia will seek conflict with NATO in the very near future, but Moscow began running similar information operations in Ukraine many years before Russian invasions in 2014 and 2022.

Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev characterized Russia as Kazakhstan's "main partner and ally" in an interview published on January 3 despite recent efforts to distance

Kazakhstan from Russia. Tokayev emphasized the strength of current Russian-Kazakh relations and Russia's position on the world stage, claiming that "no problem in the world can be solved" without Russia's participation.[29] Tokayev's statement comes after Kazakhstan took over chairmanship of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on January 1.[30] Tokayev has recently sought to balance maintaining friendly relations with Russia against allowing Kazakhstan to fall too far under Russian influence, likely reflecting an increase in tension that Russia's war in Ukraine has caused. Russia previously deployed airborne (VDV) elements to Kazakhstan as CSTO peacekeeping forces to help quell domestic anti-government protests in January 2022, but Tokayev reportedly refused to help Putin quell the Wagner PMC's June 2023 rebellion.[31] Tokayev also refused to recognize Russia's claimed independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's republics (DNR and LNR) following the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 and subsequently refused to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of the DNR, LNR, and Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts in September 2022.[32] Russian society has also recently intensified violence towards, and disenfranchisement of, Central Asia migrant communities living in Russia, including Kazakh migrants. This has likely become a growing point of neuralgia in Russia's relationship with its Central Asian neighbors, especially as Russia has massively mobilized Central Asian migrants to fight in Ukraine. A Kazakh court recently sentenced a Kazakh citizen for mercenarism for fighting with the Wagner Group in Ukraine, suggesting that Kazakh authorities feel discomfort around the idea of their citizens affiliating with Russia militarily.[33] Despite these evident frictions, Tokayev recently emphasized the extent of friendly Russian-Kazakh relations at the 19th Russian-Kazakh Regional Cooperation Forum in Ankara, Turkey on November 9, 2023, also likely to maintain strong ties with Russia while remaining relatively independent.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russia and Ukraine conducted a prisoner of war (POW) exchange on January 3 in what was the largest POW exchange of the war to date and the first official POW exchange since August 2023.**

- Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal stated on January 3 that Ukraine plans to increase its defense industrial base (DIB) output six-fold in 2024.
- Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced on January 3 that the NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) will hold an emergency meeting in response to Russia's recent mass air strikes against Ukraine.
- NATO member states continue initiatives to support Ukrainian operations in the air domain.
- Kremlin-affiliated mouthpieces may be setting information conditions to blame the West for a potential future conflict in the Arctic.
- Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev characterized Russia as Kazakhstan's "main partner and ally" in an interview published on January 3 despite recent efforts to distance Kazakhstan from Russia.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Avdiivka and Donetsk City as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- The Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion stated on January 3 that the unit will continue to operate subordinated to Rosgvardia and will not be impacted by the Russian military's reported dissolution of the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the DNR's Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD).
- Russian authorities continue efforts to integrate occupied Ukraine into Russia using infrastructure projects and social outreach programs.

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 2, 2024

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

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

January 2, 2024, 8:20pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:30 pm ET on January 2. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 3 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the West as Russia's "enemy" and implied that Russia is fighting in Ukraine in order to defeat the West. Putin responded to a Russian serviceman's question about Western aid to Ukraine during a meeting at a military hospital in Moscow Oblast on January 1, stating that Russia's issue is not necessarily that the West is aiding Ukraine, but rather that the West is Russia's "enemy."^[1] Putin added that "Ukraine by itself is not an enemy for [Russia]," but that Western-based actors "who want to destroy Russian statehood" and achieve the "strategic defeat of Russia on the battlefield" are Russia's enemies. Putin claimed that Western elites are trying to break Russia into five parts and are trying to do so using Ukraine, but that the situation on the frontlines is changing and that Russia will "deal with the [West] faster" than the West can deal with Russia on the battlefields in Ukraine. Putin added that the problem is not in Western aid deliveries to Ukraine and noted that Ukraine has already been "completely destroyed," that there is "nothing left" of the country, and that it "exists only on handouts."

Putin implied that Russia is fighting an existential war against the West in Ukraine and noted that Western rhetoric has recently refocused on how to "quickly end the conflict." This phrasing implies that Putin sees a conflict and potential negotiations between Russia and *the West* – not a conflict and potential negotiations between Russia and *Ukraine*. Putin added that Russia also wants to end the Russia-West conflict but only on the Kremlin's terms and emphasized that Russia will not give up its positions. Putin does not view Ukraine as an independent actor and is thus portraying his full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a confrontation between Russian and West – deliberately misrepresenting the reality that Russia invaded Ukraine to destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Putin's emphasis on changing narratives in the West may indicate that he will perceive and/or frame any wavering in Western support for Ukraine and any Ukrainian defeats on the battlefield as a Russian victory in this supposed Russian-Western confrontation.

Putin's framing of his war in Ukraine as a Russian struggle against the West – and not Ukraine – indicates that he does not intend to negotiate in good faith with Ukraine and is setting information conditions aimed at convincing the West to betray Ukraine through negotiations. Putin is likely deliberately and falsely framing Ukraine as pawn without agency in the Russia-West conflict to mask his expansionist and maximalist goals of establishing full effective Russian control of Ukraine. Putin's January 1 discussion of negotiations refers to his intent to negotiate solely with the West about Ukraine's future within the Russian sphere of influence and only about Western abandonment of Ukraine. It does not signal that Putin is interested in negotiating with

Ukraine as an autonomous actor. Putin previously adopted a similar line when issuing two ultimatums to the United States and NATO in December 2021, which were intended to force the West to recognize Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe by surrendering essential elements of Ukraine's sovereignty in the name of de-escalating the conflict between the West and Russia that Putin was inflaming.[2] Any Western commitment to negotiations about Ukraine's future that bypass Ukraine will signal to Russia that it can impose its will upon countries that it deems to be in its sphere of influence – even countries beyond Ukraine, and potentially including Finland and Moldova, about which various Russian actors have begun setting informational conditions for future campaigns.[3]

Putin may be expanding his war aims in Ukraine to include confrontation with the West in an effort to set conditions for permanent Russian military buildup and to justify high battlefield sacrifices. Russia gained almost no meaningful ground in 2023 at a high manpower cost, despite Putin's January 1 absurd claims that he only orders Russian servicemen to launch offensives that will not generate significant casualties.[4] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD), however, 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 Russian casualties could rise to over half a million by the end of 2024.[5] A declassified US intelligence assessment 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.[6] Such high casualties for small territorial gains are likely prompting Putin to present a strong and ideological justification to continue the prolonged war of choice on which he has launched Russia. Ukraine needs no such contorted justifications for the high losses and suffering that Putin's invasion is inflicting on its people, even when Ukraine's military operations do not produce the desired results. The war really is existential for Ukraine as it is not for Russia.

Putin notably concluded his observations about the Russian-West conflict by telling one wounded serviceman in the hospital that the serviceman did not get wounded for Russia to give up everything and surrender. Putin also addressed several domestic concerns about the lack of housing and compensations to servicemen who have received injuries on the battlefield, thereby attempting to posture himself as an empathetic and involved wartime leader even while seemingly raising the stakes to support his demands for increasing sacrifices by his people. Putin's statements likely suggest that he is preparing a long-term justification to keep forces mobilized and engaged in combat for the perpetual defense of Russia's sovereignty against the West.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed Ukraine's need for urgent Western support to protect both Ukraine and the rest of Europe in an interview with the *Economist* published on January 1.[7] Zelensky warned that the West has lost its sense of urgency and that some Ukrainians have lost a sense of the existential threat that Russia poses to Ukraine. Zelensky emphasized that Europe needs to support Ukraine not solely to protect Ukraine but also to protect Europe, as Russian President Vladimir Putin will continue fighting further west if Ukraine loses. Zelensky added that the speed of Ukrainian military success depends on Western military assistance. Zelensky noted that the idea that Putin is "winning" the war is false and that there are no indications that Russia is willing to engage in meaningful peace negotiations, citing recent massive Russian drone and missile strikes against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure as evidence of Putin's continued pursuit of his maximalist objectives. Zelensky assessed that Crimea and the Black Sea will be the center of gravity for military operations in 2024 and noted that a successful Ukrainian operation in Crimea, particularly an operation that would isolate Crimea and degrade Russian military operations there, would have a significant effect on Russia.

Russian forces conducted another massive series of drone and missile strikes against deep rear areas in Ukraine between December 31 and January 2, one of which used a strike package similar to that used on December 29, and to which Ukrainian forces appear to be adapting. Ukrainian military officials stated that overnight on December 31 to January 1 Russian forces launched 90 Shahed-136/131 drones from Cape Chauda and Balaklava (occupied Crimea); Kursk Oblast; and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai and that Ukrainian forces shot down 87 of the drones.[8] Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces also launched four S-300 missiles, three Kh-31P missiles, and one Kh-59 missile from occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts on January 1. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that later in the afternoon on January 1, Russian forces later launched an additional 10 Shahed drones and one Kh-59 missile, and that Ukrainian forces shot down nine of the drones and the missile.[9] Ukrainian officials stated that the Russian strikes damaged a museum and part of the Lviv National Agrarian University in Lviv City and residential buildings in Odesa City and Esma, Sumy Oblast.[10] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the Russian strikes on December 31 targeted unspecified Ukrainian airfields, although ISW has not yet been able to confirm strikes against Ukrainian airfield infrastructure.[11] Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on January 1 that Russian strikes on January 2 would target military infrastructure in Ukraine like the strikes on January 1.[12]

Russian forces then conducted another massive series of missile and drone strikes overnight on January 1-2 and during the day on January 2. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 35 Shahed drones; 10 Kh-47 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles; 70 Kh-101/555/55 missiles; 12 Iskander-M, S-300, and S-400 ballistic missiles; four Kh-31P anti-radar missiles; and three Kalibr missiles at Ukraine on the night of January 1-2 and the morning of January 2 and that Ukrainian forces shot down 59 of the Kh-101/555/55 missiles and all of the drones, Kinzhal missiles, and Kalibr missiles.[13] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on January 2 that Ukrainian forces shot down a record number of 10 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles with Western-provided Patriot systems.[14] Ukrainian officials stated that the Russian strikes caused damage in Kyiv and Kharkiv cities.[15] The Russian MoD claimed that the Russian strikes targeted Ukrainian weapons storage sites and defense industrial base (DIB) enterprises, including those that produce missiles and drones and repair military equipment in Kyiv City and its suburbs, and Zaluzhnyi confirmed that there were hits to civilian, critical, and military infrastructure.[16]

Western provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine remains crucial for Ukraine as Russian forces will likely attempt to adapt to Ukrainian air defense capabilities. Ukrainian military officials largely characterized the weapons composition of munitions used and the number of Russian strikes on January 1-2 as comparable to those on December 29, 2023.[17] Ukrainian forces notably shot down more Shahed drones and Kinzhal missiles on January 1-2 than on December 29, suggesting that Ukrainian forces may have adapted to the type of strike package Russian forces employed on December 29, likely after months of experimentation and testing Ukrainian air defenses using various weapons systems, strike routes, and air defense mitigation tactics.[18] Russian strikes on Ukraine are part of an ongoing tactical and technological offense-defense race wherein both sides are constantly experimenting and adapting to the other, particularly in the realm of long-range strikes and air defense. Western aid to Ukraine remains crucial as Russian forces will likely continue to experiment and innovate new ways to penetrate Ukrainian air defenses. ISW continues to assess that the end of Western aid to Ukraine would likely set conditions for an expanded Russian air campaign in Ukraine and eventually result in significant Russian advances further west, likely all the way to the western Ukrainian border with NATO member states.[19] UK outlet the *Telegraph* cited analysts on January 1 who stated that Ukraine may have to ration its air defense missiles in the face of decreasing Western aid in order to protect targets it deems to be the most important, which would likely expose critical frontline areas if Ukraine is forced to withdraw air defense systems to cover critical population centers.[20] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called on Western countries to expedite deliveries of air defense systems and ammunition to Ukraine and provide Ukraine with combat drones and long-range missiles.[21] Several Western officials condemned the Russian strikes on January 2 and noted Ukraine's need for air defenses.[22]

Russian officials publicly defined the goals for Russia's 2024 chairmanship of both BRICS and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), articulating how the Kremlin may intend to use these organizations to fulfill its foreign policy objectives this year. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated during a speech on January 1 that Russia will promote political, economic, and cultural cooperation during its BRICS chairmanship and prioritize "strengthening multilateralism for equitable global development and security."^[23] Putin stated that the accession of Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia to BRICS demonstrates the organization's "growing authority" in the world and that BRICS is attracting "like-minded" countries that respect sovereign equality and desire a multipolar world order.^[24]

The Russian government also published a list of priorities for its CIS chairmanship on January 1, which includes increased military cooperation, sanctions evasion, and joint "military-patriotic education and the popularization of common spiritual and moral values."^[25] The CIS' rotating chairmanship is something of a formality due to Russia's outsized influence on the CIS generally.^[26] Russia's emphasis on unspecified "common spiritual and moral values" in the CIS follows Putin's emphasis in his annual New Year's address on December 31, 2023, on ideological concepts such as Russian "multinationalism" and family values that fit into his wider ideology of the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*).^[27] ISW previously assessed that Putin is trying to re-establish the conception of the Russian World as the backbone of Russian domestic and foreign policy and is working to create an international order, through organizations such as BRICS and CIS, that will readily accept Russian principles, including the Kremlin's claimed right to own Ukraine.^[28]

The Norwegian government announced on January 1 that it is permitting Norwegian defense companies to sell weapons and defense-related products directly to the Ukrainian government. The new policy, which went into effect on January 1, allows Norwegian defense industrial base (DIB) companies to apply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for export licenses to sell these products to Ukraine, and the Norwegian MFA will consider each application on a case-by-case basis.^[29] Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide reiterated the need for ongoing support to Ukraine to defend against Russia's war of aggression.^[30]

The Turkish government announced on January 2 that it will not allow the United Kingdom (UK) to transport two mine hunting ships to Ukraine via the Turkish Straits “as long as the war continues.”[31] Turkey cited Article 19 of the Montreux Convention Regulating the Regime of the Turkish Straits, which stipulates that “vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers shall not...pass through the Straits.”[32] Turkey has used the Montreux Convention to deny access to Russian warships wishing to pass through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits since February 28, 2022.[33] UK Defense Minister Grant Shapps announced on December 11 that the UK transferred two Sandown-class minehunter vessels to Ukraine as part of a plan that predated Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[34]

Russian society continues to reckon with the impacts of increasing anti-migrant sentiment amid Russian authorities’ ongoing efforts to systematically disenfranchise migrant communities within Russia. Several Russian milbloggers and sources amplified footage posted on January 1 that shows a small group of apparently intoxicated adolescents, reportedly the children of Central Asian migrants, cursing at and later fighting with demobilized Russian veterans of the “special military operation” in Chelyabinsk.[35] The Russian Investigative Committee later detained three suspects—two 18-year-olds and a 17-year-old—and referred to them as “foreign citizens.”[36] Russian milbloggers seized on the incident and called for harsh and dehumanizing punishment for the adolescents while fixating on their Central Asian ethnicities and whether they and their parents are Russian citizens.[37] Russian outlet *Fontanka* additionally reported on January 1 that law enforcement in central St. Petersburg detained nearly 3,000 migrants during document checks on New Year’s Eve, 600 of whom were reportedly residing in Russia in some violation of migration law and 100 of whom now face deportation.[38] Russian opposition outlet *Novaya Gazeta* claimed that up to 1,500 of the detainees have already been coerced to sign contracts with the Russian MoD, which is consistent with a general increase in mobilization raids against migrant communities in Russia, as ISW has previously reported.[39] Russian information space actors, particularly the ultranationalist milblogger community, tend to fixate on singular incidents that implicate migrant communities in acts of violence or resistance in order to weaponize xenophobic and anti-migrant rhetoric, often to suggest that migrant communities should face wider rates of mobilization and fight in Ukraine.[40]

Key Takeaways:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin identified the West as Russia’s “enemy” and implied that Russia is fighting in Ukraine in order to defeat the West.
- Putin’s framing of his war in Ukraine as a Russian struggle against the West – and not Ukraine – indicates that he does not intend to negotiate in good faith with Ukraine and is setting information conditions aimed at convincing the West to betray Ukraine through negotiations.
- Putin may be expanding his war aims in Ukraine to include confrontation with the West in an effort to set conditions for permanent Russian military buildup and to justify high battlefield sacrifices.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stressed Ukraine’s need for urgent Western support to protect both Ukraine and the rest of Europe in an interview with the *Economist* published on January 1.
- Russian forces conducted another massive series of drone and missile strikes against deep rear areas in Ukraine between December 31 and January 2, one of which used a strike package similar to that used on December 29, and to which Ukrainian forces appear to be adapting.
- Western provision of air defense systems and missiles to Ukraine remains crucial for Ukraine as Russian forces will likely attempt to adapt to Ukrainian air defense capabilities.
- Russian officials publicly defined the goals for Russia’s 2024 chairmanship of both BRICS and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), articulating how the Kremlin may intend to use these organizations to fulfill its foreign policy objectives this year.
- The Norwegian government announced on January 1 that it is permitting Norwegian defense companies to sell weapons and defense-related products directly to the Ukrainian government.
- The Turkish government announced on January 2 that it will not allow the United Kingdom (UK) to transport two mine hunting ships to Ukraine via the Turkish Straits “as long as the war continues.”
- Russian society continues to reckon with the impacts of increasing anti-migrant sentiment amid Russian authorities’ ongoing efforts to systematically disenfranchise migrant communities within Russia.
- Russian forces made marginal confirmed advances along the Svatove-Kremenna line, northwest and southwest of Bakhmut, northwest of Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.

- The Russian military command may be seeking avenues to re-pardon recidivists who previously fought in the war in Ukraine in an apparent effort to maintain Russia's ability to leverage convict recruits as a manpower resource.
- Russian occupation authorities are restricting and likely monitoring internet communications ahead of the March 2024 presidential elections.

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