

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 22, 2023
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Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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

Russian forces conducted a limited drone and missile strike campaign in Ukraine overnight on March 21-22, indicating that Russian forces continue struggling with precision missile shortages. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted 21 drone strikes targeting residential and infrastructure areas in Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhia, and Odesa oblasts, and Ukrainian forces shot down 16 of the drones.¹ Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces struck two residential high-rise buildings in Zaporizhzhia City, killing at least one civilian and injuring 33.² Russian forces conducted more intensive and wider-ranging strikes during the fall 2022 air and missile campaign, suggesting that Russian forces may now be rationing their use of high-precision munitions for these strike campaigns or may simply lack the necessary munitions to sustain strike campaigns at their earlier pace and intensity. Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the Russian missile strike threat remains high but that Russian forces would likely only conduct a limited campaign.³

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) intends to increase the size of Russia's air defense forces at a Russian MoD collegium on March 22. Shoigu stated that one of the Russian Aerospace Forces' (VKS) development priorities is to generate more air defense units with advanced air defense systems.⁴ He noted that in 2023 Russian forces plan to form a new air defense division and brigade, form a special purpose air defense missile brigade, form a new anti-aircraft missile regiment with more advanced S-350 systems, form a military transport aviation regiment, and complete the modernization of Moscow City's air defense systems.⁵ Shoigu also commented on Russian combat experience in Ukraine, stating that Russian pilots conducted over 140,000 combat sorties since February 24, 2022, and that 90 percent of operational-tactical and army aviation, 60 percent of strategic long-range aviation, and 85 percent of UAV operators have combat experience.⁶

The Russian military is unlikely to generate such forces within several years, let alone by the end of 2023. Russia's defense industrial base has historically experienced multi-year delays in developing advanced air defense systems, even before the strict sanctions and exacerbated resource constraints resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Current Russian air defense brigades and regiments received their S-400 systems up to several years behind schedule.⁷ The Russian military had only fielded the S-500 system, which was reportedly supposed to enter production in 2015, in one Russian

air defense army by 2021.⁸ Russia also delayed its planned delivery of a second S-400 battery to India in 2022 due to constraints caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁹ Russia may eventually grow its air defense forces as part of a larger effort to recreate a large conventional military in the long term, however. Shoigu's announcement is similar to his previous announcement at an MoD collegium in December 2022 in which Shoigu stated that Russia seeks to form 17 new maneuver divisions over several years.¹⁰

The formation of new Russian air defense and airlift units will not increase Russian combat power in Ukraine this year. Shoigu's statement is likely intended to reassure the Russian people that the Russian MoD is continuing to develop the Russian military as a world-class military power to offset perceptions about Russian military failures in Ukraine.

Shoigu likely signaled to Japan that it should not attempt to exploit Russia's current military vulnerability in the Kuril Islands and to China that Russia remains a worthwhile military partner. Shoigu extolled the strength of Russia's Eastern Military District (EMD) at length and announced that the EMD deployed a battery of Bastion coastal defense missile systems on Paramushir Island—an island in the northern portion of the Russian-occupied Japanese Kuril Islands. Shoigu's statement was likely a warning signal to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who visited Kyiv and Bucha on March 21, about becoming too engaged in supporting Ukraine.¹¹ The Russian Eastern Military District is severely degraded. Significant Russian EMD elements deployed to Belarus and were badly damaged during the Battle of Kyiv in early 2022. Russian EMD elements of the 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades recently fought and suffered heavy losses near Vuhledar in Donetsk Oblast in early 2023.¹² The 155th has been destroyed and reconstituted as many as eight times in the past year.¹³ Shoigu's statement was also likely a signal to Chinese President Xi Jinping that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in East Asia and remains a viable military partner despite the terrible damage Ukraine has inflicted on the Russian military.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu walked away and refused to answer a question about how soon to expect peace in Ukraine. A journalist from the Russian Ministry of Defense-run media outlet *TV Zvezda* first asked Shoigu how the war will end, to which Shoigu responded, "any war ends in peace."¹⁴ The journalist then asked Shoigu how soon to expect peace in Ukraine. Shoigu did not answer the question and walked away. *TV Zvezda* originally aired the footage of Shoigu walking away but cut it in a later release. ISW previously reported that the Kremlin aims to set information conditions and prepare the Russian information space for a protracted war.¹⁵

The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut appears to be slowing amid Western reporting that Russian forces may be attempting to launch offensives in other directions. Russian forces made additional marginal advances in southern Bakhmut, and Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks on the southwestern and northwestern outskirts of the city on March 21 and 22.¹⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 22 that Russian forces' offensive potential in the Bakhmut area is declining, and Ukrainian officials have previously reported fewer combat clashes in the city itself in recent days.¹⁷ US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on March 21 that Russian and Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize operations around Bakhmut and that Russian forces might try to conduct another offensive, possibly in many different directions.¹⁸ The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed that Russian forces may be losing momentum in the Bakhmut area because the Russian MoD is relocating units to other directions.¹⁹ Russian forces

are currently increasing the tempo of their offensive operations around Avdiivka aiming to encircle the settlement, and it is possible that Russian forces are doing so at the expense of their operations around Bakhmut and the stalled offensive around Vuhledar.

Russian personnel of the 136th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) previously stated that they were deploying to the Vuhledar area to conduct assaults, but a Russian milblogger claimed on March 21 that elements of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade are operating in the Avdiivka direction.²⁰ This apparent deployment change—if it is not a result of Russian misreporting—possibly indicates that Russian forces prioritized the intensification of operations around Avdiivka over restarting the offensive on Vuhledar. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivyskyi stated on March 19 that Russian forces started increasing assaults in the Avdiivka area to set conditions for restarting offensive operations on Vuhledar, further suggesting that current Russian offensive operations around Avdiivka are preventing the potential resumption of offensive activities near Vuhledar.²¹ Russian forces appear to be drawing more combat power to the Avdiivka area which may allow them to increase their rate of advance, although there were no confirmed Russian advances in the area on March 22. ISW continues to assess that Russian advances may prompt Ukrainian forces to withdraw from Bakhmut and/or Avdiivka although neither appears likely at this time. Russian forces may choose to launch or intensify offensive operations in new directions, but these operations would likely produce few tangible results as the overall Russian spring offensive continues to near culmination. ISW has still not observed evidence of the commitment of the Russian 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army (Western Military District) despite reports that it had reconstituted in Belarus and deployed to Luhansk. The Russians may commit this unit to one or more offensives already underway or to a new offensive undertaking. The commitment of this division's two or three motorized rifle regiments is unlikely to achieve operationally decisive effects, however, given the failure of larger formations to do so.

Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from long-term storage to Ukraine to compensate for significant armored vehicle losses. The Georgia-based open-source *Conflict Intelligence Team* research group reported on March 22 that Russian forces transported a train loaded with T-54/55 tanks from Primorsky Krai towards western Russia, and social media sources speculated that Russian forces may deploy them to Ukraine.²² Dutch open-source group *Oryx* assessed as of March 22 that Russian forces have lost at least 57 T-90, 448 T-80, 1,025 T-72, 53 T-64, and 73 T-62 tanks in highly attritional fighting in Ukraine.²³ Russian armored vehicle losses are currently constraining the Russian military's ability to conduct effective mechanized maneuver warfare in stalling offensives in Ukraine, and Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from storage to Ukraine to augment these offensive operations and prepare for anticipated mechanized Ukrainian counteroffensives. The Soviet Union produced tens of thousands of T-54/55 tanks after the Second World War, and the Russian military may be turning to extensive Soviet reserves of these tanks to solve its significant armored vehicle shortages. The Russian military may also be deciding to field the tanks because parts to repair the T-54/55 tanks are abundantly available and substantially cheaper. T-54/55 tanks lack the armor capabilities of more modern armored equipment, however, and originally carried a smaller main gun, although the Russian military may have modernized some vehicles. The Russian military will likely experience greater numbers of casualties by fielding these older tank systems in Ukraine. The deployment of inferior equipment to replenish the Russian military's ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare may prompt a further degradation of Russian manpower in Ukraine. Russian forces

are unlikely to achieve preferable resource attrition rates on the grounds that T-54/55 are cheaper than anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) ammunition, as some have argued—each tank loss is the loss of a tank crew as well as the tank, after all, and it is not clear how effective these tanks will be against Ukrainian armored vehicles, whereas they are highly vulnerable to many anti-tank systems available to Ukraine, not all of which are expensive.

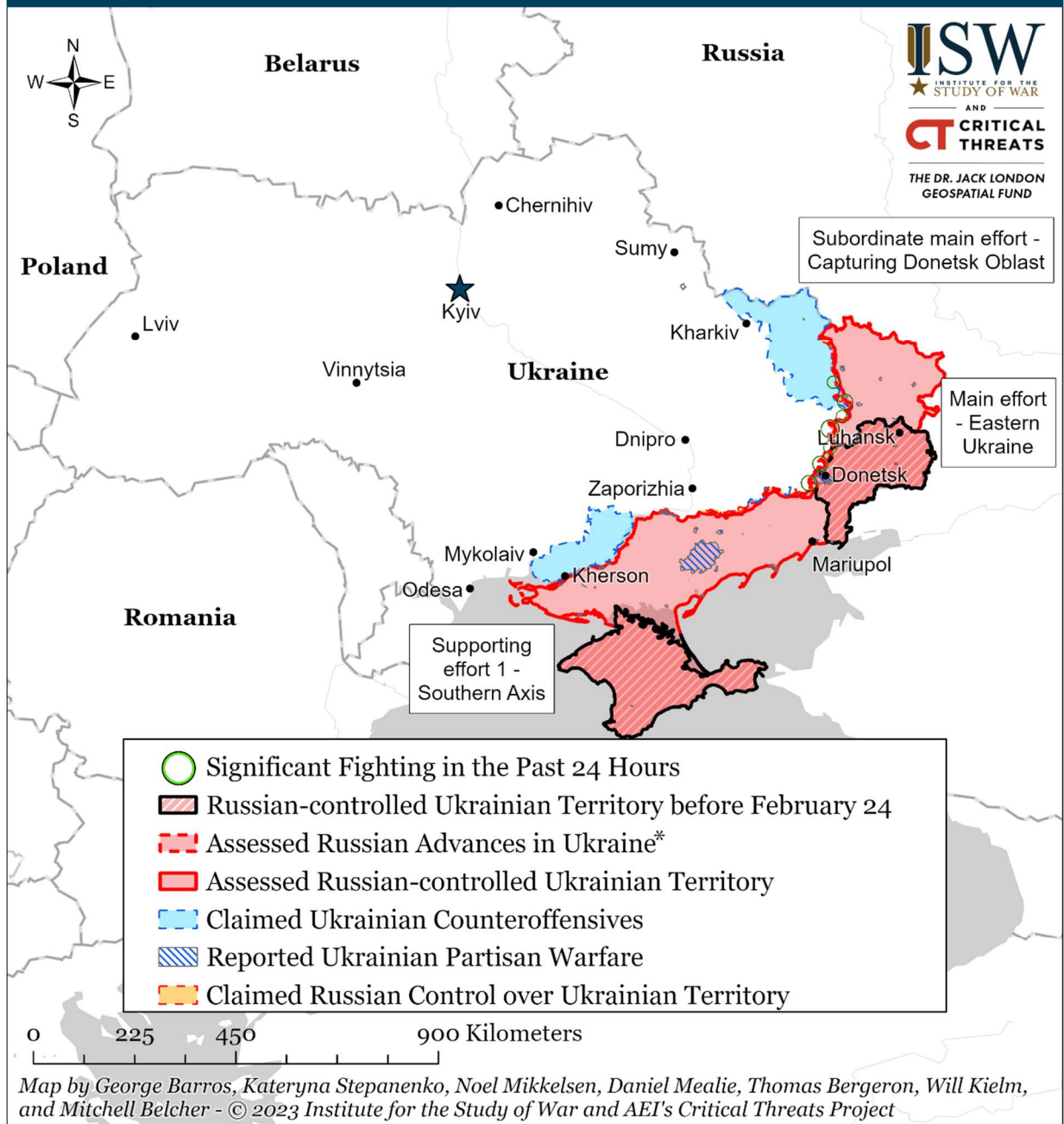
Russian authorities are cracking down against bars in urban areas, possibly to crack down against internal dissent among Russian social circles. St. Petersburg outlet *Fontanka* claimed on March 22 that St. Petersburg authorities shut down two dozen bars as part of a broader investigation into claims of involving minors in “anti-social acts,” including systematic drinking, drug use, and vagrancy.²⁴ This excuse is implausible given normal Russian attitudes toward “systematic drinking.” Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel conducted recent raids against two popular bars and forced patrons to conduct pro-war activities, after which at least one Russian businessman stepped away from his role in managing the bars, as ISW has previously reported.²⁵ These raids may target rich Russian businessmen like Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, who failed to deny current ownership of a St. Petersburg bar in his response to a Russian journalist who alleged that Prigozhin owned the bar in June 2022.²⁶ These measures may also encourage self-censorship within these circles and among bar attendees by publicly displaying the consequences of speaking out of turn.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted a limited drone and missile strike campaign in Ukraine overnight on March 21-22, indicating that Russian forces continue struggling with precision missile shortages.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) intends to increase the size of Russia’s air defense forces at a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) collegium on March 22.**
- **Shoigu likely signaled to Japan that it should not become more engaged in supporting Ukraine by announcing the deployment of an anti-shipping missile system on one of the Kuril Islands.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu walked away and refused to answer a question about how soon to expect peace in Ukraine.**
- **The tempo of Russian operations around Bakhmut appears to be slowing amid Western reporting that Russian forces may be attempting to launch offensives in other directions.**
- **Russian forces may be deploying T-54/55 tanks from storage to Ukraine to compensate for significant armored vehicle losses.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces made marginal territorial gains within Bakhmut and continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and on the outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian officials stated that Ukrainian forces continue to clear an area on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.**
- **The Kremlin continued hybrid reserve callup and crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit Russians for contract service.**

- **Russian officials and occupation authorities continued to advocate for legislative changes in an effort to further legitimize the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

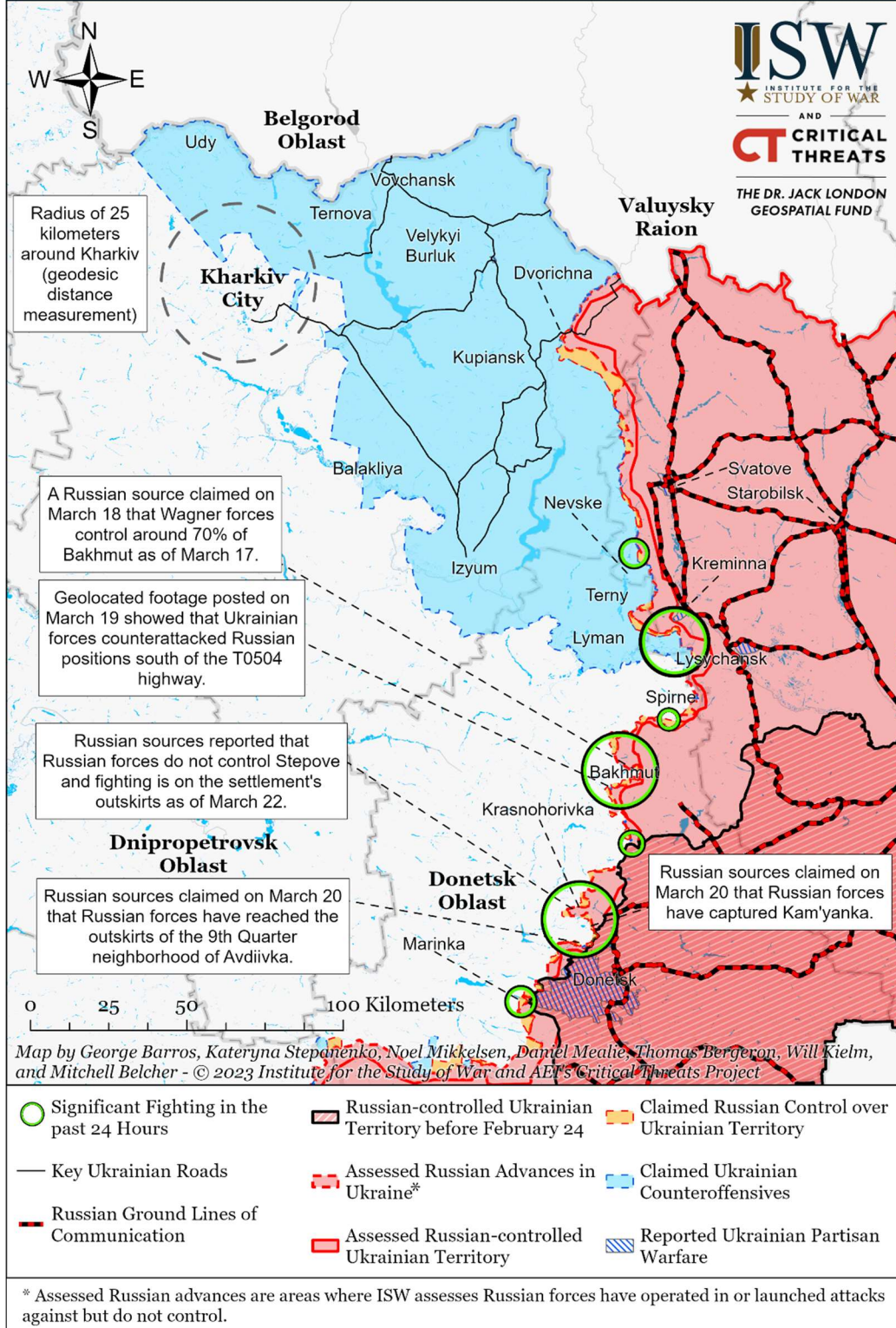
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of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

Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1— Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line on March 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Makiivka (21km northwest of Kreminna), Kreminna, Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (11km south of Kreminna), and Vesele (14km southeast of Siversk).²⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed on March 21 that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Yampolivka, Terny, and Nevske (all 17-19km northwest of Kreminna), and made unspecified advances towards Bilohorivka.²⁸ Another milblogger claimed on March 22 that Russian forces attacked towards Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove) and Makiivka.²⁹ Other Russian sources claimed that positional battles continued and that there are no changes in the Starobilsk area of the front line, likely referring to the northern section of the Kupyansk-Svatove line.³⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

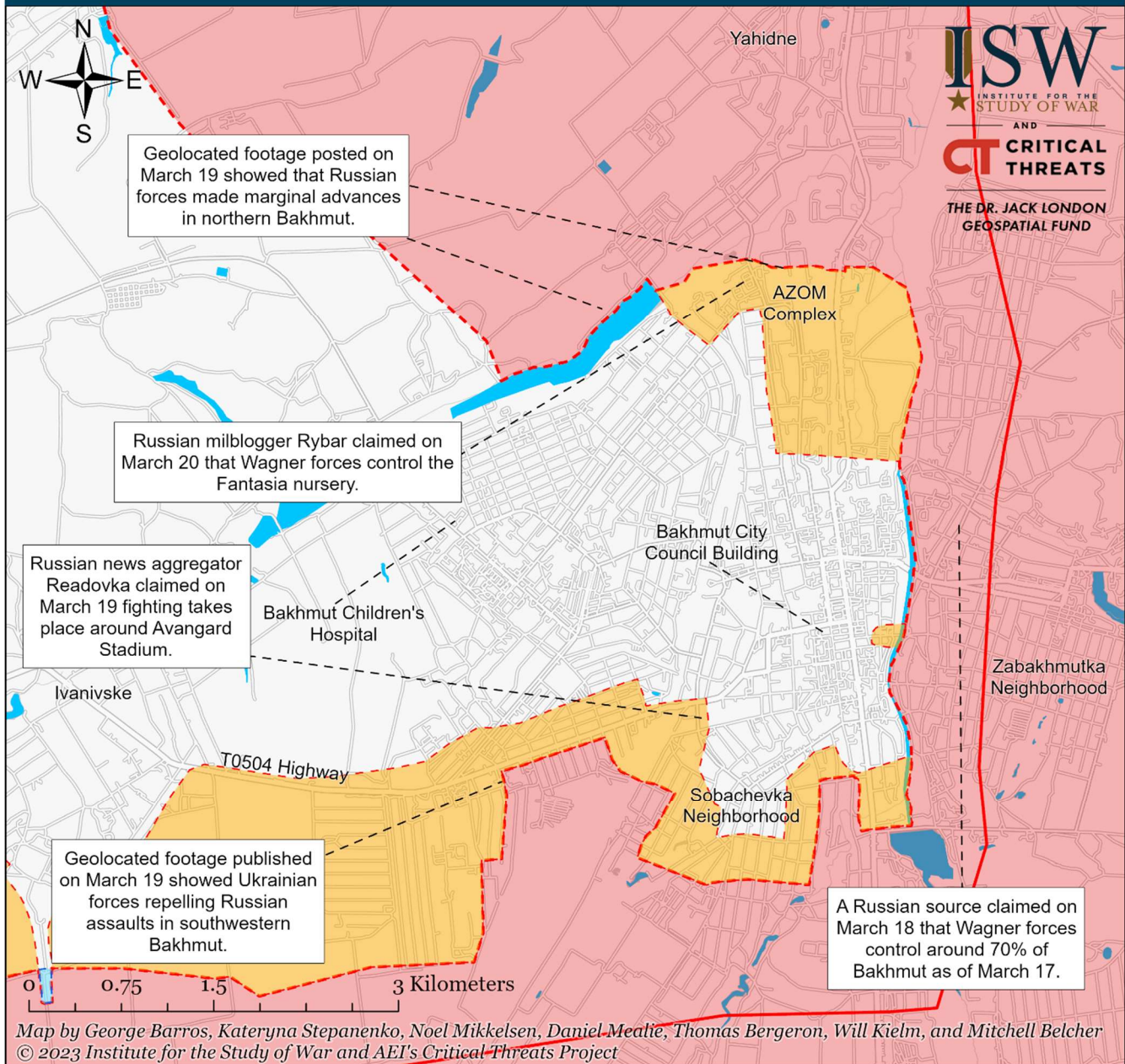


Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in Bakhmut and its environs on March 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults in southern and northern Bakhmut; within 14km northwest of Bakhmut in Bohdanivka, Hryvorivka, and Orikhovo-Vasylivka; and within 21km southwest of Bakhmut in Predtechyne, Ivanivske, Klishchiivka, and Mayorsk.³¹ Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Russian forces continue attempting to advance to the Bakhmut city center from the outskirts.³² Russian sources claimed that Russian forces cleared most of the industrial territory in Bakhmut—likely referring to the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut.³³ A Russian source also claimed that the Wagner Group continued to advance near Orikhovo-Vasylivka, Bohdanivka, and southern Bakhmut in the areas of the Mariupol cemetery and Korsunskoho Street.³⁴ Geolocated footage published on March 21 showed that Wagner forces made marginal advances in southern Bakhmut.³⁵ A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Wagner mercenaries resumed offensive operations in the direction of Predtechyne in a claimed attempt to advance to Kostyantynivka (about 21km west of Bakhmut) and continued to attack Ivanivske.³⁶ A Russian source also claimed that the elements of the 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (formerly the Donetsk People’s Republic’s [DNR] 3rd Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 1st Army Corps) are operating near Mayorsk.³⁷

Ukrainian forces are conducting tactical counterattacks on Bakhmut’s northwestern and southwestern outskirts. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that Ukrainian forces initiated a counterattack west of Bakhmut to relieve pressure on the T0504 (H-32) highway to Bakhmut.³⁸ Geolocated footage published on March 21 showed Ukrainian counterattacks south of Ivanivske and southeast of Bohdanivka.³⁹ A Russian source also claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to counterattack near the T0504 highway.⁴⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kiehm, and Mitchell Belcher
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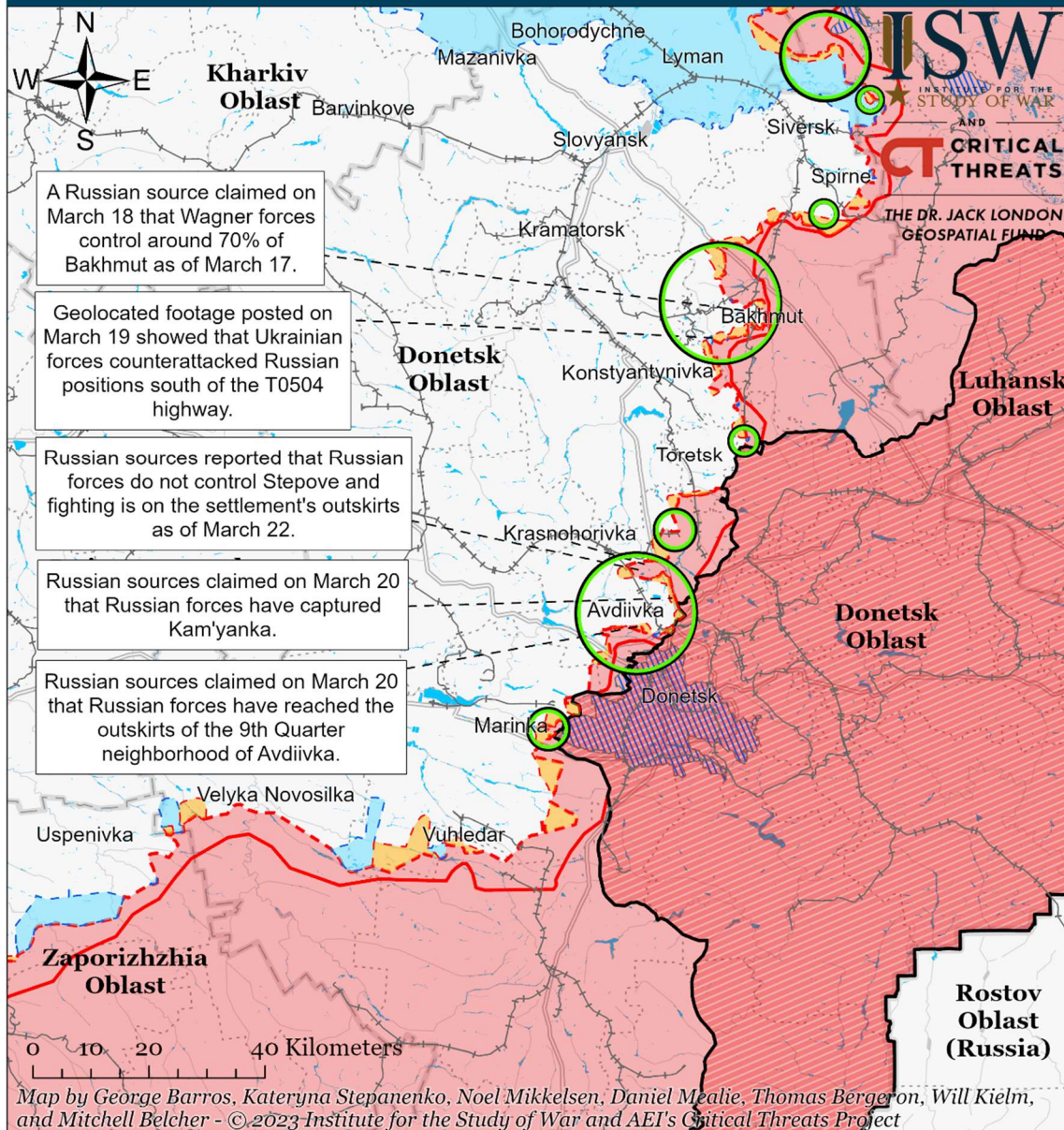
Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Russian forces are intensifying offensive operations around Avdiivka. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks north of Avdiivka in Novokalynove, Novobakhmutivka, Krasnohorivka, Stepove, Lastochkyne, and Berdychi; west of Sieverne, Vodyane, Pervomaiske; and Avdiivka.⁴¹ A spokesperson for the Russian Southern Group of Forces stated that elements of the 1st Army Corps are operating in the Avdiivka direction.⁴² Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are attacking Avdiivka from two directions: from the Orlivka direction in the north (about 12km northwest of Avdiivka) to cut Ukrainian supply lines and from the south via Opytne (about 3km southeast of Avdiivka).⁴³ Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces attacked in the direction of Berdychi and are fighting on the eastern outskirts of Stepove.⁴⁴ Geolocated combat footage shows the DNR's and Luhansk People's Republic's (LNR) "Pyatnashka" volunteer battalion targeting Ukrainian positions southeast of Avdiivka.⁴⁵ Geolocated footage published on March 21 indicates that Russian forces made marginal advances north of Vodyane.⁴⁶

Russian forces are launching assault operations west of Donetsk City but have not resumed offensives near Vuhledar as of this publication. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked Marinka and Pobieda, 22km and 25km southwest of Donetsk City, respectively.⁴⁷ Russian milbloggers amplified footage on March 21 claiming to show the DNR "Kaskad" unit fighting in the Vuhledar area and claimed that Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs employees comprise a significant portion of the unit.⁴⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck Shkilnyy Airfield in Odesa City on the night of March 21. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 22 that Russian forces struck two hangars with Ukrainian weapons and military equipment at the Shkilnyy Airfield on the outskirts of Odesa City.⁴⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched the attack on occupied Dzhankoy in Crimea on March 20 from the Shkilnyy Airfield.⁵⁰

Russian forces reportedly intercepted Ukrainian drones near occupied Sevastopol, Crimea. Geolocated footage filmed on March 22 shows likely Russian direct fire against an unidentified object—likely a maritime drone—in the water near Sevastopol Bay followed by an explosion in the water.⁵¹ Other footage posted on March 22 purportedly shows aerial drones also attacking Sevastopol.⁵² Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed on March 22 that two sailors destroyed three Ukrainian drones aimed at Russian military facilities in occupied Sevastopol.⁵³ Odesa Oblast Military Administration Spokesperson Serhiy Bratchuk reported anti-aircraft defense and anti-maritime drone activity over Sevastopol and that Russian authorities halted all maritime traffic near Sevastopol.⁵⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian maritime drones attempted to strike coastal bays in Sevastopol and that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian surface drone north of Sevastopol.⁵⁵ Zaporizhia Occupation Administration Council Member Vladimir Rogov claimed that Russian forces also repelled Ukrainian aerial drones with air defenses and small arms.⁵⁶

Ukrainian forces continue clearing operations on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk stated on March 21 that Ukrainian forces continue to clear a 20 to 30km strip in an unspecified location on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River to protect the population on the west (right) bank from constant Russian shelling.⁵⁷ Humenyuk stated that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian ammunition depot on the Kinburn Spit, preventing Russian forces from shelling from the area for an unspecified period of time.⁵⁸

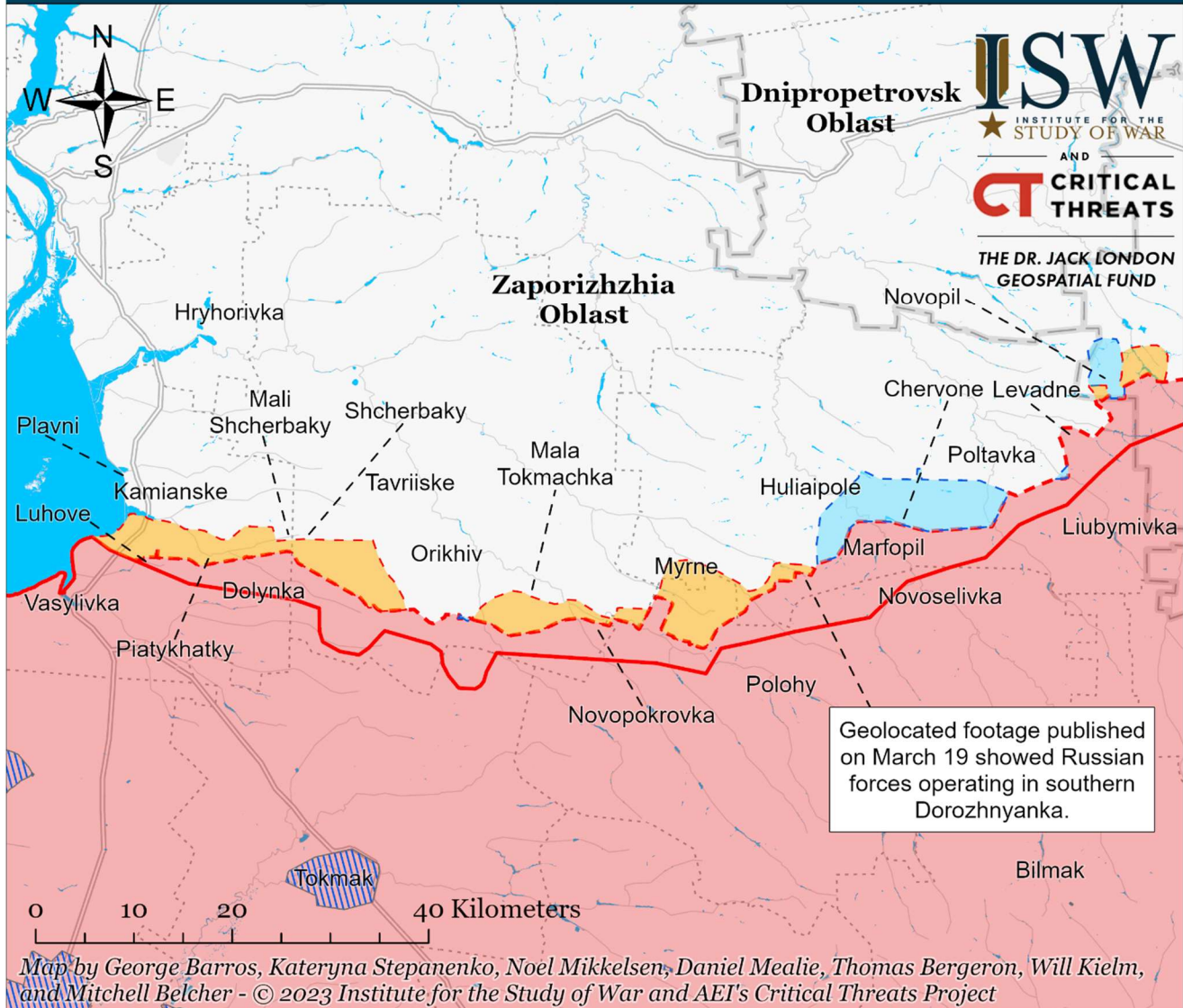
Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on March 22.⁵⁹

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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

The Kremlin continues hybrid reserve callup and crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit Russians for contract service. Russian sources reported on March 21 that Russian residents in Tyumen and Sverdlovsk oblasts, Karelia and Altai republics, and Krasnodar Krai received military summonses directing them to verify information with military recruitment offices or undergo military training as part of mandatory reserve call-ups.⁶⁰ Russian recruitment offices are likely attempting to use mandatory month-long trainings for reservists to pressure them into signing contracts while also shortening the required amount of training that new Russian contract servicemen would need to undergo before deploying to Ukraine after a future involuntary call-up. Russian officials in Yaroslavl, Chelyabinsk, and Moscow oblasts have reportedly started widespread advertisement campaigns for contract service focused on additional promised payments for signing a contract and participating in active offensive actions.⁶¹ The Kremlin is likely conducting this hybrid force generation campaign to avoid declaring a formal second mobilization wave.

Ukrainian sources reported that Russian occupation officials continue mobilization measures in occupied territories. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported on March 22 that Russian occupation officials announced large-scale military training exercises for the spring or summer of 2023 to support plans to conscript the entire male population of draft age in Starobilsk, Shchastia, Novoaidar, Nizhneteplye, and Novopskov in Luhansk Oblast.⁶² Malyar claimed that Russian occupation officials are trying to incentivize potential conscripts by promising them housing taken from Ukrainian citizens forced to leave occupied territories.⁶³ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian occupation officials are preparing for a new wave of mobilization in occupied Donetsk Oblast and that 23 occupation military recruitment offices plan to register young men born in 2006 to create a reserve of residents for future mobilization waves.⁶⁴

Kherson Oblast occupation administration Head Vladimir Saldo announced on March 22 that his administration is forming a volunteer battalion. Saldo claimed that his administration formed the Vasily Margelov Volunteer Battalion to defend against Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance activities on the east (left) bank and to maintain order in occupied Kherson Oblast.⁶⁵ Saldo claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) agreed to fully support the volunteer battalion with arms and equipment and that the formation is currently undergoing combat training.⁶⁶ Saldo's decision to form a volunteer battalion is likely aimed at increasing his control over occupied Kherson Oblast and is likely modeled on volunteer battalions that other occupation heads have formed for similar reasons.⁶⁷ The delineated public order task of the battalion suggests that the Kherson Oblast occupation administration may use the formation as a designated internal security force for further crackdowns.

Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to advocate for legislative changes in an effort to further legitimize the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova claimed on March 22 that Russian President Vladimir Putin

supported a proposal to assign special statuses to children wounded during the “special military operation.”⁶⁸ Lvova-Belova expressed hopes that there will be an official decree to establish mechanisms to identify these children and provide them with support and benefits.⁶⁹ Advisor to the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) head Rodion Miroshnik stated on March 22 that he agrees with Lvova-Belova's proposal but called for a proposal that extends the special status of children of war to all children in Donbas.⁷⁰

Russian occupation officials continue to focus on infrastructure projects that aim to cement Russian control over occupied territories. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed on March 21 that the Russian Ministry of Construction developed a bill on the creation of a free economic zone in occupied territories that will focus on business and investment activity.⁷¹ Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) head Leonid Pasechnik claimed on March 22 that 20 industrial enterprises in occupied Luhansk Oblast are interested in applying to a newly established regional industrial development fund.⁷² The Kherson occupation administration claimed on March 22 that occupation officials will offer farmers in occupied Kherson Oblast preferential credit rates for purchasing agricultural equipment.⁷³

Significant activity in Belarus (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. Unspecified elements of the Minsk-based Belarusian 120th Mechanized Brigade participated in a company tactical exercise at the Belarusian 227th Combined Arms Training Ground in Borisov, Belarus, on March 22.⁷⁴

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.

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.

¹<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0teY5FqmU8LGqkZLBCsz7LkMfygFE7sBjQ8t3ymULBQrcnKe6d98L2xTEwqtqowm9l>

² <https://twitter.com/KyivIndependent/status/1638555667723059200>; <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/22/zapoperednimy-danymy-vorog-vdaryv-po-zaporizhzhyyu-z-reaktyvnoyi-artylერიyi-yurij-ignat/>; <https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/03/22/vnaslidok-vluchannya-vorozhoyi-rakety-u-zaporizhzhii-postrazhdalo-32-osoby-dsns/>; https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/17689; https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/17688

³ <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/22/korabelne-ugrupovannya-voroga-v-mori-zroslo-vdvichi-natalya-gumenyuk/>

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- ⁴ <https://telegra dot ph/VstupitelNoe-slovo-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-generalarmii-Sergeya-SHOjgu-na-zasedanii-Kollegii-Minoborony-Rossii-03-22>; https://t.me/mod_russia/25012
- ⁵ <https://telegra dot ph/VstupitelNoe-slovo-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-generalarmii-Sergeya-SHOjgu-na-zasedanii-Kollegii-Minoborony-Rossii-03-22>; https://t.me/mod_russia/25012
- ⁶ <https://telegra dot ph/VstupitelNoe-slovo-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-generalarmii-Sergeya-SHOjgu-na-zasedanii-Kollegii-Minoborony-Rossii-03-22>; https://t.me/mod_russia/25012
- ⁷ https://web.archive.org/web/20141016221759/http://defense-update.com/features/2010/february/triumf_fielded_19022010.html; <https://eurasiatimes dot com/cleared-putin-bets-big-on-s-500-but-whats-so-special-about-this-russian-weapon-system/>; <https://www.upi dot com/Defense-News/2007/08/16/BMD-Focus-S-400-delays-Part-1/39721187298453/>
- ⁸ <https://lenta dot ru/articles/2012/04/10/future/>; <https://tass dot com/defense/1338617>
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