

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9, 2023

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April 9, 6 pm ET

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

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

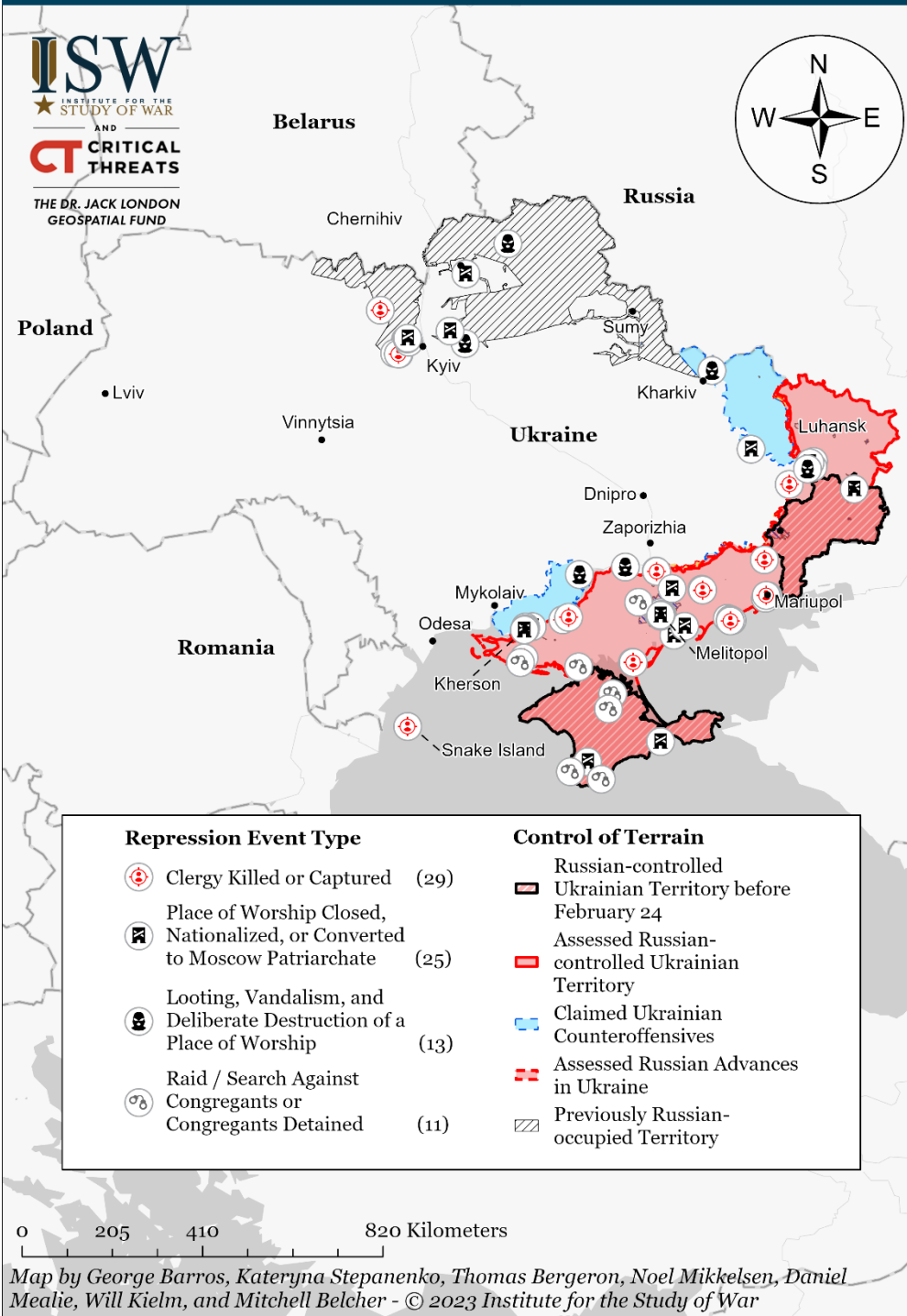
ISW is publishing a special edition campaign assessment today, April 9. This report discusses Russia's religious repressions throughout occupied Ukraine since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia continues to weaponize religion in an effort to discredit Ukraine in the international arena and is using information operations about religion to advance military objectives despite itself committing gross violations of religious freedom in occupied Ukraine. Russia may use the upcoming Orthodox Easter holiday on April 16 in an effort to delay Ukrainian counteroffensives by calling for a ceasefire out of respect for the Orthodox religion despite the fact that Russia has shown no such respect for religion in areas its forces occupy. Russian religious persecutions are likely also part of an ongoing Russian cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing campaign aimed at extirpating the idea of an independent Ukrainian nationality or Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Russian occupation authorities are likely conducting a campaign of systematic religious persecution in occupied Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Russian soldiers or occupations authorities have reportedly committed at least 76 acts of religious persecution in Ukraine.[1] Russian authorities have closed, nationalized, or forcefully converted at least 26 places of worship to the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, killed or seized at least 29 clergy or religious leaders, and looted, desecrated, or deliberately destroyed at least 13 places of worship in occupied Ukraine.[2] These cases of religious repression are not likely isolated incidents but rather part of a deliberate campaign to systematically eradicate "undesirable" religious organizations in Ukraine and promote the Moscow Patriarchate.

Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians Between February 24, 2022 - April 9, 2023 (Persecuted Denominations & Sects)



Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians Between February 24, 2022 - April 9, 2023 (Persecution Events by Type)



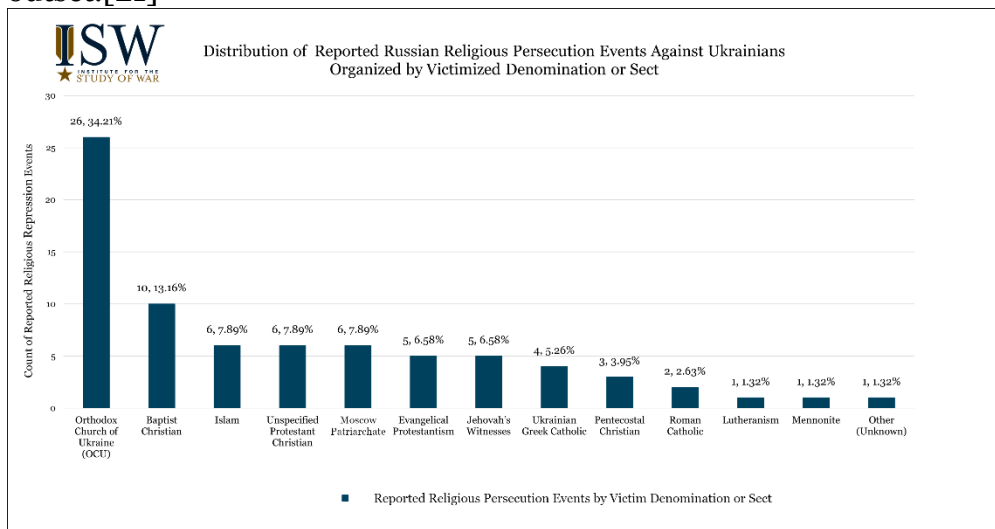
This study contains only a small subset of all reported Russian religious persecution events against religious groups in Ukraine. ISW did not include events where indirect fire may have unintentionally killed religious leaders or destroyed places of worship.[3] (This report specifically does not include all 494 religious buildings that the Russian military reportedly wholly destroyed, damaged, or looted, according to the independent Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom as of February 2023 because ISW cannot assess intentionality in all those cases, for example.)[4] The events included in this study are drawn from reports of Russian forces – usually infantry, security personnel, or occupation officials – deliberately coercing religious groups. This report also excludes many instances of Russian religious repressions in areas Russian forces have occupied from spring 2014 to February 24, 2022, to focus on more recent persecutions in newly-occupied areas.

Russian authorities systematically repress religious liberty in Russia as a matter of state policy. Russian President Vladimir Putin ratified the “Yarovaya Law” in 2016 requiring all religious organizations and churches in Russia to be registered with the Russian government. The law bans “missionary activities,” broadly defined as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially state-approved sites under the pretense of precautions against “extremism” and “terrorism.”[5] The Russian government refuses to register undesirable religious organizations it seeks to suppress.[6] Since 2016 Russian authorities have used the Yarovaya Law’s sweeping provisions to prosecute American Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries operating in Russia, outlaw most Mormon missionary work, and burn foreign-distributed Bibles not properly registered with the state.[7] Russian authorities have persecuted several other Russian religious minorities, including members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Falun Gong members, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Old Believers (Pomorian Old Orthodox), Lutherans, the Ukrainian Reformed Orthodox Church, and the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).[8] Russian authorities jailed at least 48 Russian Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2022, arrested and deported two American Mormon missionaries in 2019, and fined a Sochi-based Buddhist leader for organizing “collective meditation” for “about a dozen” people in 2019.[9] Russian authorities have also targeted Russian Muslims for “illegal missionary activities” despite the fact that Islam is legally recognized as one of Russia’s “traditional religions” (along with Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism and Buddhism).[10]

Russia is exporting its state policies of systematic religious persecution to Russian-occupied Ukraine. The Kremlin annexed Russian-controlled portions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 30, 2022, recognizing them as Russian federal subjects.[11] Russian authorities enforce Russian federal laws – including the Yarovaya and other “anti-extremist” laws – in Russian-occupied Ukraine. Russia’s Prosecutor General’s Office declared four evangelical Christian groups from Latvia and Ukraine “undesirable” organizations in 2021, effectively banning the organizations in Russia.[12] Russian authorities in occupied Melitopol raided a Ukrainian evangelical pastor’s home in August 2022 and accused the pastor of being associated with the same undesirable organizations that Russian authorities banned in Russia 2021.[13] The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in occupied Kherson Oblast reported that it eliminated an underground Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation in Novosofivka, Kherson Oblast, in January 2023.[14] The officials reported that Russian authorities found over 4,000 pieces of “forbidden literature” in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ possession and emphasized that Russian law designates Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist organization banned in Russia.[15] A Ukrainian Baptist congregation in Chernihivka regained permission to use its seized building after the congregants sent deed documents to Russian occupation authorities - possibly as part of the church’s reregistration under the Yarovaya. Law.[16]

Russian occupation officials have been repressing Ukrainian religious communities in proxy republics in eastern Ukraine and in illegally occupied Crimea since 2014. Former Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Oleksandr Zakharchenko declared in May 2015 that Ukrainian Orthodox Church (OCU) members, Greek Catholics, and Evangelical Christians were “sectarians” within the DNR.[17] Zakharchenko announced that occupation authorities would only recognize the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. Occupation authorities forced many religious groups to reregister under the Russian Yarovaya law, bureaucratically eradicating religions such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Muslim group Hizb ut-Tahir.[18] A Russian court ordered the only remaining Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Russia to be demolished at the expense of the Ukrainian diocese in 2019.[19]

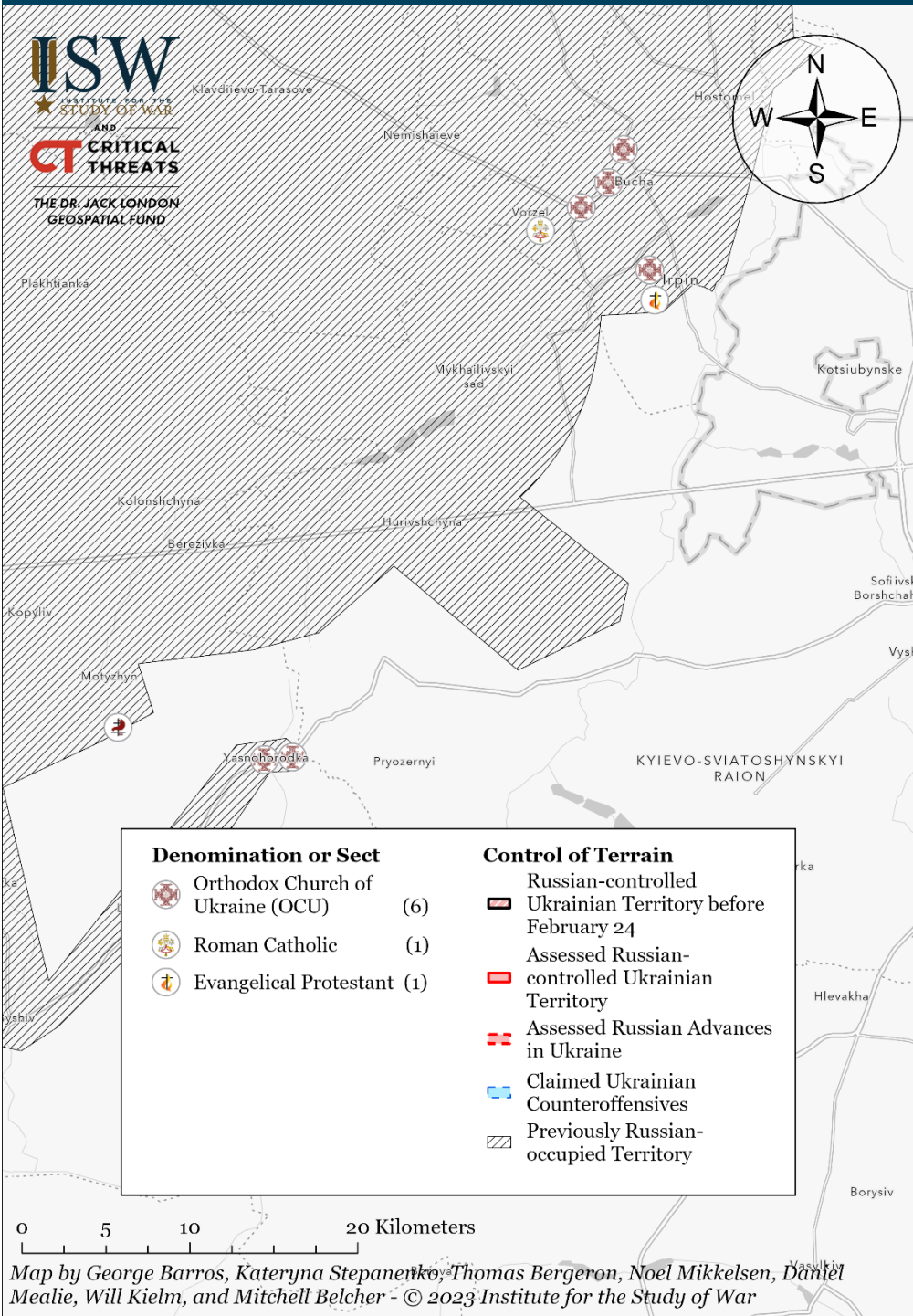
Moscow’s religious persecution campaign seeks to eradicate the Autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which Moscow views as schismatic despite the decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2019 granting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian occupation authorities are likely systematically eliminating OCU churches in occupied Ukraine. ISW’s research found that 34 percent of the reported persecution events targeted the OCU, making it the single most targeted religious group. The high percentage of persecution events aimed at the OCU is not surprising on the one hand because it is the most popular confession in Ukraine. It is surprising on the other hand because the Kremlin has been posturing as the defender of Christianity in general and Eastern Orthodoxy in particular.[20] Witness reports indicate that Russian authorities are seemingly targeting the OCU for its Ukrainianess. The Russians pursued such targeted attacks on the OCU even during the short-lived Russian partial occupation of Kyiv Oblast early in the war, suggesting that this targeting was an intentional component of the Russian invasion from the outset.[21]



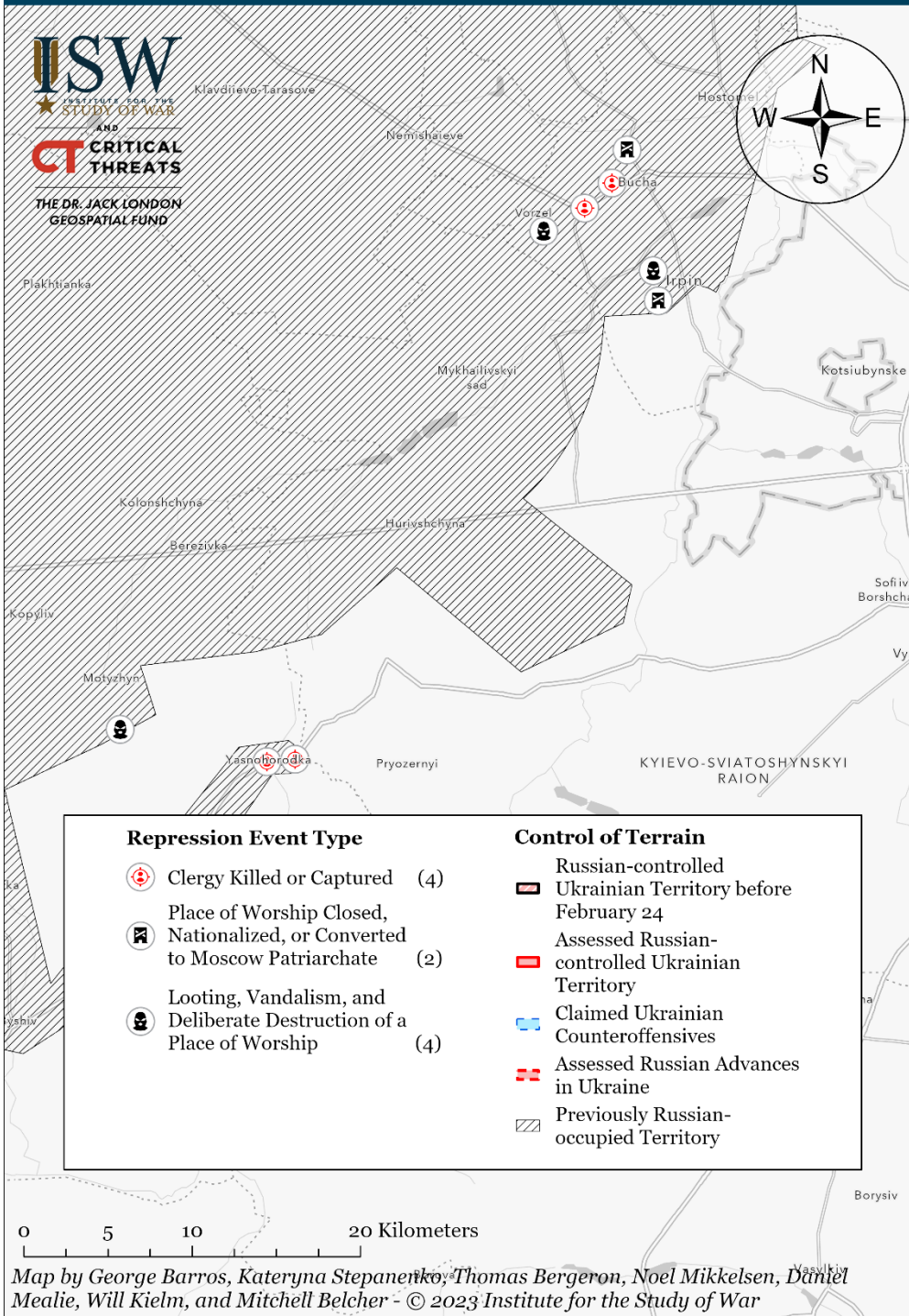
Russian occupation officials are systematically seizing UOC property to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and are eliminating worship in the Ukrainian language. The synod of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a decision to officially annex the OCU’s dioceses in Dzhankoi, Simferopol, and Feodosia in Crimea on June 7, 2022, “out of the need to maintain an effective canonical and administrative connection with the central church authorities.”[22] Six Russian FSB agents raided an OCU church in Melitopol, detained and deported its priest for conducting the liturgy in the Ukrainian language, and then closed the church in November 2022.[23] Russian authorities have converted several OCU churches in occupied Ukraine to the Moscow Patriarchate.[24] The full extent of Russian efforts to forcibly convert Ukrainians in occupied territories to Russian Orthodoxy is unclear. Russian occupation authorities have made no explicit statement allowing the OCU to coexist with the Russian

Orthodox Church in occupied Ukraine, which is alarming given the documented instances of repression and forced conversion of OCU churches.

Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians Near Kyiv Between February 24, 2022 - April 2, 2022 (Persecuted Denominations & Sects)

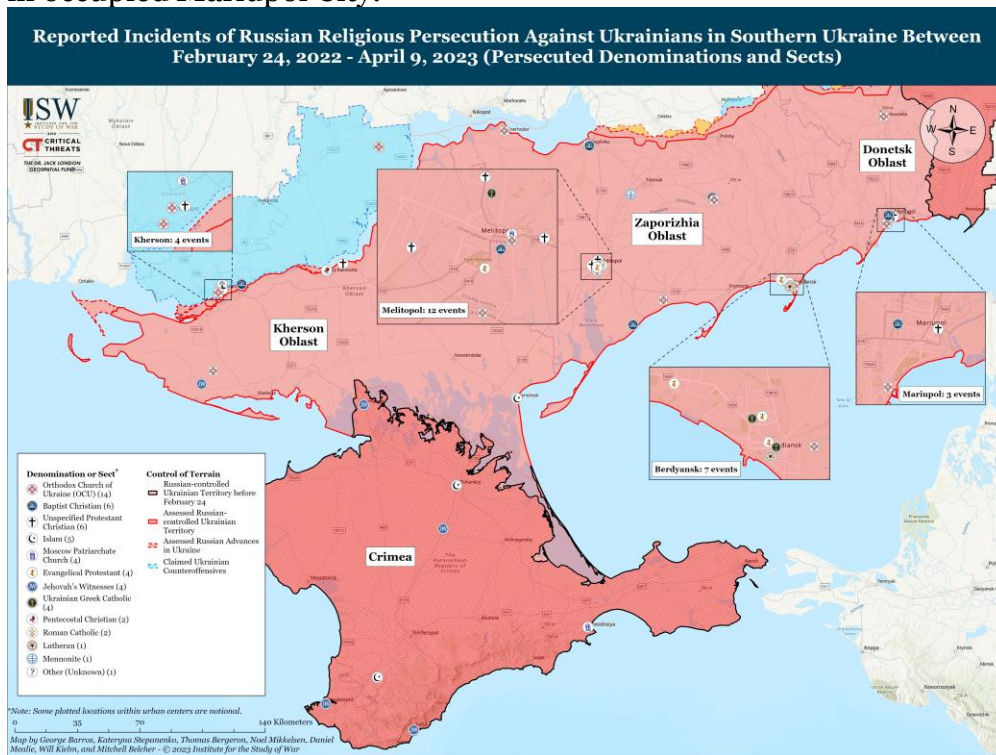


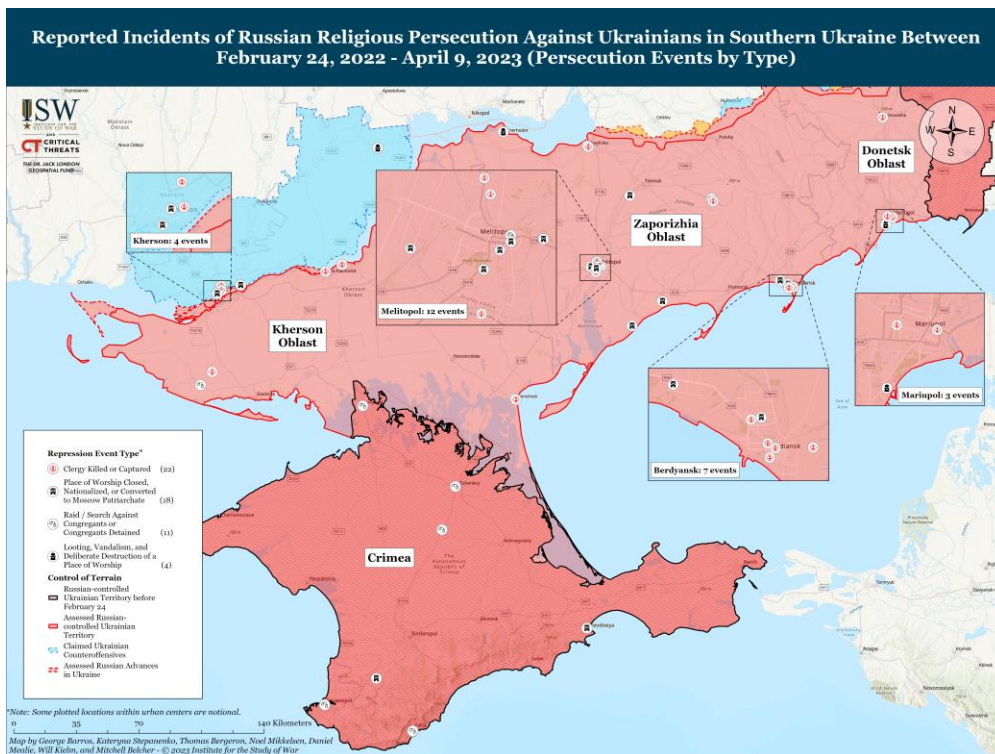
Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians near Kyiv Between February 24, 2022 - April 2, 2022 (Persecution Events by Type)



Russian occupation forces have also targeted other denominations that are distinctly culturally Ukrainian. Russian forces captured two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests in Berdyansk in November 2022, deporting them and effectively closing the main Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Melitopol in December 2022.[25] Russian soldiers arrested a Protestant pastor and closed his congregation in Melitopol, reportedly because of his pro-Ukrainian views.[26]

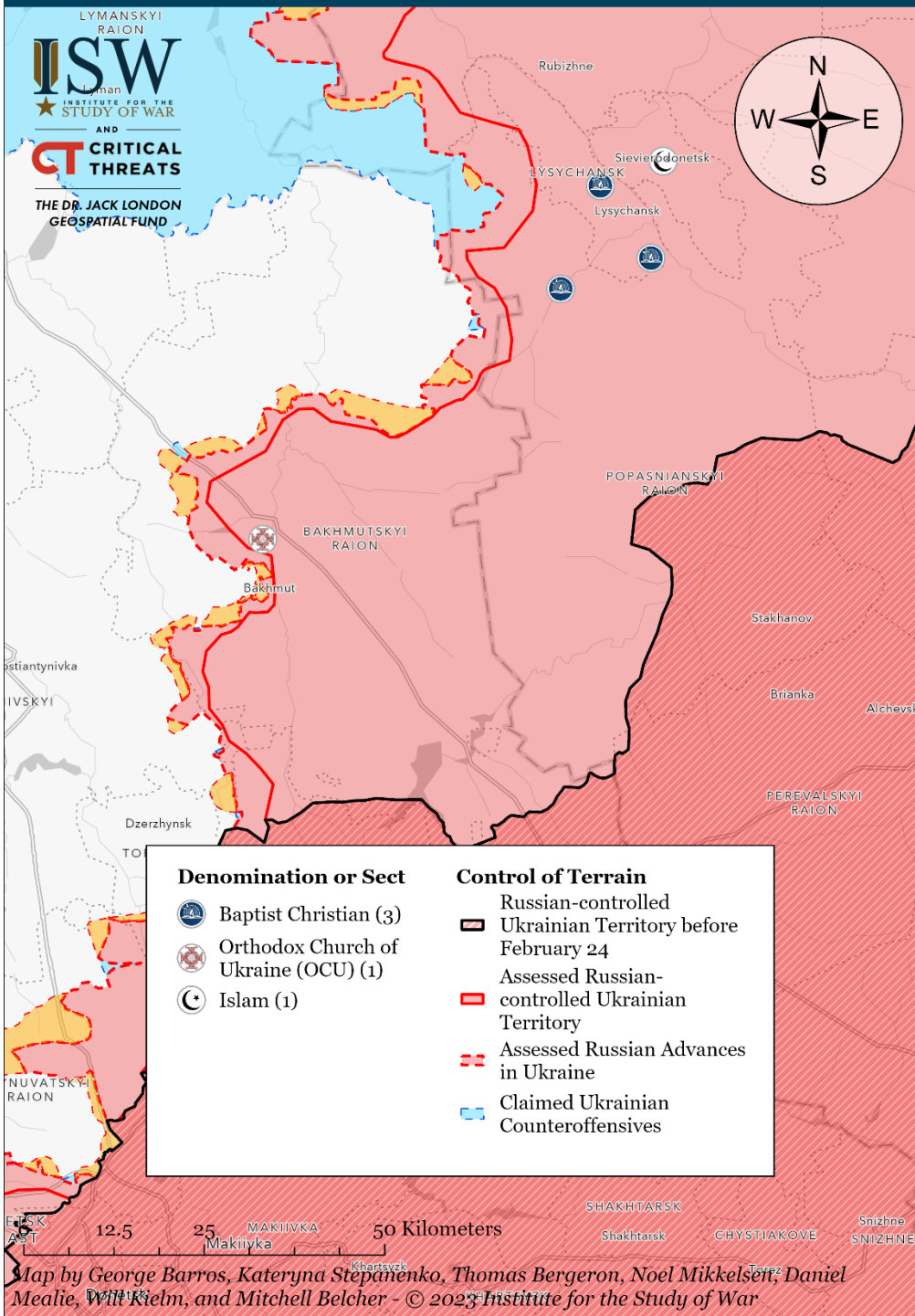
Russia’s campaign also represses Ukraine’s Protestant minority. Available open-source reporting indicates that the most common victims of Russian religious persecution after Ukrainian Orthodox are Protestants, particularly evangelical Baptists. Protestants of all denominations were the victims of 34 percent of the reported persecution events that ISW observed. Baptists made up 13 percent of victims – the largest single group after Ukrainian Orthodox. ISW observed reports of persecutions of Baptists near the occupied cities of Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Mariupol, and Melitopol. Russian forces’ persecution of Protestants is most intense in southern Ukraine. Protestants were the victims of 35 percent and 48 percent of the reported persecution events in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts respectively. Protestants suffered two-thirds of the reported repression events in occupied Mariupol City.



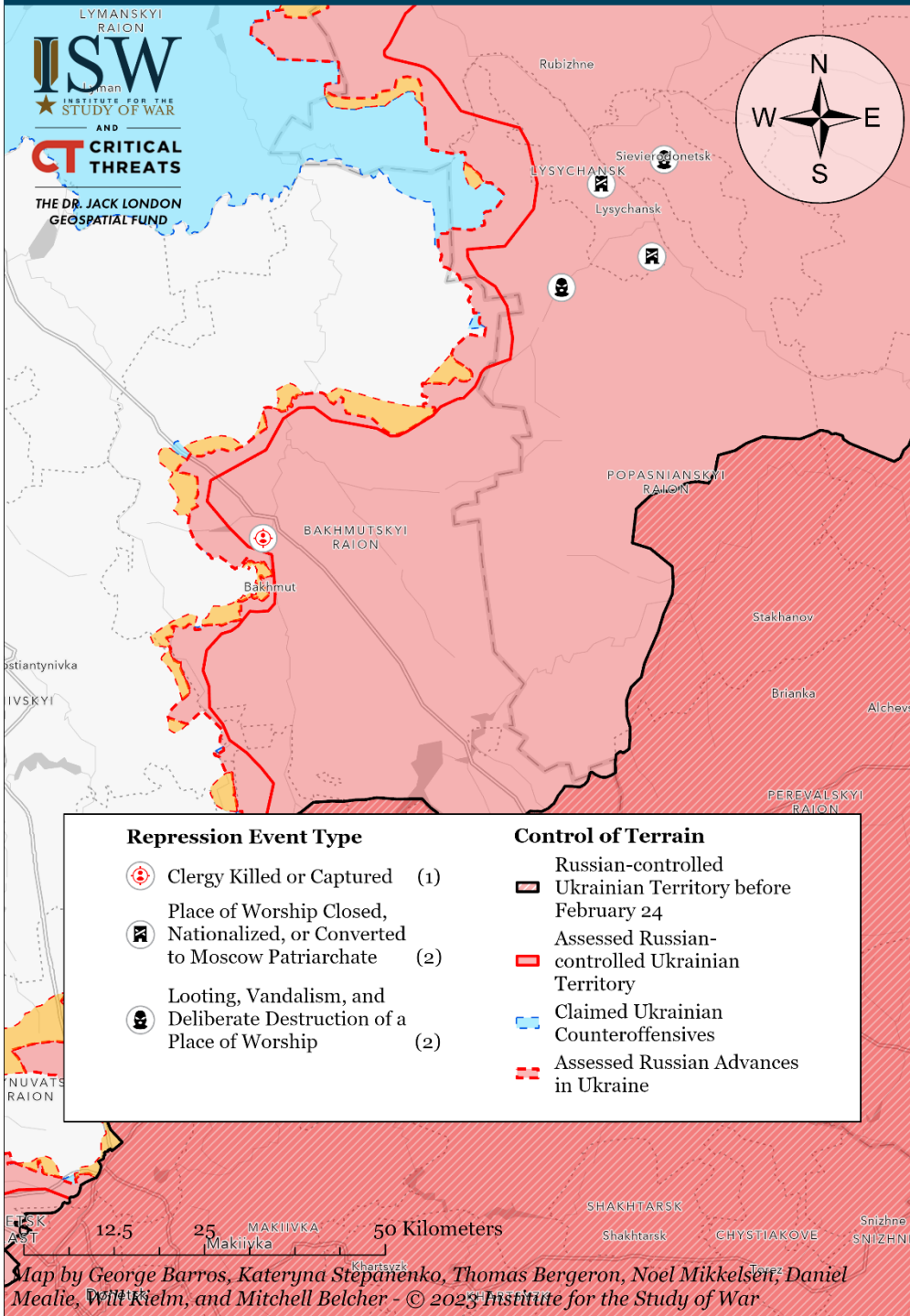


Witness reports indicate that Russian soldiers' conduct towards Protestants in occupied Ukraine is brutal. Russian troops commandeered a Kherson-based Ukrainian evangelical Baptist educational institute from March - November 2022 and established a garrison and crematorium there to cremate killed Russian soldiers.[27] The institute's rector stated that Russian soldiers repeatedly harassed the Baptists, calling them "American spies," "sectarians," and "enemies of the Russian Orthodox people." [28] One Russian officer reportedly told workers at the institute, "Evangelical believers like you should be completely destroyed...a simple shooting will be too easy for you. You need to be buried alive," and another Russian soldier reportedly said, "We will bury [Baptist] sectarians like you." [29] Russian soldiers raided and closed another Baptist Church in Chkalove, Zaporizhia Oblast, in September 2022.[30] Congregants reported that armed Russian soldiers interrupted their worship service and stated, "Your feet will not be here after the referendum. We have only one faith, Orthodoxy." [31] Russia's Yarovaya Law does not recognize Protestantism as a "traditional religion" and imposes regulations on its practice.[32]

Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians in Donbas Between February 24, 2022 - April 9, 2023 (Persecuted Denominations & Sects)



Reported Incidents of Russian Religious Persecution Against Ukrainians in Donbas Between February 24, 2022 - April 9, 2023 (Persecution Events by Type)



Russia’s systematic religious persecution supports a larger Russian campaign of cultural genocide against Ukraine. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is conducting mass deportations of Ukrainian children and depopulating Ukrainian territory in what likely amounts to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign.[33] ISW has assessed that this ethnic cleansing campaign is part of a larger Kremlin campaign of cultural genocide that seeks to eradicate the notion of a unique Ukrainian cultural identity. Ethnic cleansing has not been specified as a crime under international law, but a United Nations Commission of Experts has described ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.[34] The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide declares that genocide includes “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” This definition aligns with current Russian efforts to eliminate “undesirable” Ukrainian religious groups in occupied Ukrainian territories.[35] Russian deliberate attacks and vandalism against places of worship in occupied Ukraine may also constitute war crimes.[36]

The Kremlin continues an information operation aimed at falsely portraying Russia as a religiously tolerant state while deliberately repressing religious freedoms in Ukraine. Putin consistently presents Russia as the defender of traditional “Christian values” that also supports Orthodox, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism religions.[37] The Kremlin uses this information operation to accuse Ukraine of religious intolerance towards the Moscow Patriarchate and gain favor with religious communities worldwide. This information operation is at odds with Russian religious repressions on the ground. The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration’s indicated that Russians have reduced religious diversity by over 50 percent in Crimea, for example.[38] **The Kremlin continues to use long-standing false narratives that the Ukrainian government is oppressing religious liberties as a moral justification for its refusal to negotiate with Ukraine, likely in the hopes of turning international public opinion against Ukraine.**[39] The Kremlin is especially keen on accusing the Ukrainian government of persecuting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP).[40]

The UOC MP is not an independent religious organization but rather an extension of the Russian state and an instrument of Russian hybrid warfare.[41] The UOC MP is the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church’s subordinate element in Ukraine. The UOC MP provided material support for Russia’s initial invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.[42] Russian soldiers used UOC MP churches as military storage depots, garrisons, field hospitals, and even fighting positions during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[43] One UOC MP priest in Lysychansk, Luhansk Oblast, collected information on his OCU clergy rivals and gave instructions to Russian soldiers to murder a Ukrainian priest.[44] Russian forces have reportedly gone out of their way to punish individual UOC MP priests in Ukraine who were not fully cooperative with Russian forces. Russian troops reportedly searched the UOC MP Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Melitopol in February 2023 to register UOC MP priests who refused to pray for the Russian military’s success in Ukraine or for Russian Orthodox Church Head Patriarch Kirill’s health.[45] Russian soldiers reportedly abducted a UOC MP priest who actively distributed humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians in Kherson City in April 2022.[46] **Russia will continue to weaponize the UOC MP and religion to incite social tensions in Ukraine and influence battlefield realities.**

The Kremlin may call for a ceasefire around Orthodox Easter on April 16 as it did for Orthodox Christmas in January 2023.[47] The Kremlin has selectively called for ceasefires around religious holidays to influence the situation on the frontlines. The Kremlin, for example, refused a ceasefire during Orthodox Easter of 2022” “in order not to give the Kyiv nationalists a

break" during the Battle of Mariupol.[48] The Kremlin likely refused a ceasefire because Russian forces still held the initiative on the frontlines at the time, but sought a ceasefire months later over Orthodox Christmas to obtain additional time to prepare Russian forces for the winter offensive. The Kremlin may call for an Easter ceasefire because such a pause would disproportionately benefit Russian troops and allow them to secure their gains in urban Bakhmut and to prepare defenses against Ukraine's spring 2023 counteroffensive

Putin may call for a ceasefire to frame Ukraine as unaccommodating and unwilling to take the necessary steps towards negotiations. A ceasefire on religious grounds additionally reinforces the two-fold Russian information operation that frames Ukraine as suppressing religious groups and positions Putin as the true protector of the Christian faith. The invocation of a ceasefire on distinctly religious grounds in line with Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition is a subcomponent of this information operation. No combatant is obligated to accept a ceasefire on religious or any other grounds, however. Should Russia offer and Ukraine refuse a ceasefire over Orthodox Easter the Kremlin will not thereby have demonstrated any greater devotion to the defense of Christianity or Christian values nor shown that Kyiv rejects those values. Putin will merely have demonstrated, once again, his cynicism.

Supporters of international religious liberty should support Ukraine's efforts to liberate its territories. Religious freedom in Ukraine – especially the freedom of religious minorities – are far better defended in Ukrainian-controlled territories than in Russia or Russian-occupied Ukrainian lands. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found that Russia is one of the worst violators of religious freedoms due to its restrictive state policies and prosecution of peaceful religious activities that are legal under Ukrainian law.[49] Ukraine's Evangelical Baptist community, for example, expanded to encompass 2,272 churches and over 113,000 believers between 1991 and 2017.[50] Conversely, the Russian government has effectively outlawed foreign missionary work in Russia and persecuted Baptists along with many other Protestant sects since 2016.[51] Russia's campaign of religious repression relentlessly targets Ukrainian churches and "undesirable" Russian minorities in occupied Ukraine on a systematic basis. Russian forces will likely intensify this campaign and seek to eradicate religious organizations independent of Kremlin control, as Russian forces have done with Crimea's Muslim Crimean Tatar population since occupying the peninsula in 2014.[52]

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on April 9:

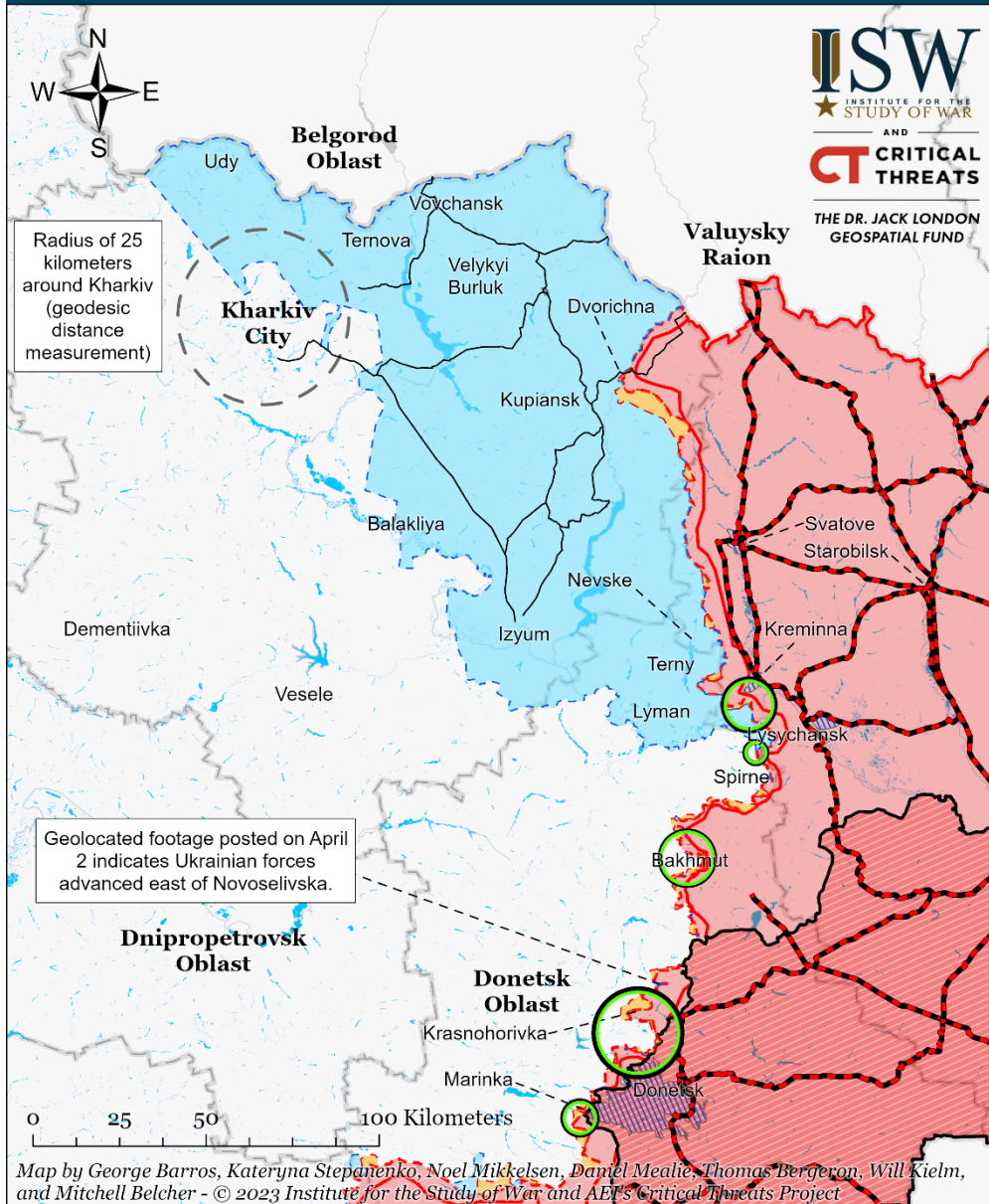
- **Russian sources reacted with outrage to Russian authorities charging "Union of Donbas Volunteers" member Yuri Yevich with discrediting Russian forces.[53] Russian sources claimed that Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs officials accused Yevich of delivering a tactical medicine class to Rosgvardia employees that negatively portrayed Russian forces in Ukraine.[54]**
- **Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly criticized the Russian Foreign Ministry's approach to Russia's presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and offered his own list of agenda items for the UNSC, likely a demonstrative act aimed at supporting his standing in the Russian ultranationalist community and furthering his oblique efforts to portray himself as a suitable president of Russia at some point in the future.[55]**
- **Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavriisk Direction Head Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces have concentrated 113 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the Zaporizhia direction and 205 BTGs in the Donetsk direction.[56]**

- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.[57] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated that seven engagements occurred in these directions.[58]**
- **Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut, and on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.[59] Cherevaty stated that Russian Airborne (VDV) forces have appeared in Bakhmut.[60] Russian forces likely made marginal gains in southern Bakhmut on April 9.[61]**
- **A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a reconnaissance-in-force operation in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[62]**
- **Head of the independent Russian human rights organization “Rus Sidyashchaya” (Russia Behind Bars) Olga Romanova claimed on April 8 that convict recruits have begun signing 18-month contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[63]**
- **Russian occupation officials are likely continuing to use medical relocation schemes to deport Ukrainian children to Russia. Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed that Russian medical specialists have examined more than 94,000 children in Luhansk Oblast and that occupation officials have sent thousands of children from Luhansk Oblast to Russian federal clinics, the majority of which are likely in Russia.[64]**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

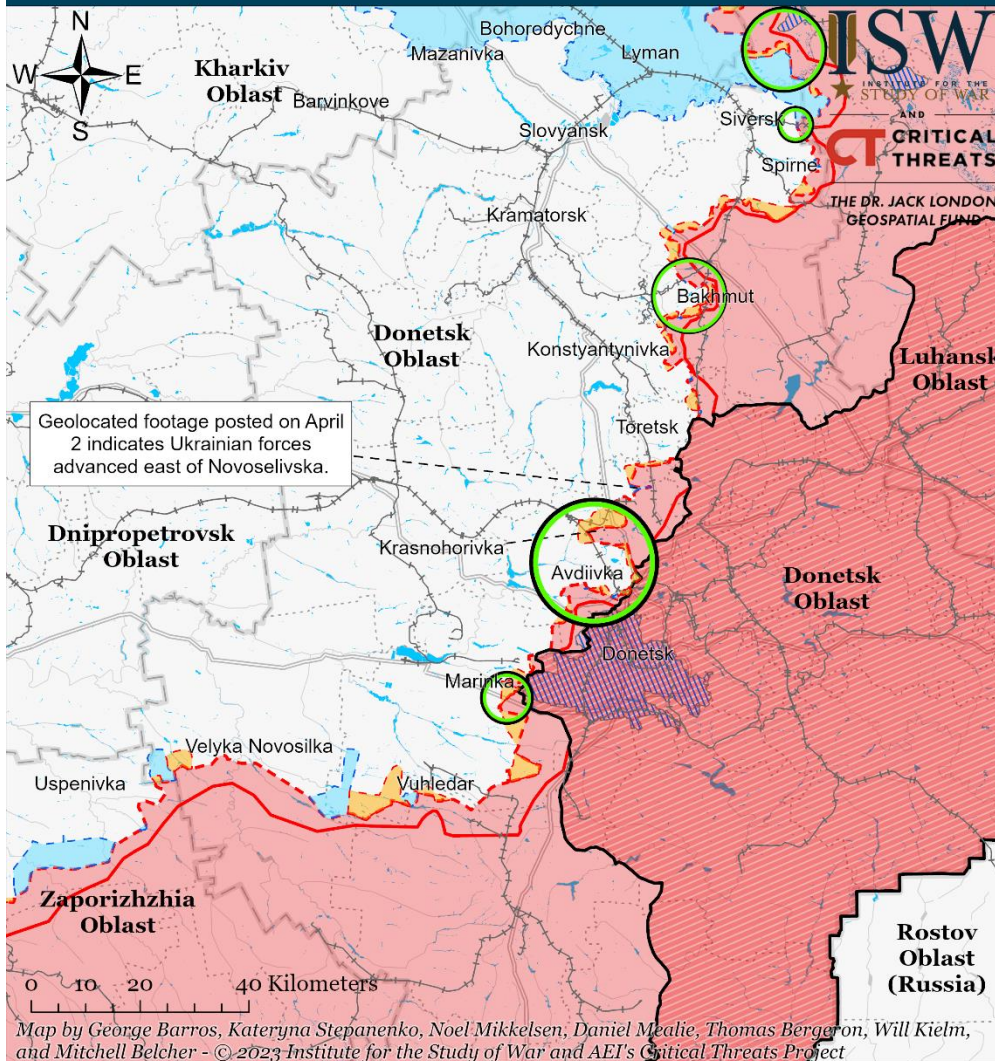


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- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Key Ukrainian Roads
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- 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.

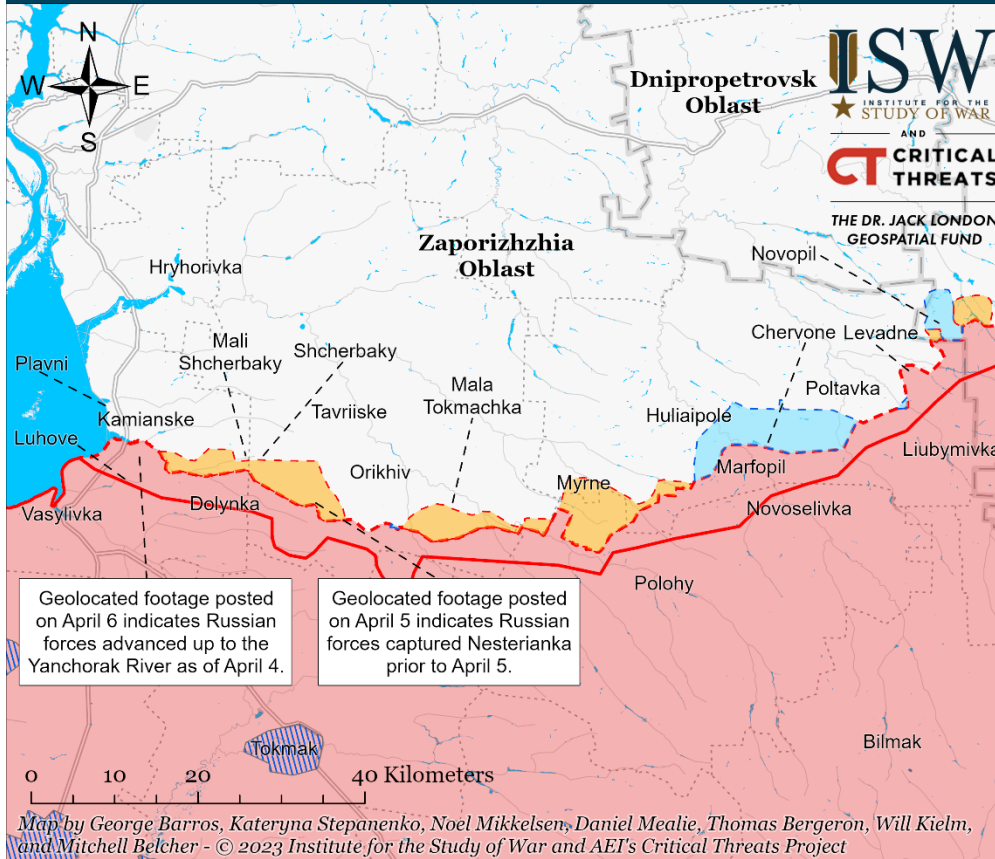
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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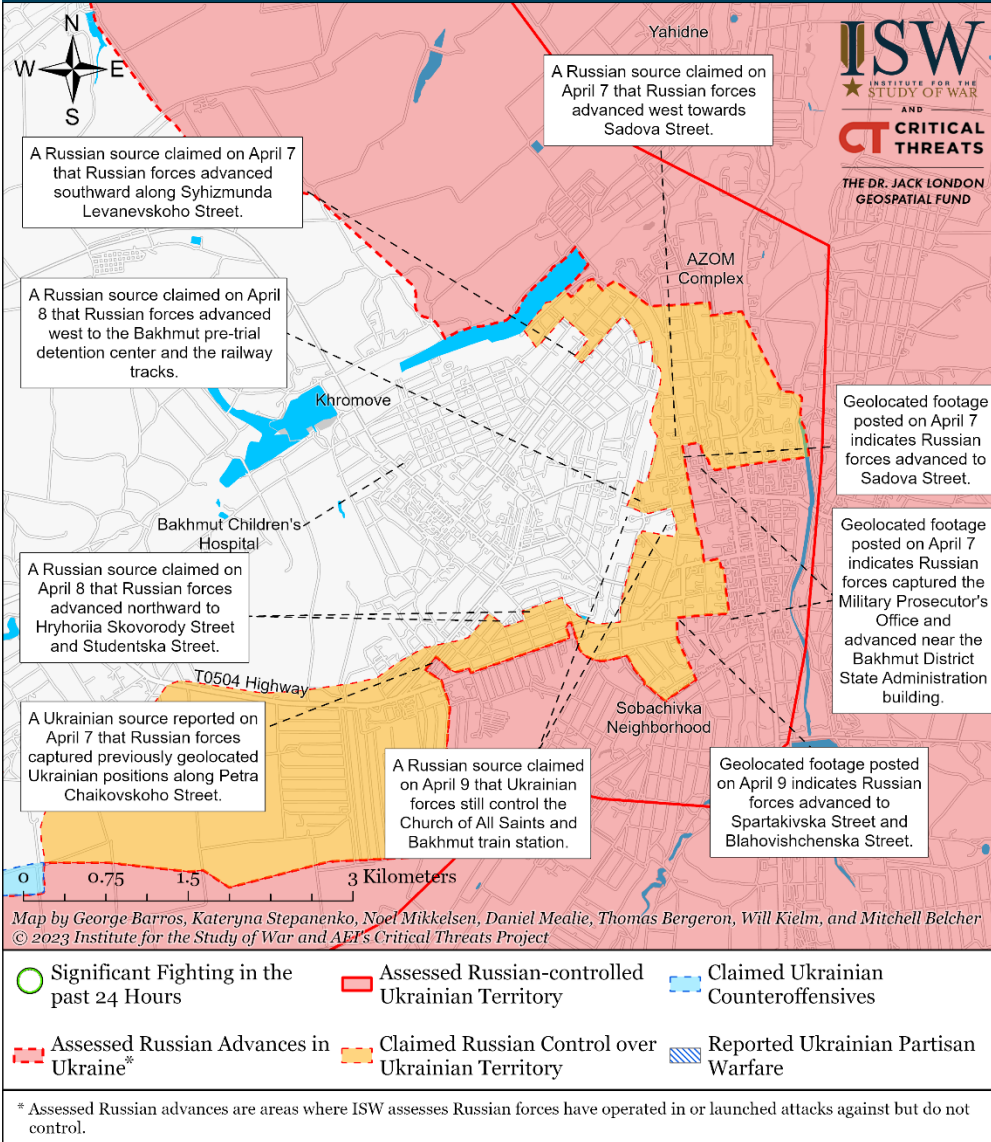
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



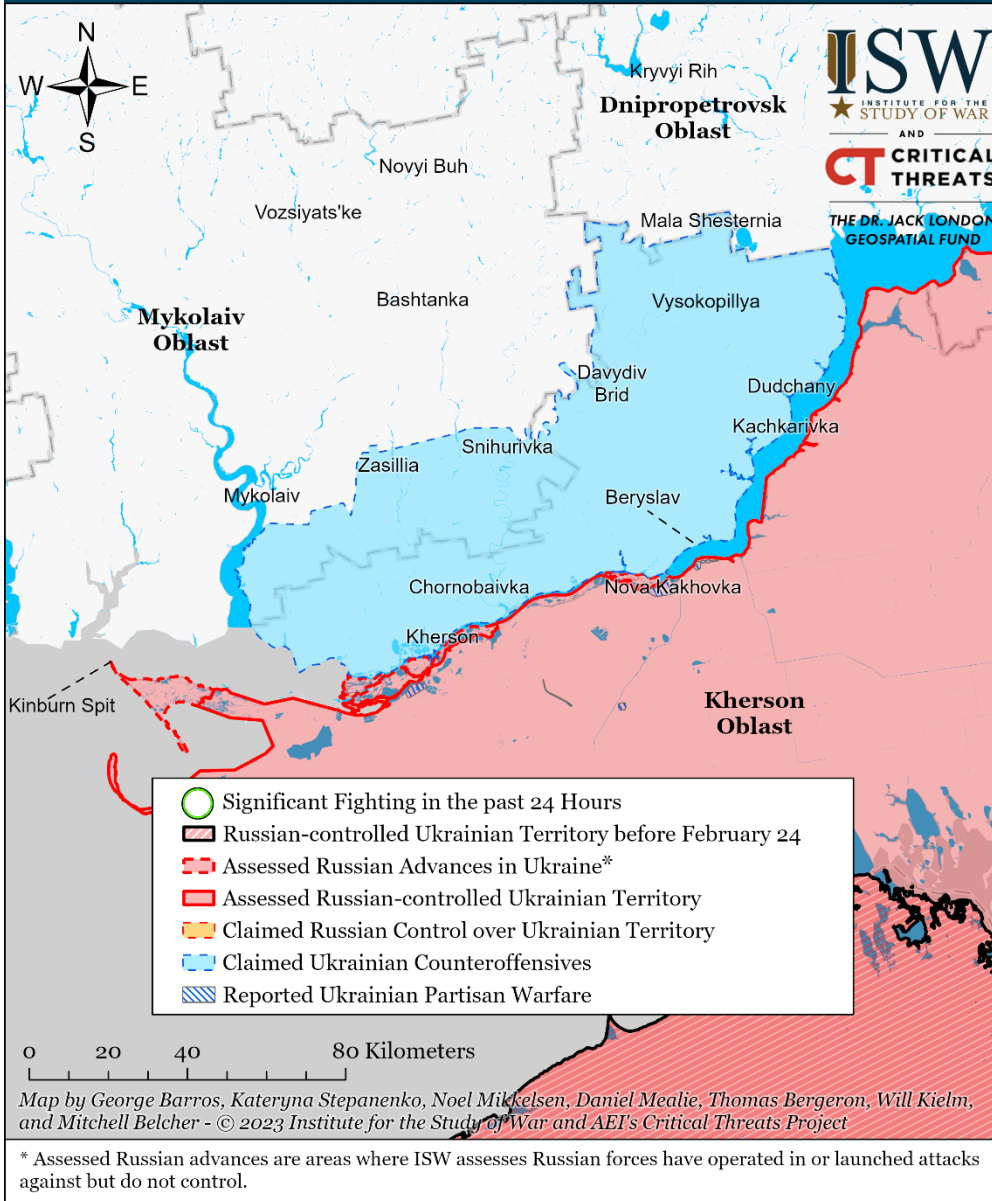
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Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 9, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



[1] <https://www.dot.slavicsac.com/2022/10/14/grace-church-ukraine/>; <https://df.news/2022/09/14/u-melitopoli-okupanty-zakhopyly-shche-odnu-protestantsku-tserkvu/>; <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=6034227813273233&set=a.dot>

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