

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 18, 2023

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August 18, 2023, 6:20pm ET

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

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

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:00pm ET on August 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the August 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. The *Washington Post* reported on August 17 that the US intelligence community has assessed that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast and will not achieve its principal objective of severing the Russian land bridge to Crimea. The unverified intelligence assessment reportedly states that effective Russian defensive operations and dense minefields have constrained Ukrainian advances and will continue to do so.[1] Anonymous US officials reportedly stated that Ukrainian forces will advance to within several miles of Melitopol but not further.[2] A Ukrainian advance to within a few miles of Melitopol would bring the critical road and rail connections on which Russia relies to supply its forces within range of Ukrainian artillery systems, severely compromising Russia's ability to continue to use them for that purpose. It is unclear from published reports why US intelligence analysts have reportedly concluded that seizing Melitopol is the only way Ukraine can sever the Russian land bridge. ISW has, in fact, assessed that Ukraine has many options for severing critical Russian ground lines of communication along the northern Sea of Azov coast of which the seizure of Melitopol is only one.[3] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken notably offered a diverging opinion from the alleged intelligence assessment on August 15, stating that the prospects for Ukraine's counteroffensive to make significant "strategic gains" will remain unclear for at least a month or longer.[4]

It is premature to make assessments about the overall success of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations occurring along several lines of advance toward several different apparent objectives. ISW has consistently assessed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will be a protracted, non-linear series of operations, which will likely continue to occur in phases of differing tempos.[5] The Ukrainian counteroffensive is not a discrete set of scheduled operations, and current counteroffensive operations are likely setting more favorable conditions for larger significant operations.[6] ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations are significantly degrading defending Russian forces and that the overall degradation of the Russian defensive line creates opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially operationally significant.[7]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 18 and have reportedly advanced further near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia

Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Berdyansk (Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area), and the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.[8] Geolocated footage published on August 17 and 18 indicate that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in northeastern Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), from which Russian sources had previously claimed that Russian forces had expelled Ukrainian forces.[9] The footage confirms that recent Ukrainian advances in the Robotyne area have likely been tactically significant, and ISW previously assessed that such advances are likely reflective of a significant degradation of the Russian forces defending the area.[10] Russian milbloggers claimed on August 18 that Ukrainian forces control northern Robotyne and conducted assaults in unspecified areas south and southeast of the settlement after Russian forces “temporarily withdrew” from Robotyne itself, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have made further advances in the area.[11] The relative speed of these alleged Ukrainian advances suggests that the areas north of the settlement may have been heavily more mined than areas into which Ukrainian forces are currently trying to advance.[12] Geolocated footage published on August 18 also indicates that Ukrainian forces made marginal gains south of Urozhaine in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[13]

The Kremlin has intensified its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space, threatening the credibility of Russian sources that inform the wider Western coverage of battlefield realities in Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) held the “Arms and Society: Mental Security Strategy” psychological operations conference as part of the ongoing Army-2023 forum on August 17.[14] The conference included discussions about the historical, ideological, geopolitical, informational, and psychological aspects of the “special military operation” and “informational and ideological concepts” to combat the “information policy of unfriendly countries.” The conference featured prominent voices in the Russian information space, including politicians, political voices, journalists, and prominent Russian ultranationalist milblogger Yevgeny Poddubny, signaling the MoD’s likely effort to consolidate control over pro-war voices and messaging.[15] Russian federal censor Roskomnadzor announced on August 18 that the Russian State Duma will consider legislation in the fall that would criminalize the publishing of information on Russian military asset locations, Ukrainian strike locations, and strike aftermaths.[16] This effort immediately follows recent similar Crimean occupation and Russian Federal Council efforts, and the Russian information space largely did not react to these prior efforts.[17] A prominent Russian milblogger dryly commented on Roskomnadzor’s August 18 announcement that Russian authorities finally cracked down against military censorship after a year and a half of war.[18] Another Russian milblogger claimed that implementing these censorship measures will drive Russians to stop following Russian information space voices and listen to pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western channels instead.[19]

The Russian ultranationalist community has widely considered Russian milbloggers to be the last remaining credible voice on the war in Ukraine, and the Kremlin’s effort to censor and control their reporting may eliminate that trust. The Kremlin’s effort to control moblogger content, therefore, threatens to undermine the Kremlin’s other effort to leverage select Russian milbloggers’ connections to the wider ultranationalist community.[20] Kremlin control over milblogger content would replace tactical and operational reporting on the war in Ukraine with unchallenged Kremlin narratives and make accurate coverage of battlefield realities more challenging.[21]

Ukrainian Operational Command South Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk challenged Russian claims that Russian authorities have adequately

repaired the Chonhar bridge after a Ukrainian strike on August 6. Humenyuk stated on August 18 that Russian officials continue repairs on the Chonhar and Henichesk bridges and that Russian officials are struggling with repairs due to a lack of suitable specialists willing to travel to dangerous areas.[22] Humenyuk stated that Russian forces are attempting to use alternative pontoon crossings at the Chonhar and Henichesk bridges to transport large loads of materiel because the bridges are currently unable to support large loads.[23] Humenyuk also stated that Russian military logistics continue to rely on the M-17 (Armyansk-Oleshky) route through the Armyansk checkpoint.[24] Humenyuk’s statement that Russian forces continue to use an alternative pontoon crossing at the Chonhar Bridge for heavy loads indicates that Russian authorities likely opted for quick, short-term repairs at the bridge instead of more time-consuming, long-term repairs. Russian authorities have likely chosen to prioritize partially reopening critical ground lines of communications (GLOCs) over fully repairing bridges supporting critical military and civilian transport.

The Russian MoD accused Ukrainian forces of targeting Russian ships in the Black Sea with an unmanned naval drone overnight on August 17 to 18. The Russian MoD claimed that the Russian *Pytlivy* and *Vasily Bykov* patrol ships destroyed the Ukrainian drone before it hit a Russian vessel in the southwestern part of the Black Sea (approximately 237km southwest of Sevastopol).[25] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the *Pytlivy* and *Vasily Bykov* patrol ships were accompanying a tanker from the Mediterranean Sea and speculated that a drone may have targeted the tanker.[26] The milblogger speculated that Ukrainian forces may have launched the drone from the civilian container ship *Joseph Schulte*, as the *Joseph Schulte* was allegedly traveling through the Bosphorus Strait at the same time as the attempted strike.[27] The milblogger conceded that the location of the drone’s launch remains unclear, however. ISW previously reported on August 16 that the *Joseph Schulte* was the first civilian vessel to travel through a Ukrainian-created temporary corridor for civilian vessels in the Black Sea.[28] The milblogger’s suggestion that Ukrainian forces may have launched the naval drone from a civilian ship is likely an attempt to justify further Russian escalation in aggressive Black Sea posturing and set informational conditions to justify future Russian strikes on civilian ships traveling through the Black Sea.

Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) Director Viktor Zolotov is allegedly attempting to remove Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu from his post. Russian lawyer Kirill Kachur, who was charged by the Russian Investigative Committee in absentia for embezzlement and bribery in 2022 and claims to have insider knowledge about internal Kremlin politics, alleged that Zolotov hoped to replace Shoigu with “one of his former subordinates and former adjutants to Vladimir Putin” as Defense Minister – possibly referring to current Tula Governor Alexei Dyumin, who previously worked in the Presidential Security Service as Putin’s bodyguard and adjutant and as Zolotov’s deputy.[29] The source claimed that the recent bill allowing Rosgvardia to receive heavy military equipment was the Kremlin’s compensation to Zolotov for rebuffing his effort to remove Shoigu.[30] Another Russian insider source had claimed on August 3 that Dyumin is also attempting to remove Shoigu as Defense Minister.[31]

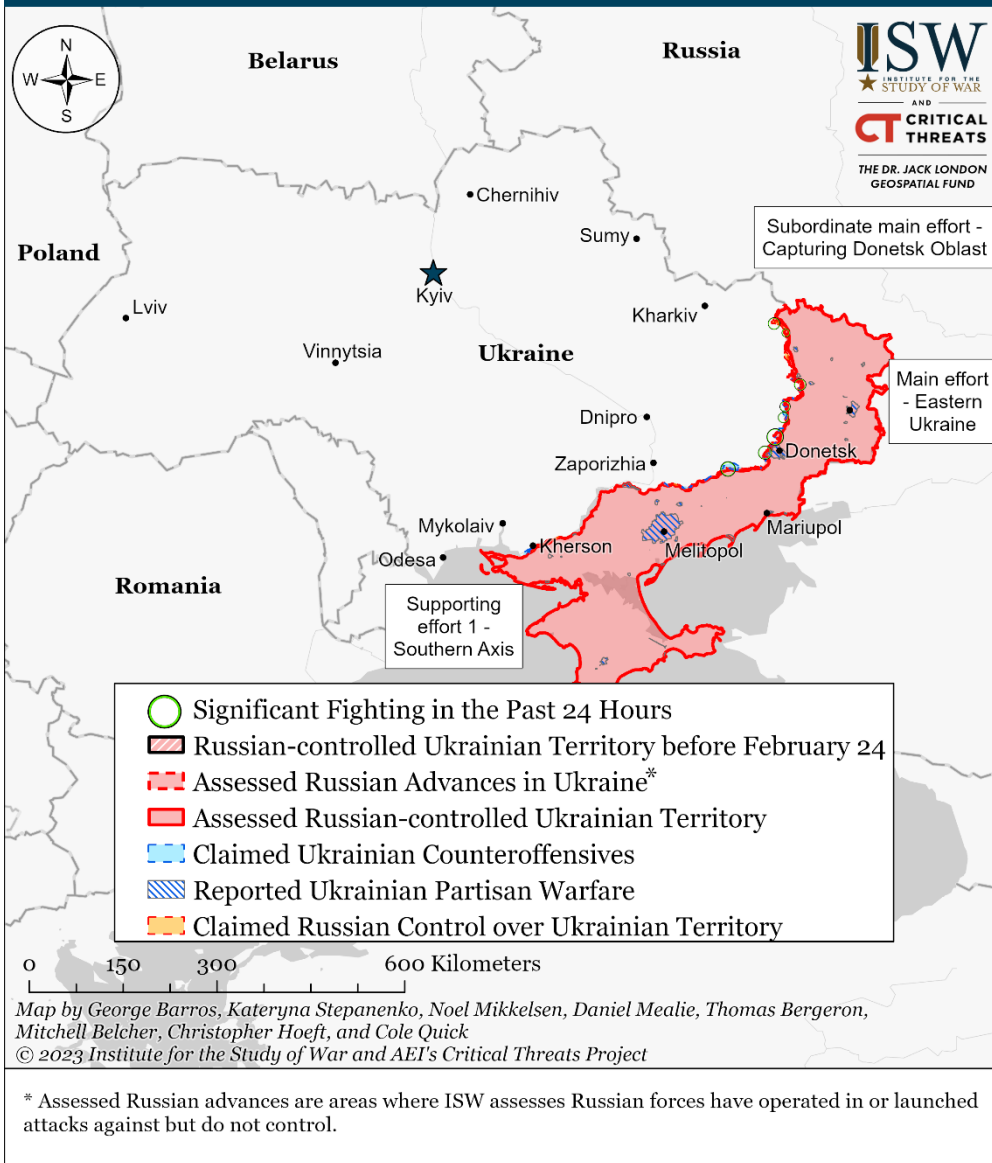
Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric intended to weaken international support for Ukraine at the Second “International Anti-Fascist Congress” in Minsk, Belarus. Shoigu stated that the Congress will focus on uniting international efforts to eradicate Nazi ideology and insinuated that Western elites and the Ukrainian government promote neo-fascist ideology.[32] Shoigu claimed that representatives of more than 30 countries are attending the congress.[33]

Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) reportedly attempted to use civilians to sabotage weapons shipments to Ukraine in Poland. *The Washington Post* reported that the GRU attempted to recruit civilians in Poland to commit sabotage operations, including the derailment of trains on a railway through which more than 80 percent of military equipment delivered through Poland to Ukraine flows.[34] The GRU also reportedly recruited civilians to post pro-Russia propaganda fliers in public spaces, hide tracking devices in military cargo, scout Polish seaports, and place cameras along railways.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- **The Washington Post reported on August 17 that the US intelligence community has assessed that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast and will not achieve its principal objective of severing the Russian land bridge to Crimea.**
- **It is premature to make assessments about the overall success of ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations occurring along several lines of advance toward several different apparent objectives.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations on at least three sectors of the front on August 18 and have reportedly advanced further near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **The Kremlin has intensified its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space, threatening the credibility of Russian sources that inform the wider Western coverage of battlefield realities in Ukraine.**
- **Ukrainian Operational Command South Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk challenged Russian claims that Russian authorities have adequately repaired the Chonhar bridge after a Ukrainian strike on August 6.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Aviiivdka-Donetsk City line, and in the eastern Donetsk-western Zaporizhia border area on August 18 and advanced in some areas.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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 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 western 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

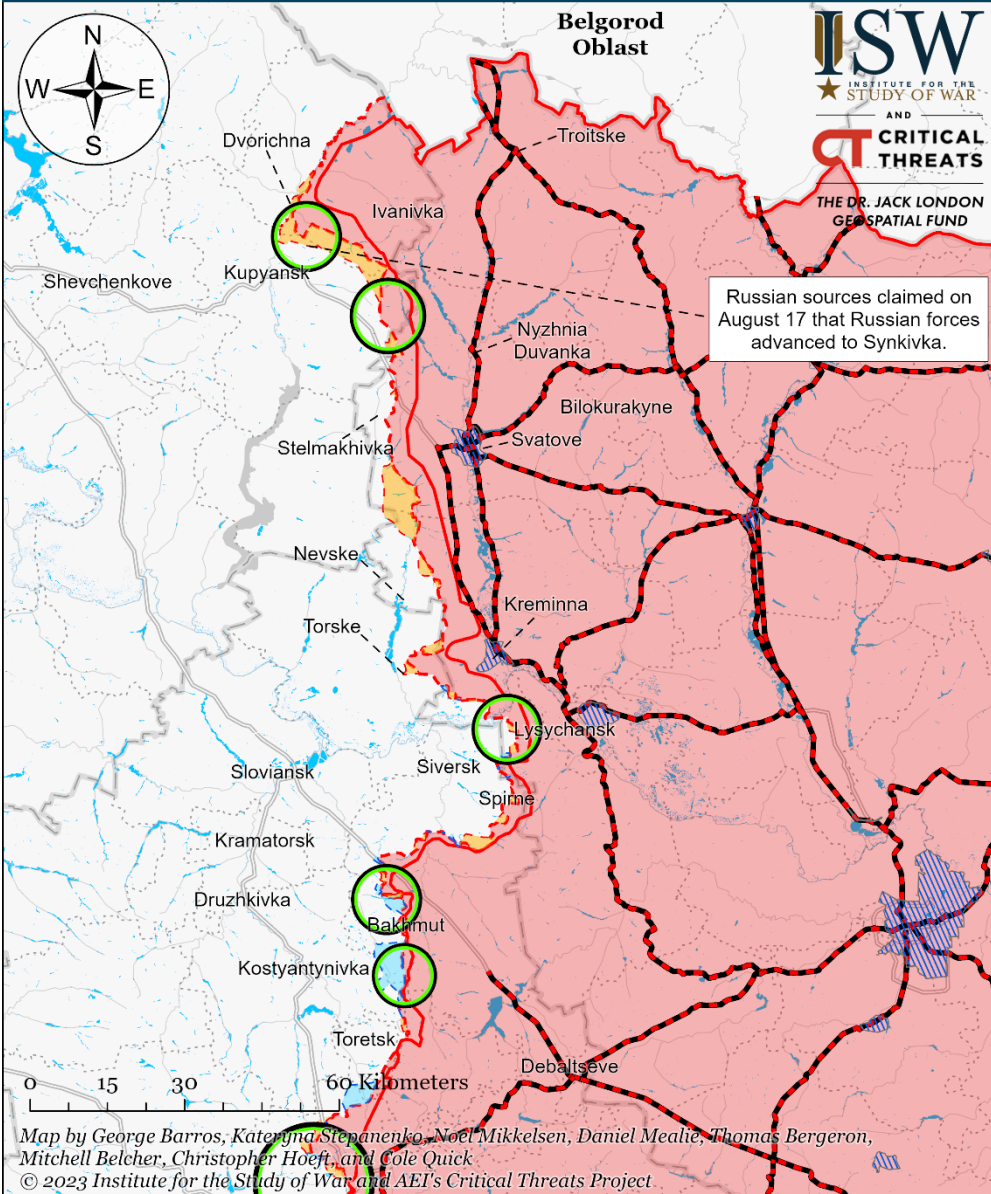
Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line and reportedly advanced on August 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk), Kyslivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk), and Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).[36] Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Artem Lysohor reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance towards Bilohorivka on August 17 and that Russian forces are using hastily-prepared “Storm Z” units manned by convicts to probe Ukrainian defenses in this sector of the front.[37] Former Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that Russian forces advanced along the Synkivka-Ivanivka line (up to 20km southeast of Kupyansk) and towards Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) on August 18.[38] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces control Pershotravneve (21km east of Kupyansk) and continue to advance in the area.[39] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continued offensive operations near Synkivka.[40]

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line but did not advance on August 18. The Russian MoD and Russian Western Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Yaroslav Yakimkin claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Synkivka, Vilshana (15km northeast of Kupyansk), the Mankivka tract (about 15km east of Kupyansk), Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove), Berestove, Kharkiv Oblast (20km northwest of Svatove), Hyrhorivka (11km south of Kreminna), Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna), and Berestove, Donetsk Oblast (30km south of Kreminna).[41] Russian milbloggers claimed on August 17 and 18 that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near the Serebryanske forest area (10km southwest of Kreminna) and that Ukrainian infantry conducted unsuccessful attacks near Torske (15km west of Kreminna).[42]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

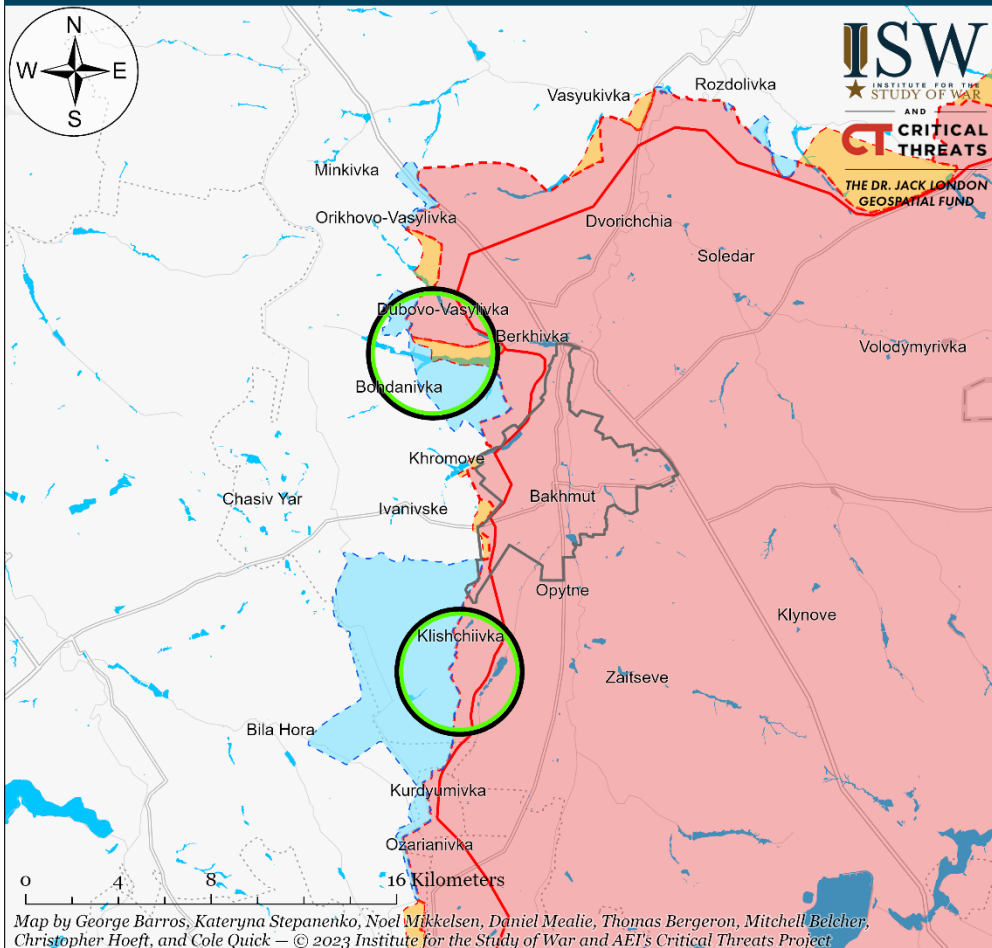
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut on August 18 but did not advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations south of Bakhmut and entrenched themselves in new positions.[43] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian armored assault with artillery support near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[44] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that the situation on Bakhmut’s southern flank remains tense despite a general decrease in the intensity of fighting in the area.[45]

Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Bakhmut on August 18 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northwest of Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) and near Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) and Bila Hora (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[46] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked from Dubovo-Vasylivka in the direction of Bohdanivka.[47] Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen Akhmat Spetsnaz elements continue to operate in the Klishchiivka direction and claimed that Russian forces maintain complete control over Klishchiivka.[48] The Russian MoD posted footage claiming to show elements of the Russian 83rd Guards Air Assault Brigade (VDV) operating near Klishchiivka.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, Christopher Hoefft, and Cole Quick – © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Bakhmut City Limits	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

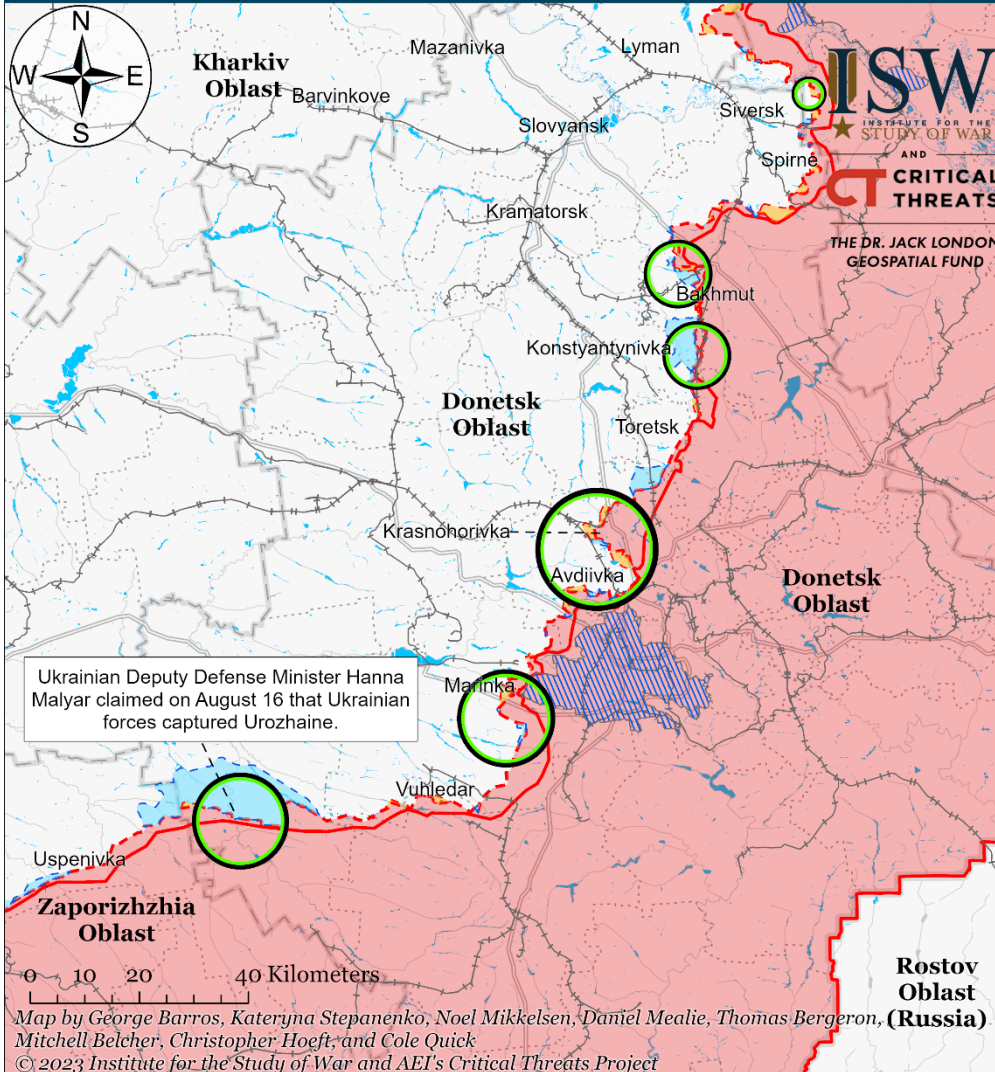
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar claimed on August 14 that Ukrainian forces captured three square kilometers in the past week and 40 square kilometers total in the Bakhmut direction.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on August 18 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian advances near Marinka (on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City) and Krasnohorivka (directly west of Donetsk City).[50] The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Avdiivka and Marinka.[51]

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on August 18 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Keramik (14km northeast of Avdiivka) and southeast and east of Novokalynove (13km northeast of Avdiivka).[52] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted offensive operations on Avdiivka's northern flank in the direction of Keramik on August 17 and claimed that Russian forces captured unspecified Ukrainian positions in the area.[53]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of August 18, 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

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

Note: Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar claimed on August 14 that Ukrainian forces captured three square kilometers in the past week and 40 square kilometers total in the Bakhmut direction. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar claimed on August 14 that Ukrainian forces achieved some success in the Urozhaine direction.

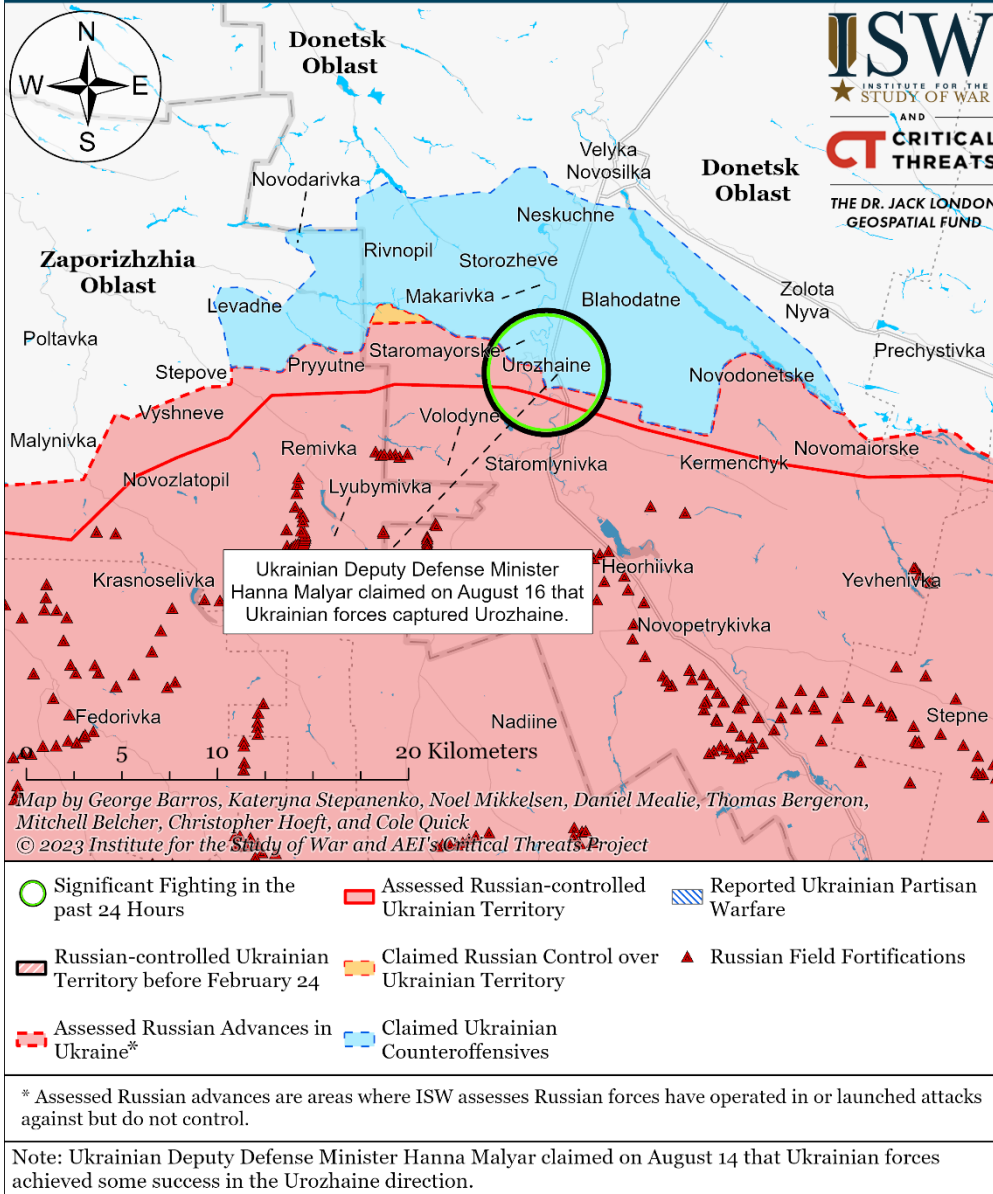
Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

The Russian MoD claimed on August 18 that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian attack near Mykilske (27km southwest of Donetsk City) in western Donetsk Oblast.^[54]

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and advanced on August 18. Geolocated footage published on August 17 and 18 shows that Ukrainian forces advanced southeast of Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) along the T0518 (Velyka Novosilka to Staromlynivka) highway.^[55] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Urozhaine and advanced towards Kermenchyk (15km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).^[56] Russian milbloggers reported continued fighting near Pryyutne (15km southwest of Velyka Novosilka), Urozhaine, and Zavitne Bazhannya (12km south of Velyka Novosilka).^[57]

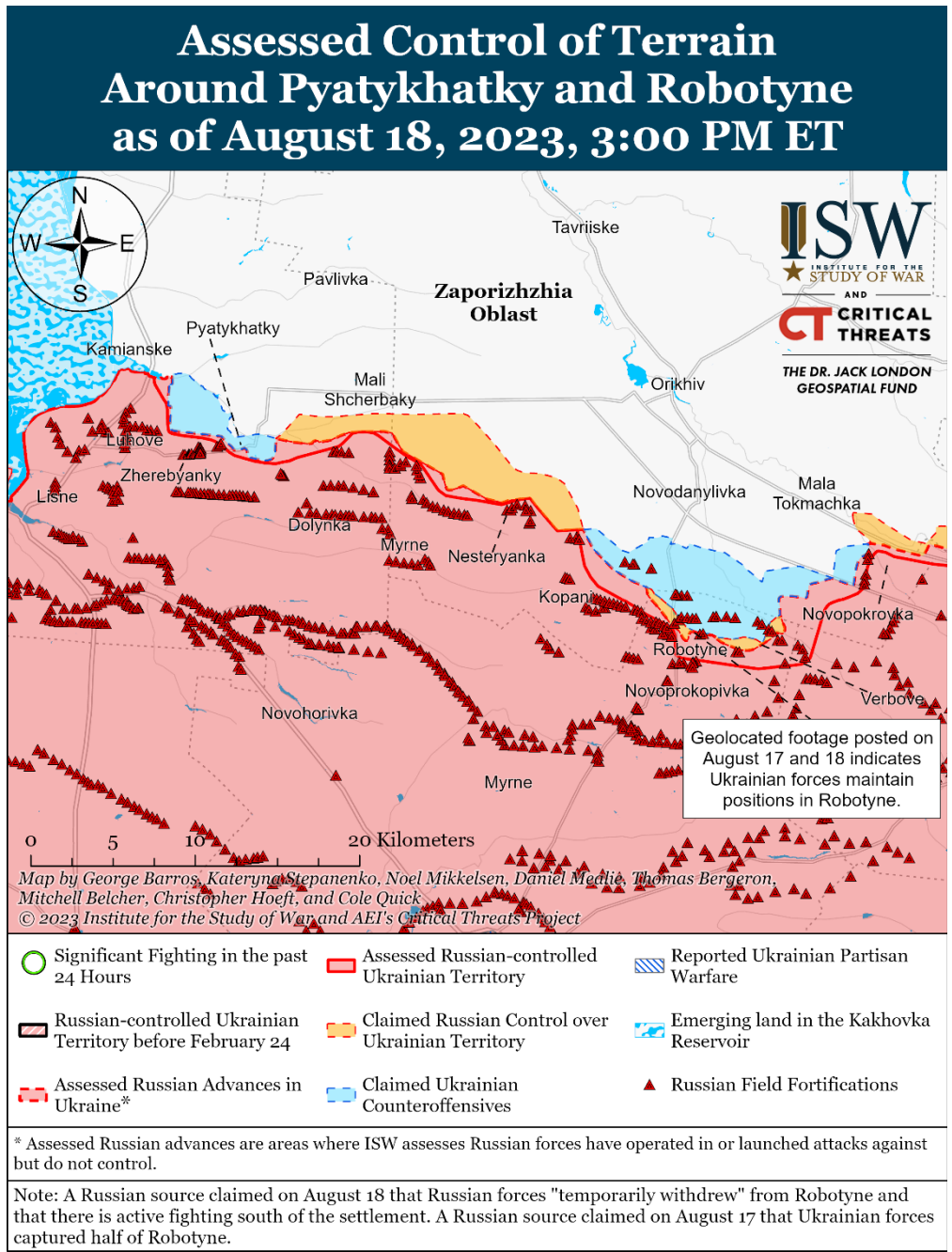
Russian forces reportedly continued limited offensive operations in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not advance on August 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to recapture lost positions near Urozhaine and Novodarivka (15km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).^[58]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



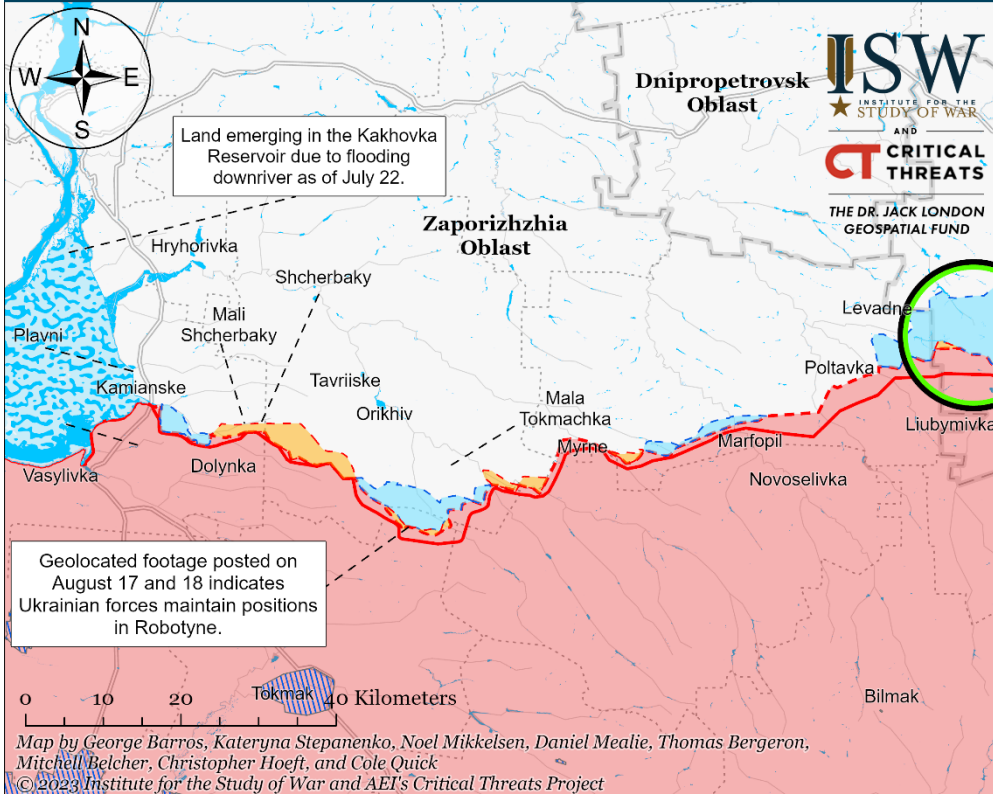
Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the western Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area and reportedly advanced on August 18. Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced in northern Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).[59] One milblogger claimed that Russian forces “temporarily withdrew” from Robotyne and claimed that fighting is ongoing south of Robotyne.[60] Other milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled the Ukrainian attacks and that Ukrainian forces do not control any part of Robotyne, however.[61] Geolocated footage published on August 17 and 18 shows that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in northern Robotyne despite the

Russian claims to the contrary.[62] Russian sources also reported Ukrainian attacks near Novopokrovka (16km southeast of Orikhiv).[63]



A Ukrainian official indicated that Russian authorities are struggling to compensate for traffic and damage to the Kerch Strait bridge. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that the Kerch Strait Bridge is still unable to consistently accommodate traffic and that Russian authorities maintain special schedules for and occasionally block road and railway traffic over the bridge to avoid overwhelming it.[64]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



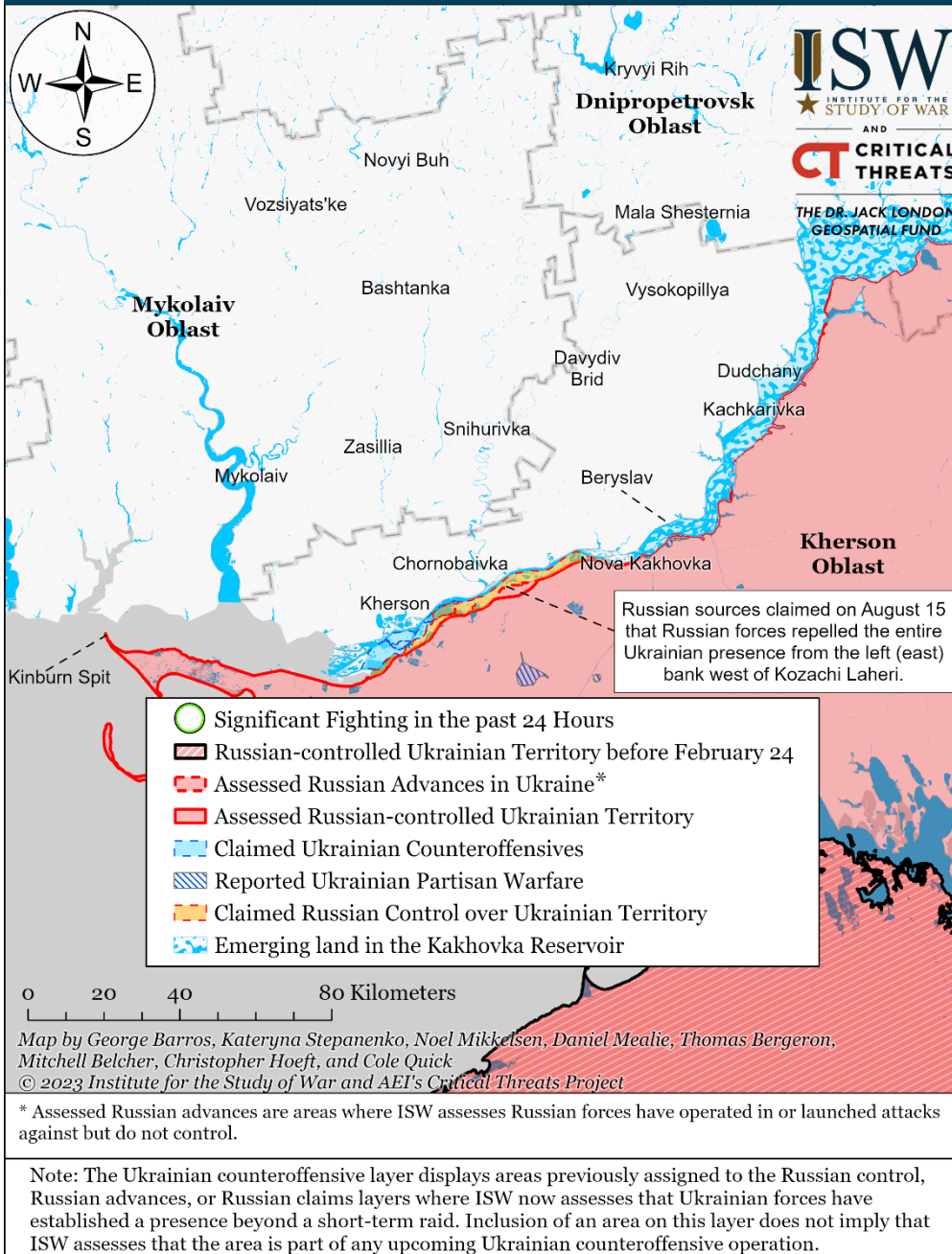
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- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
- 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.

Note: A Russian source claimed on August 18 that Russian forces "temporarily withdrew" from Robotyne and that there is active fighting south of the settlement. A Russian source claimed on August 17 that Ukrainian forces captured half of Robotyne.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of August 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Russian officials continue crypto-mobilization efforts focused on increasing the number of recruits signing contracts with the Russian MoD. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR)

Representative Andriy Yusov stated on August 18 that Russia mobilizes roughly 20,000 people per month as part of a campaign focused on signing individual contracts.[65] Yusov added that this force generation effort primarily targets migrant workers and residents who have recently received a Russian passport.[66] Russian sources reported on August 18 that Russian authorities have conducted raids in Belgorod Oblast, the Chuvash Republic, and St. Petersburg against migrants who have Russian citizenship but who have not registered with military registration and enlistment offices.[67] Independent Russian outlet *Dozhd* reported on August 17 that residents in Amur, Moscow, Ulyanovsk, Penza, and Lipetsk oblasts have received summonses for the "reconciliation and accounting of data" with military registration and enlistment offices.[68] Russian military registration and enlistment offices are likely coercing people to verify data in order to attempt to compel them to sign contracts with the MoD as part of the crypto-mobilization effort.

The Kremlin is allowing Russian defense enterprises and other enterprises to trade in foreign currencies without restriction, likely to combat increasing constraints that sanctions have placed on the Russian economy and defense industrial base (DIB). Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees on August 18 allowing the Russian state development firm Vnesheconombank (VEB), Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, and the Russian defense holding group Tactical Missiles Corporation to trade in foreign currency without restrictions.[69] Putin signed a similar decree for Russian state-owned energy company Rosneft on August 16.[70] The Russian Presidential Administration posted the decrees to the government portal under decrees concerning Russian agricultural products, likely trying to hide the new trade allowances.[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)

Russian President Vladimir Putin will personally choose candidates for Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head, bypassing direct elections. The People's Council of the LNR adopted a law on August 18 stating that People's Council deputies will hold a secret ballot to elect the head of the LNR from a list of Putin's chosen candidates.[72]

Russian authorities continue to prepare for the upcoming regional elections in occupied Ukraine. Russian Kherson Oblast election commission chairperson Marina Zakharova stated that the occupation administration continues training election observers to ensure the "transparency and legitimacy of elections" and that law enforcement will guard all polling stations.[73] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian election observers and rally organizers have arrived in the occupied territories and that representatives from the Russian Central Election Committee will oversee the elections.[74] The Center also reported that Russian authorities are requiring employees of state-owned enterprises to vote in groups on specific days.[75] Russian occupation authorities previously used police and claimed independent observers to falsely portray the September 2022 annexation referenda as transparent and lay claim to their legitimacy, as ISW previously reported.[76]

Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to establish patronage programs between Russian federal subjects and occupied territories to integrate occupied territories into Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration stated that Ryazan Oblast and the ruling United Russia party are supporting social infrastructure projects in occupied Novotroitskyi Raion, Kherson Oblast.[77]

Russian authorities continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia. Former LNR Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik claimed that Russian authorities will send 150 children aged 6-12 and their mothers from occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts to the Klyazma sanatorium near Moscow for a three-week “rehabilitation” program.[78] The Kherson Oblast occupation administration claimed that Russian authorities sent a group of children from occupied Kherson Oblast to Kaluga Oblast as part of an education program scheme.[79]

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

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated boilerplate rhetoric and Kremlin talking points in an interview about the war in Ukraine on August 17. Lukashenko claimed that Ukrainian officials are concerned about the potential use of nuclear weapons and the deployment of the Wagner Group to Belarus.[80] Lukashenko also claimed that he and not the Russian government had the idea to deploy Wagner to Belarus and confirmed that Wagner’s deployment to Belarus was one of the security guarantees that Lukashenko offered to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin during the negotiations to end Wagner’s armed rebellion on June 24.[81] Lukashenko may be attempting to posture himself as exerting control over Wagner’s presence in Belarus in order to avoid the impression that decisions about Wagner’s future in Belarus are made within the Kremlin and thus undermine Belarusian sovereignty.

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarussian military activity in Belarus, as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to increase their control over Belarus and other Russian actions in Belarus.

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.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/08/17/ukraine-counteroffensive-melitopol/?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/08/17/ukraine-counteroffensive-melitopol/?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social

[3] <https://time.com/6300772/ukraine-counteroffensive-can-still>

[4] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/15/antony-blinken-biden-foreign-policy/>

[5] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar061823> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar072623> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081123> ; <https://time.com/6300772/ukraine-counteroffensive-can-still-succeed/> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar080323> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar070123>

[6] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081223> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar080623> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar080523> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar062123> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081123> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar080323>

[7] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081723> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar081123> ; <https://time.com/6300772/ukraine-counteroffensive-can-still-succeed/>

[8] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbido2TiEsmLtn5skFEKbjnLbWPPuo6TfaA9wv279q2ZaPCvG4i323wRuj9SyS28bRe9cDI>

[9] <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/51302> ; <https://twitter.com/VigorousFalcon/status/1692487896731881540?s=20> ; <https://twitter.com/VigorousFalcon/status/1692489537849864234?s=20> ; <https://twitter.com/VigorousFalcon/status/1692499797700423766?s=20> ; <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/51302>

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