Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 25, 2023 Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan February 25, 7 pm ET

Click <u>here</u> to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

UK, French, and German officials are reportedly preparing a NATO-Ukraine pact that falls far short of the protections Ukraine would receive from NATO membership and appears to reflect a desire to press Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement on **unfavorable terms.** The Wall Street Journal reported that the exact provisions of the pact are undecided, but the officials indicated that the pact will provide advanced military equipment, arms, and ammunition to Ukraine, but not Article V protection or a commitment to station NATO forces in Ukraine—falling short of Ukraine's aspirations for full NATO membership. The officials stated that the pact aims to provision Ukraine so that Ukrainian forces can conduct a counteroffensive that brings Russia to the negotiating table and deter any future Russian aggression. The Wall Street Journal noted that these officials expressed reservations about the West's ability to sustain a prolonged war effort, the high casualty count that Ukraine would sustain in such a prolonged war, and Ukrainian forces' ability to completely recapture long-occupied territories like Crimea, however. The Wall Street Journal contrasted these officials' private reservations with US President Joe Biden's public statements of support—which did not mention peace negotiations—and with Central and Eastern European leaders' concerns that premature peace negotiations would encourage further Russian aggression. Russian President Vladimir Putin has given no indication that he is willing to compromise on his stated maximalist goals, which include Ukraine's "neutrality" and demilitarization—as well as de facto regime change in Kviv, as ISW has consistently reported.²

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko plans to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, possibly to assist Russia and China in sanctions evasion amidst reports that China is seriously considering sending Russia lethal aid. Lukashenko announced plans to visit China from February 28 to March 2 and to meet with Xi Jinping likely to sign agreements on trade, investment, large-scale joint projects, and other matters.³ Lukashenko also plans to meet with top Chinese officials and the heads of Chinese corporations.⁴ Lukashenko's announcement of his planned visit coincides with reporting from *CNN* and *The Washington Post* that senior US officials assess that China is seriously considering selling combat drones, personal weapons, and 122mm and 152mm artillery shells to Russia.⁵ Russian and Chinese officials have also reportedly developed plans for the shipment of drones to Russia under falsified shipping documents to avoid international sanctions measures.⁶ China may seek to use agreements with Belarus to obfuscate violations of sanctions.

US President Joe Biden rejected China's 12-point peace plan as Russian sources continue to capitalize on the announcement of the plan to vilify the West and Ukraine. Biden stated that the Chinese peace plan is only beneficial for Russia and that it would make no sense for China to participate in negotiations on the war in Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin argued that China's peace plan is a fundamentally different approach to the war in Ukraine from the West's as the West demands the fulfillment of preconditions while exacerbating the conflict through supporting Ukraine. Pushilin nevertheless also rejected the Chinese plan because it would

prevent Russia from achieving its maximalist goals in Ukraine. Russian officials and propagandists continue to assert that Western aid that helps Ukraine resist Russia's illegal invasion protracts the war and to ignore the role that Russia's determined pursuit of its maximalist aims plays in prolonging the conflict.

Lukashenko breathed new life into the Kremlin's Transnistria information operation by falsely claiming that opening a Transnistrian front would be in the West's interests. ¹⁰ Lukashenko claimed that Ukraine would suffer high casualties if it opened a second front to the war, but that the West aims to defeat both Russia and Russian-occupied Transnistria and bring Moldova closer to the West. Lukashenko's statements support the Kremlin's broader information operation that paints Russia as being at war with the West rather than with Ukraine. Lukashenko embroidered on the Russian government's statements warning of a supposed Ukrainian provocation along the Ukraine-Transnistria border by adding the unfounded assertion that the West desires a conflict in Moldova. The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute has previously assessed that the Kremlin likely conducted a false flag operation against the Transnistrian occupation Ministry of Defense (MoD) in April 2022 in order to blame Ukraine for the attacks and draw Transnistria into the war, a goal that the Kremlin has so far failed to accomplish. ¹¹

Russian authorities detained more than 50 people at anti-war demonstrations in 14 Russian cities on February 24. Independent Russian outlet *OVD-Info* reported that police detained at least 54 people for anti-war demonstrations at which they picketed, laid flowers, and wrote messages in the snow. The arrests suggest that the protests were far more limited in scale than they had been earlier in the war, since Russian authorities detained 1,800 people on the first day of the war and almost 5,000 on March 6, 2022. Russian milblogger Anatoly Nesmiyan claimed that Russian authorities only arrested 18 people at an anti-war demonstration on February 25 in St. Petersburg compared to 500 on February 25, 2022. The protests are noteworthy for having occurred at all rather than because of their size given the intense pressure the Kremlin has put on all public opposition to the war, including the criminalization of criticism of the war's conduct, of military officials, and of the Kremlin itself. The protests are noteworthy for having officials, and of the Kremlin itself.

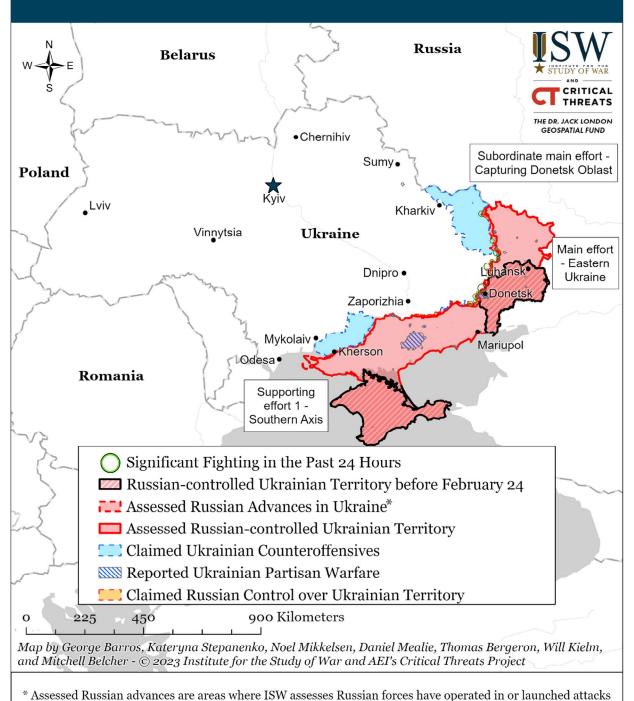
Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters criticized Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu over his son-in-law Alexei Stolyarov's alleged Instagram "likes" of anti-war posts. Independent Russian-language opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported that Stolyarov denied liking posts by anti-war journalist Yuri Dud and claimed that screenshots circulating social media were photoshopped. Prigozhin added to the criticism of Stolyarov saying "bring [Stolyarov] to me. I will train him for six weeks" and claiming that he could help Stolyarov improve by sending him into combat. Pro-Wagner milblogger called for Shoigu's removal over his association with his son-in-law.

Key Takeaways

- UK, French, and German officials are reportedly preparing a NATO-Ukraine pact that falls far short of the protections Ukraine would receive from NATO membership and appears to reflect a desire to press Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement on unfavorable terms.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko plans to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, possibly to assist Russia and China in sanctions evasion amidst reports that China is seriously considering sending Russia lethal aid.

- US President Joe Biden rejected China's 12-point peace plan as Russian sources continue to capitalize on the announcement of the plan to vilify the West and Ukraine.
- Lukashenko breathed new life into the Kremlin's Transnistria information operation by falsely claiming that opening a Transnistrian front would be in the West's interests.
- Russian authorities detained more than 50 people at anti-war demonstrations in 14 Russian cities on February 24.
- Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his supporters criticized Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu over his son-in-law Alexei Stolyarov's alleged Instagram "likes" of anti-war posts.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Russian forces continue to struggle to conduct effective combat operations on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line.
- Russian forces are continuing to suffer significant losses on the battlefield prompting some milbloggers to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for failing to recognize the scale of the casualties.
- Russian authorities are exploiting Ukrainian children from Mariupol as propaganda to falsely portray Russia as the savior of occupied areas.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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.

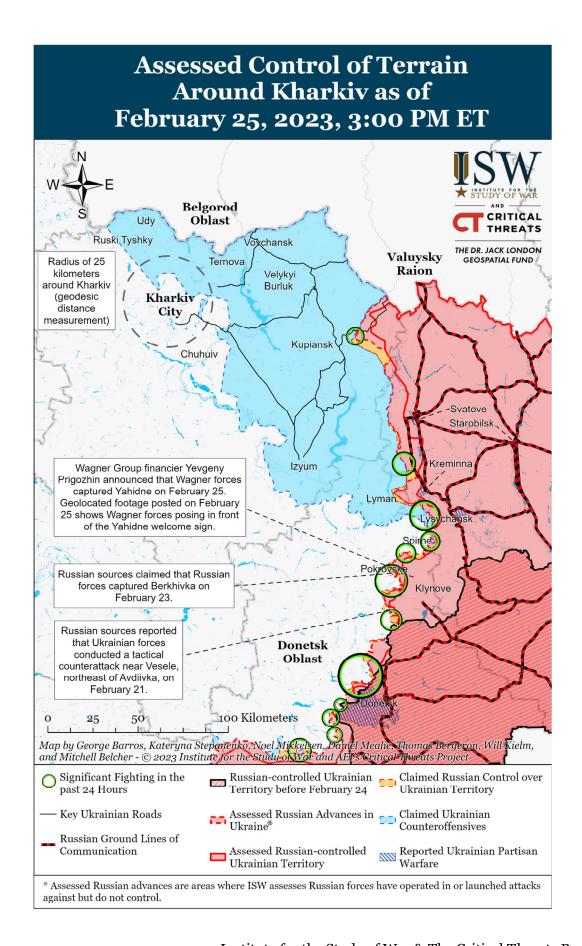
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of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

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove on February 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful offensive action near Masyutivka (51km northwest of Svatove). Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian forces attempting to advance with heavy equipment in the Svatove area. Geolocated footage posted on February 24 shows Ukrainian forces shelling Russian infantry in Dzherelne (15km west of Svatove). Russian Combat Reserve) unit claimed that Russian forces disrupted a Ukrainian counterattack near Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove).

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in the Kreminna area on February 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), and in the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna). Haidai claimed that Russian forces suffered heavy losses in an assault near Kreminna with 70 killed in action and about 70 wounded in the course of a three-company assault. A Russian milblogger posted footage on February 25 purportedly showing elements of the 98th Guards Airborne Division operating in the Kreminna direction.



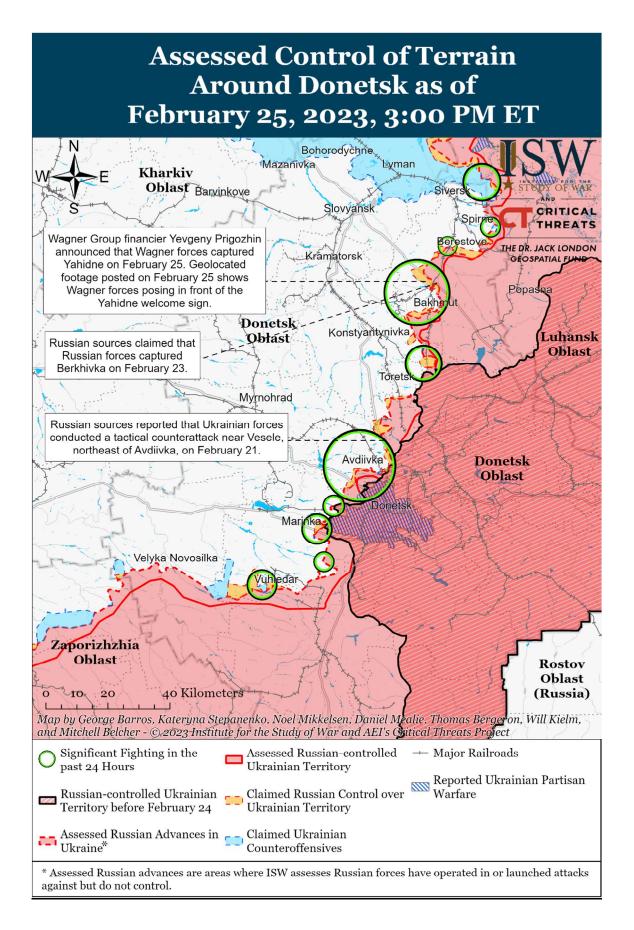
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on February 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), Berkhivka (4km north of Bakhmut), Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), and Pivnichne (21km southwest of Bakhmut).²⁶ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner Group fighters captured Yahidne (2km north of Bakhmut) and posted a picture of Wagner fighters posing near the settlement's welcome sign that was later geolocated, indicating that Wagner fighters likely captured the settlement.²⁷ Russian sources continued to claim that Wagner fighters captured Berkhivka and completed clearing the settlement, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims.²⁸ Russian sources provided conflicting claims about Russian gains near Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), with Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claiming that Wagner fighters captured the settlement and a prominent milblogger claiming that Russian forces only entered the settlement.²⁹ Another prominent Russian milblogger claimed that fighting was ongoing on the outskirts of Dubovo-Vasylivka.³⁰ Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces destroyed a dam north of Bakhmut and flooded the Stupky area of Bakhmut in order to slow Russian advances from the north, although ISW has seen no visual evidence of these claims.³¹ Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner fighters conducted assaults near Zaliznianske (11km north of Bakhmut), Vasyukivka (14km north of Bakhmut), Rozdolivka (17km northeast of Bakhmut), and Fedorivka (18km north of Bakhmut).³² Geolocated footage published on February 24 indicates that Russian forces likely made marginal advances in eastern Bakhmut.³³ The Ukrainian Border Guards Service reported that the Russians have committed their most combat-ready forces to Bakhmut and that there are many Wagner Group convict personnel around the city.³⁴ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced in the southern part of Bakhmut and that Wagner fighters conducted ground attacks near Chasiv Yar (12km west of Bakhmut) and Dyliivka (15km southwest of Bakhmut).35

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on February 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Avdiivka and within 36km southwest of Avdiivka near Vodyane, Pervomaiske, Nevelske, Marinka, and Novomykhailivka.³⁶ Geolocated footage published on February 25 indicates that Russian forces likely made marginal advances southwest of Avdiivka and near Pobieda (32km southwest of Avdiivka).³⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Pobieda and conducted assaults on the southern and northern outskirts of Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).38 Another Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Somalia" Battalion advanced towards Avdiivka from Opytne (3km southwest of Avdiivka) and that Russian forces surrounded a Ukrainian stronghold between Pervomaiske (12km southwest of Avdiivka) and Vodyane (8km southwest of Avdiivka).³⁹ Representative of the Ukrainian Tavriisk operational direction Oleksiv Dmytrashkivyskyi reported that Russian forces also conducted attacks near Krasnohorivka, although it is unclear if it is the settlement 22km southwest of Avdiivka or the one 9km north of Avdiivka.40 A Russian milblogger claimed that the DNR 11th Motorized Rifle Regiment (now the 114th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Division) broke through Ukrainian defenses near Novobakhmutivka (13km northeast of Avdiivka) and advanced up to the Krasnohorivka north of Avdiivka.⁴¹

Russian forces continued offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast on February 25. Dmytrashkivyskyi reported that Russian forces conducted attacks near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City).⁴² Dmytrashkivyskyi reported that Russian forces have not changed their tactics around

Vuhledar but that lately there has been an increase in Russian forces conducting assaults without armored support and even some instances of armored personnel carriers driving infantry to the frontline for dismounted assaults and then withdrawing.⁴³ Dymtrashkivsykyi reported that the 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades of the Pacific Fleet have merged into one brigade because of significant losses in the Vuhledar area and that Russian forces deployed a Rosgvardia special rapid response unit to prevent these personnel from rioting and refusing to fight.⁴⁴ Dymtrashkivyskyi also reported that Russian forces transferred an unspecified number of personnel by bus from Melitopol to the area to replenish the 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades. 45 ISW has previously reported that 43 buses of Wagner fighters arrived in Melitopol possibly representing one or two battalions' worth of personnel, and Russian forces may have since transferred these Wagner personnel to the Vuhledar area.46 ISW has not observed any visual confirmation of Wagner fighters operating in the Vuhledar area, and Russian forces could also have transferred mobilized personnel to replenish the severely degraded naval infantry formations. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces still hold positions in the dacha areas near Vuhledar and continue to inflict heavy losses on Ukrainian forces.⁴⁷ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted an assault near Prechystivka (35km southwest of Donetsk City) but failed to break through Ukrainian defenses.⁴⁸



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

Russian forces continue to struggle to conduct effective combat operations on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line. Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) released an intercepted call in which a Russian servicemember claimed that 120 soldiers of the Russian 503rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (19th Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) tried to conduct reconnaissance near Shcherbaky (32km northwest of Tokmak) but Ukrainian forces struck all 120 personnel.⁴⁹

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to establish military positions in civilian areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated on February 25 that Russian military positions in civilian areas complicate the Ukrainian ability to strike against Russian positions.⁵⁰ Humenyuk also stated that Russian forces have moved the majority of their forces tens of kilometers back from the Dnipro River bank and are reinforcing their positions with mobilized personnel.

Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on February 25.⁵¹

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of February 25, 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 February 25, 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.

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

Russian forces are continuing to suffer significant losses on the battlefield prompting some milbloggers to criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for failing to recognize the scale of the casualties. *BBC* and Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* confirmed that Russian forces suffered confirmed 15,136 casualties based on open source information such as publicly available obituaries since the start of the war.⁵² *BBC* and *Mediazona* also reported that Russian forces lost over 1,200 mobilized servicemen, over 1,300 convicts, over 1,800 officers, and 199 lieutenant colonels, colonels, and generals. Western officials previously reported that Russian forces sustained almost 200,000 casualties since the beginning of the invasion.⁵³ *Idel.Realii* reported that as of February 23, Russian officials confirmed that 3,312 residents of the Volga (Povolzhye) region died in combat.⁵⁴ Omsk Oblast Civil Association observed that the Russian official records indicate that 237 residents of Omsk Oblast died in Ukraine, and a local Svedlovsk Oblast project found that 97 mobilized men from Sverdlovsk Oblast were killed in combat.⁵⁵ A prominent Russian nationalist critic noted that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and the rest of the military leadership are silent over Russia's heavy losses.⁵⁶

The Russian MoD continues its efforts to integrate irregular formations into its conventional formations. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 25 that the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "force structures" will switch to operating on the basis of Russian legislation as of March 1.⁵⁷ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that the Russian military command is releasing servicemen of DNR's 1st Army Corps who have reached the end of their terms of military service. The Russian MoD will likely attempt to install its own conventional officers into these units.

The Kremlin continues to recruit forces within radical online groups. A prominent Russian news aggregator published a video on February 24 promoting the Russian Espanyola volunteer battalion comprised of Russian soccer hooligan fan clubs.⁵⁸ The Espanyola volunteer battalion has been reportedly operating in Ukraine since fall 2022 under the command of Stanislav Orlov who had previously led the Horlivka reconnaissance company since 2014.

A Russian source indicated that convicts are fighting within the DNR units in eastern Ukraine. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger denied reports that convicts within the DNR "Somalia" battalion deserted to Rostov Oblast.⁵⁹ The milblogger claimed that those individuals were mobilized servicemen, claiming that convicts that fight within Somalia achieve "good results."

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

Russian authorities are exploiting Ukrainian children from Mariupol as propaganda to falsely portray Russia as the savior of occupied areas. Russian opposition outlet *Important Stories* reported on February 24 that Russian soldier Yuri "Angel" Gagarin, whom Russian sources claim saved over 300 children in Mariupol, and three Ukrainian children travel to multiple propaganda events, including the Luzhniki Stadium rally in Moscow on February 22, in which the children thanked Gagarin for saving them.⁶⁰ Gagarin also claimed that Russian forces have a duty to protect children in Donbas and

Mariupol, portraying the children as Russian rather than Ukrainian. *Important Stories* noted that six children whom Gagarin reportedly saved and who were featured at the Luzhniki rally survived the siege of Mariupol, and many were either separated from or lost relatives due to the conflict and subsequent forced removals from occupied Ukraine.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (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.

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.)

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense amplified a video posted by Belarusian-state affiliated outlet *VoenTV* claiming cadets at the Integrated Training Center are mastering new types of equipment, including Tochka-U and Iskander missile systems.⁶¹

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.

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