#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 24, 2023 Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, Nicole Wolkov, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan March 24, 4:30pm ET

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

Click here to 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.

Prominent voices in the Russian information space are increasingly setting information conditions to prepare for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russian Security Council Deputy Head Dmitry Medvedev emphasized on March 24 that the Russian General Staff is aware that Kyiv is preparing for offensive operations and that the Russian General Staff is considering its own decisions and responses to prepare for a Ukrainian offensive.[1] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian actors are disseminating disinformation about plans for a Ukrainian attack towards Belgorod Oblast, in order to draw Russian troops to border areas and allow Ukrainian troops to launch attacks on other sectors of the front, partially echoing Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's prior warnings about a Ukrainian push on Belgorod Oblast.[2] Another Russian milblogger warned that Ukrainian forces will likely try to launch a counteroffensive before the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) gains the capacity to increase production and bolster Russian defensive potential.[3] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin similarly claimed on March 23 that he knows of plans for an extensive Ukrainian counteroffensive, as ISW previously reported.[4] The wider Russian spring offensive appears to be culminating, and the Russian information space appears to be responding to the slow-down of Russian operations and potential for Ukraine to regain the initiative with substantial anxiety.[5] Russian military command will need to commit a significant number of forces to the frontline to either prevent culmination or launch renewed offensive operations, and it is unlikely that such forces exist at sufficient scale to do either.

Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov has reportedly formed a Wagner Groupaffiliated private military company (PMC) in occupied Crimea. Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* (*iStories*) reported on March 23 that Aksyonov has publicly sided with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and created PMC "Convoy" under the leadership of Prigozhin associate Konstantin Pikalov, who has led Wagner operations in Africa.[6] PMC "Convoy" is reportedly a BARS (combat reserve) unit, meaning that "Convoy" servicemembers sign two contracts—one with "Convoy" itself and one with the Russian MoD.[7] *iStories* reported that "Convoy" initially consisted of 300 people and has been deployed to occupied Kherson Oblast.[8] The *iStories* report is particularly noteworthy against the backdrop of Wagner's and Prigozhin's continually declining influence in Russia and loss of access to convict recruits. Prigozhin and Prigozhin-affiliated elements may be trying to diffuse Wagner's remaining power by creating separate PMCs and other parallel military formations in addition to launching new recruitment efforts through traditional channels.[9] Aksyonov additionally appears to have affiliated himself and the Crimea occupation administration with Prigozhin, which may have important implications for the role of forces from occupied Crimea in subsequent phases of the war.

Some prominent Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for continuing to impale Russian forces on Vuhledar with ineffective human-wave style frontal assaults. The milbloggers claimed that current Russian tactics against Vuhledar, which include an initial frontal assault followed by assaults against fortified Ukrainian flanks, result in high

Russian combat losses resulting in no gains due to challenging terrain, lack of combat power, and failure to surprise Ukrainian forces.[10] The milbloggers called on Russian forces to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Vuhledar both with strikes against rear GLOCs and by encircling the settlement for a multi-vector attack, but implied that Russian forces are unable to implement these suggestions due to munitions shortages and the failure to take many settlements surrounding Vuhledar.[11] Russian forces are unable to sustain any significant rate of advance anywhere on the front line using these human-wave style attacks, and the Vuhledar area once held informational significance to Russian milbloggers during the offensive for Pavlivka in in late October and early November 2022.[12] The Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade has been destroyed and reconstituted as many as eight times since the start of the war in large part due losses sustained during the prolonged effort against Vuhledar.[13] The re-emergence of vitriolic criticism about Russian failures near Vuhledar likely reflects the information space's ongoing frustration with the Russian military command amid deep-seated fear about a prospective future Ukrainian counteroffensive. It is possible that Russian forces are undertaking a renewed and inconsistent push to take Vuhledar in the style of limited and localized ground attacks, though it is also possible that the sources claiming as such are engaging in circular reporting or re-reporting old events.[14]

Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with the Russian Security Council likely as part of his effort to portray himself as a present and effective wartime leader. The meeting centered around Russia's effort to develop its electronics industry, though the Kremlin readout provides little detail about the meeting itself.[15] Russia has been seeking ways to mitigate the effect of Western sanctions on the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), which relies on electronics to produce advanced materiel and weaponry.[16] Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has notably claimed that Belarus can produce weapons for Russia given Belarus's access to electronics, and Russia and Belarus recently signed an agreement on furthering their respective electronics industries.[17] This meeting likely aimed to portray Putin as holding the Russian Security Council responsible for mobilizing the DIB to meet wartime demands while not providing evidence of any progress towards this goal.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Prominent voices in the Russian information space are increasingly setting information conditions to prepare for a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov has reportedly formed a Wagner Group-affiliated private military company (PMC) in occupied Crimea.
- Some prominent Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian military command for continuing to impale Russian forces on Vuhledar with ineffective human-wave style frontal assaults.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with the Russian Security Council likely as part of his effort to portray himself as a present and effective wartime leader.
- Russian forces conducted limited attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces have made gains in and around Bakhmut and conducted ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.

- The Ukrainian General Staff corrected its March 23 statement that Russian forces withdrew from Nova Kakhovka, occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities announced the creation of a pro-Russian militaristic youth movement aimed at brainwashing children.
- The Russian government is adopting new measures to revitalize and eliminate corruption, lethargy, and resistance in Russia's defense industrial base (DIB).
- The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on March 24 that at least 1,000 Russian personnel training at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, redeployed to Russia.



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.

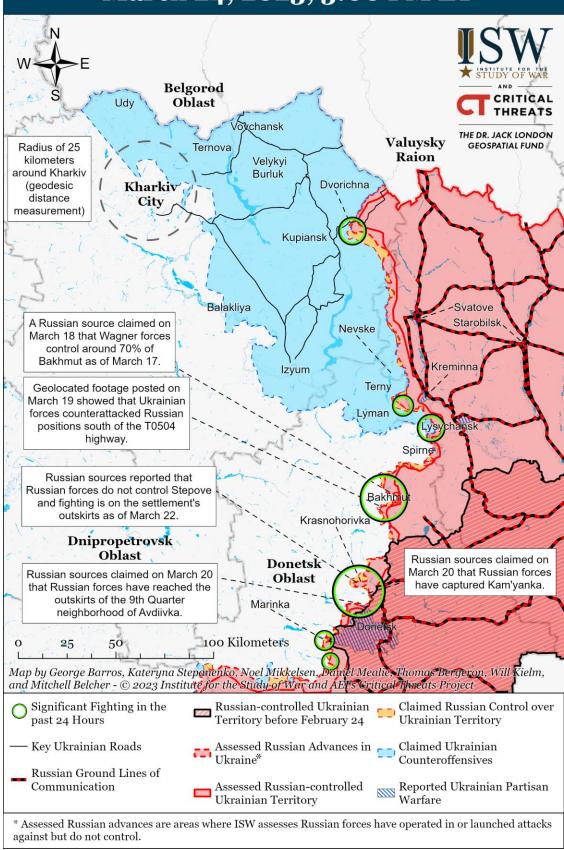
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiy Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of 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 conducted limited attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Kupyansk), Bilohorivka (13km south of Kreminna), and the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna).[18] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that positional battles continue in the Kupyansk area but the situation has not changed.[19] The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces made marginal advances northwest of Kreminna towards the outskirts of Makiivka (22km northwest) and west of Ploshchanka (16km northwest).[20] This prominent Russian milblogger used old combat footage filmed no later than November 2022 to assert that Russian forces advanced near Makiivka in March 2023.[21]

## Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 24, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



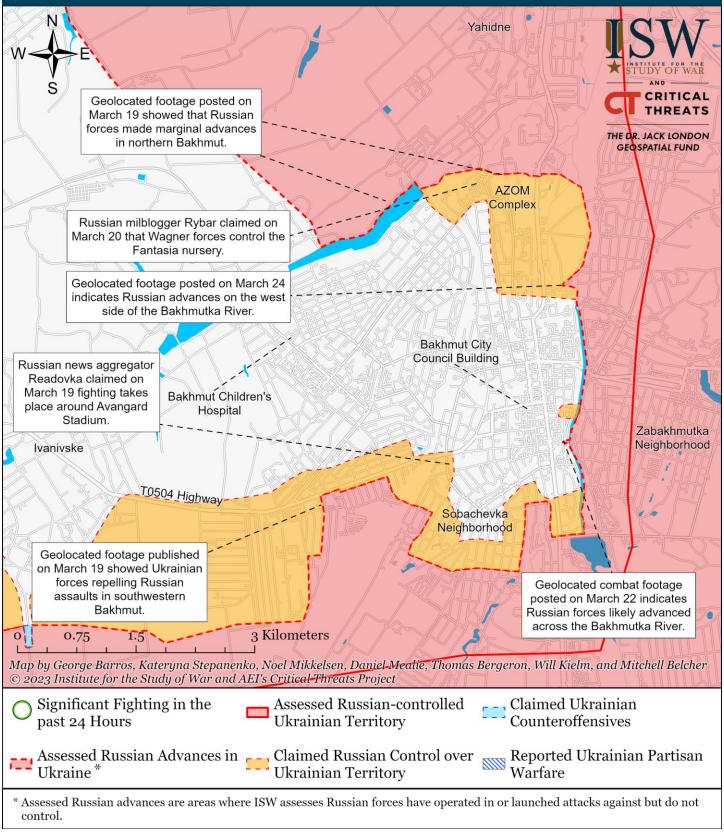
# <u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Bakhmut area and have made gains in and around the city as of March 24. Geolocated footage posted on March 24 shows that Russian forces have advanced towards the To504 Kostyantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway just south of Ivanivske, about 7km southwest of Bakhmut.[22] Geolocated footage posted on March 24 additionally confirms that Russian forces have advanced west of Zalizianske (11km northwest of Bakhmut) and within northern Bakhmut itself.[23] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiv Cherevaty noted on March 24 that Russian Airborne (VDV) and other unspecified conventional Russian forces are reinforcing the Wagner Group around Bakhmut, supporting ISW's assessment that conventional Russian forces are likely increasingly supplanting Wagner operations in this area.[24] Cherevaty reported that there have been 32 combat clashes in the Bakhmut area over the past day.[25] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continue to fight northwest of Bakhmut in the Orikhovo-Vasvlivka and Bohdanivka areas and that Russian forces are approaching Ivanivske west of Bakhmut.[26] Several Russian milbloggers additionally claimed that Wagner units are moving through the AZOM plant in northern Bakhmut and otherwise advancing in urban sectors of the city.[27] Ukrainian forces also appear to have retaken a segment of the E40 Bakhmut-Slovyansk highway north of Bakhmut, as indicated by geolocated footage posted on March 24.[28] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself, northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest) and Bohdanivka (6km northwest); west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west); and southwest of Bakhmut near Stupochky (11km southwest) and Predtechyne (14km southwest).[29]

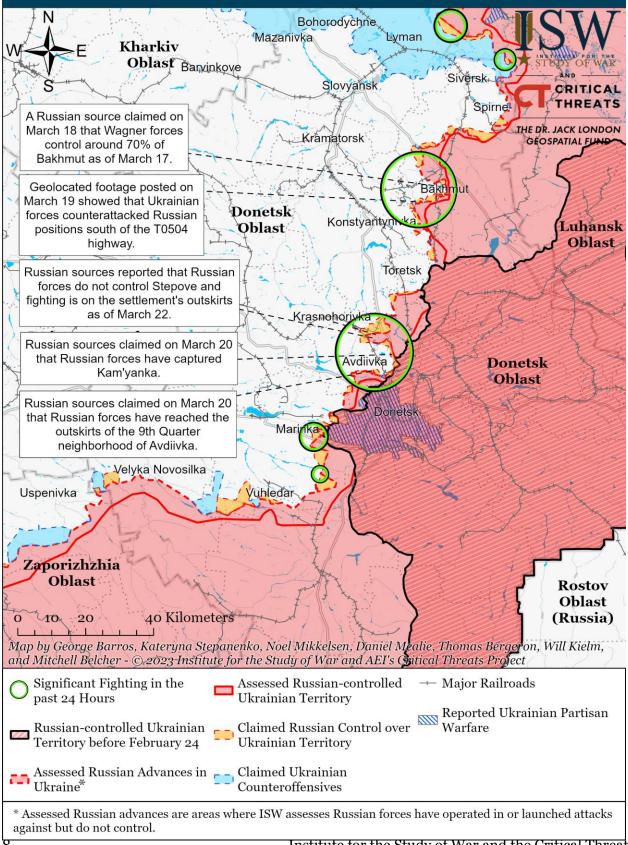
Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on March 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive operations towards Avdiivka itself; in the Avdiivka area near Keramik (12km north of Avdiivka), Stepove (7km northwest of Avdiivka), Severne (5km west of Avdiivka), Novokalynove (12km north of Avdiivka), and Novobakhmutivka (12km northwest of Avdiivka); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Pervomaiske; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka, Pobieda, and Novomykhailivka.[30] Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Army Corps advanced west of Novobakhmutivka and towards Novokalynove.[31] Russian sources continue to claim that Russian forces are advancing towards Avdiivka itself and getting closer to taking the settlement in a semiencirclement.[32] Russian milbloggers posted footage of various 1st DNR Army Corps elements, including the 14th "Kalmius" artillery brigade and 5th Brigade, operating near Avdiivka and Marinka.[33]

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 24. Combat footage geolocated on March 24 confirms that Russian forces are operating in the dacha area in southern Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City).[34] Russian milbloggers pessimistically discussed the prospect of future Russian offensives on Vuhledar and highlighted challenging terrain and poor Russian force capacity in the area.[35]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of March 24, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



## Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 24, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



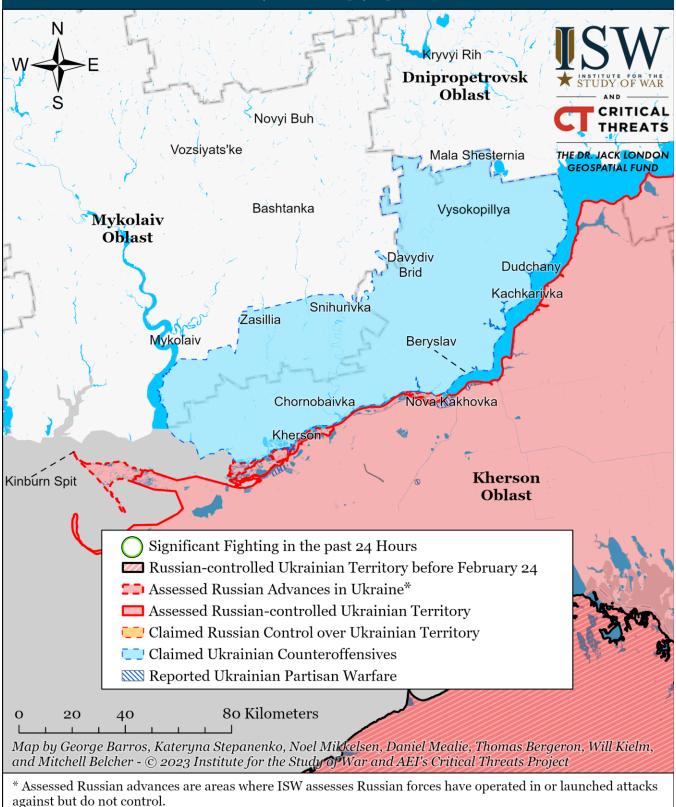
# <u>Supporting Effort—Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

The Ukrainian General Staff corrected its March 23 statement that Russian forces withdrew from Nova Kakhovka, occupied Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 23 that Russian forces are still "temporarily" in Nova Kakhovka and that prior reported information alleging Russian forces had withdrawn from Nova Kakhovka was published due to incorrect use of available data.[36] Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces remained in Nova Kakhovka.[37] Ukrainian military sources continue to suggest that Russian authorities are evacuating other parts of southern Ukraine, however. Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Representative Andriy Yusov reported that Russian occupation authorities in Crimea began warning Crimeans to evacuate over FM radio stations.[38] Yusov reported that the Russian authorities likely intended to warn Crimeans who cooperated with the Russian authorities and continue to tell rank-and-file soldiers that the situation is normal.[39]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces prepared to conduct counteroffensive operations in the Zaporizhia direction on March 24. Zaporizhia Occupation Administration Council Member Vladimir Rogov claimed that Ukrainian forces are concentrating forces and preparing to break through the front line near Orikhiv (50km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City) possibly in the coming days.[40] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) struck Ukrainian positions near Orikhiv before Ukrainian forces could launch a counteroffensive.[41] The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces attempt to prepare reconnaissance-in-force operations near Orikhiv and Polohy (88km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City).[42]

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Mykolaiv, Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk on March 24.[43]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 24, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 24, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



<sup>\*</sup> 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)

The Russian government is adopting new measures to revitalize and eliminate corruption, lethargy, and resistance within Russia's defense industrial base (DIB). Independent Russian media outlet *SOTA* reported on March 23 that unspecified Russian authorities created a working group under the Collegium of the Military-Industrial Complex that will seize control over enterprises implementing state contracts "inefficiently," as justified by martial law.[44] *SOTA* posted a screenshot of the working group's alleged creation document and noted that the working group's power applies to all state contractors, not just those explicitly connected to Russia's DIB, however.[45] Russian authorities may use this power to crack down on political and economic rivals or nationalize Russian businesses. Russian milbloggers continue to critique Russian defense-related production limitations and call for state intervention.[46]

Russian authorities continue to promote contract and volunteer service aggressively while avoiding a major public wave of mobilization. Several Russian news sources reported on March 23 that Russian officials and military registration and enlistment offices use a variety of methods to coerce or intimidate Russian men into "volunteering" or "clarifying their data" - likely to support targeted recruitment campaigns or future covert mobilization.[47] Russian opposition news outlet *Mediazona* reported that Moscow City Disinfection Center stations told their employees that unspecified authorities gave the Moscow City Disinfection Center a recruitment quota of 100 men from each of the city's 11 stations. Disinfection stations with fewer than 100 male employees reportedly encouraged their workers to persuade their acquaintances and friends and give information on male connections to their employer.[48]

Russian authorities work to protect key specialists and insulate public servants from service on the front lines despite major personnel needs on the front lines. The Russian Ministry of Labor approved on March 24 a list of 149 professions – including 64 working professions and 65 civil servant positions –eligible for alternative civilian service during mobilization.[49]

Russian authorities continue to crack down harshly on limited domestic resistance to the war in Ukraine and mobilization. Russian independent media outlet *OVD News* reported on March 23 that Russian security services detained a student on suspicion of committing an arson attack on a building housing a military registration and enlistment office in Leningrad Oblast.[50] *OVD News* also noted on March 23 that the Makhachkala, Republic of Dagestan district court sentenced a participant in September protests against mobilization to two years imprisonment.[51] *OVD News* cited a Russian human rights group "Zone of Solidarity" on March 23 report that a pre-trial detention center holding a Novosibirsk resident falsely accused of committing arson against a military registration office used a series of physical and psychological pressures to debase the detainee.[52] Russian news source *People of Baikal* claimed on March 22 that Russian authorities twice visited its editor and attempted to silence *People of Baikal's* coverage of repeated complaints about mobilization conditions from soldiers in Regiment 1439.[53] A regional branch of *Radio Liberty* reported on March 23 that a Tartarstan military commissariat fined a Bashkirian company 50,000 rubles (\$647) for advertising services aiding men in avoiding mobilization.[54]

Russian authorities continue use prosecution to deter deserters. Russian human rights activist Pavel Chikov stated on March 23 that Russian courts are considering around 500 cases of desertion.[55] Chikov critiqued the Russian Supreme Court's draft resolution which would greatly expand what qualifies as desertion or a "crime against military service," on which ISW reported on March 21.[56] A regional branch of *Radio Liberty* reported on March 23 that Russian authorities suspended the five-year sentence of a deserter from Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Khabarovsk Krai in favor of remobilizing the man.[57] Independent Russian news outlet *Meduza* amplified a report on March Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project 2023

20 that Russian authorities sentenced a major in the Federal Protective Service to 6.5 years in a penal colony and stripped him of his rank for allegedly fleeing to Kazakhstan after the start of mobilization.[58]

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

Russian occupation authorities announced the creation of a pro-Russian militaristic youth movement aimed at brainwashing children. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration First Deputy Chairperson Alexey Lysov announced on March 21 that the first congress of the "Yug Molodoy" (Young South) youth movement occurred in occupied Melitopol.[59] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that the movement provides assistance to occupation authorities and law enforcement to maintain public order and is designed to attract children to Russian propaganda centers.[60] Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov stated that the occupation administration has allocated over 18 billion rubles (\$232 million) to pro-Russian organizations to influence Ukrainian children in occupied territories.[61]

Russian occupation authorities continue to integrate occupied territories into the Russian electoral system in an effort assert legal control. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin visited a preliminary voting site for the United Russia ruling party and claimed that over 67 people registered to vote early at the single voting point.[62] United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak claimed that the DNR voting point has one of the highest rates of early voting registration presumably in all of occupied Ukraine and Russia.[63]

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to exert bureaucratic control over occupied areas through the use of infrastructure development, social benefit schemes, and nationalization of Ukrainian resources. Kherson Oblast occupation officials praised ongoing Russian efforts for further economic, infrastructure, and social benefits in occupied Kherson Oblast, including efforts to develop the Arabat Spit and create a social maternity capital benefit system for children born or adopted after 2007.[64] Russian authorities reportedly registered over 1,500 companies, including agricultural holdings, bakeries, mining companies, factories, and the food industry, into Russian jurisdiction, and either nationalized or transferred many of these businesses to new owners to bypass sanctions and support the war effort.[65]

<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 United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on March 24 that at least 1,000 Russian personnel training at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, redeployed to Russia, supporting previous ISW assessments.[66] The UK MoD noted that it has not observed a new Russian force rotation in Belarus as of March 24 and noted that the Kremlin is likely using Belarusian trainers to augment Russia's degraded training capacity.[67]

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. A tank company of the Belarusian 11th Mechanized Brigade conducted exercises with T-72 tanks at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, on March 24.[68] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on March 24 that elements of the Minsk-based Belarusian 120th Mechanized Brigade would remove equipment from storage and deploy to an unspecified area to conduct unspecified tasks, likely exercises.[69]

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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