### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 17

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan September 17, 9:30 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.

Russian forces continue to conduct meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut instead of focusing on defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives that continue to advance. Russian troops continue to attack Bakhmut and various villages near Donetsk City of emotional significance to pro-war residents of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) but little other importance. The Russians are apparently directing some of the very limited reserves available in Ukraine to these efforts rather than to the vulnerable Russian defensive lines hastily thrown up along the Oskil River in eastern Kharkiv Oblast. The Russians cannot hope to make gains around Bakhmut or Donetsk City on a large enough scale to derail Ukrainian counteroffensives and appear to be continuing an almost robotic effort to gain ground in Donetsk Oblast that seems increasingly divorced from the overall realities of the theater.

Russian failures to rush large-scale reinforcements to eastern Kharkiv and to Luhansk Oblasts leave most of Russian-occupied northeastern Ukraine highly vulnerable to continuing Ukrainian counter-offensives. The Russians may have decided not to defend this area, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated declarations that the purpose of the "special military operation" is to "liberate" Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Prioritizing the defense of Russian gains in southern Ukraine over holding northeastern Ukraine makes strategic sense since Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts are critical terrain for both Russia and Ukraine whereas the sparsely-populated agricultural areas in the northeast are much less so. But the continued Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, which are using some of Russia's very limited effective combat power at the expense of defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives, might indicate that Russian theater decision-making remains questionable.

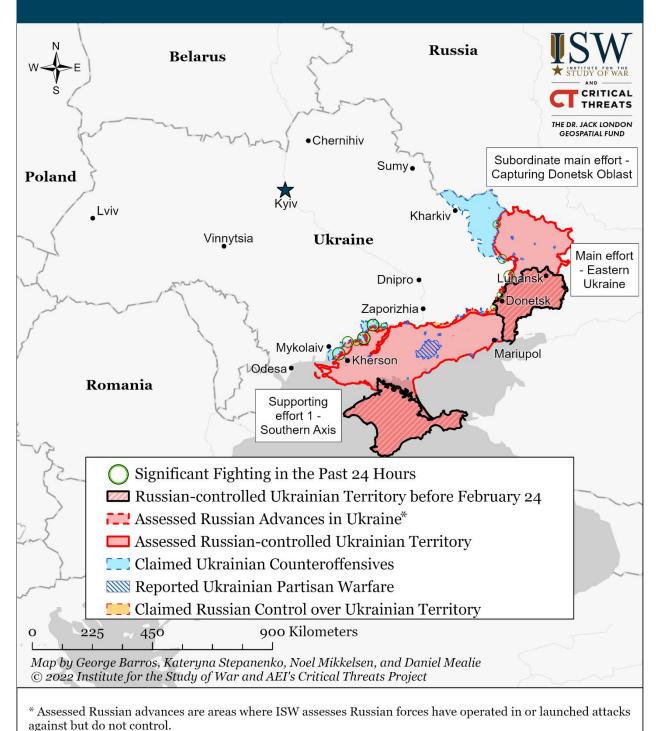
Ukrainian forces appear to be expanding positions east of the Oskil River and north of the Siverskyi Donets River that could allow them to envelop Russian troops holding around Lyman. Further Ukrainian advances east along the north bank of the Siverskyi Donets River could make Russian positions around Lyman untenable and open the approaches to Lysychansk and ultimately Severodonetsk. The Russian defenders in Lyman still appear to consist in large part of BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) reservists and the remnants of units badly damaged in the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive, and the Russians do not appear to be directing reinforcements from elsewhere in the theater to these areas.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces continue to prioritize strategically meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut over defending against continued Ukrainian counter-offensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces liberated a settlement southwest of Lyman and are likely continuing to expand their positions in the area.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct an interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct unsuccessful assaults around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.

- Ukrainian sources reported extensive partisan attacks on Russian military assets and logistics in southern Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continued to undertake crypto-mobilization measures to generate forces for war Russian war efforts.
- Russian authorities are working to place 125 "orphan" Ukrainian children from occupied Donetsk Oblast with Russian families.

### Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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.

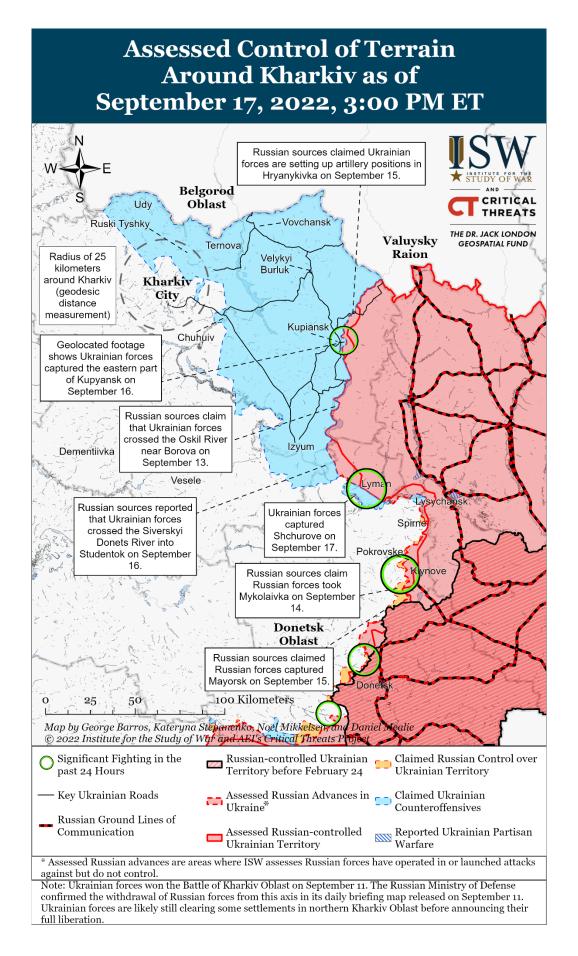
- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

### <u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

#### **Eastern Ukraine:** (Vovchansk-Kupyansk-Izyum-Lyman Line)

Ukrainian and Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to establish positions northwest and southwest of Lyman on September 17, while Russian forces have maintained their positions in Lyman and Yampil.¹ Geolocated footage showed Ukrainian forces raising a flag over Shchurove, situated on the eastern bank of the Siverskyi Donets River six kilometers southwest of Lyman.² Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces crossed the Siverskyi Donets River and reached Studenok (approximately 25km northwest of Lyman) after Russian forces withdrew from the settlement on September 15.³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces shelled Oleksandrivka, which could indicate that Ukrainian forces advanced eight kilometers from Studenok.⁴ Russian milbloggers also noted heavy fighting in Oleksandrivka and settlements northwest of Oleksandrivka.⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Russian forces fired artillery at Yarova (10km southeast of Studenok), while milbloggers noted fighting in the settlement, likely indicating a Ukrainian advance in the area.⁶ Russian sources also claimed active combat in Dobrysheve, between liberated Shchurove and contested Yarova.⊓

Ukrainian and Russian sources also reported kinetic activity on the northern segment of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff and the Russian Defense Ministry reported that Russian forces are shelling Dvorichna (about 17km northeast of Kupyansk), while milbloggers speculated that Ukrainian forces are preparing for an eastward counterattack from the settlement. Geolocated footage showed Ukrainian artillery fire on Russian military equipment operating on the eastern bank of the Oskil River, approximately 38 northeast of Izyum.



#### **Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)**

Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding the progress of the counteroffensive on September 17 but noted the continuation of the Ukrainian interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces struck an alternative Russian pontoon crossing near Sadove (approximately 17km east of Kherson City), an electronic warfare (EW) station in Nova Kakhovka, and a Russian concentration area in Stara Zburyivka (about 23km southwest of Kherson City). The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are preparing retreat routes, including a new crossing in the area of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, due to Ukrainian strikes on Russian crossings over the Dnipro River. Ukrainian military officials noted that the Ukrainian strike on Kherson City on September 10 resulted in the deaths of over 180 Russian servicemen. Social media footage corroborates Ukrainian official statements about the continuation of the interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast. Residents reported smoke and explosions in Antonivka (on the left bank of the Dnipro River) and in Nova Kakhovka.

Ukrainian and Russian sources reported kinetic activity in three main areas: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border near Vysokopillya. The Russian Defense Ministry and Russian milbloogers claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian "large-scale" attack on Pravdyne (approximately 28km northwest of Kherson City) on September 16.14 Some milbloggers specified that Ukrainian forces advanced through Russian defenses Pravdyne with up to two reinforced companies (likely less than a battalion in strength), which is hardly a large-scale attack. 15 The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command also reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to attack Stepova Dolyna (the next settlement north of Pravdyne) from Pravdyne. 16 A milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are using helicopters to transfer troops to Sukhyi Stavok (about 12km southeast of the bridgehead), which if true, likely indicates the reduced capacity of Russian air defenses in the area. 17 Ukrainian and Russian forces noted that Russian forces continued to shell and launch airstrikes on Sukhyi Stavok.18 Geolocated footage also showed Ukrainian forces firing at Russian positions in Davydiv Brid.<sup>19</sup> The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that a Russian reconnaissance and sabotage group attempted a failed advance on Ukrainian-controlled Novovoznesenske (8km southeast of Vysokopillya) and conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the direction of Arhanhelske-Ivanivka along the Inhulets RIver.<sup>20</sup>

Russian forces are intensifying filtration and social control measures in Kherson Oblast as a result of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the region. A local Kherson Oblast Telegram channel reported that Russian forces are conducting filtration measures on Chaykovskiy Street in Kherson City.<sup>21</sup> Russian Telegram channels published footage of Russian servicemen firing at unspecified targets near the Kherson City railway terminal, claiming that Russian forces were conducting a "counterterrorist operation."<sup>22</sup>

#### Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

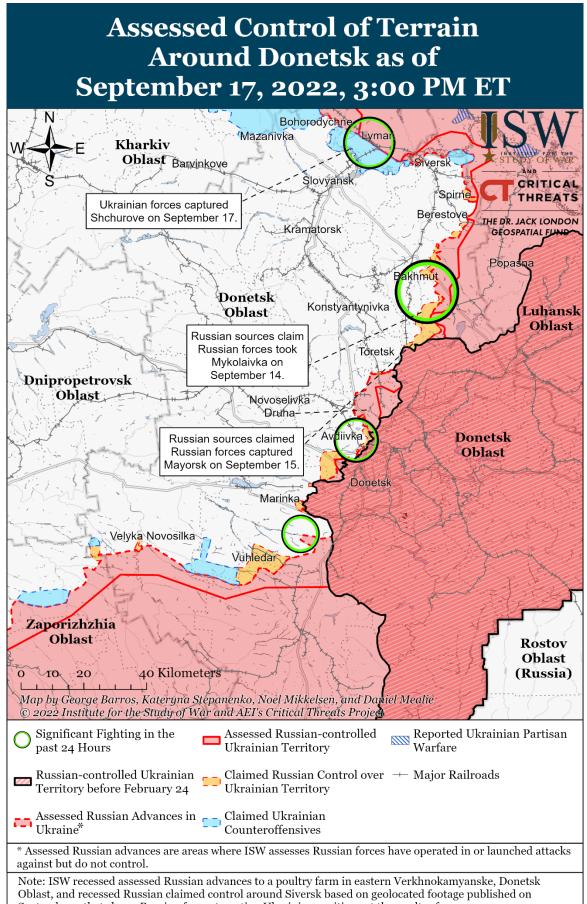
### <u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued operations and allocating reinforcements to offensive actions aimed at taking relatively small settlements in Donetsk Oblast rather than dedicating these forces to defending against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives. Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks and continued routine fire throughout Donetsk Oblast on September 17.23 The Ukrainian General Staff reported that

Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground assaults on and south of Bakhmut, on and west of Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.<sup>24</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made incremental advances into the eastern and southern outskirts of Bakhmut.<sup>25</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian ground attack on Berestove, 15km northeast of Soledar on the T1302.<sup>26</sup> Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on September 17 that Russian forces transported a column of 15 Russian tanks marked with the 3rd Army Corps symbol from Mariupol towards Donetsk City, likely to reinforce Russian positions along the Bakhmut-Donetsk City front line.<sup>27</sup>

Russian forces continued striking Ukrainian infrastructure facilities on September 17. Russian forces fired on the Slovyansk Thermal Power Plant, causing a fire and damaging the facility.<sup>28</sup> Ukrainian authorities also stated that Russian shelling of Mykolaivka interrupted the settlement's water supply.<sup>29</sup>

Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) authorities and other Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of striking government buildings in the Donetsk City center on September 17.30 DNR Territorial Defense Headquarters claimed that Ukrainian forces fired six 155mm NATO artillery rounds at an administration building, the Ministry of Justice building, and the Central Post Office, killing four and injuring eight civilians.<sup>31</sup>



September 5 that shows Russian forces targeting Ukrainian positions at the poultry farm.

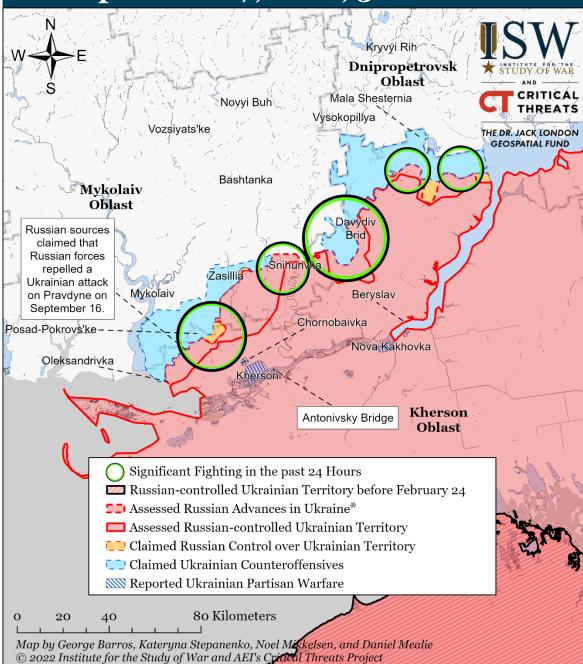
### <u>Supporting Effort—Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces did not conduct any ground attacks and continued routine fire in Zaporizhia Oblast west of Hulyaipole on September 17.32 Russian sources stated that Russian forces struck unspecified infrastructure in Zaporizhzhia City, likely as part of a continued effort to target Ukrainian infrastructure.33 Ukrainian authorities reported that Russian forces shelled Ochakiv, Mykolaiv Oblast (less than 10km from the Kinburn Spit in Kherson Oblast), throughout the night on September 16-17 and morning on September 17, and conducted air or missile strikes on the settlement during the day on September 17.34

Ukrainian sources reported extensive partisan attacks on Russian military assets and logistics in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 17. Ukraine's Resistance Center reported that (likely partisans) detonated explosives at the Nyzyany rail station (40km east of Tokmak), damaging rail lines on which Russian forces frequently transport military equipment and supplies from occupied Crimea.<sup>35</sup> Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck the Nyzyany rail station with artillery, rockets, or HIMARS, but the high level of documented partisan activity and the inconsistent Russian narrative suggests that Ukrainian partisans likely conducted the attack.<sup>36</sup> Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported explosions (from likely partisan activity) in Bohatyr and Radivonivka (on the southwestern outskirts of Melitopol), where Fedorov reported that Russian forces have established a military base and are storing military equipment.<sup>37</sup> Russian occupation authorities claimed that "terrorists" (likely Ukrainian partisans) blew up power lines in southern Melitopol, damaging concrete supports on the M18/E105 highway connecting Melitopol to Crimea.<sup>38</sup>

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced on September 17 that Ukrainian authorities reconnected the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to the Ukrainian power grid following repairs to the main external power lines on September 16.39 Ukrainian state nuclear agency Energoatom announced on September 16 that a large convoy containing spare parts, chemical reagents, and diesel fuel traveled through Russian checkpoints and arrived at the ZNPP on September 16 that enabled Energoatom engineers to conduct the repairs necessary to reconnect the ZNPP to the Ukrainian power grid.40 The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Ukrainian forces "resumed provocations" by shelling the area around the ZNPP on September 17 but provided no evidence of the claimed shelling.41 Russian forces continued routine strikes against areas on the north bank of the Kakhovka Reservoir opposite Enerhodar.42

## Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 17, 2022, 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.

Note: Ukrainian officials announced on August 29 that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. An unnamed military official of an unspecified country told CNN on August 29 that Ukrainian forces liberated Pravdyne, Nova Dmytrivka, and Tomyna Balka (northwest of Kherson City) and Arkhanhelske (along the Inhulets River). ISW will readjust the maps when more open sources confirm the liberation of these settlements. ISW extended Ukrainian counteroffensives to Sukhyi Stavok based on several claims from Russian milbloggers that Ukrainian forces liberated the settlement on August 29. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back to Sukhyi Stavok from Kostromka and Bezimenne on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched air strikes on Bezimenne and Kostromka on September 4, which may indicate a Ukrainian advance in the area.

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

Russian authorities are seeking warm bodies to confront Ukrainian counteroffensives in the absence of trained soldiers and are taking extreme measures to speed recruitment efforts. A recruitment poster in Sevastopol advertised a mere 10 days of training for recruits prior to deployment as a part of the 810th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade of the Black Sea fleet, which Ukrainian sources report has lost over 85% of its personnel.<sup>43</sup> The report noted that locals spotted similar posters in Bakhchysarai, Simferopol, Kerch, and Yalta, Crimea.<sup>44</sup> Ten days is not remotely enough time to provide even basic levels of military training. The commitment of such "troops" will more likely further degrade Russian forces' capability to defend against Ukrainian forces and conduct their own offensive operations than add to Russian combat power.

Russian authorities continue to support major recruitment drives in prisons through private military companies (PMCs). *BBC* reported that the father of a prisoner in penal colony IK-6 stated that Wagner Group leadership is actively promoting military service with Wagner Group in exchange for pardons, including of narcotics and sexual crimes that previously disqualified individuals from Wagner Group employment.<sup>45</sup> Russian humanitarian group "Rus Sidyashiy" head Olga Romanova stated that Russianled forces have recruited at least 7,000 prisoners to fight in Ukraine, visited roughly 35 penal colonies, and recruited an average of 200 new prisoners per visit.<sup>46</sup>

Conditions for Russian soldiers continue to vary depending on the soldiers' contract status and Russian sources reported a systematic preference for "traditional" contract soldiers over reservists. The Russian Union of Paratroopers and a Russian milblogger posted a public call to action on September 14 that details the poor treatment of BARS personnel in receiving promised benefits, recording their contracts, and in the documentation and quality of their medical care.<sup>47</sup> The post claimed that the Russian milblogger has gathered nearly two dozen reports of such treatment from a single unit from Rostov-on-Don and that some BARS personnel were thrown on the streets with no money or supplies to get home and some returned home with untreated injuries.<sup>48</sup> The post appealed to the Russian Ministry of Defense to protect the rights of military personnel and prosecute the worst perpetrators of unequal treatment.<sup>49</sup>

Russian federal subjects are continuing to deploy military personnel to Ukraine. Russian Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov announced that more Chechen Spetsnaz, including an unspecified sniper platoon and reinforced mortar, anti-aircraft, sapper, and assault companies, left Grozny, Chechnya, for an unspecified location in Donbas on September 16.50

# <u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of occupied areas; set conditions for potential annexation into the Russian Federation or some other future political arrangement of Moscow's choosing)

Russian authorities reported that Ukrainian children forcibly deported to Russia for adoption have received Russian citizenship and may be separated from their siblings.<sup>51</sup> Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova stated that Russian authorities are working to place 125 "orphan" Ukrainian children from occupied Donetsk Oblast with Russian families but may have to separate siblings from families with over seven children.<sup>52</sup> Lvova-Belova stated that Russian authorities have already granted these children Russian citizenship and are conducting "psychological testing" to determine appropriate placement with Russian families.<sup>53</sup> As ISW has previously reported, the forcible transfer of children from one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part,

a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>54</sup>

Russian authorities are intensifying measures to identify and detain Ukrainians who oppose the occupation regime. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Zaporizhia Oblast occupation authorities recently announced the strengthening of "sanctions" against patriotic Ukrainians and are threatening Ukrainian activists with forced deportation to occupied Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts where occupation authorities have deemed providing support to members of the Ukrainian resistance movement a crime punishable by death.<sup>55</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast are conducting weekly inspections of Ukrainian businesses and are threatening to "nationalize" the businesses if they do not cooperate with the occupation regime.<sup>56</sup> Ukraine's Resistance Center reported that occupation authorities are searching for patriotic Ukrainians in Kherson City by engaging in dialogues to fish for personal information, setting up fake fundraisers for Ukrainian forces, or asking about the deployment of Russian forces, after which occupation authorities detain the Ukrainians for filtration.<sup>57</sup> The Rosgvardia Press Service announced that Rosgvardia forces detained over 50 alleged "accomplices of the Ukrainian Armed Forces" in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts within the past week.<sup>58</sup>

Ukrainian officials stated on September 16-17 that Ukrainian partisans did not assassinate Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Prosecutor General Sergey Gorenko and Deputy Prosecutor General Yekaterina Steglenko. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai claimed that LNR internal divisions, specifically the rift between Gorenko and LNR Head Leonid Pasechnik, caused Gorenko's death.<sup>59</sup> Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mikhail Podolyak suggested that local organized criminal groups could have assassinated Gorenko or that Russian authorities may be purging witnesses of Russian war crimes.<sup>60</sup> The Ukrainian government has offered an official response to the assassination as of September 17.<sup>61</sup> Various proxy officials claimed on September 16-17 that Ukrainian "terrorists" or "gangs" assassinated Gorenko and Steglenko.<sup>62</sup>

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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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://t.me/wargonzo/8315

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://twitter.com/UkrArmyBlog/status/1571039222131466241;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> https://t.me/swodki/163537; https://t.me/boris\_rozhin/64187

<sup>5</sup> https://t.me/swodki/163537; https://t.me/boris\_rozhin/64187; https://t.me/rybar/38935; https://t.me/vysokygovorit/9439; https://t.me/epoddubny/12321

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<sup>7</sup> https://t.me/swodki/163537; https://t.me/boris rozhin/64187

8 https://t.me/vysokygovorit/9444; https://t.me/kommunist/9544; https://t.me/sashakots/35701;

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<sup>9</sup> https://twitter.com/Blue\_Sauron/status/1570841438690373633;

https://twitter.com/TexAgg04/status/1570850622194450437;

https://twitter.com/TexAgg04/status/1570852968571994113

<sup>10</sup> https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=515546733630594

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<sup>13</sup> https://t.me/hueviyherson/26060; https://t.me/hueviyherson/26061; https://t.me/hueviyherson/26060

<sup>14</sup> https://t.me/rybar/38921; https://t.me/mod russia/19924; https://t.me/sashakots/35702;

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<sup>15</sup> https://t.me/strelkovii/3260; https://t.me/strelkovii/3261; https://t.me/sashakots/35702;

https://t.me/voenacher/29096; https://t.me/boris rozhin/64159

<sup>16</sup> https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=515546733630594

<sup>17</sup> https://t.me/rybar/38962

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<sup>19</sup> https://twitter.com/kingarooty/status/1571022263360843779;

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https://twitter.com/PaulJawin/status/1571015682388807680

<sup>20</sup> https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=515546733630594

<sup>22</sup> https://t.me/chpsevas/3987

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> https://t.me/hueviyherson/26042

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> https://t.me/kramatorsk rada/6167; https://t.me/kramatorsk rada/6163;

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- <sup>28</sup> https://t.me/pavlokyrylenko\_donoda/4918; https://armyinform dot com.ua/2022/09/17/okupanty-obstrilyaly-slovyansku-tes-na-stancziyi-pozhezha/; https://t.me/Bratchuk\_Sergey/18869; https://t.me/stranaua/64479; https://t.me/rybar/38944; https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/40507
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