

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 23

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
September 23, 10:00 pm ET

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

**The Russian mobilization system is struggling to execute the task Russian President Vladimir Putin set and will likely fail to produce mobilized reserve forces even of the low quality that Putin's plans would have generated unless the Kremlin can rapidly fix fundamental and systemic problems.** Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Armed Forces would mobilize combat-ready reservists to quickly stabilize the frontlines and regain the initiative on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Milblogger and social media reports, however, show that Russian military recruitment centers, enlistment officials, and local administrations are mobilizing men who do not meet the Kremlin's stated criteria, especially Shoigu's promise that mobilization would prioritize men with "combat experience." Russian opposition outlets and Telegram channels leaked information suggesting that the Kremlin aims to complete this partial mobilization by November 10 and that the Kremlin is seeking to mobilize 1.2 million men instead of the publicly announced 300,000.<sup>2</sup> ISW cannot verify these reports, but significant available information suggests that this mobilization campaign (the first in post-Soviet Russia) is overwhelming an ineffective and unmotivated bureaucratic system and could fail to generate the much-needed combat-ready reserve force in a short time or at all.

**Russian pro-war milbloggers and social media users are raising concerns about unlawful mobilization practices and showcasing many serious Russian mobilization problems on the second day of the mobilization effort.** Russian milbloggers reported receiving numerous complaints from social media users that older men, students, employees of military industries, and civilians with no prior military experience are receiving illegal mobilization notices.<sup>3</sup> Shoigu and other officials have repeatedly stated that these categories of individuals would be exempt from this partial mobilization. Other sources reported that Russians are mobilizing airport and airline employees and workers from other industries.<sup>4</sup> The Russian government FAQ portal also indicated that local mobilization-enforcing officials may mobilize part-time students, despite the Kremlin's declaration that no students will undergo mobilization.<sup>5</sup>

Some milbloggers noted that Russian enlistment personnel are assigning men with prior military service to very different specializations from those in which they served, while other sources recounted instances of military recruitment centers mobilizing men with chronic illnesses.<sup>6</sup>

The quality of Russian bureaucrats and military trainers are also raising fears among the Russian pro-war crowd that the partial mobilization effort may not succeed. Milbloggers noted that employees of the military enlistment centers are unmotivated and underpaid, reducing their enthusiasm to adhere to the envisioned mobilization plan. Milbloggers also pleaded with officers and commanders in charge of preparing mobilized men for war to train them before deployment.<sup>7</sup>

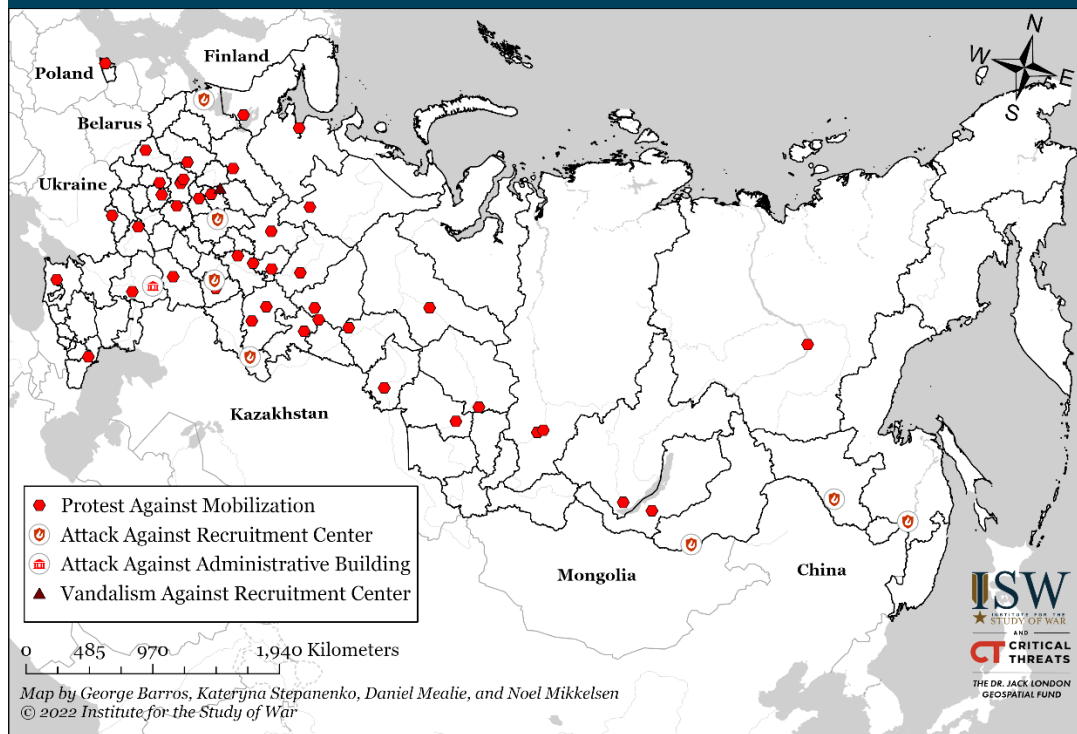
**Challenges and errors in the first days of executing a large-scale and demanding partial mobilization in the midst of a failing war are not necessarily surprising, although they suggest that the Russian military mobilization infrastructure was not better prepared for a major war than the Russian armed forces themselves.** It is nevertheless conceivable that the Russian Ministry of Defense will address some of the worst problems and get the mobilization effort on track. It is also possible, moreover, that much of the partial mobilization is proceeding more or less as

planned and that social media and the milblogger community are highlighting problems that are serious but not necessarily pervasive. Some of the reports suggest, however, that regional mobilization officials have been given quotas to fill and received pressure to fill them in ways that are more likely to cause errors than to reward adherence to the stated principles and the needs of an effective, combat-ready reserve force.

**Divergences from the mobilization decree and from Putin’s and Shoigu’s statements about the categories of men who are exempt from mobilization are also causing anger and mistrust toward Russian federal subjects and the Kremlin itself.** Some social media footage already shows mobilized men fighting with enlistment officers, arguing with mobilization representatives, and refusing to serve under unlawful orders.<sup>8</sup> Some milbloggers claimed that some of the discontented men who have been wrongfully mobilized would have accepted their fate if they had actually met the mobilization criterium.<sup>9</sup> The Kremlin is thus committing unmotivated and potentially angry men to war with the task of regaining the initiative in an offensive war in a foreign land on a battlefield far from home.

**The highly nationalist and pro-war milblogger community is calling on the Kremlin to address these mobilization issues rapidly, but the Kremlin is unlikely to be able to meet their demands.** Russian milbloggers express cautious optimism that partial mobilization will reinforce degraded combat units and allow Russian forces to advance in Donetsk Oblast, but are concerned that the Kremlin’s failures to enforce mobilization according to the law and stated policies will create political unrest.<sup>10</sup> One milblogger stated that the Kremlin’s poor handling of the partial mobilization is giving rise to “separatist movements” and opposition media.<sup>11</sup> Another milblogger noted that the Kremlin’s failure to fix mobilization practices within the military recruitment centers may shatter Russians’ trust in the military-political leadership.<sup>12</sup> A failed or badly flawed partial mobilization campaign may risk further alienation of the Russian nationalist crowd that has been supportive of the war and mobilization.

## Confirmed Russian Protests Against Military Mobilization from September 21 to September 23, 2022



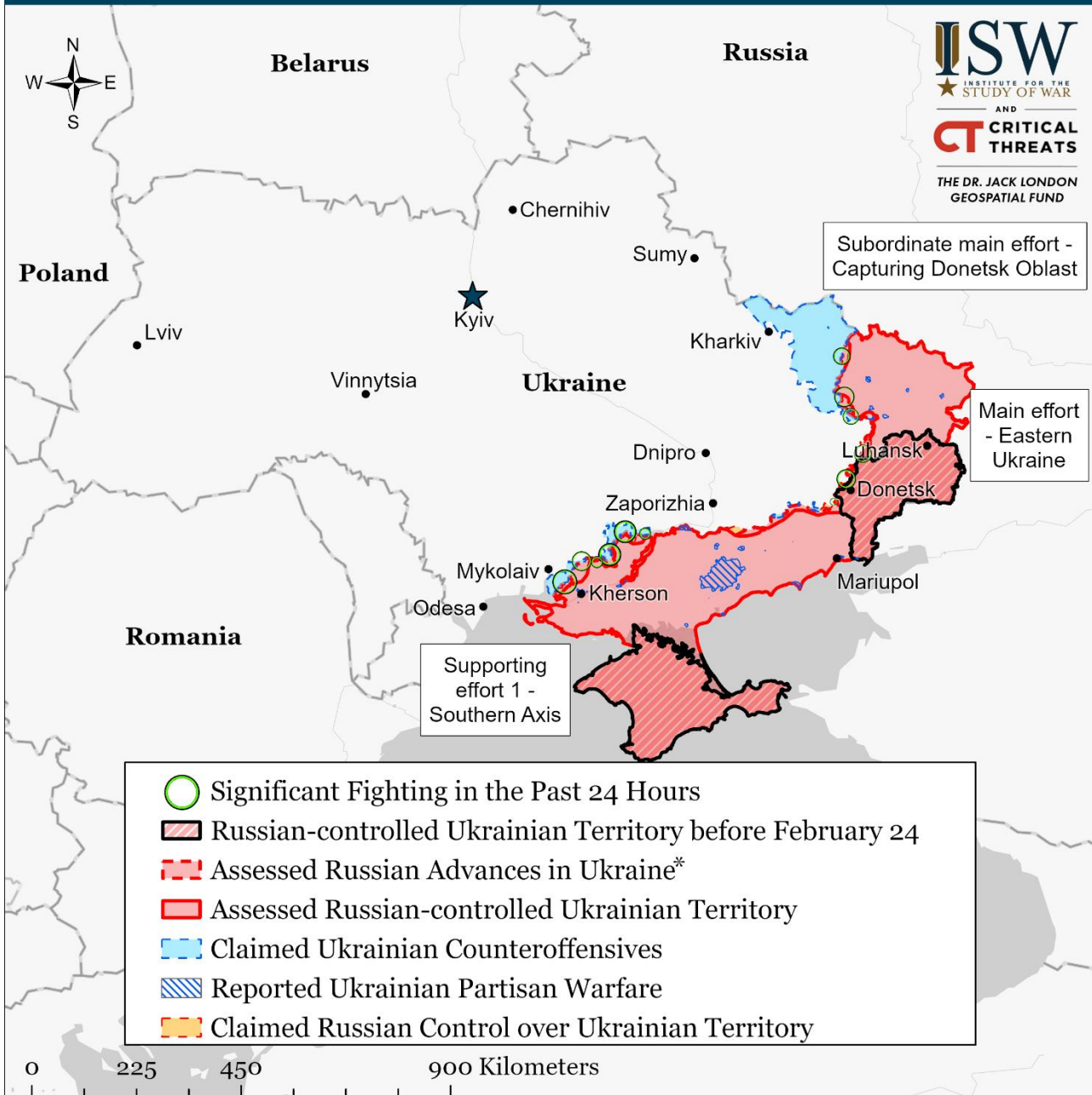
**Disparate mobilization processes across different regions may exacerbate social tensions in Russia already raised by perceived inequalities in the creation of volunteer battalions.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov stated in a live TV broadcast that the Republic of Chechnya will not conduct mobilization because the Republic has already exceeded an unspecified force generation plan by 254 percent.<sup>13</sup> Kadyrov added that Chechnya has already deployed 20,000 servicemen to war since February 24. Kadyrov threatened to mobilize any protesters in Chechnya and send them to the front, however. Kadyrov then seemingly modified his statements by encouraging those opposing mobilization to respect Russian sovereignty instead of using the constitution to avoid service.<sup>14</sup> Kadyrov’s initial statement, addressed to the Chechen public, may be an attempt to both address and discourage criticism of mobilization, the war, and himself within the Chechen community. Kadyrov’s statement could also be a worrisome indicator for the Kremlin—if one of the war’s most vociferous and aggressive advocates feels the need to refuse to mobilize his people, at least publicly, that could indicate that even Kadyrov senses the popular resentment the partial mobilization will cause and possibly even fears it.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian partial mobilization efforts are suffering from serious and systemic problems in their first days, generating popular resentment and setting conditions to produce a mobilized reserve force incapable of accomplishing the tasks Russian President Vladimir Putin has set for it.
- Protests, attacks against recruiting centers, and vandalism have occurred across Russia in the first 48 hours after the announcement of partial mobilization.
- Ukrainian forces continued to advance north and northwest of Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast and maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian progress on the axis.

- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful assaults near Bakhmut and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down an Iranian-made Mohajer-6 drone in an unspecified area of the Black Sea, likely near Odesa.
- Russian occupation authorities began the voting period for their sham annexation referenda on September 23 with overt coercion and falsified turnout numbers.
- Russian occupation authorities remained on high alert to prevent partisan attacks against sham election workers, polling stations, and government facilities.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, and Daniel Mealie  
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\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks 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.***

- 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

### **Ukrainian Counteroffensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)**

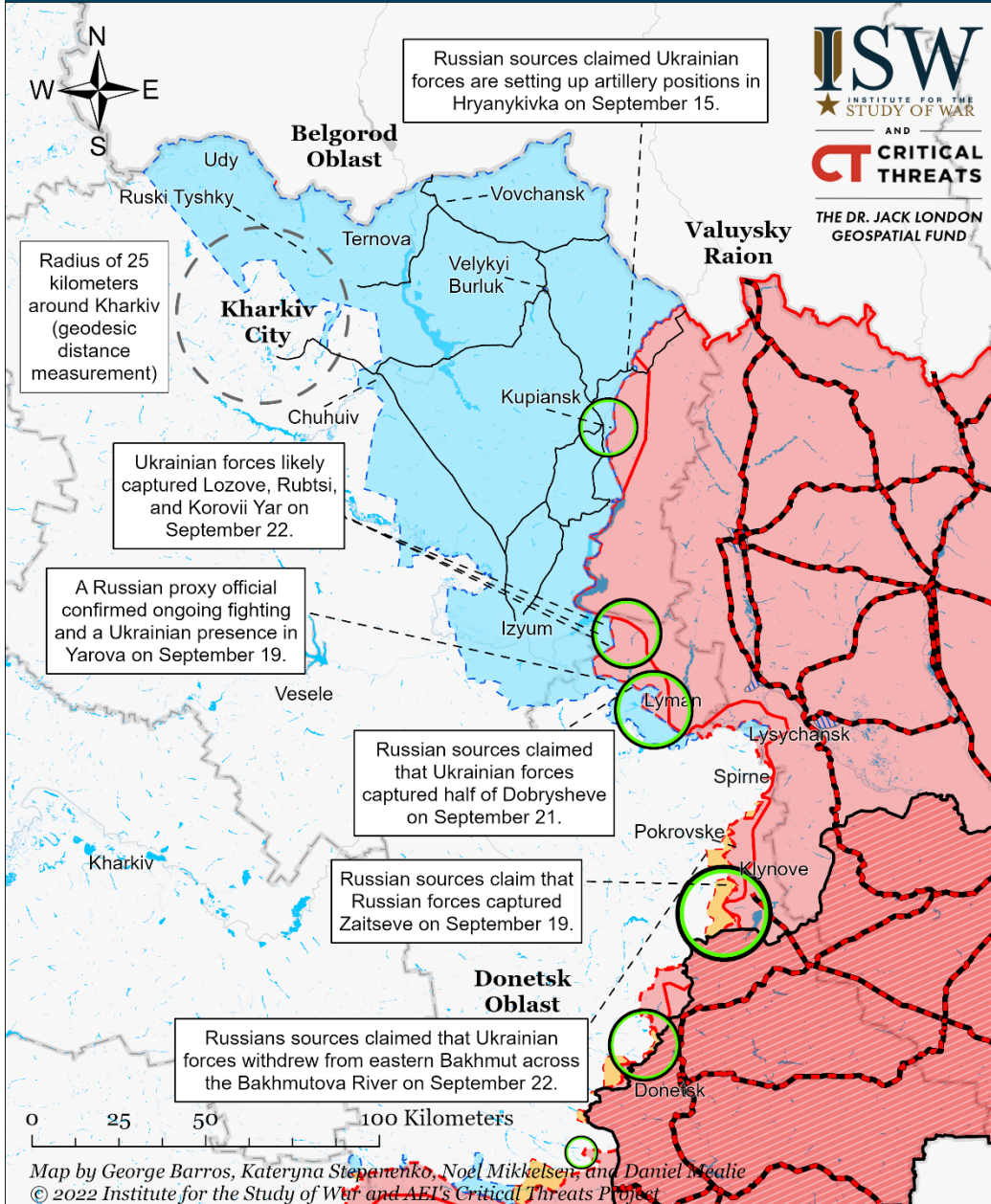
#### **Eastern Ukraine: (Vovchansk-Kupyansk-Izyum-Lyman Line)**

Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian effort to regain lost positions around eastern Kupyansk on September 23.<sup>15</sup> Ukrainian officials also reported that Russian forces again unsuccessfully targeted a dam over the Pechenihiy Reservoir likely in an effort to flood the Siverskyi Donets River and disrupt Ukrainian logistics on its eastern bank.<sup>16</sup>

Ukrainian forces continued to advance north and northwest of Lyman. Russian milbloggers reported that Ukrainian forces have driven into the rear of Russian positions in Lyman from the north, after reportedly breaking through Russian defenses around Karpivka and Ridkodub (about 22km northwest of Lyman).<sup>17</sup> Another milblogger noted that there are no communications with a Russian BARS-13 reservist detachment that was occupying a defensive position near Drobysheve (7km west of Lyman).<sup>18</sup>

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian strikes wounded the commander of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army of the Western Military District (WMD), Major General Oleg Tsokov in Svatove (about 37km east of the new frontline in Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast).<sup>19</sup> The 144th Division is based in western Russia near the Belarusian border. Its losses in Luhansk Oblast, along with those of the 1st Guards Tank Army of the WMD, confirm that Russia continues to expend some of its premier forces that had been responsible for defending Russian borders against a NATO attack as well as threatening NATO.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of September 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

Note: Ukrainian forces won the Battle of Kharkiv Oblast on September 11. The Russian Ministry of Defense confirmed the withdrawal of Russian forces from this axis in its daily briefing map released on September 11. Ukrainian forces are likely still clearing some settlements in northern Kharkiv Oblast before announcing their full liberation.

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

Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground attacks in Kherson Oblast but noted that Russian forces continued efforts to restore lost positions and fired along the entire line of contact on September 23. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported on September 23 that Russian forces continued to organize their defense of occupied Ukrainian territories and are using aerial reconnaissance to search for opportunities to regain Ukrainian-held positions.<sup>20</sup>

Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported continued Ukrainian interdiction efforts against Russian positions in Kherson Oblast on September 22-23. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces conducted seven airstrikes against Russian forces and anti-aircraft assets on September 23 and conducted 99 fire missions.<sup>21</sup> Ukrainian forces reportedly destroyed two command posts in Henichensk (just north of the Crimean Peninsula) and Kakhovka Raions. Social media users reported explosions on September 22 and 23 in Nova Kakhovka.<sup>22</sup> Ukrainian forces maintained fire control over the Kakhovka Bridge over the Dnipro River.<sup>23</sup> Social media footage published on September 23 depicted additional Ukrainian artillery strikes on a Russian warehouse and damaging a Russian armored vehicle near Liubymivka, 80km northeast of Nova Kakhovka.<sup>24</sup> A Kherson-based Ukrainian source reported on September 22 that Ukrainian forces likely targeted unspecified Russian military positions in Chornobaivka, just north of Kherson City.<sup>25</sup> A Russian milblogger confirmed reports of Ukrainian Tochka-U missile fire into Kherson Oblast.<sup>26</sup>

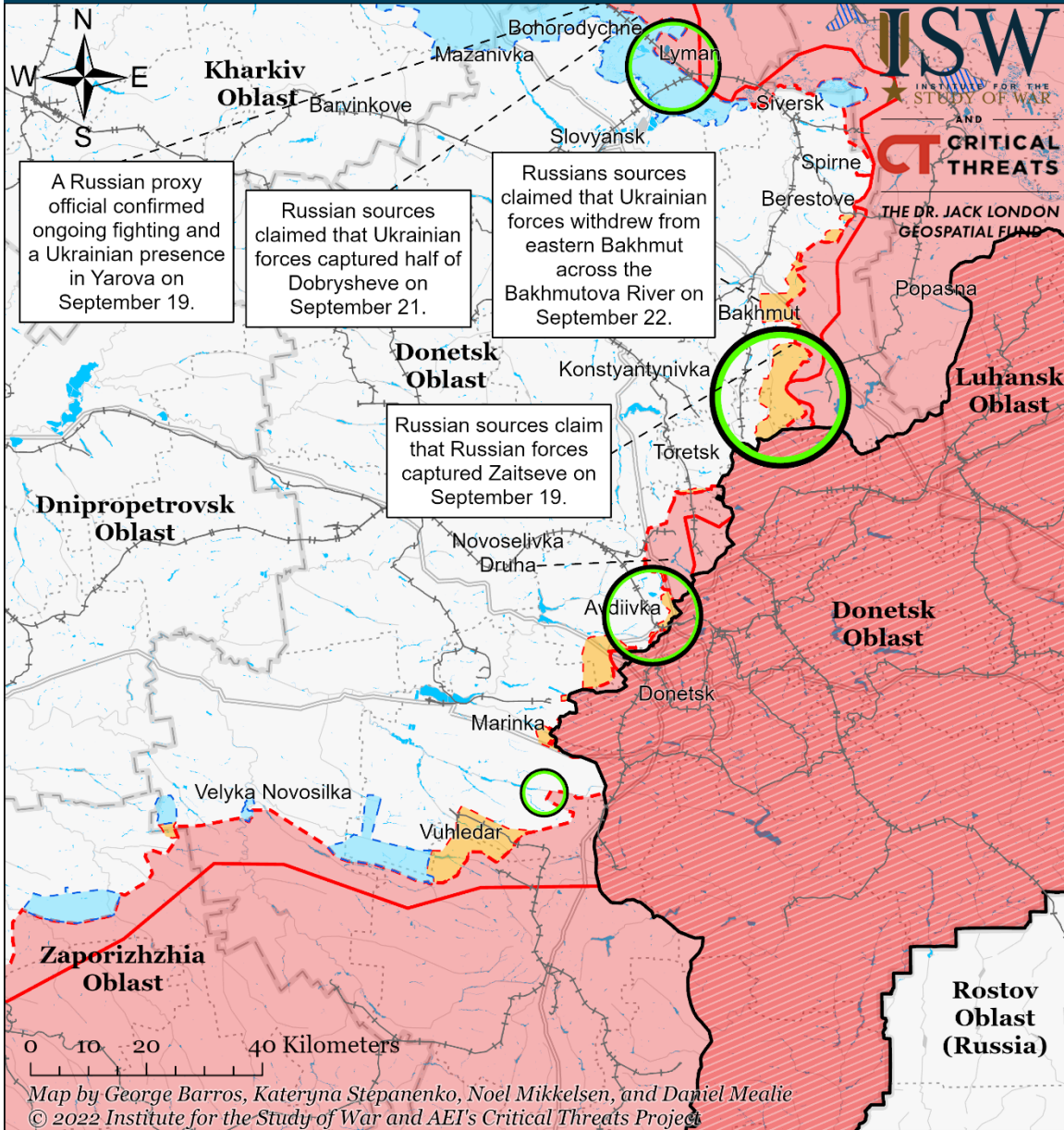
## **Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine**

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

Russian forces conducted routine shelling and rocket artillery strikes along the front lines around Bakhmut and Donetsk City on September 23 according to the Ukrainian General Staff.<sup>27</sup> Russian forces conducted failed ground assaults on September 23 on Zaitseve and Maryorsk in the Bakhmut area and around Novomykhailivka, Avdiivka, Opytne, and Kamianka in the Donetsk City area.<sup>28</sup>



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

Note: ISW reassessed assessed Russian advances to a poultry farm in eastern Verkhokamyanske, Donetsk Oblast, and reassessed Russian claimed control around Siversk based on geolocated footage published on September 5 that shows Russian forces targeting Ukrainian positions at the poultry farm.

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

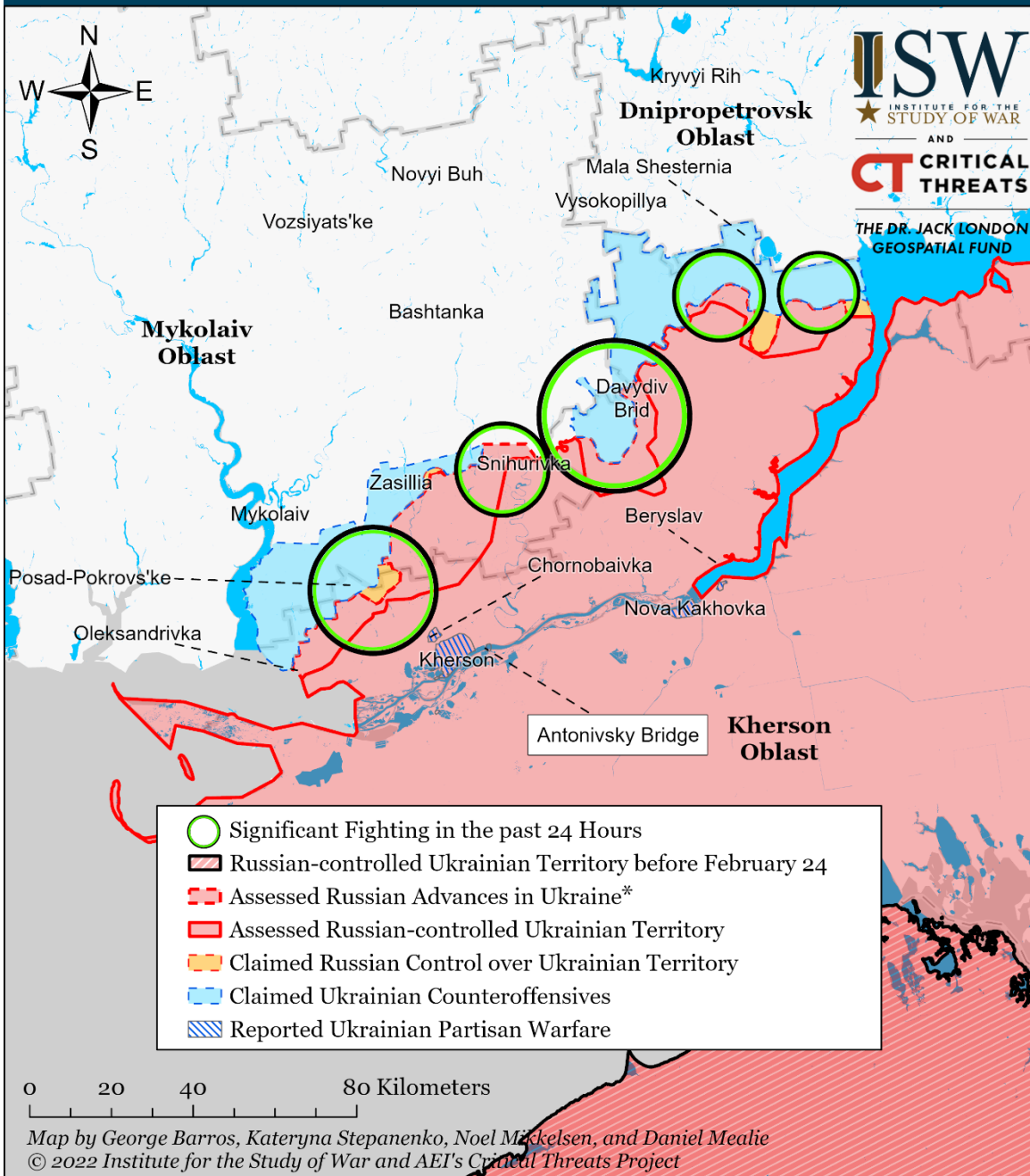
Russian forces are continuing to use Iranian-made drones to strike Ukrainian forces and cities in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down an Iranian-made Mohajer-6 in an unspecified part of the Black Sea, likely near Odesa, on September 23.<sup>29</sup> That attack marks the first time ISW has observed a Mohajer-6 in Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Russian forces have previously used Shahed-136 kamikaze drones in Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Odesa City officials reported that Russian forces conducted a drone attack on an administrative building in Odesa on September 23, likely using a Shahed-136.<sup>32</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that the attack targeted the Ukrainian Navy Headquarters.<sup>33</sup> Ukrainian forces also reportedly shot down two Shahid-136 drones over Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.<sup>34</sup>

Russian occupation officials claimed that Ukrainian forces broke through Russian defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast. Russian-appointed Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed on September 23 that a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group broke through Russian defenses near Polohy and traveled toward Rozivka, likely along the NO8 highway, in off-road vehicles.<sup>35</sup> The Zaporizhia Occupation Administration announced a 500,000-ruble reward for information leading to the capture of the “saboteurs.”<sup>36</sup> ISW cannot independently confirm these reports.

Russian forces continued strikes on Zaporizhia City on September 22-23. Rogov posted footage on September 22 of Russian rockets striking Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and military facilities overnight.<sup>37</sup> Rogov claimed that Ukrainian air defenses damaged civilian buildings by shooting down the rockets. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian rocket attacks struck a Ukrainian military enlistment office and a factory in Zaporizhia City on September 23.<sup>38</sup> Ukrainian Zaporizhia Oblast Administration Head Oleksandr Starukh also reported that Russian forces hit civilian infrastructure in Zaporizhia City.<sup>39</sup>

Russian forces continued routine shelling of Nikopol, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and Mykolaiv City, Mykolaiv Oblast on September 23. Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command and local Ukrainian officials reported on September 23 that Russian forces shelled Nikopol and Marhanets, damaging civilian residences and electrical lines.<sup>40</sup>

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 23, 2022, 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.

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 Bezimmenne on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched air strikes on Bezimmenne and Kostromka on September 4, which may indicate a Ukrainian advance in the area.

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

Ukrainian counteroffensives are likely continuing to attrit and grind down Russian forces even as the Kremlin's partial mobilization attempts to backfill new personnel to degraded Russian units. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 23 that the Russian military delivered the bodies of 105 deceased Russian servicemembers to a military hospital in Rostov-on-Don and reported that preparations are underway for the receipt of 200 additional bodies in the near future.<sup>41</sup>

## **Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (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 occupation authorities began the voting period for their sham annexation referenda on September 23 with overt coercion and falsified turnout numbers. Ukrainian sources reported that members of the occupation "election commissions" went door-to-door in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts accompanied by armed men.<sup>42</sup> Voters who turned up at polling stations did not have access to private voting booths; armed occupation forces reportedly showed voters which boxes to check and did not check identification at polling sites.<sup>43</sup> Occupation authorities reportedly stopped people on the streets to force them to vote.<sup>44</sup> The Ukrainian head of the Luhansk Military Administration, Serhiy Haidai, reported that armed men threatened to break into apartment buildings that refused them entrance and told voters who offered identification that "we already know you."<sup>45</sup> Haidai reported that occupation authorities are recording the names of those who vote no on the referendum, indicating that Russian authorities are likely preparing to retaliate against uncooperative Ukrainian civilians.<sup>46</sup>

Russian occupation authorities remained on high alert to prevent partisan attacks against sham election workers, polling stations, and government facilities. The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) reported that forces from Rosgvardia, the Russian military police, as well as the Russian Ministry of Emergencies are tasked with the "protection" of annexation referenda measures.<sup>47</sup> Russian occupation authorities in Luhansk Oblast reported that forces from the LNR Interior Ministry, the Russian Internal Affairs Ministry, and Rosgvardia implemented unspecified "organizational and practical measures" to protect public order and civilian safety during the referendum, including the protection of election commission personnel "outside the polling stations."<sup>48</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense stated on September 23 that sappers from the International Mine Action Center have begun inspecting polling stations and nearby areas in Luhansk for explosives, referring to these as "anti-terrorist measures."<sup>49</sup> The Russian head of the "We Are Together With Russia" movement, a likely Kremlin-directed attempt to demonstrate grassroots support for the sham referenda, reported a "terrorist" attack near a residential building in central Melitopol on September 23, likely describing a partisan attempt to disrupt the sham referendum there.<sup>50</sup>

Russian milbloggers already set information conditions to explain away any reported low turnout. One milblogger reported on September 23 that occupation administrations in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts have not maintained the telephone lines meant to inform residents in Ukraine and Russia about where polling stations are located.<sup>51</sup> The milblogger claimed that no employees answered the phone at informational call centers and that many residents in Ukraine and Russia cannot vote because they do not know where the polling stations are located. Russian milbloggers may use this misleading narrative to justify low turnout or coercive door-to-door "polling" of residents.

Russian media will likely distribute false turnout numbers each day of the sham referendum to maintain a thin veneer of legitimacy. A Russian reporter claimed that 15.3% of voters in Kherson Oblast, 22% of voters in Luhansk Oblast, 20.5% in Zaporizhia Oblast, and 23.6% in Donetsk Oblast turned out to vote on September 23.<sup>52</sup> He did not clarify whether these percentages refer to all eligible voters in each oblast, or only in occupied areas. Russian occupation authorities may have specific quotas of paper ballots to meet for informational purposes, but the results of these sham referenda are pre-determined and will wildly overstate turnout and support for Russian occupation.

**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>1</sup> <https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-21>

<sup>2</sup> [https://twitter.com/The\\_Lookout\\_N/status/1573304908979355648?s=20&t=g74oiWK9kuuTLIX7otmz8g](https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1573304908979355648?s=20&t=g74oiWK9kuuTLIX7otmz8g)  
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<sup>3</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/39237>; <https://t.me/rybar/39263>; <https://t.me/rybar/39264>; <https://t.me/rybar/39267>;  
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<https://t.me/epoddubny/12489>; <https://t.me/brussinf/5014>

<sup>4</sup> <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/09/phosagro-lists-106-employees-fight-ukraine>;  
<https://meduza.io/en/news/2022/09/23/russian-airline-employees-summoned-less-than-a-day-after-mobilization-declared>

<sup>5</sup> <https://meduza.io/news/2022/09/23/studentov-zaochnikov-mogut-mobilizovat-po-resheniyu-prizyvnoy-komissii>

<sup>6</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/39267>; <https://t.me/kommunist/9801>; <https://t.me/MedvedevVesti/11389>;  
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<sup>7</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/39240>

<sup>8</sup> <https://meduza.io/video/2022/09/23/rot-zakroyte-cto-vy-orete-vse-igrushki-zakonchilis>; <https://www.fontanka.ru/2022/09/23/71680199/>; <https://twitter.com/ABarbashin/status/1573258049657225216>;  
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<sup>9</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/39237>; <https://t.me/rybar/39263>; <https://t.me/rybar/39264>; <https://t.me/rybar/39267>;  
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<sup>10</sup> <https://t.me/sashakots/35835>; [https://twitter.com/666\\_mancer/status/1573294099830296577](https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1573294099830296577)

<sup>11</sup> <https://t.me/pezdicide/2134>

<sup>12</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/39237>; <https://t.me/rybar/39263>; <https://t.me/rybar/39264>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/v-chechne-mobilizatsiya-provoditjsya-ne-budet-kadyrov/32046850.html>

<sup>14</sup> [https://t.me/RKadyrov\\_95/2866](https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/2866); <https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonov/18065>; [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/64909](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/64909)

<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0GHhP8EVUDrXSgvSHxfgrBYcKfBPG5jFGvZVdzeeGVWHhuJrRPz>

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