

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 15, 2023

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April 15, 5pm 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.

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Reporting from some Western sources that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin called for Russia to end its war against Ukraine is inaccurate.[1] Some Western reports covering Prigozhin's April 14 essay on a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive and the future of the war miscontextualized a rhetorical statement in which Prigozhin established a strawman argument he attributed to Russia's "internal enemies" who seek to rationalize Russia ending the war in Ukraine now.[2] The point of his essay was to attack this strawman, not to advance it. Prigozhin actually called on Russia to commit to a decisive fight that will either defeat Ukraine or result in a temporary Russian defeat that will catalyze Russia's nationalist rebirth and set conditions for future victory.[3] A full reading of Prigozhin's essay, titled, "Only an Honest Fight: No Negotiations," does not lend itself to any reasonable interpretation that Prigozhin advocated for an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Reading Prigozhin's public communications is not a straightforward undertaking. Much of the nuance included in Prigozhin's speech is lost when translating Russian to English. Prigozhin has an idiosyncratic rhetorical and writing style that relies heavily on deadpan sarcasm, selective ambiguity, aphorisms, vulgarity, and ironic slang. Prigozhin's isolated quotes separated from the full context of his messages often lose their initial meaning.

Certain Russian players in the information space have also misinterpreted Prigozhin's essay, further exposing fissures between some Russian milbloggers. Pro-Kremlin news aggregator *Readovka* noted on April 15 that some unspecified Russian-language Telegram channels — like some Western media — simply repeated Prigozhin's strawman argument about the seduction of settling for negotiations without "reading any further" into Prigozhin's call for a protracted struggle.[4] *Readovka* endorsed Prigozhin's actual argument that the "uncomfortable truth" is that Russia must continue to fight, concurring that negotiations to end the war would "do more harm than good." [5] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin — an enemy of Prigozhin — leaned into the misinterpretation of Prigozhin's essay (possibly on purpose) as part of their ongoing blogging feud. Girkin sarcastically asked, "Do I understand correctly that the Black Clown [Prigozhin] called for the Russian Federation to reject half of the Donetsk People's Republic and a third of Zaporizhia Oblast...?" [6] Girkin also implied that that Russian prosecutors should investigate Prigozhin for his essay, likely for discrediting the Russian "special military operation," given that the strawman argument advocates that Russia should simply retain only territory it currently occupies in Ukraine.[7] Prigozhin's essay may continue to fuel debate along existing cleavages in the Russian information space where Prigozhin's supporters and competitors may use selective readings of the essay to either praise or malign Prigozhin while advancing their own arguments.

The Russian information space is reckoning with demographic transitions within Russia in a way that indicates that the nationalist ideologies underpinning the war in Ukraine will continue to have reverberating domestic

impacts. Russian outlet *RBC* reported on April 13 that a study published by the Russian New Economic Association found that an increase in the number of migrants from 390,000 to 1.1 million annually would help stabilize Russia’s population, which is in decline due to domestic levels of fertility and life expectancy as well as population outflow.[8] Moscow Duma Deputy Andrey Medvedev responded to the study and accused “lobbyists” of advocating for uncontrolled migration from Central Asia, which Medvedev claimed will bring more violence and extremism to Russia at great social and economic cost.[9] Medvedev called instead for a new law on the repatriation of ethnic Russians from all over the world in order to stabilize demographic shifts and save them from “Russophobia” abroad.[10] Russian State Duma Deputy for Defense Dmitry Kuznetsov relatedly reported on April 15 that Voronezh Oblast may begin a pilot program on the social integration of refugees and noted that this program is intended for pro-Russian refugees who left Ukraine for Russia.[11] Kuznetsov’s proposed bill underlines the same brand of staunch nationalism that Medvedev is advocating for and seeks to uphold and codify a sense of exceptionalism for ethnic Russians in Russia at the expense of all ethnic minority populations. The war in Ukraine has had, and will continue to have, substantial population and demographic impacts within Russia.[12] These impacts will leave the door open for the continued weaponization of intensely nationalist rhetoric as the war continues to empower the most staunchly xenophobic (and vocal) factions of Russian society.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party intends to recruit Russian military personnel who have served in Ukraine as candidates for elections in 2023 and 2024, likely in an effort to establish itself as the definitive pro-war party in Russia. United Russia Central Executive Committee Head Alexander Sidyakin announced on April 14 that the Young Guard of United Russia (United Russia’s youth wing) launched an educational module about participating in primaries for Russian military personnel and volunteers who have fought in Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine.[13] Sidyakin reportedly stated that Russian military personnel and volunteers will be on United Russia candidate lists for upcoming regional elections in September 2023.[14] The United Russia party is currently nominating candidates for primaries until April 27, and primaries will run from May 22 to 28.[15] Young Guard of United Russia Chairman Anton Demidov reportedly stated on April 14 that Russian military personnel and volunteers will become the main speakers of the party during Russia’s 2024 presidential election.[16]

The recruitment of military personnel as political candidates during a time of war is typical for a society that holds elections, regardless of the fairness or significance of those elections. The Kremlin likely intends to recruit military personnel as candidates to a greater extent than is usual even for a war time country, however. The Kremlin likely aims to use candidates who have served in Ukraine as the public face of the United Russia party in upcoming elections to court the support of military constituents and their family members and to establish United Russia as the definitive political party for the pro-war movement. The potential “militarization” of the United Russia party likely does not presage a Kremlin effort to escalate the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin is likely aiming to co-opt military personnel to support its ongoing effort to curry favor with the pro-war Russian ultranationalist community without fulfilling the community’s extreme demands.

Key Takeaways

- **Reporting from some Western sources that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin called for Russia to end its war against Ukraine is inaccurate.**
- **Certain Russian players in the information space have also misinterpreted Prigozhin’s essay, further exposing fissures between some Russian milbloggers.**

- The Russian information space is reckoning with demographic transitions within Russia in a way that indicates that the nationalist ideologies underpinning the war in Ukraine will continue to have reverberating domestic impacts.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party announced its intention to recruit Russian military personnel who have served in Ukraine as candidates for elections in 2023 and 2024, likely in an effort to establish itself as the definitive pro-war party in Russia.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kreminna and may be preparing to defend territory in the Kupyansk direction.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City front.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- A Russian opposition news source reported that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head Leonid Pasechnik signed a decree on April 14 authorizing spring and fall conscription in occupied Luhansk Oblast.
- The Russian State Security Service (FSB) is likely involved in efforts to target Ukrainian youth in occupied territories for law enforcement and counter-partisan purposes.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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Subordinate main effort - Capturing Donetsk Oblast

Main effort - Eastern Ukraine

Supporting effort 1 - Southern Axis

- 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 Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

* 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 these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push 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

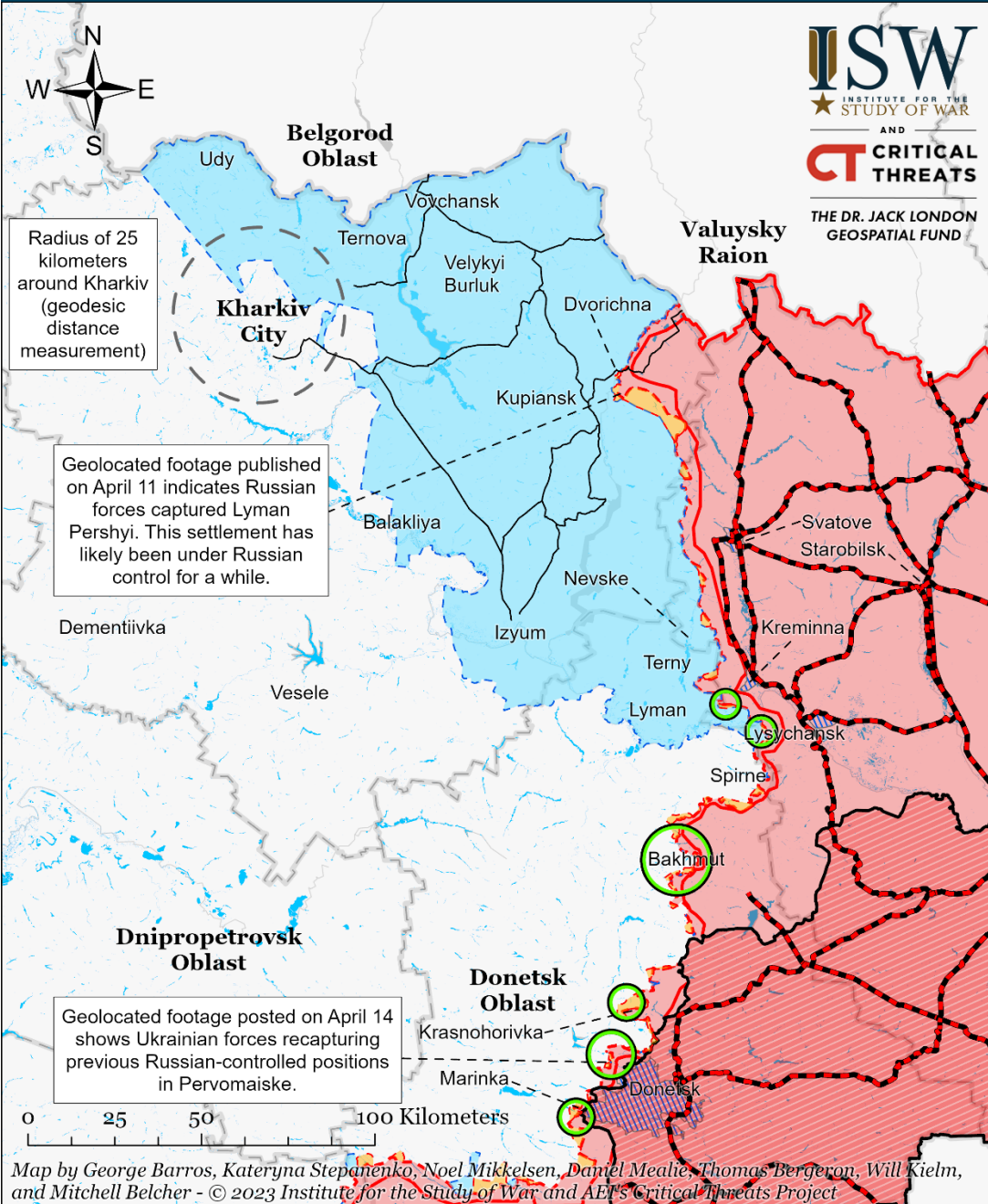
Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kreminna on April 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna) and Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna).[17] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces made limited advances north from Zolotarivka toward Bilohorivka.[18] Ukrainian Severodonetsk Regional State Administration Head Roman Vlasenko reported that the most active fighting is occurring in the Kreminna forests in the Bilohorivka direction and that the frontline remains unchanged except in the Bilohorivka direction.[19] Footage published on April 15 purportedly shows the 6th Cossack Regiment of the 2nd Luhansk Army Corps operating near Bilohorivka.[20] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed an unspecified number of new T-90 tanks and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.[21] Geolocated footage published on April 14 shows the Russian “Storm” detachment operating near Kreminna.[22]

Russian forces may be preparing to defend territory in the Kupyansk direction. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces mined areas of four unspecified settlements in the Kupyansk direction, suggesting that Russian troops may be preparing for defensive actions in this area.[23]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Key Ukrainian Roads
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- 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

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

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

Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut on April 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that heavy battles continued in Bakhmut and that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Khromove (2km west of Bakhmut).[24] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Wagner Group assault detachments captured two unspecified blocks on the northern and southern outskirts of the city.[25] Russian sources claimed on April 14 and 15 that Wagner fighters captured the Bakhmut–2 railway station and that most Ukrainian forces withdrew from the area, although ISW has not yet seen visual confirmation of either claim.[26] Russian sources claimed that Wagner fighters have crossed unspecified sections of the railway line in central Bakhmut.[27] One Russian milblogger claimed that heavy fighting was ongoing near Vyzolyetliv Donbasu Street in western Bakhmut, although other available Russian reporting and the observed rate of Russian advances in the city indicate that the claim is likely an exaggeration.[28] Russian milbloggers who claim to be reporting from within Bakhmut reported that Russian forces are using T–90 tanks within Bakhmut itself, suggesting that Wagner has access to these modern tanks for its assault on the city.[29] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a ground attack in the direction of Pryvillia (18km northwest of Bakhmut along the E40 Bakhmut–Slovyansk highway).[30]

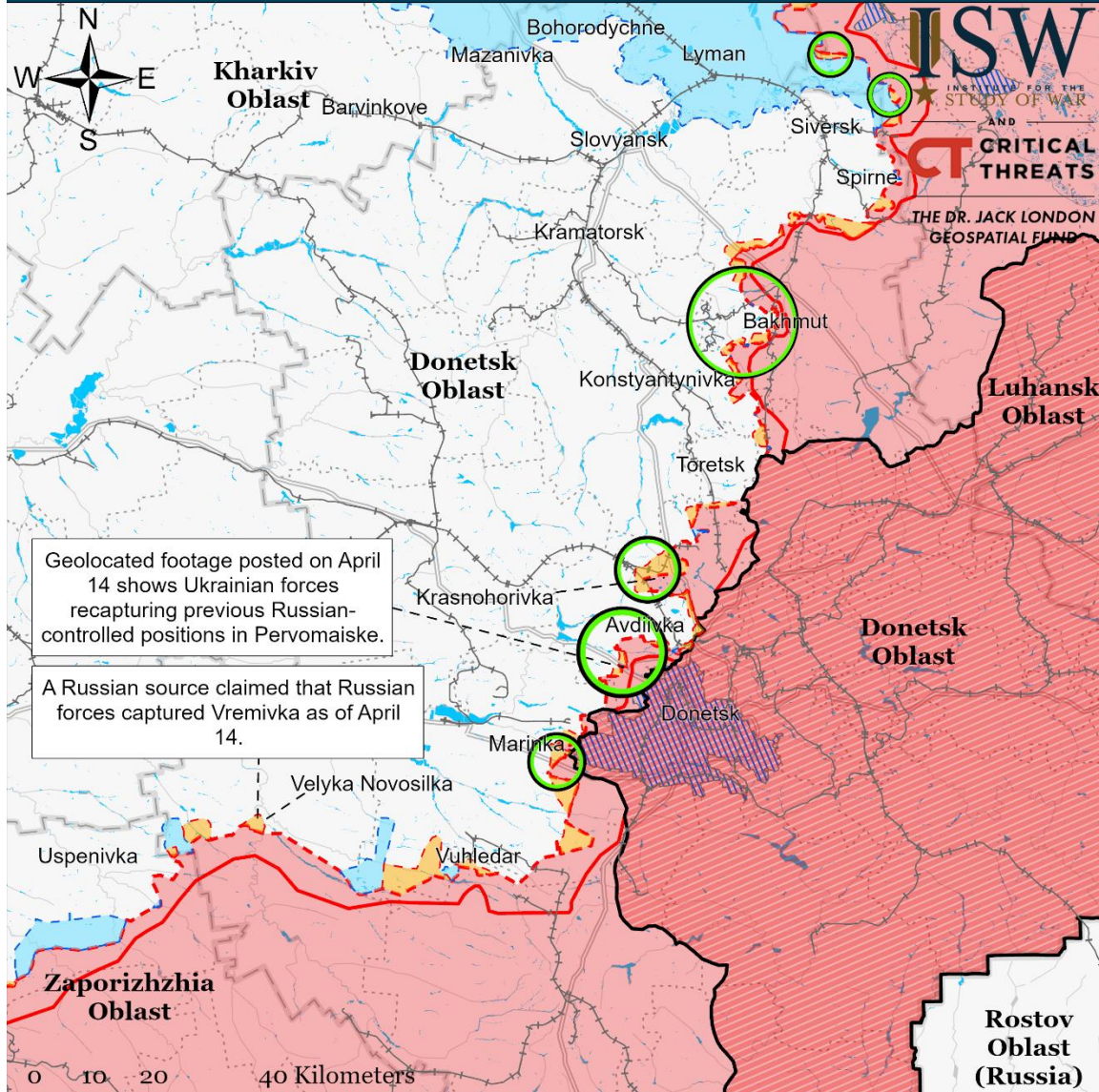
Russian discussions about Russian airborne forces (VDV) protecting Wagner’s flanks may imply that the Russian command views the Bakhmut front to be larger than just the immediate Bakhmut area. A Russian milblogger allegedly reporting from within Bakhmut claimed on April 14 that elements of the 106th VDV Division are holding Wagner’s flank near Yakovlivka (17km northeast of Bakhmut).[31] The VDV’s alleged presence near Yakovlivka suggests that Russian discussions about VDV units protecting Wagner’s southern and northern flanks encompass both the large Russian salient north of Bakhmut from Dubovo–Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) to Yakovlivka and the Russian salient south of Bakhmut from areas south of the T0504 highway to Kurdyumivka (14km southwest of Bakhmut). The milblogger’s claim suggests that VDV units are not necessarily focused on directly aiding Wagner attempts to encircle and capture Bakhmut and are likely deployed to the area to prevent possible Ukrainian counterattacks along a wider axis. Russian milbloggers continue to express concerns about a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area.[32]

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline on April 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Novokalynove (13km north of Avdiivka), Sieverne (8km southwest of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).[33] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a ground attack near Stepove (8km northwest of Avdiivka).[34] Another Russian milblogger claimed on April 14 that Russian forces occupied Ukrainian positions west of Novobakhmutivka (13km northeast of Avdiivka) along the H–20 highway.[35] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults near Novomykhailivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka) and Pobieda (32km southwest of Avdiivka), as well as in western Marinka.[36] One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces control all the high–rise buildings in Marinka, although fighting in Marinka has largely leveled the city and it is unclear how useful these supposed positions will be for further Russian attempts to capture the settlement.[37]

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) on April 15. Russian milbloggers claimed on April 14 and 15 that Russian forces resumed assaults near Vuhledar and advanced near Mykilske (27km southwest of Donetsk City).[38] The

Ukrainian General Staff, however, reported that Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations in this direction.[39]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of April 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Geolocated footage posted on April 14 shows Ukrainian forces recapturing previous Russian-controlled positions in Pervomaiske.

A Russian source claimed that Russian forces captured Vremivka as of April 14.

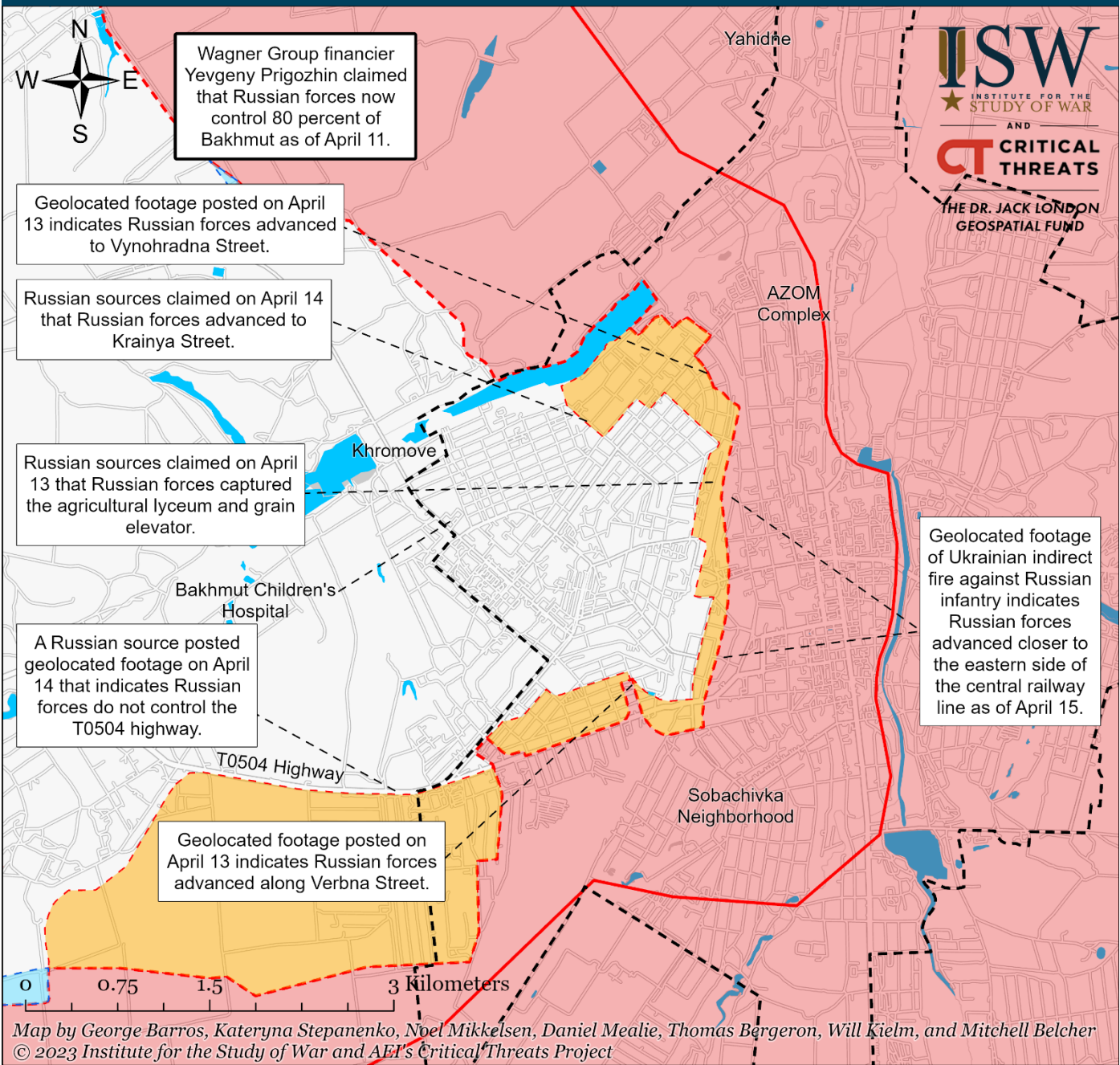
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- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed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

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

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of April 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



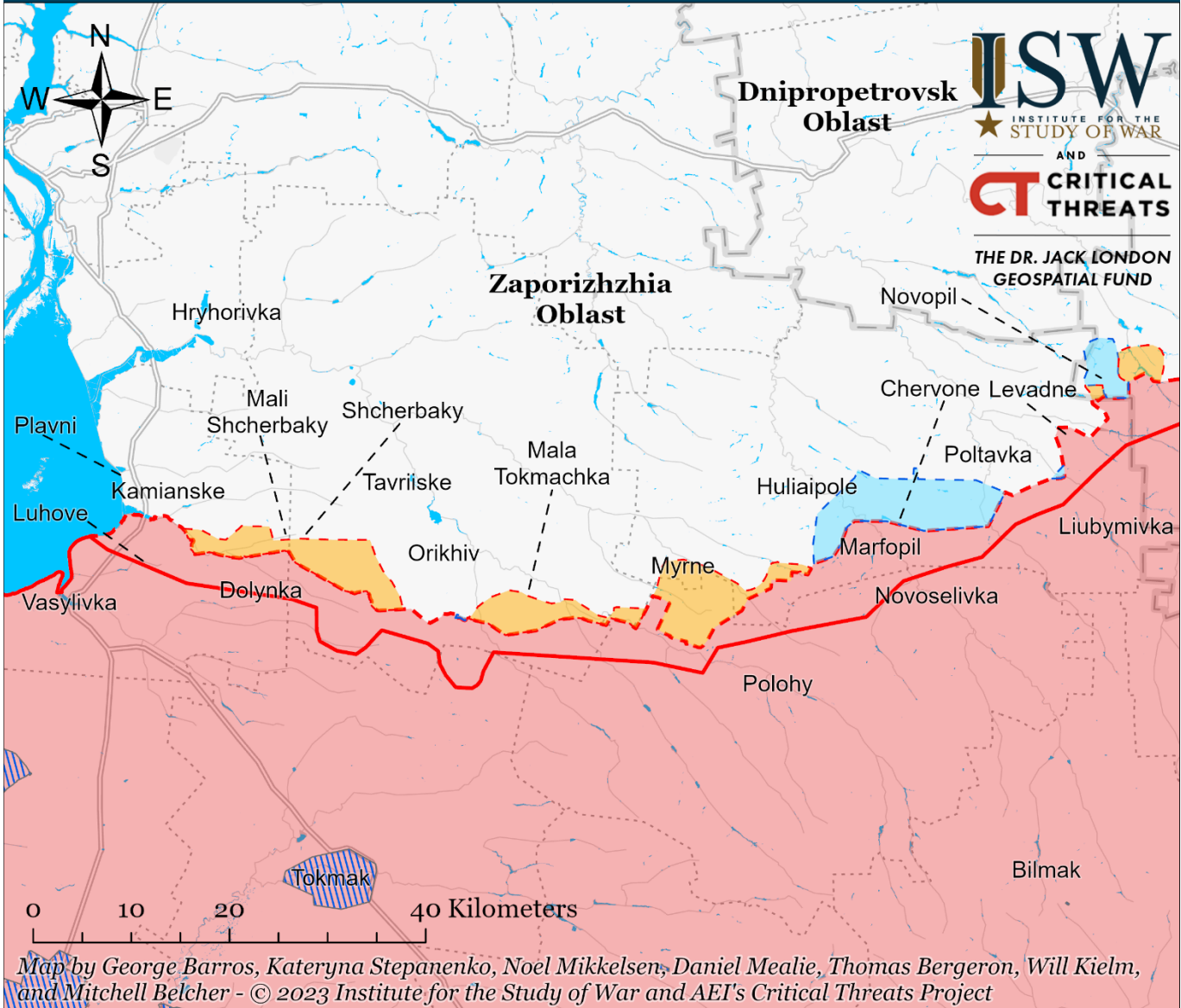
- Bakhmut City Limits
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

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

Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine on April 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops continued defensive actions in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, and Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that there have been no changes in the condition, composition, or position of Russian forces on this front.[40] Satellite imagery shows that Russian forces constructed trenches along the northern coast of occupied Crimea near Chornomorske between March 5 and April 14.[41] Russian forces continued routine shelling along the line of contact in southern Ukraine on April 15.[42]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of April 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 15, 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.

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

Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head Leonid Pasechnik signed a decree on April 14 authorizing spring and fall conscription in occupied Luhansk Oblast.[43] The decree states that the LNR spring conscription cycle will align with the Russian spring conscription cycle, running from April 1 to July 15.[44] It is unclear how LNR authorities plan to build conscription apparatuses, send summonses, and implement conscription considering that the conscription cycle has already been ongoing for over two weeks. It is also unclear where these conscripts will serve, as Russian authorities have denied that other conscripts will fight in the war in Ukraine.[45] Pasechnik's announcement directly contradicts Duma Defense Committee Chair Andrei Kartapolov's March 30 claim that conscription will not occur in occupied Ukraine, highlighting the lack of coordination and consistent planning among Russian government organs and the exclusion of legal authorities from decision-making processes.[46]

Russian occupation authorities may be preparing to intensify mobilization efforts in occupied Ukrainian territories. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on April 15 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) instructed raion-level occupation administrations to transfer lists of Russian passport holders to local military registration and enlistment offices by April 18.[47] Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported on April 15 that Russian authorities will add residents of occupied territories to the digital registry of Russians liable for military service.[48] Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the law authorizing the registry's creation on April 14.[49] ISW previously assessed that this registry will enhance Russian authorities' ability to crack down on mobilization evaders.[50]

Russian Department of Organization and Mobilization head Colonel Andrey Biryukov asserted on April 15 that Russian conscription is going according to plan and is set to be complete by July 15. Biryukov stated that the first wave of conscripts will deploy to permanent deployment points within Russia on April 20. Biryukov claimed that 52,000 citizens have received conscription notifications and that over 50,000 citizens have already arrived at military recruitment centers – 21,000 of whom will serve while 29,000 have received legal deferrals.[51] ISW continues to assess that Russia will not commit Russian conscripts to Ukraine in the foreseeable future.[52]

Russian authorities continue to create new military formations and use all available methods to increase and expedite military recruitment.[53] A regional branch of *Radio Liberty* reported that the Astrakhan Oblast military registration and enlistment office began to form the new, contract-based "Lotos" subdivision on April 15.[54]

Endemic corruption poses an enduring challenge to Russian force generation efforts. Russian authorities sentenced Chechen military warehouse chief Ivan Popov to 1.5 years in prison on March 9 for embezzlement. Popov reportedly stole and resold 12.5 million rubles (about \$153,250) worth of ammunition and specialized uniforms/gear between December 2021 and June 23, 2022.[55]

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

The Russian State Security Service (FSB) is likely involved in efforts to target Ukrainian youth in occupied territories for law enforcement and counter-partisan purposes. FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov held a meeting with the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAC) on April 11 to "improve the prevention of terrorism in the field of education and the youth environment." [56] Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery

Gerasimov also attended the meeting, where participants discussed how to implement programs to counter extremist sentiments among youth, including in occupied areas of Ukraine.[57] The NAC meeting suggests that the FSB is likely directly involved in shaping youth policy in occupied areas to reflect a law enforcement and counterterrorism focus, which essentially serves as a method of militarizing youth in occupied areas. The FSB may also be attempting to recruit young Ukrainians as agents in the event that Russia loses control of some occupied territory. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky similarly noted on April 15 that the Russian Federal Agency for Youth Affairs is overseeing the development of a large-scale educational program called “Generation of the South” in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast that will focus on “creative and patriotic work.”[58] Russian occupation authorities will likely continue efforts to target youth in occupied Ukraine in order to expand social control of occupied areas.

Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Sergey Kiriyenko visited occupied Donetsk Oblast on April 15 to highlight purported developments in the oblast. Kiriyenko and Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin visited Mariupol and discussed medicine prices, claiming that there are no existing issues with medicine supply in the city.[59] Pushilin and Kiriyenko also met with Russian Minister of Education Sergey Kravtsov and DNR Minister of Education Olga Koludarova to discuss education and children’s issues in occupied Donetsk Oblast as well as the implementation of the United State Exam that is required for entrance into Russian universities.[60] Kiriyenko stated that more children from occupied areas should be able to “improve their health” and “rest” in Russian regions during summer vacation, setting conditions for additional deportation of Ukrainian children from Donetsk Oblast under the guise of “rest and rehabilitation” schemes.[61]

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on April 14 that officially switched occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts to Moscow time.[62]

Significant activity in Belarus (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.

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. Unspecified elements of the Vitebsk-based 103rd Airborne Brigade completed unspecified brigade tactical exercises at the Losvido Training Ground in Vitebsk, Belarus, on April 15.[63]

Belarusian engineering elements conducted exercises to cross water obstacles in Belarus. A pontoon-bridge company and other engineering elements of the Belarusian 30th Railway Brigade constructed a river crossing near Beshenkovichi, Vitebsk Oblast, on April 15.[64] A bridging battalion of the Belarusian 36th Road and Bridge Brigade established a pontoon bridge over a river (likely the Berezina River) near Vialikaje Stachava, Minsk Oblast, on April 15.[65]

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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