

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 18, 2023
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April 18, 8 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.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a wartime leader in anticipation of a planned Ukrainian counteroffensive during his visit to occupied Kherson and Luhansk oblasts. The Kremlin announced on April 18 that Putin visited the headquarters of the Russian Dnepr Group of Forces in Kherson Oblast and the Vostok National Guard headquarters in occupied Luhansk Oblast.[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that Putin visited occupied territories on April 17. Putin, however, stated that Orthodox Easter holiday is “coming up” in one of the videos, which suggests that his visit occurred prior to April 16.[2] The Kremlin later edited the video to exclude Putin's statement about the then-upcoming East holiday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the Avdiivka frontline on April 18, and it is possible the Kremlin deliberately released footage of Putin's visit to overshadow Zelensky's visit in the information space.[3] ISW reported on Russian milbloggers criticizing Russian officials for failing to visit the frontlines like Zelensky, and Putin had previously visited occupied Mariupol on March 19 to improve his appearance as a wartime leader.[4] Russian occupation officials and milbloggers celebrated Putin's visit and claimed that he boosted the morale of Russian servicemen preparing to repel Ukrainian counteroffensives.[5] Geolocated footage shows that Putin visited Arabat Spit in southwestern Kherson Oblast - at least 130km from the nearest frontline.[6]

Putin's visit likely also intended to publicly identify potential scapegoats ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. Putin received briefings from Commander of Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, Commander of the Dnepr Group of Forces Colonel General Oleg Makarevich, and other unnamed military commanders regarding the situation along the Kherson and Zaporizhia frontlines.[7] Putin also met with Colonel General Alexander Lapin and other unnamed top-ranking officers to discuss the situation on the Luhansk frontline. Putin likely deliberately singled out Teplinsky and Makarevich as commanders responsible for southern Ukraine, and Lapin as a commander overseeing the Luhansk direction. Putin, Kremlin sources, and milbloggers have been increasingly discussing the prospects for a Ukrainian counteroffensive, and it is likely that the Kremlin is preparing the domestic information space for either military failures or the defeat of the counteroffensive threat.[8]

Putin's demonstrative meetings with Teplinsky, Makarevich, and Lapin likely confirm another change in military command and possibly within the Kremlin's inner circle. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger observed that the Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu did not attend Putin's meetings in occupied

Ukraine.[9] The milblogger claimed that Teplinsky and Lapin – both of whom had reportedly been placed on a leave – returned to the Russian military command likely against the wishes of Gerasimov and Shoigu. Russian sources previously claimed that the Kremlin replaced Wagner-affiliated Teplinsky with Makarevich as the VDV commander on January 13, likely after the Russian MoD and Gerasimov regained Putin’s favor in the lead up of Russia’s unsuccessful winter-spring offensive operation in Donbas.[10] The meeting confirms previous Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s hints at Teplinsky’s reappointment.[11] ISW previously assessed that Teplinsky’s confirmed reappointment suggests that the Kremlin is likely seeking to work with Wagner to achieve a decisive victory in Bakhmut.[12] The confirmation may further indicate that Prigozhin has at least partly regained Putin’s favor by overriding Gerasimov and Shoigu’s efforts to eliminate Wagner in Bakhmut.[13]

Putin may be attempting to balance Wagner’s influence by reappointing Lapin to command the Luhansk sector of the frontline. The Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Lapin assumed the role of the commander of the Vostok National Guard formation and noted that the Putin-Lapin meeting confirms Lapin’s return to the frontlines.[14] Prigozhin and Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov had led a successful campaign to remove Lapin from his position as the commander of the “center” group of Russian forces, likely due to personal conflicts during the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk and Luhansk offensive operations in the summer of 2022.[15] The milblogger speculated that Putin reappointed Lapin to reinforce command in the area or to help Putin avoid conflicts with the Russian Defense Ministry.

Select members of the “Club of Angry Patriots” are advocating for a revolution in Russia if the Kremlin freezes the war or pursues peace negotiations with Ukraine and the West. Self-proclaimed former “People’s Governor of Donetsk Oblast” Pavel Gubarev defined the “Club of Angry Patriots” as a “potentially revolutionary power” that will prevent “betrayal” if the government decides to freeze the current frontlines in Ukraine.[16] Gubarev also noted that Russia cannot win the war without a revolution – either from within the government or in society – because oligarchs, agents, ethnic mafias, and nationalist separatists will not allow for the reformation of social-economic institutions to support the war effort. Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin noted that Gubarev’s opinion does not represent the collective vision on the “Club of Angry Patriots” and noted that any revolution begins with a “coup from the top” over which he and other members of the group have no control over since they do not have connections to the Kremlin.[17]

The official “Club of Angry Patriots” Telegram account amplified a forecast regarding possible political changes within the Kremlin as a result of a Ukrainian counteroffensive, which may represent the group’s concerns over the progress of the war.[18] The group amplified a post from the leader of the Russian “Civil Solidarity” movement Georgiy Fedorov, who stated that the political situation in Russia largely depends on frontline realities. Fedorov assessed that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s recent statements about the end of the “special military operation” is the start of the campaign to freeze the war in Ukraine.

Fedorov stated that if Russians are able to defeat Ukrainian counteroffensives over the summer, then Russian President Vladimir Putin may freeze the war to avoid calling up mobilization ahead of the 2024 presidential election cycle. Fedorov claimed that Russia would likely present a suppressed Ukrainian counteroffensive as a victory and is likely intensifying volunteer recruitment efforts to generate enough contract servicemen to hold existing frontlines. Fedorov claimed that the Kremlin will continue to intensify censorship and repressions and will not replace officials in the Kremlin or within the military command under the conditions of unsuccessful counteroffensive operations. Fedorov stated that if Ukrainians are successful, then political situation within the Kremlin will lead to a deeper conflict between different parties for influence and the Kremlin will conduct personnel changes. Fedorov claimed that despite potential mobilization and disruption in society and the Kremlin, Putin's system is capable of eliminating all threats "associated with the interception of power." Fedorov noted that the most unlikely scenario is the imminent dissolution of Putin's power system, but noted that different financial, regional, and industrial figures may be preparing for such an outcome.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met to discuss unspecified strategic partnership and military cooperation in Moscow on April 18. Shoigu claimed that mutual Russian-Chinese efforts aim to stabilize and reduce conflict and that each state significantly values deepening military cooperation.[19] Shoigu also claimed that Russia and China can deepen their partnership by firmly supporting each other on national security issues. Li stated that his first visit to Russia as Defense Minister demonstrates the determination to strengthen cooperation between the Russian military and the Chinese People's Liberation Army.[20] Shoigu's and Li's remarks largely echoed Li's and Russian President Vladimir Putin's remarks on April 16.[21]

The Kremlin continued efforts to portray Russia as a respected international partner by meeting with China against the backdrop of the G7 meeting in Japan on April 18. The G7 communique condemned Russian nuclear blackmail rhetoric, Russia's possible deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, destabilizing Wagner Group activities in Africa, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine, Russia's suspension of the New START Treaty, and Iran's provision of combat UAVs to Russia.[22] The Russian Ministry of Defense published footage of two Russian strategic bombers flying in international airspace over the Bering and Okhotsk Seas as part of the Pacific Fleet's ongoing readiness check.[23] ISW previously assessed that the Pacific Fleet's ongoing readiness checks are likely meant to posture that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in the Pacific ahead of the G7 meeting.[24]

Russian authorities detained Russian public relations specialist Yaroslav Shirshikov, an associate of detained *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, in Yekaterinburg on April 18. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on April 18 that Russian authorities detained Shirshikov and charged him with justifying terrorism possibly for his social media posts about prominent Russian milblogger Maxim Fomin's (alias Vladlen Tatarsky) assassination.[25] Shirshikov spoke to Gershkovich shortly before Gershkovich's arrest and was one of the first people to report Gershkovich as missing.[26] Shirshikov previously stated that Gershkovich had traveled to Yekaterinburg to report on Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's

criticisms of Yekaterinburg History Museum Director Igor Pushkarev and locals' opinions on the war.[27]

The Russian State Duma approved a series of possibly unconstitutional amendments to the Russian Criminal Code on April 18 aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship and repressing the Russian public. The Russian State Duma approved amendments to the Russian Criminal Code that increase the maximum prison sentence for high treason from 20 years to life and authorize the revocation of Russian citizenship for discrediting the Russian military and participating in designated undesirable nongovernmental organizations.[28] The amendment also stipulates that a Russian citizen may not renounce their citizenship if the citizen has an outstanding duty to the state, such as mobilization.[29] These measures appear to violate the Russian Constitution, as Article 6 states that a Russian citizen may not be deprived of their citizenship or of the right to change citizenship status.[30] The State Duma also approved an amendment that criminalizes advising international organizations in which Russia does not belong or foreign states bodies.[31] Russian opposition media outlet *OVD-Info* states that this amendment would criminalize facilitating international war crimes investigations.[32] International Humanitarian Law, to which Russia is a party, stipulates that states have a duty to investigate and prosecute war crimes.[33]

The Russian Immortal Regiment Central Headquarters announced the cancellation of the annual Immortal Regiment Victory Day march, likely in an effort to reduce public discussion of deaths in the current conflict. Russian State Duma Member Deputy and Co-Chair of the Immortal Regiment Central Headquarters Elena Tsunaeva announced the cancellation of the march, which memorializes Russian war dead, on April 18, for unspecified security reasons.[34] Tsunaeva stated that citizens can instead submit photos of relatives to a centralized online database to participate in a "virtual procession," which Russian authorities will likely use to hide the number of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. Tsunaeva also invited people to share pictures of their deceased family members online, on clothes, and on cars.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a wartime leader in anticipation of a planned Ukrainian counteroffensive during his visit to occupied Kherson and Luhansk oblasts.**
- **Putin's visit likely intended to publicly identify scapegoats ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.**
- **Putin's demonstrative meetings with Teplinsky, Makarevich, and Lapin likely confirm another change in military command and possibly within the Kremlin's inner circle.**
- **Select members of the "Club of Angry Patriots" are advocating for a revolution in Russia if the Kremlin freezes the war or pursue peace negotiations with Ukraine and the West.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu met to discuss on strategic partnership and military cooperation in Moscow on April 18.**
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- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued to make gains in Bakhmut and conducted ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.**
- **Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue defensive preparations in southern Ukraine.**
- **The Kremlin continues efforts to integrate proxy formations with conventional Russian forces.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian civilians to Russia under healthcare and rehabilitation schemes.**
- **Belarus may begin economically supporting Russian-occupied Donetsk Oblast with a patronage system.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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.

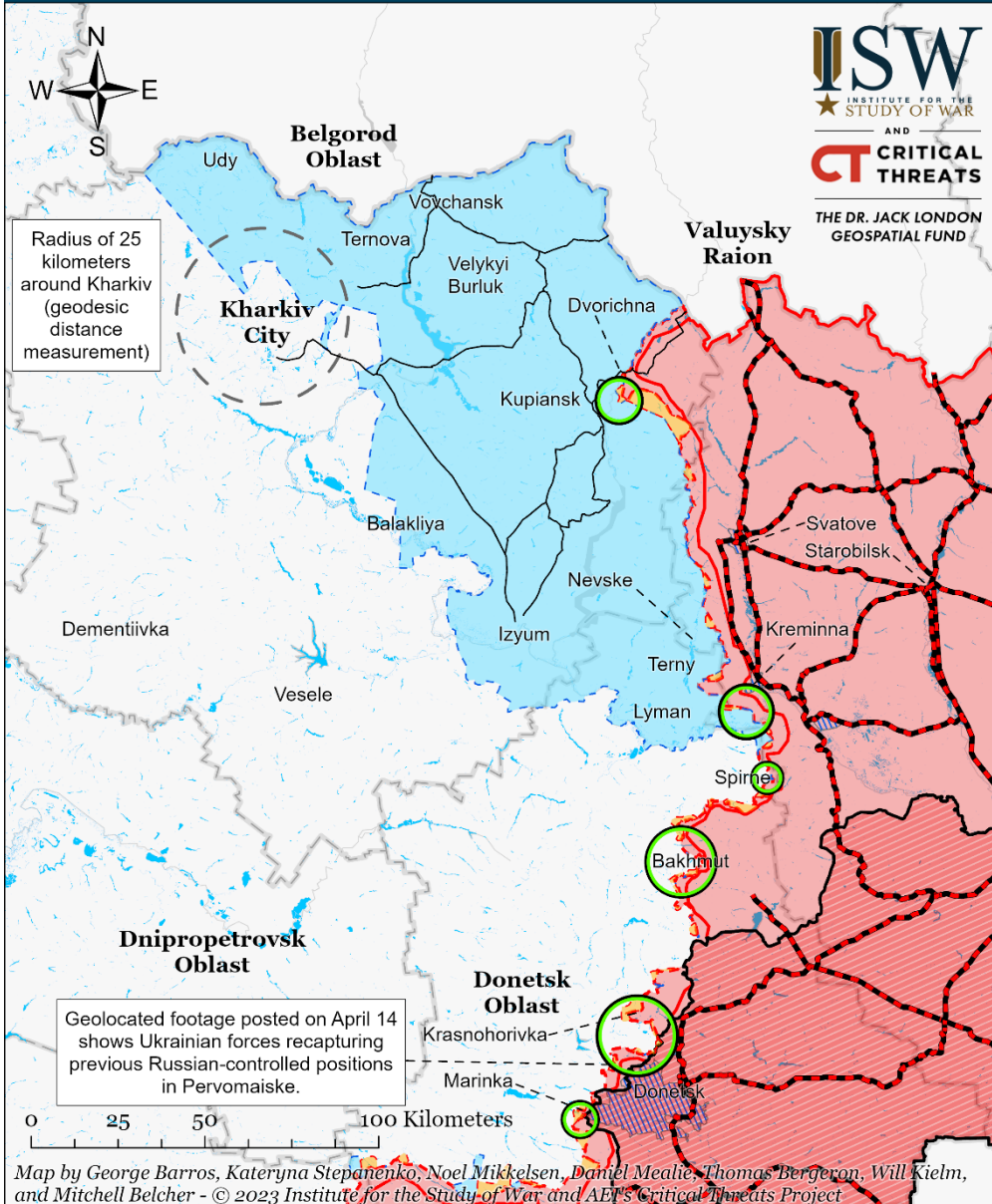
- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety 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 northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on April 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk), Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), and Spirne (25km south of Kreminna).[35] Russian milbloggers claimed on April 17 that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Synkivka, Dvorichna (15km northeast of Kupyansk), Chervonopopivka (5km northwest of Kreminna), and Kreminna, and that Russian forces conducted assault operations near Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna) toward Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna).[36] Another Russian milblogger claimed on April 18 that Russian forces conducted ground attacks in the direction of Torske, Terny, and Nevske (all within 14 to 18km west or northwest of Kreminna) and near Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).[37] Footage published on April 17 and 18 purportedly shows Ukrainian forces driving a captured TOS-1A thermobaric artillery system in the Svatove-Kreminna direction and Chechen "Akhmat" special forces elements repelling Ukrainian forces near Kreminna.[38]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

- 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.

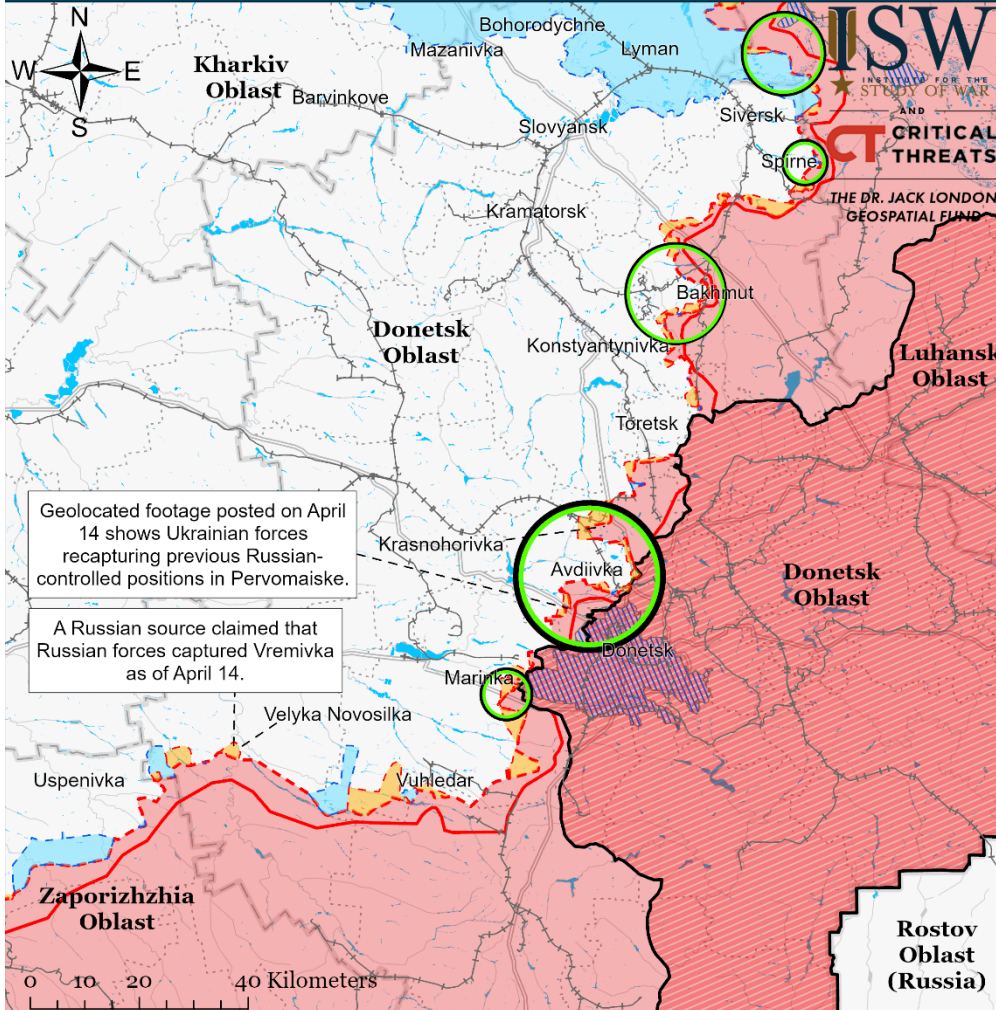
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued to make gains in Bakhmut on April 18. Geolocated footage published on April 17 indicates that Wagner Group forces have likely advanced closer to the House of Culture in northwestern Bakhmut.[39] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Wagner forces captured three unspecified blocks in northern, central, and southern Bakhmut.[40] Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces have advanced in northern, southern, and central Bakhmut, including most of the rail station area and across the railway in central Bakhmut.[41] A Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner forces advanced west of the rail line in western Bakhmut.[42] One milblogger claimed that Wagner attacks towards Khromove (immediately northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (3km southwest of Bakhmut) failed.[43] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Bakhmut, and that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian forces near Ivanivske and Predtechynne (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[44] Commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Russian forces have increased heavy artillery and air strikes against Bakhmut.[45] The Ukrainian Border Guards stated on April 18 that Wagner forces are not currently suffering from artillery ammunition shortages.[46] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces began to use modified FAB-500 aerial bombs equipped with guidance systems to strike Bakhmut as of at least April 17.[47]

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on April 18. Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces have advanced up to the H-20 highway northeast of Krasnohorivka (3km north of Avdiivka).[48] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Stepove (2km north of Avdiivka), Novokalynove (8km north of Avdiivka), Berdychi (4km northwest of Avdiivka) Avdiivka, Sieverne (5km west of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).[49] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made unspecified advances near Kruta Balka (3km northeast of Avdiivka), Vodyane (8km southwest of Avdiivka), and Nevelske (6km northwest of Donetsk City).[50] Other milbloggers claimed that Russian forces tried and failed to break through Ukrainian defenses near Keramik, Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Marinka.[51]

Ukrainian forces likely conducted limited counterattacks in western Donetsk Oblast. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks near Vuhledar, Pavlivka (3km southwest of Vuhledar), and a forest belt north of Mykilske (4km southeast of Vuhledar) and posted footage of Russian forces striking Ukrainian tanks in the area.[52] Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed or claimed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on April 18.[53]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of April 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

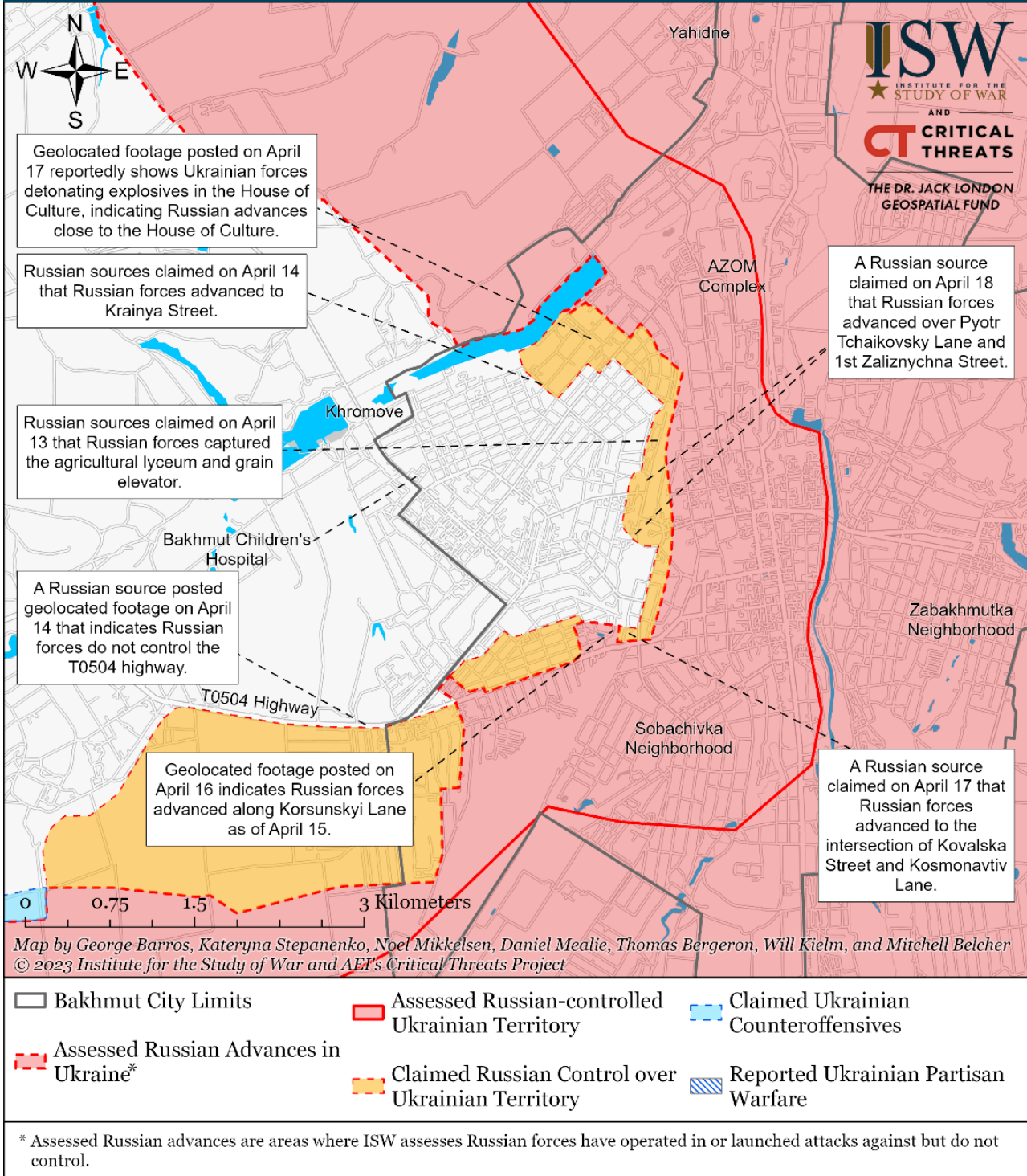


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kiehm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- 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 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



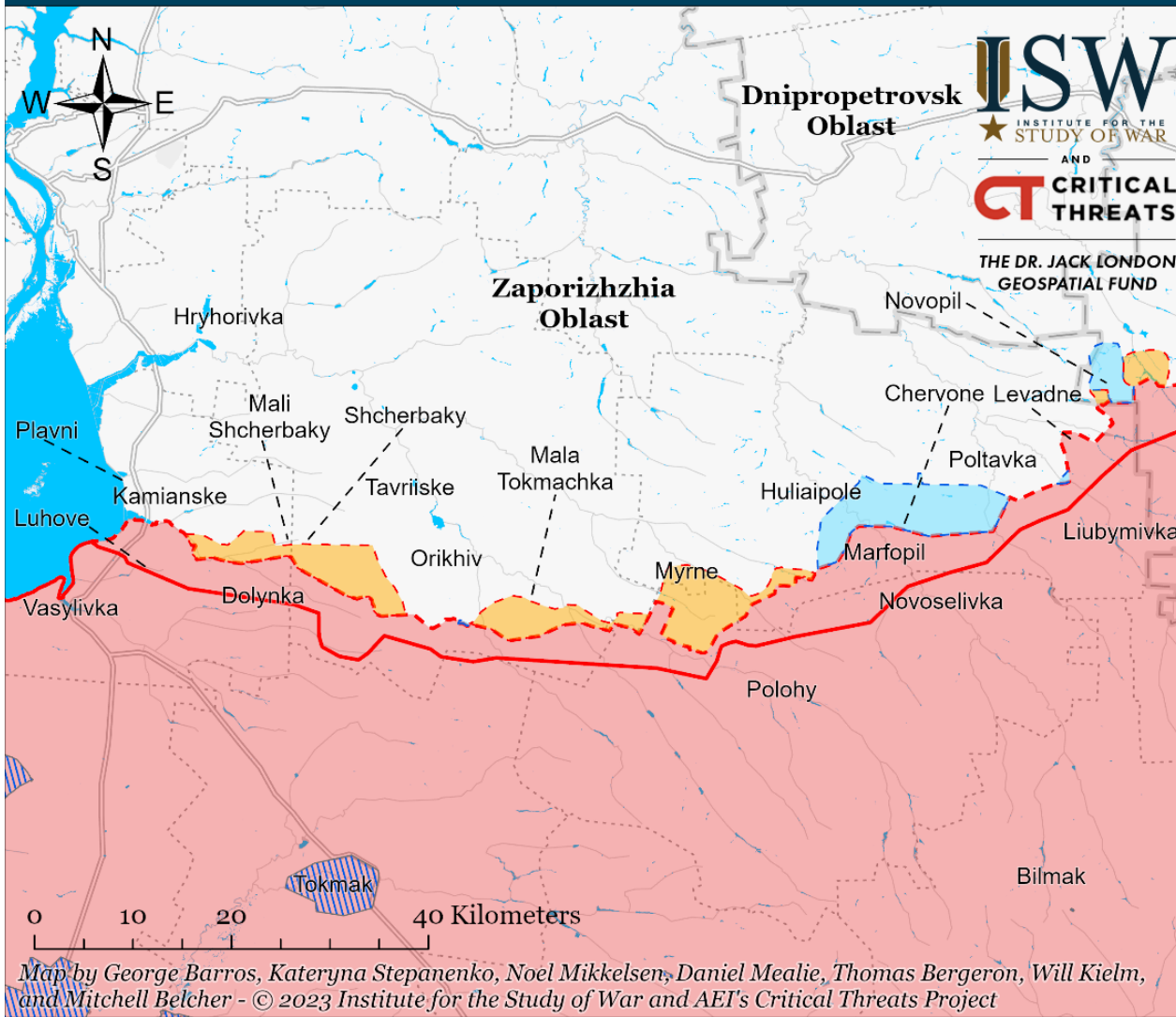
Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue defensive preparations in southern Ukraine. Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces have mined the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast in preparation for a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.[54] Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported that Russian forces in Mariupol have not conducted any major movements recently and continue to reinforce Mariupol as some Russian forces deploy from Mariupol to other areas including the Vuhledar area.[55] Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov stated that Russian forces continue to transport personnel and defensive fortifications through Melitopol between other rear areas and the front.[56]

Some Russian occupation officials and milbloggers have significantly shifted their narrative warning of a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive; Russian sources that previously warned about a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast are now warning that Ukrainian forces may conduct a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo claimed on April 18 that Ukrainian forces have concentrated unspecified forces in west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and have demonstrated a willingness to cross the Dnipro River.[57] Saldo's claim coincides with Russian President Vladimir Putin's recently reported visit to the Russian rear on the Arabat Spit in Kherson Oblast to check Russian preparations for a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive.[58] Russian milbloggers went into greater detail on Saldo's claims, largely assessing that Ukrainian forces are preparing to establish a bridgehead across the Dnipro River.[59] Russian milbloggers have largely claimed that Ukrainian forces would mass for a counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast and warned of claimed imminent counteroffensives since October 2022, as ISW has previously reported.[60] Another prominent Russian milblogger claimed that reports of a Ukrainian counterattack in western Zaporizhia Oblast (north of Melitopol) are false, but that Ukrainian forces are preparing for counteroffensive pushes near Polohy and Orikhiv.[61]

Russian forces conducted routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on April 18.[62]

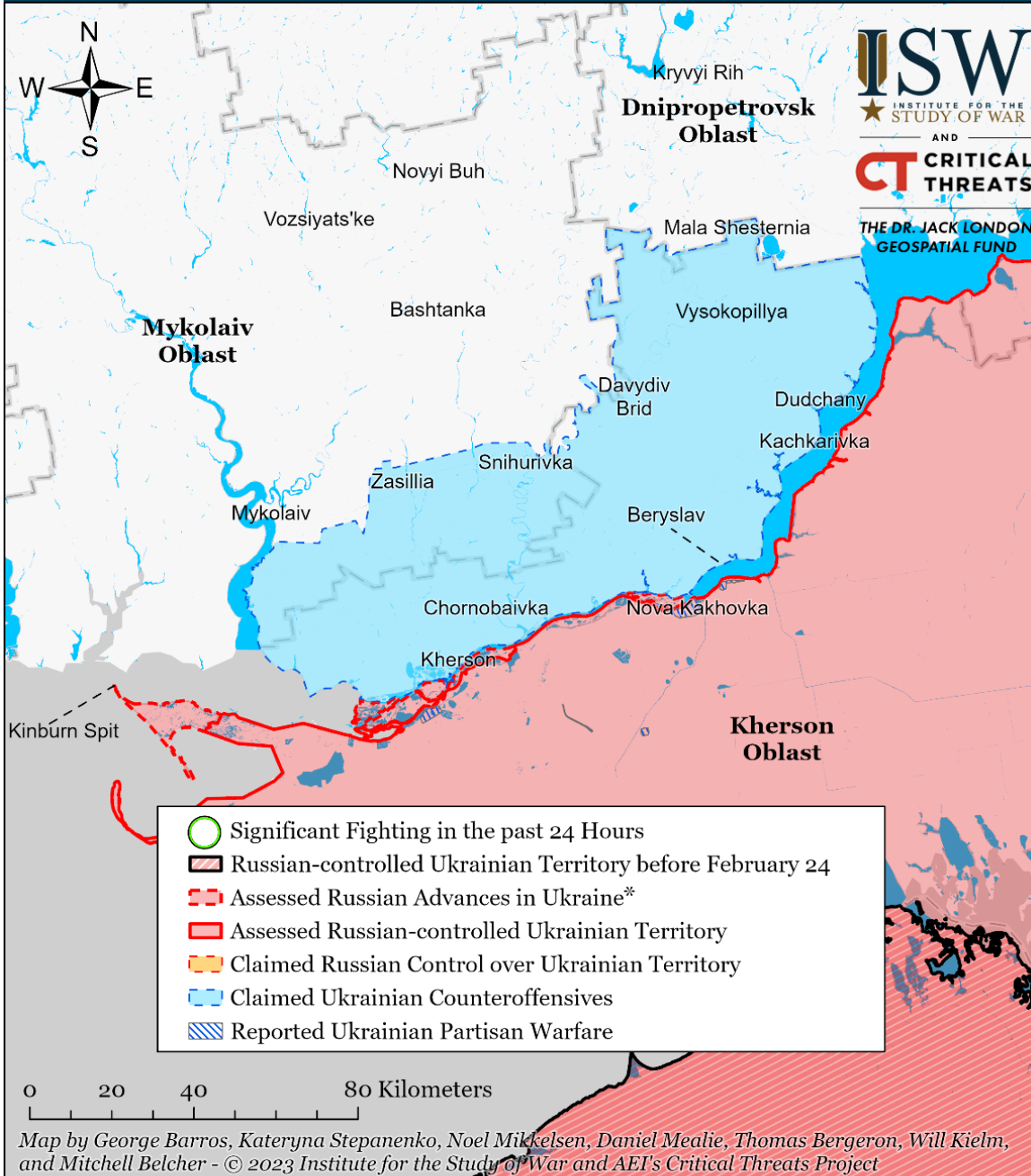
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of April 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- 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.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 18, 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)

The Kremlin continues efforts to integrate proxy formations with conventional Russian forces. The Russian State Duma passed a bill on its first reading on April 18 that grants veteran status and benefits to Russian proxy fighters and Russians nationals who fought in Donbas starting since 2014.[63] The Duma also passed a bill that completely writes off loans for anyone who participated in Russia's invasion in Ukraine starting since 2014 and died or was seriously wounded in combat.[64]

The Kremlin dramatically increased advertisements for the Russian volunteer recruitment campaign starting since March 2023. Russian independent outlet *Novaya Gazeta Europe* reported that Russian officials, local media, and even schools posted 75,000 enlistment advertisements on Russian social media platform VK, of which 70 percent emerged over the past two months.[65] *Novaya Gazeta* noted that 90 percent of all posts advertise contract service with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), while another 2,500 posts promoted recruitment for the Wagner Group private military company (PMC). The outlet found that government officials most commonly promote such advertisements and noted that recruitment posts also appear within social media groups that are completely unrelated to news, employment, or military affairs. Russian officials are also advertising in hospitals, apartment entrances, and on the metro. A Russian military expert told *Novaya Gazeta* that volunteers used to sign contracts with the Russian MoD for a defined temporary service period, but currently the Russian MoD is offering indefinite military service contracts that can only be terminated by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin's ongoing volunteer recruitment campaign is likely increasingly integrating Wagner recruitment efforts into an overarching official Kremlin recruitment effort. *Novaya Gazeta* reported that Wagner is planning to recruit volunteers with the help of local officials and has promised to visit 36,097 settlements in Russia in April. Wagner is planning to advertise military service on local administration buildings and in post offices. Wagner advertisements have also appeared on federal TV channels such as *RT*, and local Crimean and Novosibirsk channels. The local administrations' support for Wagner recruitment may indicate that the Kremlin is once again allowing Wagner to expand its force or suggests that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has a profound network of Wagner-affiliated local officials. Prigozhin previously complained that St. Petersburg and Yaroslavl Oblast are the only two regions that are not actively supporting the recruitment efforts.[66]

Russia is forming a new private military training entity, which likely also supports the Kremlin's force generation efforts. The Voevoda Training Center announced the opening of variety of training centers in several Russian cities, inviting individuals ages 14 to 60 to attend military training on April 6.[67] Voevoda advertised that experienced combat veterans will train the class and promoted specialized tactical lessons for operations with UAVs and anti-UAV operations.

Russian occupation officials are also forming Cossack military formations in southern Ukraine. Head of the Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Administration Yevgeny Balitsky announced that the administration supported the decision to make a registered Cossack force in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[68]

Pardoned former Wagner convict forces are continuing to commit violent crimes in Russia following the conclusion of their contracts and reintegration into Russian society. Released Wagner mercenary Georgy Siukaev reportedly killed a civilian in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia.[69] Siukaev recently returned from the frontlines in Ukraine, and Prigozhin claimed that Wanger’s reoffender rate remains low.[70]

Russian outlets reported that Russian state defense conglomerate Rostec had transferred ammunition production facilities in Burevestnik Central Research Institute, Uraltransmash, and Plant No. 9 from under the ownership of the Uralvagonzavod machine industry company to the Techmash.[71] Rostec claimed that the transfer would increase production volume, while Uralvagonzavod focuses on tank production. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger noted that some Russian sources are criticizing the transfer, claiming that such move is an “insidious privatization” of defense enterprises while Russian forces face shell shortages.[72] The milblogger denounced such concerns, noting that these industrial facilities remain under state ownership.

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)

Russian occupation officials continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian civilians to Russia under healthcare and rehabilitation schemes.[GM47] Former Advisor to Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Rodion Miroshnik claimed on April 18 that 23 children and 17 mothers from Severodonetsk, Kreminna, and other occupied areas of Luhansk Oblast departed from occupied Ukraine and will spend 21 days at Klyazma sanatorium in Moscow Oblast under the “We Help Our Own” project.[73] Miroshnik claimed that the “We Help Our Own” project also plans to send mothers and children from occupied areas of Donetsk Oblast to Russia under the same healthcare and rehabilitation scheme.

Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian children into Russian patriotic organizations. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky announced on April 18 that the public youth organization “Russian Student Teams,” which aims to engage in the patriotic education of youth and involve students in unspecified labor activities, opened a regional branch in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[74] Balitsky claimed that the organization already has three cells of over 80 people that will unite under the new regional branch.

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.

Belarus may begin economically supporting Russian-occupied Donetsk Oblast with a patronage system.[GM48] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin met Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk on April 18.[75] Pushilin stated said Lukashenko said that Belarus is ready to assist occupied Donetsk Oblast with “large scale restoration.”[76] Pushilin claimed that he and Lukashenko also discussed potential agriculture, industry, and construction cooperation between occupied Donetsk Oblast and Belarus.[77] The Kremlin may seek to leverage Belarus’ state budget to offset some of the costs of restoring damaged infrastructure in Donetsk Oblast. ISW has previously written about how Russian federal subjects have formalized patronage-like partnerships in an effort to bring the standard of living in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories up to Russian standards.[78]

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on April 18 that Belarusian territorial defense elements will conduct a command staff exercise of unspecified size to protect critical infrastructure from enemy sabotage and reconnaissance elements in the Novogrudok and Korelichi raions in Grodno Oblast from April 18 – 21.[79]

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.

[1] https://t.me/mod_russia/25750; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70944>; https://t.me/VGA_Kherson/8699; ; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/11094; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/11093; <https://t.me/sashakots/39348>; https://t.me/vzglyad_ru/75817; https://t.me/z_arhiv/20404; https://t.me/rian_ru/200115 <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1648241830759378947?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1648242789325627398?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1648245874043256832?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1648248931003043842?s=20>

[2] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65308470>

[3] <https://www.president.gov dot ua/news/glava-derzhavi-vidvidav-peredovi-poziciyi-ukrayinskih-zahisn-82321>

[4] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%2C%20March%2019%2C%202023.pdf>

[5] <https://t.me/rybar/45951> ; <https://t.me/Aksenov82/2364>; https://t.me/glava_lnr_info/993; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/11094; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/11093; <https://t.me/sashakots/39348>

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