

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 16, 2023

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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.

Russian forces conducted another missile strike on infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces fired 32 air- and sea-launched missiles at Ukraine, including 12 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles from Tu-95MS aircraft over the Caspian Sea, 8 Kalibr cruise missiles from a Black Sea frigate, 12 Kh-22 cruise missiles from Tu-22M3 long-range bombers over Kursk Oblast, and 2 Kh-59 cruise missiles from Su-35 aircraft over Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.[1] Ukrainian air defense reportedly shot down 14 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles and 2 Kh-59 cruise missiles, 6 over Mykolaiv Oblast, 2 over Kherson Oblast, and the remainder over western regions of Ukraine.[2] Russian missiles struck infrastructure targets in Lviv, Poltava, Kirovohrad, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.[3] Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian forces have changed their tactics and are launching cruise missiles at night, instead of in the middle of day, in order to take Ukrainian air defense forces by surprise.[4]

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on February 16, confirming that the Kremlin is directly involved in facilitating the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families. During an in-person working meeting with Lvova-Belova, Putin stated that the number of applications submitted by Russian citizens for the adoption of children from Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts is growing significantly.[5] Lvova-Belova noted that she herself adopted a child from Mariupol and stated that she has particularly been working with Russian families to facilitate the placement of Ukrainian children into Russian homes, highlighting the story of one Moscow Oblast family who took custody of nine children.[6] **Lvova-Belova confirmed that Russian regional governors are facilitating adoption efforts and emphasized the role of Chechen Head Ramzan Kadyrov's efforts to work with her on programs for "difficult teenagers."**[7] Lvova-Belova's and Putin's meeting is likely a result of Putin's January 3 list of instructions to Lvova-Belova and the occupation heads of occupied oblasts directing them to take a number of measures ostensibly to support children in occupied areas of Ukraine.[8] This meeting is additionally noteworthy because it suggests that Putin himself is overseeing and directing efforts to facilitate deportation and adoption programs, which ISW continues to assess may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[9]

Putin also ostensibly made a limited concession to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin during his meeting with Lvova-Belova. Lvova-Belova noted that some servicemembers are fighting for Russia in private military companies (PMCs) but that their families aren't receiving the same social support as families of other servicemembers.[10] Putin responded that volunteers, contract servicemen, and everyone in the Russian Armed Forces are equal and that Russian officials are working on providing social benefits to all families, including those of PMC fighters. While Putin did not mention the Wagner Group explicitly, the allusion to PMCs suggests that Putin to some degree sees such irregular military formations as equal to conventional Russian forces. The provision of social guarantees to families of PMCs, especially Wagner, would mark an inflection from Putin's recent attempts to disenfranchise Wagner and move closer to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment, on which ISW has previously reported.[11]

Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces aim to capture Bakhmut by the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, which would require a significantly higher rate of Russian advance than anything seen for many months. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated on February 16 that Russian forces intend to capture Bakhmut by February 24 to mark the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine and plan to conduct a massive series of missile strikes to mark the date.[12] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin recently stated that he expects Wagner Group fighters to encircle Bakhmut by March or April, and Prigozhin's pragmatic assessments of Russian advances in the Bakhmut area have generally been closer to tactical realities than assessments forecasting rapid Russian advances.[13] Russian forces do not appear to be quickening their rate of advance around Bakhmut and are unlikely to meet this reported February 24 goal. Ukrainian forces could always decide that the costs associated with holding Bakhmut are too high and voluntarily withdraw from the city, although Ukrainian forces and leaders continue to indicate that they intend to hold the city. ISW previously assessed that the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut would likely prevent Putin from claiming that Russian forces secured the city on the anniversary of the invasion in an attempt to renew hope in a Russian victory in Ukraine.[14] The Kremlin may launch another series of missile strikes on civilian targets throughout Ukraine to mark the symbolic anniversary as actual military success continues to evade the Russian military.

Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of airpower in Ukraine but are unlikely to dedicate significant amounts of airpower to combat operations over Ukrainian-controlled territory. The *Financial Times (FT)*, citing shared NATO-member intelligence, reported on February 14 that Russia is massing fixed-wing and rotary aircraft near the Russo-Ukrainian border and suggested that Russian fighter jets may support an offensive on the ground.[15] Russian opposition outlet *Important Stories*, citing an internal Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) source, reported on February 16 that the Russian military is changing tactics and has committed to using large amounts of airpower in Ukraine.[16] A senior NATO official reported that 80 percent of Russia's airpower remains intact and that Russian forces have been attempting to disable Ukrainian air defenses in preparation for a large strike campaign.[17] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on February 16 that Russian sortie rates have increased over the past week to levels last seen in summer 2022 but noted that Russian forces have not increased their air presence in Ukraine and assessed that Russian forces are not likely preparing for an extended air campaign.[18] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated that current Ukrainian air defense capabilities are not sufficient to combat a renewed wave of air attacks but stated that there are no imminent signs of a massive Russian aerial attack.[19] *Important Stories* noted that Russian forces have not likely adequately trained enough personnel to fully crew their aircraft.[20] Russian forces would likely suffer unsustainable aircraft losses if they committed aircraft to extended combat operations like a strategic bombing campaign or close air support, especially if Western states provide Ukraine with adequate air defense capabilities.

Russia and Ukraine exchanged 202 prisoners-of-war (POWs) in a one-for-one exchange on February 16.[21] Head of the Ukrainian Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak, stated that of the 101 personnel Ukraine received, 94 were taken prisoner in Mariupol and that 63 of them were defenders of the Azovstal plant.[22] A Russian source expressed frustration that the Russian Ministry of Defense casually released Azovstal POWs while Russian authorities imposed a harsh sentence against Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko for claiming that Russian forces destroyed the Mariupol Drama Theater.[23] A court in Barnaul, Siberia sentenced Ponomarenko on February 15 under the law against the dissemination of fake information about the Russian military to six years in a strict regime penal colony.[24]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to subtly attack the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) credibility. Wagner Group artillerymen posted a video on social media on February 16 in which they claimed that Wagner Group artillery elements lack artillery ammunition and are "cut off" from ammunition supplies — implying that the Russian MoD is sabotaging Wagner Group's ammunition supply despite Prigozhin's claims that the Wagner Group is the main combat-ready force on the frontlines.[25] Prigozhin amplified this narrative when Russian media asked for his comment about the video, stating that these artillerymen are effective fighters simply asking for necessary supplies for success on the battlefield.[26] Prigozhin stated that he personally has had to appeal to "offices in Moscow" to secure resources before and that the fact that he has had to ask for ammunition does not undermine the Russian military's credibility.[27] Prigozhin's statement nonetheless promotes the larger narrative that the Russian MoD's incompetence is hamstringing Wagner Group's frontline forces and supports his larger effort to portray the Russian MoD as ineffective and corrupt.[28]

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted another series of missile strikes on infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on February 16.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on February 16, confirming that the Kremlin is directly involved in facilitating the deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.**
- **Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces aim to capture Bakhmut by the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, which would require a significantly higher rate of Russian advance than has been recently observed.**
- **Russian forces are reportedly increasing their use of airpower in Ukraine but are unlikely to attempt dramatically increased air operations over Ukrainian-controlled territory.**
- **Russia and Ukraine exchanged 202 prisoners-of-war (POWs) in a one-for-one exchange.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to subtly attack the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) credibility.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued reconnaissance activities along the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly continuing its prison recruitment efforts.**

- Russian occupation officials continued efforts to integrate occupied areas into the Russian legal system.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated his longstanding boilerplate rhetoric that Belarusian forces will attack Ukraine if Ukraine or the West attacks Belarus.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 16, 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.

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

- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern 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 continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

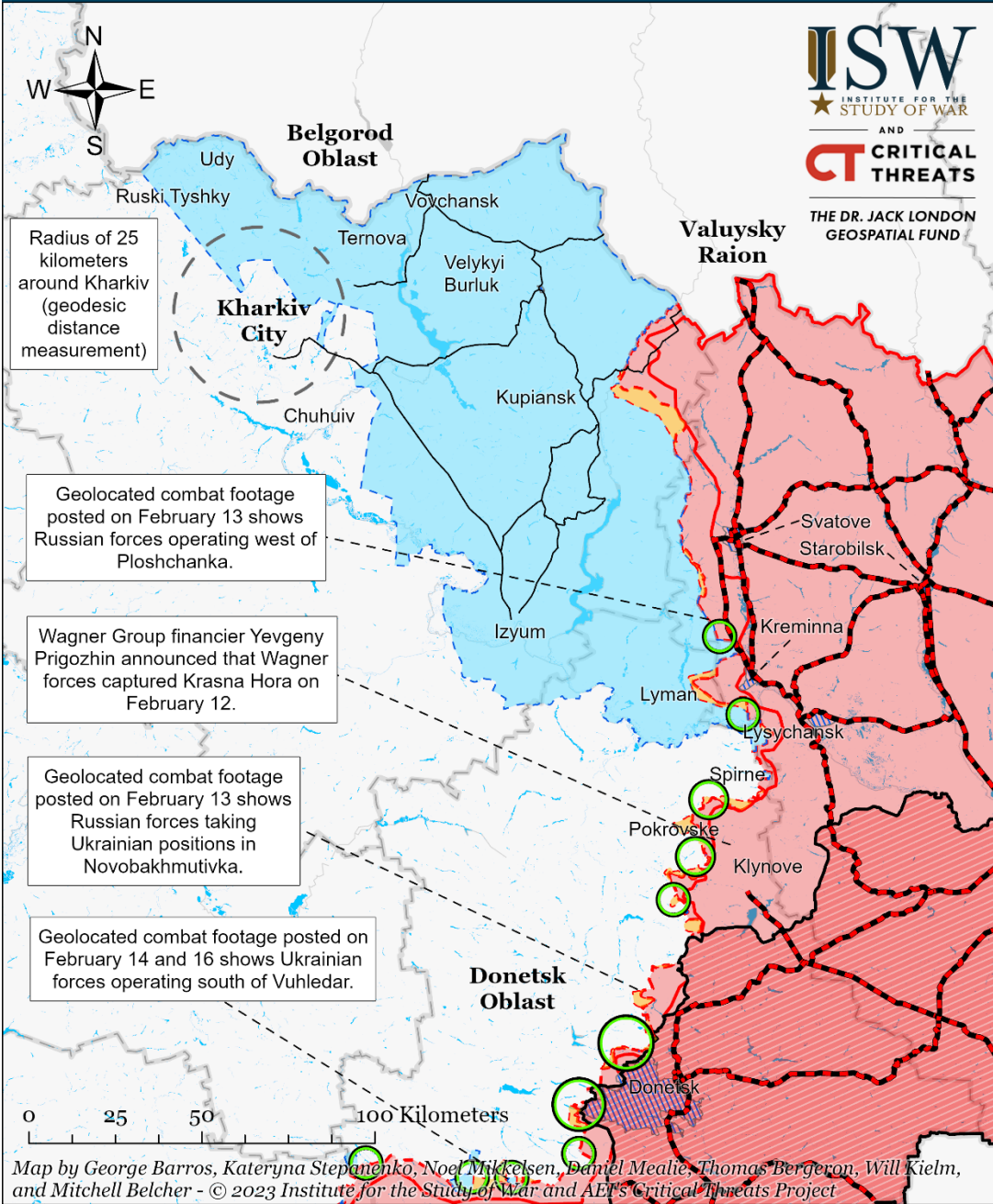
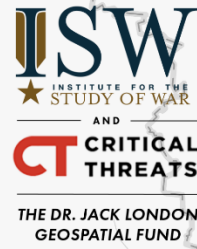
ISW continues to assess the current Russian most likely course of action (MLCOA) is an imminent offensive effort in Luhansk Oblast and has therefore adjusted the structure of the daily campaign assessments. We will no longer include the Eastern Kharkiv and Western Luhansk Oblast area as part of Ukrainian counteroffensives and will assess this area as a subordinate part of the Russian main effort in Eastern Ukraine. The assessment of Luhansk Oblast as part of the Russian main effort does not preclude the possibility of continued Ukrainian counteroffensive actions here or anywhere else in theater in the future. ISW will report out on Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts as they occur.

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks near Svatove on February 16. Ukrainian think tank Center for Defense Strategies reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian 138th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (45th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, 6th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) attack near Hryanykivka (53km northwest of Svatove).[29] The Center for Defense Strategies also reported that Russian forces entered Lyman Pershyi, advanced to the Synkivka area, and attacked Masyutivka, Kharkiv Oblast (all 50–54km northwest of Svatove).[30] ISW has no independent verification of these claims. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces continue to fight for control of Hryanykivka and near Synkivka.[31] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are testing a remote-controlled machine gun system equipped with a self-destruction system near Svatove.[32]

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks near Kreminna on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Bilohorivka and in the Serebrianska forest area, both south of Kreminna.[33] The Ukrainian Center for Defense Strategies reported that the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (20th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) pushed Ukrainian forces back 500–1,000 meters near Kreminna.[34] The Center for Defense Strategies reported that the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division then entered a field east of Yampolivka (14km northeast of Kreminna), where Ukrainian forces fired at Russian positions. ISW has no independent verification of these claims. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Bilohorivka (32km southeast of Kreminna), Torske (13km east of Lyman), and Nevske (22km northeast of Lyman).[35]

Russian sources continued to claim on February 16 that Ukrainian forces are concentrating and fortifying in preparation for possible Russian offensives in the Kupyansk and Kreminna areas.[36]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of February 16, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

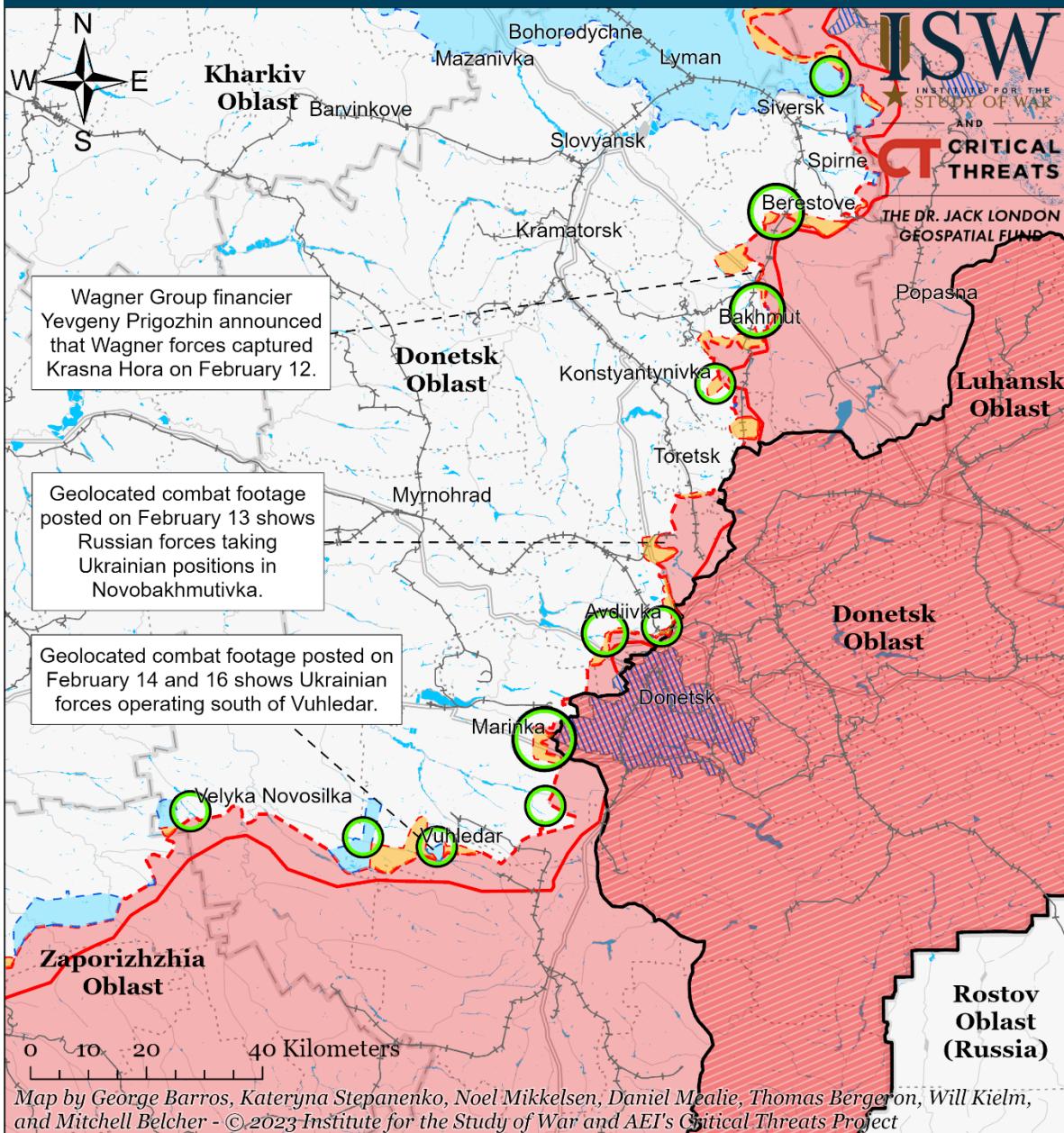
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself and near Fedorivka (15km northeast of Bakhmut) and Dyliivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut).[37] Geolocated footage shows special forces elements of the Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) striking Russian positions in Paraskoviivka, indicating that Russian forces have made marginal advances just northeast of Bakhmut.[38] Russian milbloggers emphasized that heavy fighting is ongoing in Paraskoviivka and that Russian forces are trying to envelop the settlement from two sides.[39] A Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner Group fighters advanced west of Soledar (10km northeast of Bakhmut) and reached Zaliznianske. [40] Two milbloggers claimed to be in Bakhmut itself and remarked that they personally observed fierce fighting on the northeastern outskirts of Bakhmut as Wagner Group forces try to cut all remaining Ukrainian supply lines into the town.[41] One Russian source claimed that the Wagner Group resumed an offensive on Ivanivske, 5km west of Bakhmut.[42]

Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Avdiivka–Donetsk City area on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks near Avdiivka and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City near Vodiane and Pervomaiske (on the northwestern outskirts) and Marinka and Novomykhailivka (on the southwestern outskirts).[43] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made unspecified advances towards Pervomaiske and changed their tactics in Marinka to focus on bypassing the settlement from the south via Pobieda and Novomykhailivka instead of continuing costly frontal assaults on fortified urban areas in western Marinka.[44] The Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) posted footage of the aftermath of a purported DNR 5th Brigade attack in Marinka.[45] A Russian milblogger confirmed that elements of the Southern Military District’s 150th Motorized Rifle Division are supporting DNR operations in the Marinka area.[46]

Russian forces conducted ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on February 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attacked near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City), Prechystivka (35km southwest of Donetsk City), and Novosilka (65km southwest of Donetsk City).[47] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian troops attacked near Prechystivka and on the outskirts of Vuhledar.[48] Another Russian source posted footage of Russian forces firing a TOS-1A thermobaric artillery system reportedly at the dacha area near the outskirts of Vuhledar.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of February 16, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- 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.

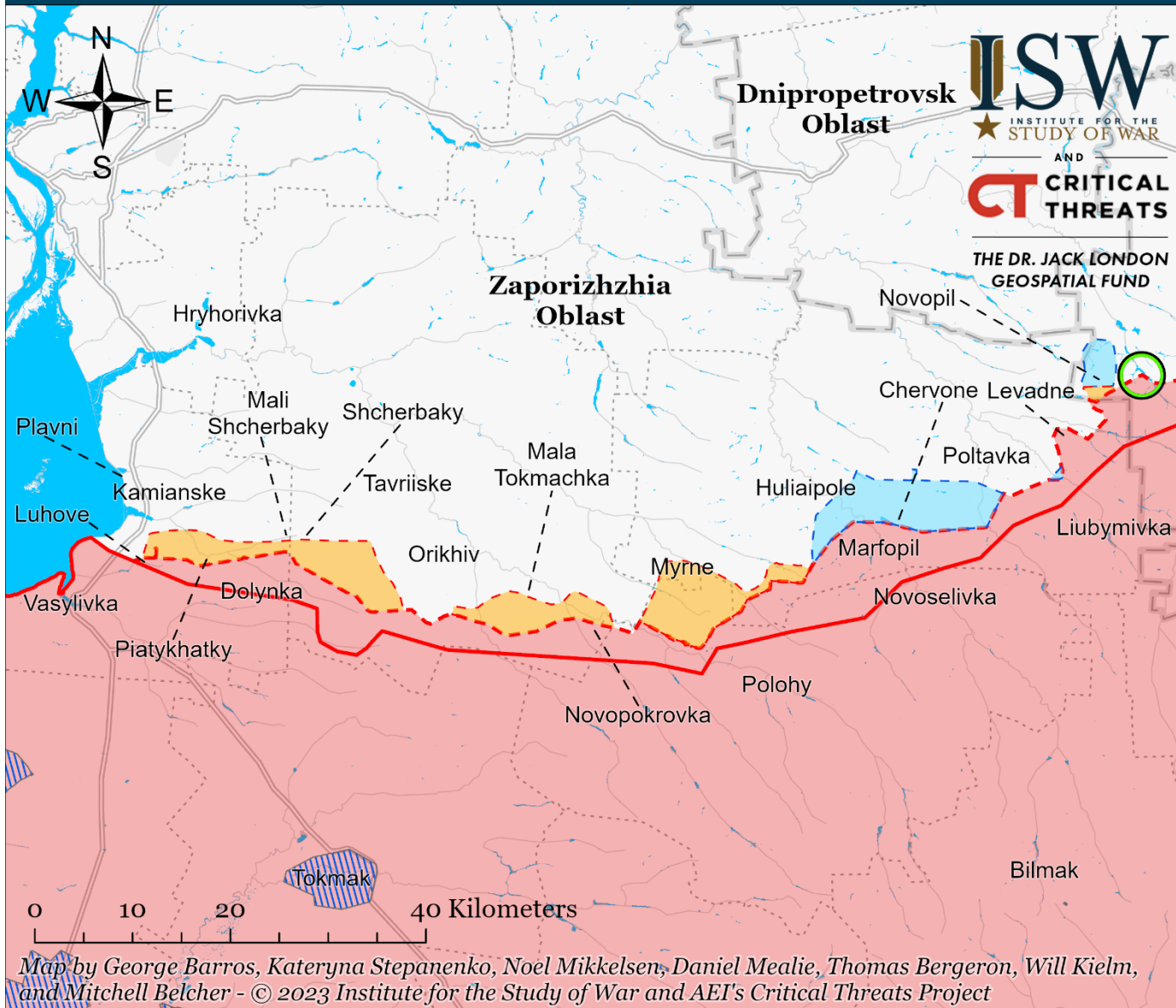
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued reconnaissance activities along the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast on February 16. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian artillery units of the Southern Military District destroyed a Ukrainian naval vessel during an attempted landing of a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group in an unspecified area of the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.[50] The Russian MoD claimed that the Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group was attempting to land near positions of unspecified Airborne (VDV) and motorized rifle formations.[51]

Russian officials claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted drone attacks against Crimea amid reports of explosions in occupied Crimea on February 16. Sevastopol occupation head Mikhail Razvozhayev claimed that Ukrainian forces launched several drones at Sevastopol and other locations in Crimea on the night of February 15 to 16 and that Russian air defenses shot down two drones near Sevastopol and several others elsewhere in Crimea.[52] Social media sources and Russian milbloggers amplified footage purporting to show a large explosion north of Armyansk, Crimea, but Crimean occupation advisor Oleg Kryuchkov claimed that Russian forces were conducting combat coordination activities in the area.[53]

Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Dnipropetrovsk and Kherson oblasts on February 16.[54] Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck Kherson City.[55] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces intentionally shelled Chaplynka, Kherson Oblast on February 14 to accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling the settlement.[56] A social media source amplified footage on February 16 claiming to show explosions near Chaplynka and Skadovsk in Kherson Oblast.[57]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of February 16, 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
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*

* 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 February 16, 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.

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

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly continuing its prison recruitment efforts. Head of the Russian human rights organization “Rus Sidyashchaya” Olga Romanova stated that the Russian MoD prepares lists of prisoners with military experience and forcibly recruits them without notification.[58] Romanova claimed that the Russian MoD has conducted recent recruitment campaigns in Tambov Oblast, Volgograd Oblast, and Siberia.[59] Romanova also contrasted the MoD’s forced recruitment effort with the Wagner Group’s prison recruitment campaign, claiming that 300 prisoners voluntarily joined the Wagner Group in October 2022 and 20 in January 2023 from an unspecified oblast.[60] The reported decline in the Wagner Group’s recruitment from this unspecified oblast may be indicative of an overall reported decline in the Wagner Group’s prison recruitment campaign, and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin recently claimed that the Wagner Group has stopped its prison recruitment campaign.[61] The Russian MoD’s reported intensification of prison recruitment efforts and the Wagner Group’s avowed end to its own campaign suggests that the Russian MoD may have barred the Wagner Group from this effort in order to monopolize the recruitment of prisoners.

Russian authorities reportedly arrested Russian military personnel for discrediting the Russian military on February 16. A Russian source claimed that the Samara Oblast military prosecutor’s office arrested two mobilized personnel reportedly from the 1444th regiment for discrediting the Russian military in connection with a video they recorded on February 9 in which they complained about a lack of proper documentation, payments, and instructions.[62] The 1444th regiment reportedly suffered significant casualties in a Ukrainian strike on a Russian base in Makiivka, Donetsk Oblast on December 31, 2022, and the Russian military reportedly disbanded the unit following the strike.[63] Russian outlet *Novaya Gazeta* reported that Russian military officials assigned the thousands of mobilized personnel from the disbanded 1444th regiment to the 362nd Regiment of the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division of the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army.[64] The arrest of the two Russian servicemembers may indicate that the Russian military intends to more aggressively silence routine criticism from rank-and-file Russian personnel.

The Western Military District Financial Department head Marina Yarinka reportedly fell out of a window and died on February 16.[65] A prominent Russian milblogger amplified claims that Yarinka’s mysterious death could be related to an April 2022 report that supposedly alleged that unspecified actors stole 70 percent of the funds allocated for the modernization of air and missile defense near St. Petersburg.[66]

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

Russian occupation officials continued efforts to integrate occupied areas of Ukraine into the Russian legal system. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo and Crimea occupation State Council Chair Vladimir Konstantinov discussed integrating occupied Kherson Oblast into the Russian legal system on February 16, and Saldo claimed that Kherson Oblast will be completely legally integrated by the end of 2023 with Crimea’s support.[67] Russian opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported that Kremlin-affiliated news outlet *RIA Novosti* reported that the Russian Federation Council and State Duma plan to meet on March 1 to reportedly discuss integrating the annexed regions of Ukraine into the Russian legal system, particularly in regard to two laws relating to the budget and taxes of annexed territories.[68] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky announced that the occupation administration will speed up the passportization process of Zaporizhia Oblast civilians following his meeting with Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Head of the Main Directorate for Migration Valentina Kazakova.[69] Balitsky claimed that the Russian MVD will open four additional migration departments and claimed that over 130,000 residents of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast have received RU passports.[70] The Ukrainian Resistance Center relatedly reported that occupation officials in Zalizny Port, Kherson Oblast apply pressure on citizens to get Russian passports by threatening to withhold social benefits and business licenses.[71]

Russian occupation officials continued efforts to deepen social integration of occupied Ukrainian territories into the Russian social sphere. Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko posted reported curriculum documents that the Russian occupation administration in Mariupol intends to use in schools that present a fabricated history of Ukraine and Russia in line with the Kremlin’s revisionist history.[72] The excerpt claims that Crimea and Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts are historically tied to Russia with Polish and Austro-Hungarian influence sparking “Ukrainization” and that Russia invaded Ukraine as a preemptive strike against the West, which uses Ukraine to attack Russia.[73] Russian occupation officials’ attempts to rewrite and erase Ukrainian history in classrooms is an extension of wider government initiatives to erase Ukrainian identity among youth. Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik, Head of Sorokyne (Krasnodon) LNR Administration Sergey Kozenko, and City Head of Krasnoyarsk Vladislav Loginov signed an agreement establishing the cities as twin cities.[74] Pasechnik claimed that this relationship will include youth exchanges, infrastructure restoration, urban development, and sports development.[75] The Yale School of Public Health’s

Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL) released a report stating Russian officials have used youth camps to attempt to indoctrinate Ukrainian children with Russian political ideology, holding at least 300 children in Russia for several weeks to several months longer than the specified program timeframe, and the youth exchange program touted by Pasechnik may be part of this youth camp scheme.[76]

Russian occupation officials are increasingly using medical infrastructure to consolidate control of occupied areas. Kremlin-affiliated news outlet TASS reported that Putin supported Balitsky's idea to create an interregional children's medical center for Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts because Kherson Oblast does not have a children's hospital.[77] TASS also claimed that Putin promised to help arrange special medical transport by purchasing five off-road vehicles so that doctors can reach rural areas.[78] ISW has previously reported on Russian occupation officials using the improvement of medical infrastructure and patient care to import Russian medical personnel to occupied areas and transport Ukrainian children further into Russian-occupied areas or to Russia.[79]

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 President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated his longstanding boilerplate rhetoric that Belarusian forces will attack Ukraine only if Ukraine or the West attacks Belarus.[80] This statement is not extraordinary — Lukashenko has parroted this narrative since February 2022, and his decision to reiterate it today is likely part of long-running Russian information operations suggesting that Belarusian conventional ground forces might join Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[81] ISW has written at length about why Belarus is extraordinarily unlikely to invade Ukraine in the foreseeable future.[82] ISW continues to assess that Belarusian forces remain extremely unlikely to invade Ukraine with or without Russian forces. Lukashenko may have made this statement to set information conditions for his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin planned for February 17.

The Belarusian 465th Missile Brigade based in Yuzhny, Osipovichy, is likely operating the Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems that Russia gave Belarus in late 2022 or early 2023.[83] A Belarusian media interview with a Belarusian operator of the new Iskander systems shows the soldier's uniform bearing a patch of the Belarusian 465th Missile Brigade.[84]

Belarusian forces continue conducting exercises in Belarus. Unspecified elements of the Belarusian 11th Artillery Brigade and 48th Separate Electronic Warfare Battalion conducted tactical medicine training at the Brest Training Ground on February 16.[85]

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://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02vrQD2oNzzdqLBDs5Rf3KkFk1foxwytd9iaTGaDqs7LXAFyDziUzGKHMuYfW4QvBjl>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02vrQD2oNzzdqLBDs5Rf3KkFk1foxwytd9iaTGaDqs7LXAFyDziUzGKHMuYfW4QvBjl>; <https://www.facebook.com/OperationalCommandSouth/videos/515401910703204/>

[3] <https://suspilne dot media/387509-rosia-zminila-taktiku-raketnih-obstriliv-ukraini-povitrani-sili/>; <https://ua.news/ua/war-vs-rf/v-vsuoobshhili-skolko-raket-vypustili-okkupanty-vo-vremya-nochnoj-ataki>; <https://www.facebook.com/OperationalCommandSouth/videos/515401910703204/>

[4] <https://suspilne dot media/387509-rosia-zminila-taktiku-raketnih-obstriliv-ukraini-povitrani-sili/>

[5] <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70524>

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- [14] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-15-2023>
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