Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 13, 2023 Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan March 13, 7:30 pm ET

Click <u>here</u> to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click <u>here</u> to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

A member of the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of pursuing political objectives in Russia that are endangering Wagner forces in Bakhmut. Russian political scientist Aleksey Mukhin-who contributes to the Valdai Discussion Club and Russian state media—commented on Prigozhin's March 11 sarcastic announcement that he will be running in Ukrainian presidential election in 2024. Mukhin stated on his Telegram channel that the Russian public began to interpret Prigozhin's statement as an announcement that he will run for the Russian presidential elections, which are also scheduled for 2024. Mukhin rhetorically asked if Prigozhin notified Russian President Vladimir Putin about his "presidential ambitions." Mukhin argued that Prigozhin's presentation of himself as the "commander" of the Wagner private military company (PMC) "directly affects the planning and management of the assault squads' combat operations." Mukhin also sarcastically stated that Prigozhin is a "prospective politician" who searches for scapegoats to blame for Wagner's high losses among personnel. Mukhin observed that everyone knows that the Russian government pays for Prigozhin's forces and their ammunition and stated that Prigozhin's failure to acknowledge the support from conventional Russian forces alienated him from other Russian battlefield commanders. Mukhin concluded that Prigozhin "has placed the Wagner fighters in danger of encirclement during the expected Ukrainian counterattack" as a result of his actions. Mukhin stated that Prigozhin now is demanding that Russian conventional forces "cover his flanks," and that Russian forces may need to put aside their distaste for Prigozhin to prevent further Wagner losses in Bakhmut.

Mukhin's attack on Prigozhin is in line with ISW's March 12 assessment that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be deliberately expending Wagner forces in Bakhmut in part to derail Prigozhin's political aspirations.² Mukhin's accusations also support ISW's assessment that the Kremlin and Russian MoD may be attempting to blame Prigozhin for the slowed pace of advance in Bakhmut and for high casualties among Wagner mercenaries. Mukhin's statement showcases how the Kremlin may be perceiving Prigozhin's controversial statements and his threat to Putin's regime. ISW previously observed harsh criticism towards Prigozhin from milbloggers such as disgraced Russian officer Igor Girkin, but Mukhin's statement is notable because of his existing affiliation with the Kremlin institution that is the Valdai Club.³

Prigozhin likely indirectly responded to Mukhin's accusations on March 12 but has not scaled back his hostile rhetoric towards the Russian MoD. Prigozhin responded within an hour of Mukhin's statement, stating that the situation in Bakhmut remains "really hard" and that his

"550 attempts" to procure ammunition for Wagner were ignored.4 Prigozhin, however, emphasized that servicemen subordinated to the Russian MoD have been bringing 12 to 15 cars full of ammunition to Wagner in Bakhmut from Zaporizhia, Donetsk City, and Avdiivka frontlines. Prigozhin noted that "there is no conflict between Wagner PMC fighters and Russian MoD fighters," and claimed that he is confident that Wagner will continue to receive such donations due to friendly relations with these units. Prigozhin doubled down on his statements on March 13 and reportedly met with an unnamed commander of an unspecified Russian brigade. Prigozhin claimed that he had developed a relationship with unspecified conventional forces after they had suffered a year of "betrayal" and stated that these forces are not covering one of Wagner's flanks—a statement that mimics Mukhin's claim that Russian conventional forces are not interested in assisting Wagner.

A Wagner-affiliated milblogger also directly responded to Mukhin's commentary stating that while Prigozhin was simply "trolling" about his presidential ambitions in Ukraine, he does not need to notify Putin of his political ambitions according to Russian law.⁶ The milblogger further echoed Prigozhin's claims that Wagner is on good terms with conventional forces, which further confirms that Prigozhin's March 12 and March 13 statements were in response to Mukhin's accusations.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to maintain Chechnya's relevance in the Russian political and military sphere. Kadyrov met with Putin on March 13 to discuss Chechnya's socioeconomic achievements and domestic developments in 2022.7 Kadyrov also used the meeting to laud the success of Chechen fighters in Ukraine and emphasized that Chechen fighters are dutifully fulfilling Putin's orders and "aim to act to the bitter end," to which Putin responded by acknowledging the role of Chechen fighters and thanking Kadyrov.⁸ Kadyrov appeared visibly nervous during the meeting, potentially indicating that he felt considerable pressure to present Chechnya, himself, and his troops to Putin in a positive and productive light.⁹ Chechen troops are currently playing a very minimal role on the frontline in Ukraine and mainly appear to be conducting offensive operations near Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast, and are otherwise carrying out law enforcement tasks in rear areas of occupied Ukraine.¹⁰ Kadyrov may therefore fear that he is losing favor with Putin because he has very little to show in terms of Chechen combat gains, and likely hoped to correct and bolster his reputation over the course of this meeting. Putin, in turn, likely hopes to pressure Kadyrov into increasing the role of Chechen fighters in combat operations due to continued losses to both the Wagner Group and conventional Russian forces in ongoing offensive operations in Ukraine.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations. Iranian state media reported that Lukashenko met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber.¹¹ Raisi and Lukashenko signed eight cooperation agreements in the spheres of comprehensive cooperation, trade, transportation, agriculture, and culture and noted that Belarus and Iran tripled bilateral trade in 2022 compared to 2021.¹² Raisi notably stated that cooperation with Belarus could be a way for both nations to counter sanctions.¹³ Lukashenko has frequently acted as a Kremlin vassal in recent trips to foreign countries, and his visit to Tehran is likely a component of the Kremlin's wider effort to secure continued Iranian support in the face of international sanctions.¹⁴ Iranian state media notably announced on March 11 that Iran has finalized a deal to buy Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia, indicating that military, political, and economic agreements between Tehran and Moscow are continuing to prove mutually beneficial for both parties.¹⁵ The Kremlin will likely continue to leverage Lukashenko's influence to deepen cooperation with Tehran.

Russian milbloggers continue to speculate about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine, suggesting increasing concern in the Russian information space about Ukrainian combat capabilities as Russian forces pin themselves on offensive operations in Bakhmut. The milbloggers largely agreed that Ukrainian forces would prioritize an offensive in the south against Berdyansk-Melitopol in Zaporizhia Oblast or Mariupol-Volnovakha in Donetsk Oblast, but some claimed that Ukrainian forces have enough combat power to conduct a second counteroffensive either in another area of southern Ukraine or along the Kupyansk-Svatove line in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast. 16 A Wagner-affiliated milblogger agreed with ISW's prior assessments on the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut, claiming that Ukrainian forces are grinding Russian forces' best available infantry around Bakhmut to reduce Russian forces' capability to stop any Ukrainian advances.¹⁷ The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces would be able to drive south and face minimal Russian resistance in southern Ukraine, unlike other areas of the front line. Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces would target southern Ukraine because a "destroyed Crimea" holds strategic importance while a "destroyed Donbas" does not. 18 Russian State Duma Deputy Dmitry Kuznetsov claimed that Ukrainian forces would target the Kerch Strait Bridge in Crimea in a monthslong interdiction campaign like the Antonivskyi Bridge in Kherson Oblast and called on Russian forces to quickly develop anti-drone warfare to defend the critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) Russia.19 connecting Crimea mainland

A Russian State Duma bill aiming to raise the conscription age suggests that the Kremlin is not planning to conduct full mobilization in the future. The Russian State Duma received a bill for consideration on March 13 that would implement Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's proposal for raising the conscription age. 20 The bill would raise the maximum conscription age from 27 to 30 immediately while raising the minimum conscription age from 18 to 21 with a one-year annual increase between 2024 and 2026.21 Shoigu proposed the conscription age increase at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) board meeting on December 21, 2022, and Russian officials have since offered oscillating statements on whether the increase would apply to upcoming conscription cycles in the spring and fall of 2023.²² The bill's immediate increase of the maximum age likely seeks to expand the conscription age range to fulfill some portion of the Russian military's immediate manpower demands in Ukraine and then subsequently shrink the overall conscription demands on Russian society in the following years. The gradual increase of the minimum conscription age means that three year groups of potential Russian conscripts will essentially receive deferments of three, two, and one years each, while the current year groups eligible for conscription face continued attritional fighting in Ukraine. The Kremlin may be attempting to shield a new generation of Russians from the demographic and social impacts of attritional fighting in Ukraine by siloing these impacts among one generational group of Russians. The timeline given for the contraction of the conscription age range may also suggest that the Kremlin does not expect the war in Ukraine to last longer than the next three years. This proposed expansion of the conscription age range is another incremental force generation effort well below full mobilization and indicates that the Kremlin is still highly averse to the prospect of a full mobilization.

The Russian military is reportedly employing the newly created "assault detachments" in different manners across different tactical situations. A Ukrainian reserve officer who has previously reported on a captured Russian military manual on the new "assault detachment" reported on March 12 that Russian forces are using both formalized permanent assault ("storm") units and ad hoc temporary assault detachments in Ukraine.²³ The Ukrainian officer reported that Russian forces

have integrated permanent assault units into battalion, regiment, and brigade structures and that their size ranges from that of a company to that of a reinforced battalion.²⁴ Russian forces reportedly assemble temporary assault detachments within a regiment or battalion for specific operations and do not give these temporary detachments a number, name, defined structure, regular commander, or specific armaments.²⁵ Permanent Russian assault detachments reportedly have designated commanders and are most often comprised of one or two tanks, several armored personnel carriers, and 40 to 80 personnel.²⁶ Russian forces reportedly will form temporary assault detachments to respond to situations as they arise, and these formations apparently often retreat after initial losses and suffer from significant communication and coordination problems.²⁷ Russian forces reportedly designed permanent assault units to break through Ukrainian positions and may have modeled them after the Wagner Group's small scale assault tactics in the Bakhmut area.²⁸ Russian forces have also reportedly used some of these permanent assault units for punitive reasons and forcibly staff them with problematic and disobedient soldiers to retaliate against them for bad behavior.²⁹

The Russian military is likely attempting to concentrate combat ready forces and equipment in permanent formations trained to conduct small-scale assaults while distancing severely degraded formations from offensive operations of tactical importance. Russian forces are reportedly employing these assault formations to attack well-fortified Ukrainian positions and conduct urban warfare.³⁰ These non-doctrinal formations would likely struggle to conduct a mechanized advance across open country in Ukraine, and Russian forces are likely implementing them for conditions on the current frontlines and not for any wider operational goals.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk confirmed that Russia has illegally deported 2,161 Ukrainian orphans to Russia.³¹ The Ukrainian government previously verified the illegal deportation of a total of 16,207 children to Russia, including those deported alongside their families, and estimated that the total number of children may be closer to 150,000.³² ISW previously reported on a Russian documentary series following Ukrainian children after adoption into Russian families that claimed that Russian officials "evacuated" over 150,000 children to Russia from Donbas alone.³³ ISW continues to assess that the forcible deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children is a violation of the Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and a potential constituent element of a wider ethnic cleansing campaign.³⁴

Key Takeaways

- A member of the Kremlin-affiliated Valdai Discussion Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of pursuing political objectives in Russia that are endangering Wagner forces in Bakhmut. This attack on Prigozhin is in line with ISW's March 12 assessment that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) may be deliberately expending Wagner forces in Bakhmut to derail Prigozhin's political aspirations.
- Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continues efforts to maintain Chechnya's relevance in the Russian political and military sphere.
- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations.
- Russian milbloggers continue to speculate about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine, suggesting increasing concern in the

Russian information space about Ukrainian combat capabilities as Russian forces pin themselves on offensive operations in Bakhmut.

- A Russian State Duma bill aiming to raise the conscription age suggests that the Kremlin is not planning to conduct full mobilization in the future.
- The Russian military is reportedly employing the newly created "assault detachments" in different manners across different tactical situations.
- Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk confirmed that Russia has illegally deported 2,161 Ukrainian orphans to Russia.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks throughout the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line and made marginal gains northeast of Kupyansk and east of Siversk.
- Russian forces continued making advances in and around Bakhmut but have not succeeded in completing a turning movement, envelopment, or encirclement of the city as of March 13.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids against areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Subordination of mobilized Russian military personnel to Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR) formations is generating increasing discontent.
- Russian occupation officials continue to introduce new provisions to discourage and restrict the use of the Ukrainian language in educational facilities.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 13, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

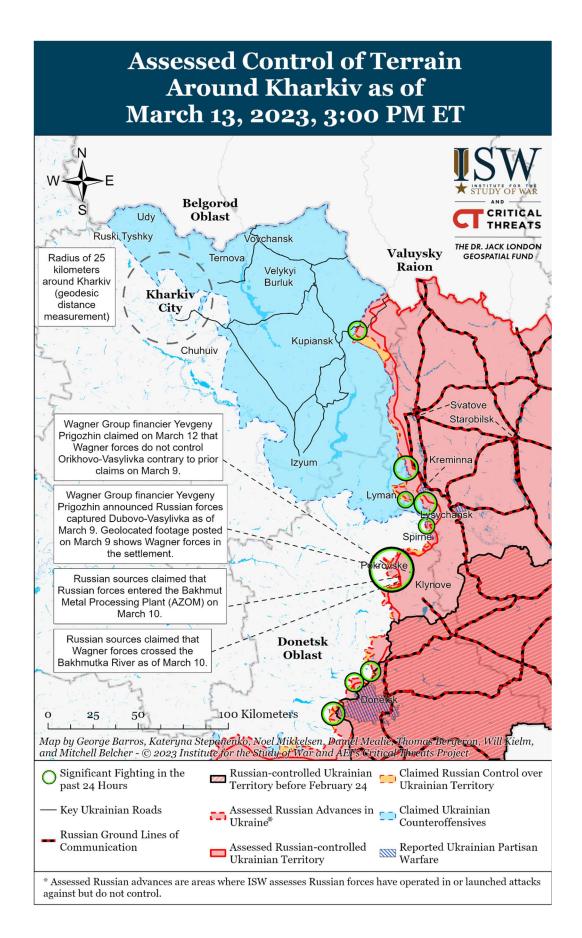
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1— Luhansk Oblast (</u>Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces have made marginal territorial gains northeast of Kupyansk as of March 13. Geolocated footage posted on March 13 shows that Russian forces advanced south of Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Kupyansk).³⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions northeast of Kupyansk near Masyutivka (13km northeast of Kupyansk), Dvorichna (17km northeast of Kupyansk), and Hryanykivka on March 12 and 13.³⁶

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line on March 12 and 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Kreminna, Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna), Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna), and the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna) on March 12 and 13.³⁷ Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are focusing on operations near Kreminna and Bilohorivka and constantly attack near Kreminna area.³⁸ Haidai also stated that Russian forces dedicated new T-90 tanks to offensive operations near Kreminna but ran out after two weeks and are now using T-72s.³⁹ Russian sources claimed that Russian forces achieved localized successes along the Svatove-Kreminna line on March 12 and 13, including in the Serebrianska forest area.⁴⁰ One milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Terny, (17km west of Kreminna), Nevske, and Makiivka (23km northwest of Kreminna), but made marginal gains near Ploshchanka (17km northwest of Kreminna) and the Zhuravka gully (18km west of Kreminna) after repelling a Ukrainian counterattack on March 12.⁴¹ The milblogger claimed on March 13 that Ukrainian forces conducted a counterattack near Karmazynivka (13km southwest of Svatove).⁴²

Russian forces made marginal territorial gains east of Siversk as of March 13. Geolocated footage posted on March 13 shows that Russian forces made slight advances northeast of Verkhnokamianske (7km east

of Siversk). ⁴³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that offensive actions near Verkhnokamianske on March 13. ⁴⁴	Russian	forces	conducted	unsuccessful



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

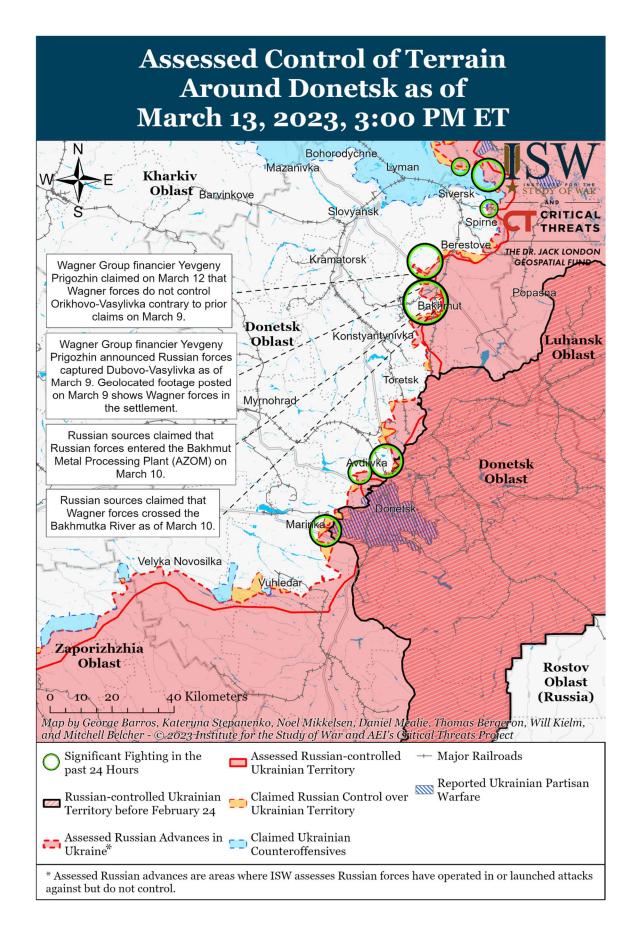
Russian forces continued making advances in and around Bakhmut on March 12 and 13 but have not succeeded in completing a turning movement, envelopment, or encirclement of the city as of March 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attacked towards Minkivka (15km northwest of Bakhmut) on March 12 and 13, indicating that Russian forces have likely advanced along the E40 Bakhmut-Slovyansk highway in order to launch assaults further northwest of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage posted on March 12 indicates that Russian forces have also made advances about 8km northwest of Bakhmut in the area between Dubovo-Vasylivka and Bohdanivka. Geolocated footage posted on March 13 shows that Russian forces have advanced to new positions in southwestern Bakhmut along the To504 Kostiantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces spokesperson Colonel Cherevaty reported on March 12 that over 39 combat clashes took place within Bakhmut over the past day, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself; north of Bakhmut near Vasyukivka (15km north); northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (12km northwest) and Hryhorivka (10km northwest); and west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west) and Chasiv Yar (10km west) between March 12 and 13.48

Russian sources continued to make claims about Russian gains in and around Bakhmut on March 12 and 13. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin notably refuted claims that Wagner took control of Orikhovo-Vasylivka, despite conflicting reports by other Russian sources that Wagner captured the settlement.⁴⁹ One milblogger noted that Russian forces control the southern half of Orikhovo-Vasylivka and are clearing two recently captured strongholds.⁵⁰ Russian milbloggers widely circulated on claims on March 12 that Wagner fighters began assaults on underground sections of the AZOM complex in northwestern Bakhmut and strengthened their positions at the complex on March 13.51 Several Russian sources also discussed purported Russian attacks and gains in southern Bakhmut.⁵² Russian milbloggers also claimed that the Wagner Group has further advanced towards the To504 and are conducting positional battles near Ivanivske, Stupochky (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Khromove (5km west of Bakhmut).53 Russian sources notably warned that Ukrainian forces are massing near Bakhmut in preparation for a counterattack to break Wagner's blockade of the city, with one milblogger reporting that Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks along the Klishchiivka-Chasiv Yar line west of Bakhmut on March 13.54 A Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger remarked that Wagner troops are trying to extend their flank west of Bakhmut along the Siversky Donetsk-Donbas water canal to create an artificial operational encirclement of the Bakhmut area, suggesting that Wagner will likely continue efforts to push west to reach the banks of the canal.⁵⁵

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline on March 12 and 13. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive operations on Avdiivka itself; in the Avdiivka area near Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka), Kamianka (4km northeast of Avdiivka), and Severne (5km west of Avdiivka); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Nevelske, Vodyane, and Pervomaiske; on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka and Pobieda. Fa Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces gained new positions in Krasnohorivka on March 12 and are clearing Kamianka as of March 13. Milbloggers highlighted these claims as evidence that Russian sources are close to encircling Avdiivka, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation of Russian advances near Avdiivka, and several Russian milbloggers, including former officer Igor Girkin, disputed reports that Avdiivka is near encirclement. Russian

sources additionally claimed that Russian forces are fighting on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City and within Marinka on March 12 and 13.58

Russian forces conducted a ground attack in western Donetsk Oblast on March 12. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensives near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) on March 12 and did not confirm any ground attacks in the area on March 13.⁵⁹ A Russian source posted footage on March 10 of scouts of the 5th Guards Tank Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) targeting Ukrainian drones near Vuhledar.⁶⁰



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

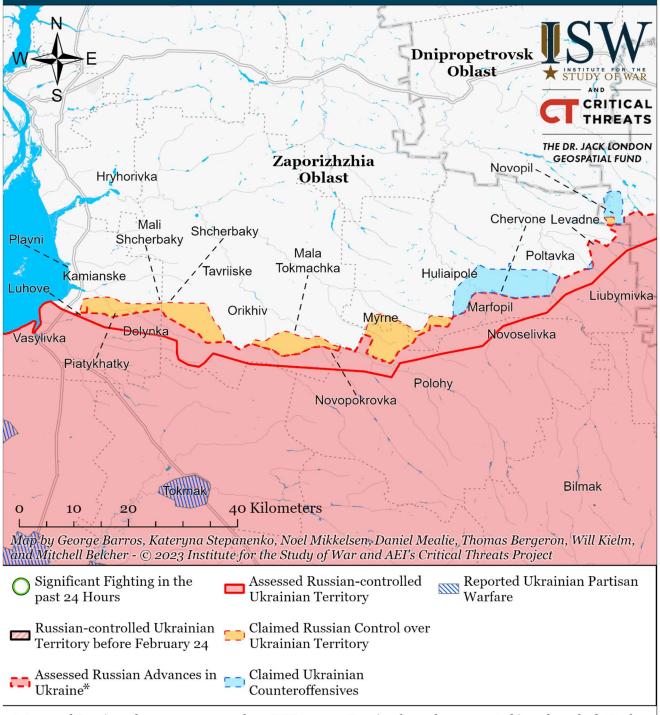
Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids against areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian officials posted footage on March 10 showing Ukrainian forces conducting a limited raid in an unspecified area in east bank Kherson Oblast.⁶¹

Russian forces continued routine fire against areas west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on March 12 and 13.62 Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk stated on March 12 that Russian forces have the capacity to replace damaged military equipment positioned on the Kinburn Spit, but noted on March 13 that Ukrainian fire against Russian positions on the spit has reduced the pace of Russian artillery fire.63 Humenyuk also stated on March 13 that Ukrainian forces are working to push Russian forces 20km away from the Dnipro River bank.64

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 13, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 13, 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.

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

The subordination of mobilized Russian military personnel to Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR) formations is generating increasing discontent. Russian personnel and relatives of servicemembers from Kursk, Sverdlovsk, Perm, and Moscow oblasts released video addresses to Russian officials and Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 11 and 12 in which they complain about their subordination to LNR and DNR formations. ISW previously reported that formations from at least 17 Russian federal subjects have released video complaints appealing to various Russian leaders in February and March alone, with many of these complaints being about the poor quality of DNR and LNR command. The increasing rate of public complaints appears to be in part associated with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) effort to integrate LNR and DNR formations into the Russian military by subordinating mobilized personnel under them. The Russian MoD is likely struggling to address complaints from Russian military personnel about poor DNR and LNR command as recent dismissals of DNR and LNR commanders have resulted in significant backlash from portions of the Russian ultranationalist community.

A Russian milblogger claimed that there is a high desertion rate among Russian SPETSNAZ forces in Ukraine.⁶⁹ The milblogger claimed that SPESTNAZ units in Ukraine are all understaffed, that even commanders have deserted these units, and that many SPETSNAZ veterans returned to serve with Russian forces in Ukraine following the start of partial mobilization but have since deserted in high numbers. SPETSNAZ units are some of the most combat-capable forces within the Russian military and the reported high desertion rate may suggest that persistent personnel issues among Russian forces in Ukraine affect elite units as much as they do non-elite units. ISW has not observed confirmation of the high SPETSNAZ desertion rate, however.

The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that there are significant regional disparities in the Russian casualty rate in Ukraine. The UK MoD reported on March 12 that Russian military personnel from eastern regions of Russia die in Ukraine at per capita rates up to fortyfold of those of Russian personnel from Moscow City.⁷⁰ The UK MoD also stated that there are ethnic disparities in casualty rates, reporting that Kazakh and Tartar minorities represent 75 percent of the casualties among Russian military personnel from Astrakhan Oblast.⁷¹ An earlier open-source investigation by BBC's Russia service and independent Russian outlet *Mediazona* suggests that confirmed Russian casualties in Ukraine occur along regional lines as opposed to predominantly ethnic ones.⁷²

Russian milbloggers called on Russian officials to expand efforts to send commercially available drones to Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers continued to criticize Russian officials for not following through on promises to deliver drones to Russian forces as well as for reportedly constraining the use of small commercially available drones in operations in Ukraine.⁷³ Russian milbloggers also continued to extoll volunteer groups for reportedly manufacturing commercially available drones, mostly quadcopters, with their own funds.⁷⁴ Russian milbloggers called on Russian officials to not just fund efforts to manufacture commercially available drones but to also rapidly expand training programs for operating these small drones.⁷⁵ A prominent Russian milblogger argued that Russian officials need to extend these proposed training programs to youth-focused military patriotic programs and begin instructing schools to offer classes for drone assembly and operations.⁷⁶

These small commercially available drones can normally carry payloads of one to four kilograms, and milbloggers are likely overstating their tactical usefulness.

A Russian source claiming to be affiliated with BARS (Combat Reserve of the Country) claimed that the Russian MoD has suspended BARS recruitment. A *Vkontakte* page allegedly run by BARS veterans claimed on March 12 that the Russian MoD issued an order on February 16 suspending BARS recruitment until further notice.⁷⁷ BARS formations have reportedly not been receiving promised compensation from the Russian MoD, another indication that the MoD may be abandoning its effort to raise reserves through BARS recruitment.⁷⁸ Current BARS formations provide Russian forces with little combat power in Ukraine, and the RU MoD may be temporarily halting BARS recruitment to prioritize crypto-mobilization efforts and the upcoming spring conscription cycle in April.

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

Russian occupation officials are continuing to introduce new provisions to discourage and restrict the use of the Ukrainian language in educational institutions in occupied Ukraine. Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Education Minister Elena Shapurova announced on March 13 that the administration will end compulsory Ukrainian instruction in schools from September 1.79 Shapurova claimed that parents will be able to choose the language of instruction for their children, but noted that if parents choose Russian instruction, then their children will not receive any Ukrainian instruction. Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Administration Head Yevgeny Balitsky stated on March 13 that residents that consider Ukrainian as their native language can study Ukrainian for a maximum of three hours a week in schools in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.80 Balitsky added that if students refuse to study Ukrainian their curriculum will only include Russian language instruction. Balitsky attempted to frame these harsh restrictions on the study of Ukrainian language as the Russian Education Ministry's respect for the Ukrainian language and original culture. Russian occupation authorities may use the allocated three hours of Ukrainian language study to identify residents with openly pro-Ukrainian attitudes to further suppress Ukrainian culture and identity and consolidate control of occupied territories. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov also announced on March 11 that Moscow State University is offering free Russian language classes in occupied Enerhodar.81

Ukrainian partisans damaged a railway track in occupied Kherson Oblast on March 11. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated on March 12 that the Ukrainian and Tatar partisan group "Atesh" destroyed a railway track between Abrykovisvka and Radensk, Kherson Oblast, in an effort to disrupt Russian ground logistics supply chains. ⁸² Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Nataliya Humenyuk stated on March 13 that the resistance movement continues to help Ukrainian forces keep Russian supply lines under control. ⁸³

Russian occupation authorities are intensifying law enforcement activities in occupied territories. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 13 that Russian occupation officials are unable to ensure the security of occupied territories from partisan threats and stop Wagner Group and Akhmat forces from looting property in occupied settlements—which Russian occupation officials likely hoped to keep for themselves. The Resistance Center stated that Russian occupation authorities asked Moscow for additional police staff to target Ukrainian civilians for partisan sentiments, rather than focusing on preventing looting by Russian-affiliated groups.⁸⁴ The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)

additionally continues to target the ethnic Tatar communities and arrest Tatars on claimed suspicions of "sabotage" in Crimea and Kherson Oblast. 85

Russian occupation authorities are attempting to improve economic conditions by mirroring policies instituted following Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014. Rogov stated on March 11 that the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration is creating a free economic zone (FEZ) to intensify business and investment activity in the region, a policy that Rogov claimed has also been implemented in occupied Crimea. Rogov claimed that the occupation administration has already introduced a zero-tax rate for the production and processing of agricultural and other food products, as well as unspecified services in the social, household, and educational sectors. Rogov claimed that the occupation activity in the rogov claimed that the occupation administration has already introduced a zero-tax rate for the production and processing of agricultural and other food products, as well as unspecified services in the social, household, and educational sectors.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (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.

See topline text.

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.

https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0WHsQz1Z31Zyh6oyNSe95CdwyLrabYRTHMnFa7EmtG23cfLeDEC5gWWduYD2LgJq7l; https://t.me/RKadyrov 95/3386; https://t.me/andriyshTime/6612

¹ https://t.me/AlekseyMukhin/4937

² https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-12-2023

³ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-26-2023

⁴ https://m.vk.com/wall-177427428 2294; https://t.me/concordgroup official/586

⁵ https://t.me/concordgroup official/587

⁶ https://t.me/grey zone/17711

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