

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 14, 2023

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March 14, 5:45pm 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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Prominent Russian milbloggers are reamplifying a longstanding Russian information operation that seeks to weaponize religion to discredit Ukraine. The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture issued a decision on March 9 stipulating that the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra Reserve will terminate its lease agreement with the Kremlin-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP), meaning that the UOC MP will need to vacate the premises of the lower Lavra by March 29.[1] The Ukrainian government did not renew the UOC MP's expired lease on the upper Lavra and allowed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to hold Christmas services at the Lavra on January 7, as ISW previously reported.[2] Two prominent milbloggers responded on March 14 to the latest decision requiring the UOC MP to vacate the lower Lavra by March 29 and exploited the story to accuse Kyiv of repressing freedom of religion within Ukraine.[3] Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin claimed with no evidence that Kyiv will likely stage a military takeover of the Lavra because Ukrainian authorities are bent on "bloodily pitting the Russians on both sides of an artificial border" against one another.[4] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander and former DNR Security Minister Alexander Khodakovsky accused Ukraine of causing a "church frenzy" to divide the UOC MP and OCU dioceses and encouraged Ukrainian authorities to see past Ukrainian and Russian distinctions and exercise "restraint and Christian patience." [5] Khodakovsky's comment is remarkable because it is Russia's rejection of the validity of seeing any distinctions between Russians and Ukrainians that was one of the justifications for the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine in the first place.

Both Girkin's and Khodakovsky's renewed exploitations of the Lavra issue are based on a misrepresentation of events and disingenuously seek to portray Kyiv as attacking religious liberty in Ukraine. The UOC MP is the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church's subordinate element in Ukraine and provided material support for Russia's illegal invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.[6] The UOC MP is not an independent religious organization but rather an extension of the Russian state and an instrument of Russian hybrid warfare.[7] By misrepresenting the Ukrainian government's decision to reduce the Kremlin-controlled UOC MP's influence in Ukraine, Russian milbloggers are amplifying a known information operation attempting to delegitimize the Ukrainian state and turn international public opinion against Ukraine.

Russian authorities continue measures to mobilize the struggling Russian defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war effort, including measures that will force the Kremlin to choose between having skilled workers in the DIB and skilled military personnel fighting in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed during a March 14 visit to an aviation production plant in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia, that the DIB suffers from a lack of adequately trained personnel and announced a series of reforms to attract more specialists to work at military production plants, including the reallocation of federal assets to housing and increasing pay.[8] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tactical Missile Corporation in Moscow Oblast and called on the plant to double production even after announcing that the plant had met the requirements of the state defense order.[9] Putin also announced that the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade has prepared a list of unspecified specialties to defer from military service, which may suggest that the Kremlin is prioritizing using skilled workers in the production of Russian weapons over having skilled soldiers fight in Russia's military.[10] Russian news outlets *Interfax* and *RBK*, the latter citing a Russian federal official, reported that the Russian Ministry of Finance is also considering issuing war bonds.[11] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed that Putin's March 3 presidential decree on government oversight of the DIB sets conditions for the Russian Ministry of Trade and Industry to bypass DIB managers at enterprises that fail to meet Russia's production standards.[12] The Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service reported that Russian defense enterprises significantly decreased their hiring standards and now accept workers without experience and with histories of drug use, criminal records, and bankruptcy.[13] ISW has previously reported on Russia's struggle to rejuvenate its DIB amid labor shortages and Western sanctions and its ensuing lack of success in this endeavor.[14]

Two Russian Su-27 aircraft downed a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over the Black Sea in international airspace. US General James B. Hecker stated that two Russian aircraft hit the drone nearly causing both aircraft to crash and resulting in the loss of the drone.[15] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the drone crashed due to "sharp maneuvering." [16] The incident will not cause an escalation to direct conflict between Russia and the US. Russian forces have used coercive signaling against US and allied flights and naval vessels for decades in multiple theaters without

triggering conflict.[17] The US and Russian presidents retain full freedom to choose how to respond to such incidents, and there is nothing automatic about escalation in such situations. Given President Joe Biden's repeated commitments to avoid committing US forces to direct conflict with Russia and the Kremlin's clear and repeatedly demonstrated reluctance to get into a war with NATO, there is no reason for incidents such as these to cause dangerous escalations.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated on March 14 that Poland could supply MiG-29 multirole fighters to Ukraine within four-to-six weeks. Morawiecki stated that Poland is ready to give Ukraine an unspecified proportion of its total fleet of 28 MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine as part of an international coalition. Slovak Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad previously signaled Slovakia's support for providing Ukraine MiG-29 aircraft on March 9.[18] The Ukrainian Air Force operates MiG-29s and would be able to use them in counteroffensive operations if Ukraine receives them with enough time in advance of its next counteroffensive.

Key Takeaways

- **Prominent Russian milbloggers are reamplifying a longstanding Russian information operation that seeks to weaponize religion to discredit Ukraine.**
- **Russian authorities continue measures to mobilize the struggling Russian defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war effort.**
- **Russian Su-27 jets forced down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over the Black Sea in international airspace.**
- **Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated on March 14 that Poland could supply MiG-29 multirole fighters to Ukraine within four-to-six weeks.**
- **Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continue building defenses along Russia's border with Ukraine in order to pin Ukrainian troops to northern border areas.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces advanced within Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline and in western Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continue fortifying rear areas in Russian occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak announced on March 14 that the Russian State Duma will consider a law simplifying the legal recognition of missing Russian soldiers as dead.**
- **Ukrainian partisans injured the Deputy Head of the Nova Kakhovka Occupation Military Administration in an improvised explosive device (IED) attack.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because 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)

Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continue building defenses along Russia’s border with Ukraine in order to pin Ukrainian troops to northern border areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 14 that Russian forces continue to construct fortifications along the border with Ukraine in Kursk and Bryansk oblasts and keep troops in Belgorod Oblast to perform demonstrative actions to keep Ukrainian forces from moving to other directions.[19] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may be constructing defensive fortifications to support an information operation that portrays Ukrainian forces as a direct threat to Russian territory.[20] ISW has not independently observed Russian forces deployed to these defenses, and any Russian personnel or equipment deployed to these areas would likely be better used elsewhere.

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on March 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk near Dvorichna (17km northeast) and Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Kupyansk).[21] Geolocated footage posted on March 14 showing a destroyed Ukrainian BMP-2 near defending Ukrainian soldiers indicates minor Russian advances toward Novoselivkse (14km northwest of Svatove).[22] A Russian news aggregator claimed on March 13 that Russian aviation and infantry fought near Yahidne (30km northwest of Svatove and directly east of Kupyansk). A Russian milblogger posted footage on March 14 claiming to show the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (20th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) operating near Svatove.[23] Russian forces additionally continued ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna), Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna) and Berestove (30km south of Kreminna).[24] Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Russian forces in this area lose up to a company (30 to 100 personnel) per day but do not reduce the number of attacks on the Svatove-Kreminna line.[25] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced near Terny and Yampolivka (both 17km west of Kreminna) and attacked towards Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna) and Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna).[26] Geolocated combat footage posted on March 12 shows the BARS (Combat Reserve) unit “Kaskad” striking Ukrainian positions in the Serebrianske forest area southwest of Kreminna.[27]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



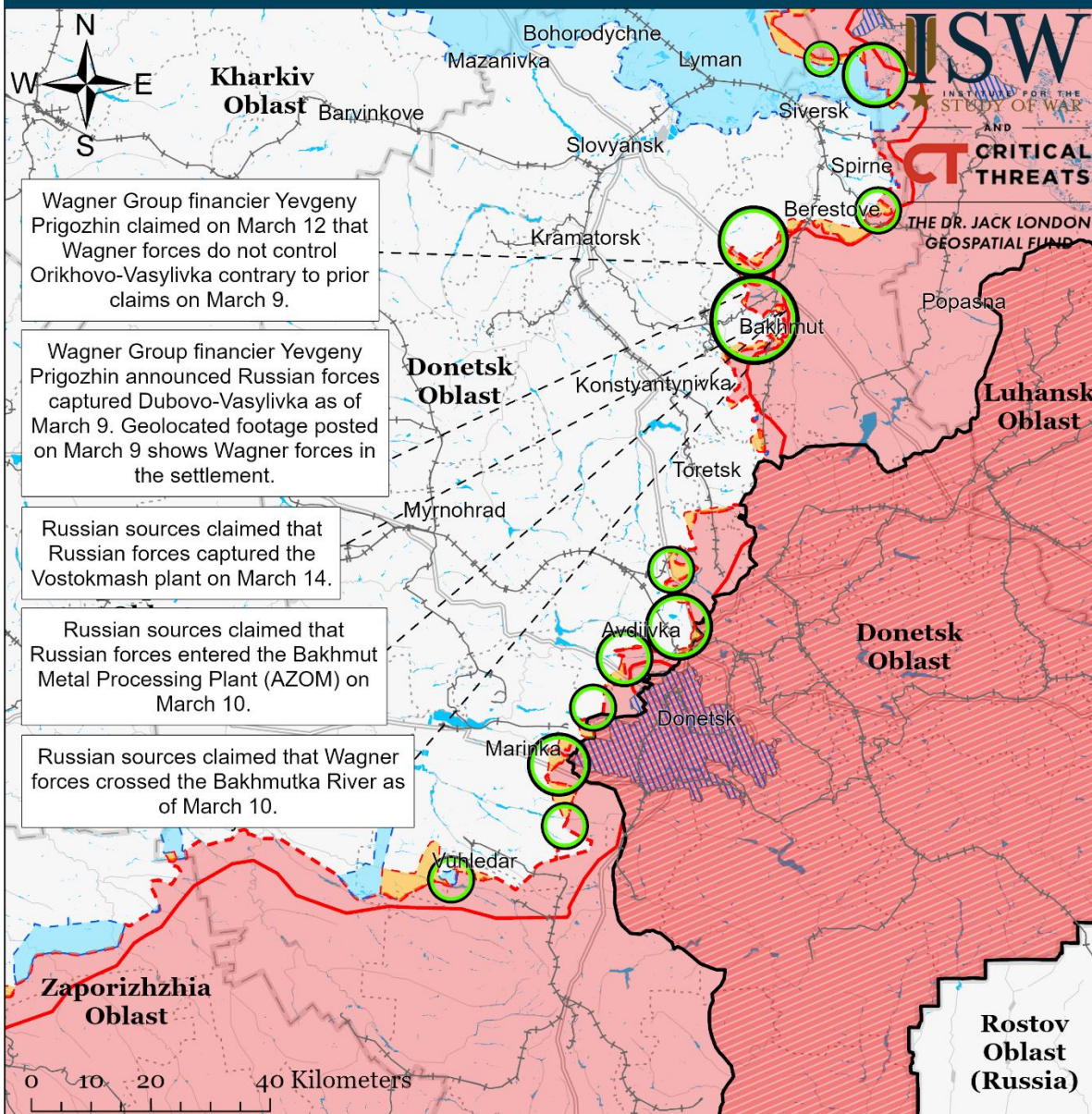
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces advanced within Bakhmut and continued ground attacks in and around the city on March 14. Geolocated footage posted on March 13 indicates that Russian forces have advanced along Sadova Street in southern Bakhmut.[28] Russian milbloggers widely claimed on March 14 that Wagner Group fighters captured the “Vostokmash” plant in the northern part of the AZOM complex in northwestern Bakhmut and posted images reportedly showing Wagner troops inside “Vostokmash.”[29] Russian sources additionally claimed that Wagner is advancing northwest of Bakhmut in the direction of Orikhovo-Vasylivka (12km northwest of Bakhmut), Zalizianske (9km northwest of Bakhmut), and Minkivka (15km northwest of Bakhmut).[30] One milblogger reported that the fighting is increasingly moving towards western Bakhmut and that Wagner fights are trying to reach the Khromove-Bohdanivka line, 5km west of Bakhmut.[31] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are conducting positional battles in and around Bakhmut and that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself; north of Bakhmut near Vasyukivka (15km north); northwest of Bakhmut near Yahidne (1km northwest), Orikhovo-Vasylivka, Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest), Minkivka, and Hryhorivka (10km northwest), and west of Bakhmut near Khromove (5km west) and Ivanivske (5km west).[32] Russian forces have not succeeded in completing a turning movement, envelopment, or encirclement of Bakhmut as of March 14.

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline on March 14. Geolocated combat footage posted on March 13 shows that Russian troops have advanced east of Krasnohorivka (about 9km north of Avdiivka), which is consistent with Russian claims of a recent successful localized offensive in this area.[33] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Avdiivka itself; in the Avdiivka area near Kamianka (4km northeast of Avdiivka), Novokalynove (14km north of Avdiivka), and Severne (5km west of Avdiivka); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Nevelske, Pervomaiske, and Neitalove; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka, Novomykhailivka, and Pobieda.[34] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue to advance in Krasnohorivka and are trying to bypass Avdiivka by pushing northwest from the Opytne-Vodyane road.[35] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces reached the N20 Donetsk City–Kostaintynivka–Kramatorsk highway near Kamianka.[36] Russian sources continue to claim that Russian forces are fighting within Marinka.[37]

Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in western Donetsk Oblast on March 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Vuhledar, 30km southwest of Donetsk City.[38] Likely older combat footage posted on March 13 confirms that Russian forces have captured Neskuchne, 30km west of Vuhledar.[39] Russian milbloggers continue to claim that Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade elements are making unspecified advances in the dacha area southeast of Vuhledar.[40]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on March 12 that Wagner forces do not control Orikhovo-Vasylivka contrary to prior claims on March 9.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced Russian forces captured Dubovo-Vasylivka as of March 9. Geolocated footage posted on March 9 shows Wagner forces in the settlement.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured the Vostokmash plant on March 14.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces entered the Bakhmut Metal Processing Plant (AZOM) on March 10.

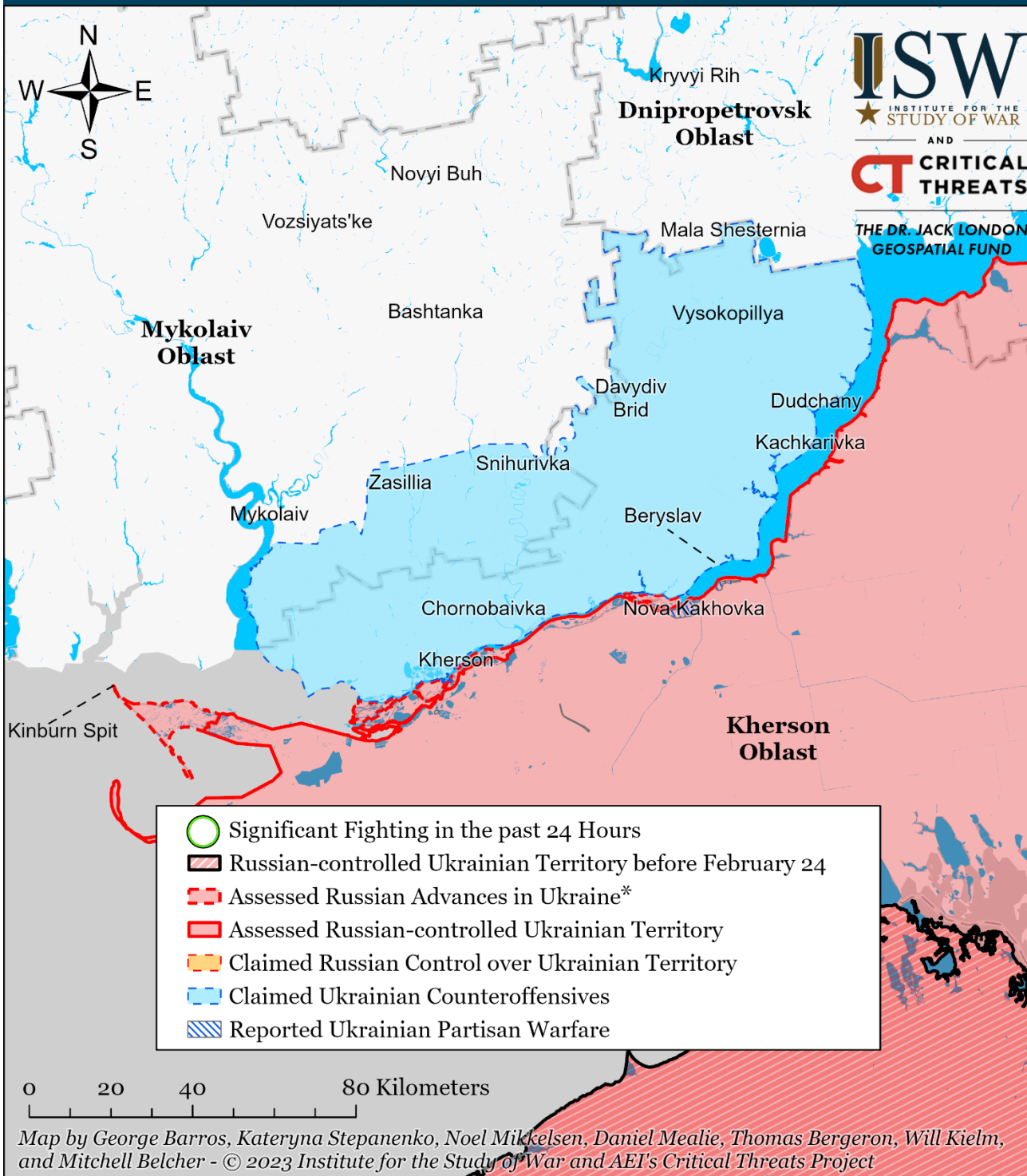
Russian sources claimed that Wagner forces crossed the Bakhmutka River as of March 10.

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

- 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
- 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 Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 14, 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)

United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak announced on March 14 that the Russian State Duma will consider a law simplifying the legal recognition of missing Russian soldiers as dead.[45] The bill would consider a written statement from a missing soldier's commander sufficient evidence to declare the soldier dead. The bill would also reduce the amount of time to declare a soldier as missing automatically from two years to six months, after which the soldier's family can petition courts to declare the soldier dead.

A Russian milblogger claimed that a Russian federal subject that has taken responsibility over its unit has been successful in improving morale and comradery among the unit's personnel. The milblogger claimed the ethnic composition of a majority Bashkort unit operating in Zaporizhia Oblast is a key factor in the regiment's success and happiness, as these personnel already know each other and their commander.[46] The milblogger also claimed that the Republic of Bashkortostan monitors the unit and rotates out Bashkort personnel for two weeks of leave every 20 days and that many Bashkorts want to serve in this unit.

A Ukrainian official reported that the Wagner Group is recruiting in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov stated that Wagner forces are conducting a recruitment campaign in occupied Melitopol.[47] It is unclear whether Wagner's recruitment campaign is purely online or if Wagner forces have a presence in Melitopol. ISW has previously reported on Wagner forces' arrival in southern Ukraine.[48]

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)

Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against the Deputy Head of the Nova Kakhovka occupation Military Administration on March 14. Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that the attack targeted occupation deputy Vitaly Gur's car and that Gur has been hospitalized with injuries.[49] The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) conducted an information operation in August 2022 falsely claiming that Ukrainian partisans killed Gur in an effort to identify Ukrainian partisans.[50]

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to consolidate social control of occupied territories by targeting children and youth. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov posted footage on March 14 of preparations for the opening of the Zaporizhia Oblast branch of the military-patriotic "Yunarmia" branch.[51] Occupation officials are likely incentivizing involvement with the Yunarmia program in order to collect personal data on Ukrainian children upon registration with the organization and encourage children's engagement with militarized Russian ideals. The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on March 14 that Russian occupation officials in Strilkove, Kherson Oblast, are forcing students and employees of educational institutions to sing the Russian national anthem during school, study the Russian constitution outside of school hours, and participate in a mandatory rhetorical extracurricular activity called "Conversations about the Important." [52] Russian occupation officials continue to weaponize the education system in occupied areas to instill militaristic and pro-Russian sentiments in Ukrainian youth.

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to facilitate the financial and economic integration of occupied areas into the Russian system. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky stated on March 14 that pensioners must reapply for pensions by applying to the Russian Social Fund, in accordance with Russian legislation on provision of pensions.[53] By registering with the Social Fund, pensioners will provide personal information to the Russian occupation authority, and will likely only receive pension payments in rubles, which allows Russian occupation officials to coercively consolidate control of occupied areas at the expense of vulnerable pensioner populations. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin additionally met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov on March 13 to discuss major developments in the industrial sector and integration of enterprises in occupied Donetsk Oblast into the Russian industrial sphere.[54]

Significant activity in Belarus (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. A mechanized element of the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade conducted a combat readiness check on March 13 and will deploy to an unspecified area for further exercises.[55] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on March 14 that the Belarusian military will continue conducting combat readiness checks as part of a planned Belarusian military call-up of Belarusian reservists in March 2023.[56]

The Kremlin continues to expand its control over the Belarusian information space under the rubric of military cooperation. Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Spokesperson Inna Gorbacheva and Belarusian military correspondents from the Belarusian MoD's *Vayar* military news agency and VoenTV television channel met with correspondents from Russian state media *RT* and Russian milblogger Gleb Ervie at the *Sputnik News* press center in Minsk, Belarus, on March 14.[57] Gorbacheva stated that Belarusian military correspondents should improve their professional skills by learning from their Russian colleagues.[58] The Kremlin will likely further expand its control over the Belarusian information space — a campaign that Moscow intensified in August 2020 when Russian state media assumed direct control over Belarusian state media during the height of protests against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.[59]

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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