

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 16, 2023

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Frederick W. Kagan
March 16, 6:15 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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The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) appears to be trying to penetrate the Russian Defense Industrial Base (DIB) in a way that is reminiscent of the KGB's involvement with the Soviet military establishment. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Center for the Research of Trophy and Prospective Weapons and Military Equipment of the Ukrainian General Staff Andrii Rudyk remarked on March 16 that Ukrainian experts have found FSB markings on many Russian weapons components that Ukrainian forces have destroyed or captured on the battlefield.[1] Rudyk noted that these markings appear not only on equipment such as T-90M tanks, but also on weapons' microcircuits, and suggested that this means that the FSB conducted an equipment inspection of such weapons and components.[2] Rudyk concluded that this means that the FSB does not trust Russian military leadership and is conducting inspections of Russian equipment accordingly.[3] FSB markings on Russian equipment and weapons components, if confirmed, would have broader implications for the relationship between the FSB, the Russian DIB, and the broader Russian military apparatus. Either FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov has instructed the FSB to conduct these investigations at the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin, or Bortnikov has issued this directive independent of Putin. In either case the FSB appears to be directly inserting itself into the inner workings of the Russian DIB, likely penetrating equipment acquisition and inspection processes. The KGB (the FSB's predecessor) notably penetrated the Red Army and Soviet defense industry in a similar fashion.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that he received a press question exposing a plot spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to undermine and "neutralize" the Wagner Group. Prigozhin's press service published a claimed request for comment on March 16 from Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* asking if Prigozhin was aware of alleged discussions between Putin and Patrushev regarding the future of the Wagner Group.[4] The press comment claims that information on these discussions has recently circulated on Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels and alleges that Patrushev suggested to Putin that there will be "nothing left" of Wagner in "one and a half to two months." [5] The post goes on to claim that Patrushev suggested that upon Wagner's destruction in Ukraine, Prigozhin will try to "unite the former and remaining active Wagner fighters under a far-fetched pretext," arm them, and "send them to the territory of Russia in order to seize power in the regions bordering Ukraine with a possible advance inland." [6] The post concludes that Patrushev has already ordered observation and control over the movement of former Wagner fighters and that Putin reportedly agreed with this step and thanked Patrushev for his efforts to "neutralize Wagner in general and Yevgeny Prigozhin in particular." [7] Prigozhin posted an audio clip in response to the claimed press comment saying that he had not heard about these supposed negotiations or observed speculation on Telegram channels, remarking that Russian special services should work to neutralize threats to Russia regardless of where they come from. [8]

ISW has not observed any information to suggest that these discussions have happened, nor has ISW captured any speculation in the Russian information space about them. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has not published the press comment on its own site, and no record of the comment is visible anywhere other than in references to the post by Prigozhin's press service. The lack of external confirmation on this subject suggests that Prigozhin has fabricated the alleged plot to further several information operations on behalf of Wagner and his own reputation. First, this exchange clearly identifies Patrushev and possibly the Russian Security Council as enemies of the Wagner Group. Prigozhin appears to be setting careful information conditions to blame Patrushev for Wagner's failures and potential crackdowns against the group, as well as introducing an invented scenario wherein Wagner poses a direct threat to Russia domestically. This effort appears to be the next evolution of Prigozhin's campaign against the Russian military establishment, and Patrushev could become Prigozhin's next target after his concerted informational campaigns against the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff. [9]

Western news agencies confirmed on March 16 that Chinese companies have sold rifles, drone parts, and equipment that could be used for military purposes to unidentified Russian entities. *Politico* cited data provided by customs data aggregator ImportGenius showing that Chinese companies sent equipment including 1,000 assault rifles, 12 shipments of drone parts, and over 12 tons of body armor to unspecified Russian actors between June and December 2022. [10] *CNN* also reported on March 16 that Ukrainian forces shot down a retrofitted, weaponized commercial

Mugin-5 drone produced by a Chinese commercial manufacturer.[11] ***These sales appear small in scale, concern largely commercial equipment, and — in all but one confirmed case — do not include companies with ties to the Chinese government, according to Politico.***[12]

Such Chinese shipments are significant, however, because they could alleviate strain on the overextended Russian defense industrial base (DIB) and circumvent Western attempts to limit Russian access to microchips. ISW has not observed routine Russian small arms shortages, and Russia's DIB appears capable of producing sufficient quantities of assault rifles. The import of domestically available equipment from China likely enables the Russian DIB to transfer resources — most critically the limited number of skilled Russian defense plant workers — from the production of such goods to the production of military equipment for which Russia has a dire need.[13] Meanwhile, the sale of even commercial drone parts to Russian entities could provide Russia's DIB with access to valuable microchips vital to the production of sophisticated equipment, which Western sanctions have worked to prevent.[14]

Syrian President Bashar Assad used a staged interview with Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* to amplify notable Russian information operations. Assad told *RIA* on March 16 that Russian military bases in Syria should receive the “most advanced weapons” to effectively deter threats in response to a question about the deployment of hypersonic missiles.[15] This comment is explicitly in support of the deployment of Russian hypersonic weapons, likely of the Kinzhal variety, to Syria, which is part of a longstanding Russian information operation to strengthen Assad and increase pressure against Turkey as Ankara considers ratification of Finland and Sweden's accession into NATO. [16] Assad also notably recognized the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as a part of Russia.[17]

Polish President Andrzej Duda stated on March 16 that Poland will give Ukraine four MiG-29 fighter jets. Polish news outlet *Wydarzenia* reported that Duda said that Poland will deliver the MiG-29s in the coming four to six weeks.[18] Polish news outlet *Rzeczpospolita* reported that Duda announced that Poland is servicing an unspecified number of additional MiG-29s for delivery to Ukraine.[19] 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.

Russia's redeployment of elements of its “peacekeeping force” from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is eroding Russia's influence with Armenia. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accused Azerbaijan of preparing to conduct a new large-scale attack and genocide against ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh at an unspecified future time on March 16.[20] Pashinyan stated that Armenia should appeal to the United Nations Security Council if the Russian Federation is unable to uphold the November 9, 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire that Moscow helped broker with Azerbaijan.[21] Pashinyan previously accused Russia's “peacekeeping force” in Nagorno-Karabakh of “not fulfilling its obligation” under this ceasefire in December 2022 after Russian forces failed to secure passage on the only road through the Lachin Corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.[22] Russia's “peacekeeping force” in Nagorno-Karabakh is very likely understrength. The Russian military redeployed elements of the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade — Russia's only dedicated peacekeeping brigade — from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine in March 2022.[23] Ukraine's General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces severely degraded the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade, killing about 800 and wounding about 400 soldiers of the brigade's 1,800 soldiers that deployed to Ukraine as of June 2022.[24] Russia will likely lose military influence in other post-Soviet states since Moscow has redeployed elements of permanently stationed Russian forces from Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan, occupied Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Tajikistan to fight in Ukraine.[25]

Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long-term economic consequences, likely as part of the Kremlin's effort to prepare Russians for a protracted war. Putin delivered a speech at the Congress of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs in Moscow on March 16 in which he claimed that the Russian economy has steadily grown in the past eight months following a roughly five percent contraction over the first months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[26] Putin attempted to portray Russia as not being isolated from the international economy by claiming that Russian trade with fast-growing markets has increased at double-digit rates.[27] Putin claimed that the domestic Russian economy will experience sustainable long-term growth and forecasted that Russian industries will significantly grow as they fill niches previously held by Western firms that have left the country and stopped doing business with Russia.[28] Putin suggested that the entire Russian economy will expand in a manner similar to the Russian agricultural sector's growth following 2014 Western sanctions regimes associated with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.[29] Putin claimed that Russia's supposed economic resilience has disproven Western analysts who predicted empty store shelves and massive shortages of goods in Russia because of Western sanctions.[30]

Putin's portrayal of a healthy and resilient Russian economy is at odds with Russia's issues with sanctions-related supply chain bottlenecks, the Russian defense industrial base's (DIB) struggle to meet the Russian military's needs in Ukraine, and the Kremlin's substantial projected budget deficit problems.[31] Putin likely sought to reassure the Russian public as the

Kremlin increasingly signals to Russians that the Kremlin intends to fight a protracted war in Ukraine and implicitly consign the Russian economy to an indefinite period of stringent Western sanctions.[32] The Kremlin also likely sought to reassure the Russian public that war-related production will not detrimentally impact the rest of the Russian economy as Russian officials continue efforts to gradually mobilize more of Russia's DIB.[33] The Kremlin will likely struggle to not contradict its different informational lines of effort as it attempts to reassure the Russian public about the Russian economy, set informational conditions for a protracted war, and mobilize a wider portion of Russia's DIB.

Key Takeaways

- **The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) appears to be trying to penetrate the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) in a way that is reminiscent of the KGB's involvement with the Soviet military and industrial base.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that he received a press question exposing a plot spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to undermine and “neutralize” the Wagner Group.**
- **Western news agencies confirmed that Chinese companies have sold military and dual-use equipment to unidentified Russian entities. These sales appear small in scale but could alleviate strain on Russia's defense industrial base (DIB) and circumvent Western attempts to limit Russian access to microchips.**
- **Syrian President Bashar Assad used a staged interview with Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* to amplify notable Russian information operations.**
- **Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that Poland will give Ukraine four MiG-29 fighter jets.**
- **Russian's decision to redeploy elements of its “peacekeeping force” from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine is eroding Russia's influence with Armenia.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to reassure the Russian public that the war in Ukraine will not have significant long term economic consequences, likely as part of the Kremlin's effort to prepare Russians for a protracted war.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line and in Western Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized assaults in Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces increased their naval presence in the Black Sea.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 16, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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Subordinate main effort - Capturing Donetsk Oblast

Main effort - Eastern Ukraine

Supporting effort 1 - Southern Axis

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

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

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

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

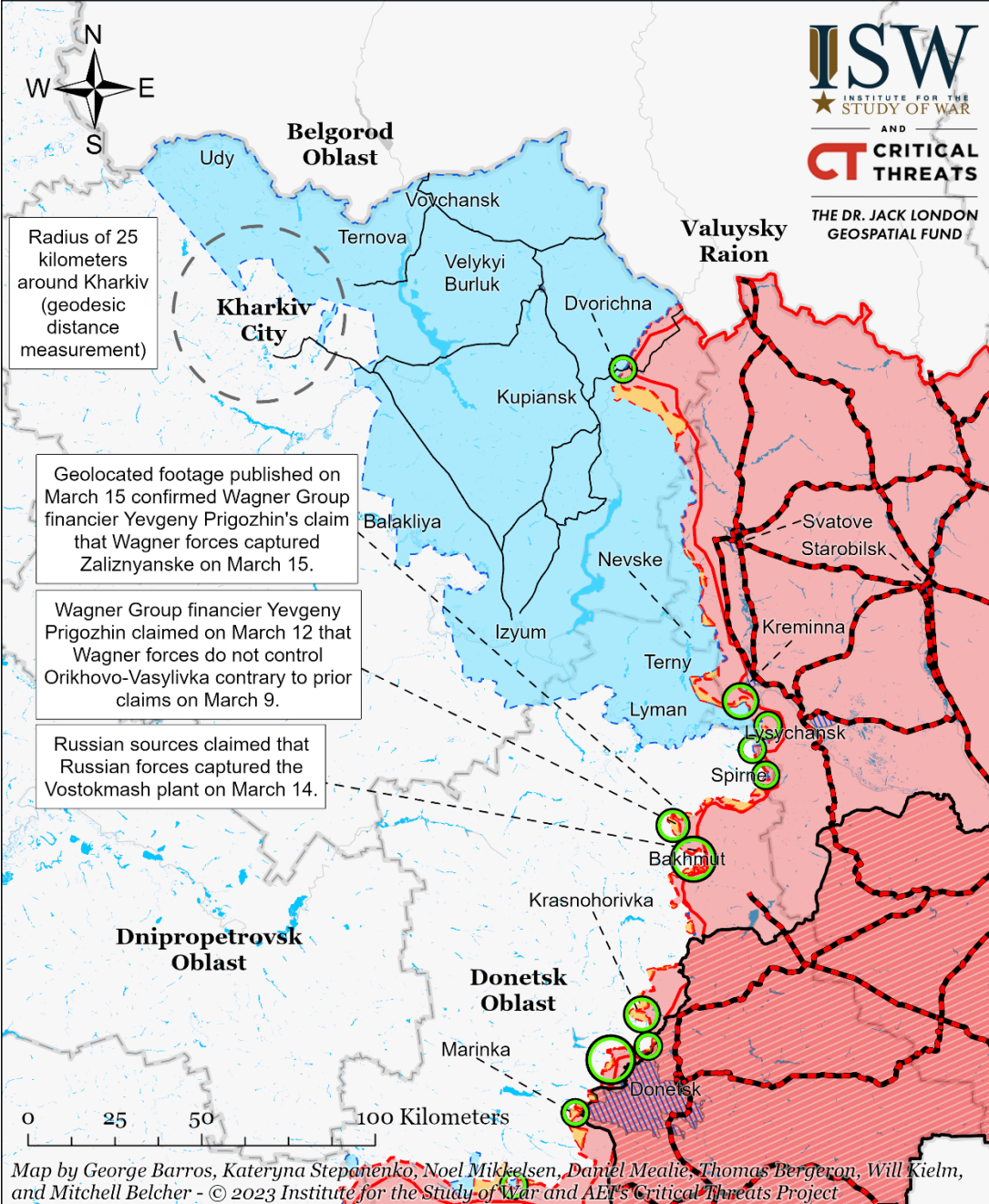
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of 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)

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on March 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Kupyansk), Kreminna, Kuzmyne (3km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), Verkhokamyanske (20km south of Kreminna), and Spirne (25km southeast of Kreminna).[34] Geolocated footage published on March 16 showing Ukrainian forces striking a Russian MT-LB vehicle west of Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna) indicates a limited Russian advance northwest of Kreminna.[35] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian forces are active near Hryanykivka, Bilohrivka, and Spirne.[36] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attempted to advance in the direction of Makiivka, Nevske, Terne, Yampolivka, and Bilohorivka (all within 22km northwest of Kreminna) but did not specify the outcome of the attempted advances.[37] Drone footage published on March 14 purportedly shows Russian forces from the 2nd Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Army Corps striking Ukrainian forces in the Lysychansk direction in western Luhansk Oblast.[38]

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



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

	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours		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.

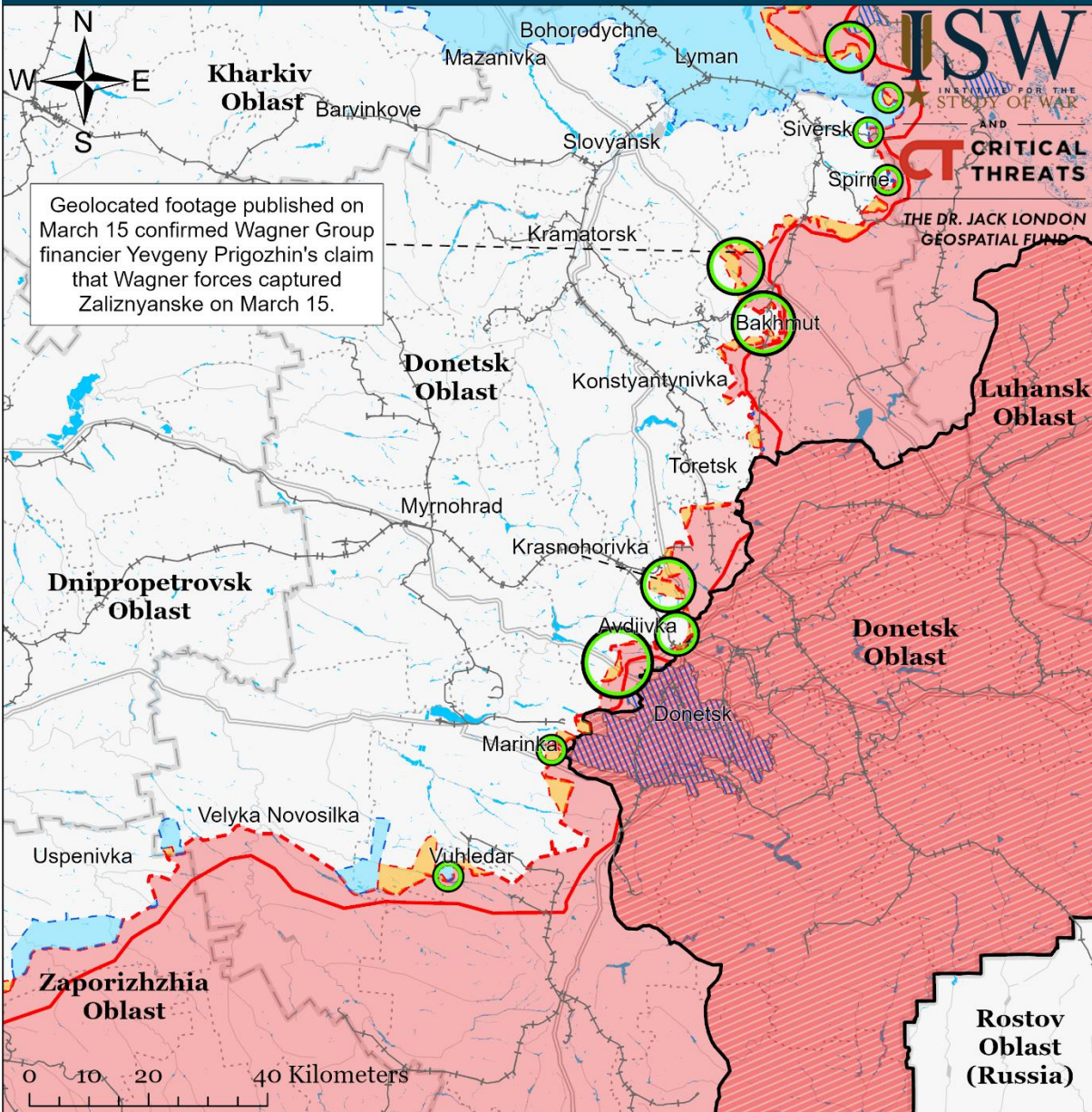
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut on March 16. Geolocated footage posted on March 14 indicates that Russian troops have advanced northwest of Bakhmut on the northern banks of the Pivnichnyi Reservoir.[39] Geolocated images additionally confirm Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s claim that Wagner troops captured Zalizianske (9km northwest of Bakhmut) on March 15.[40] Geolocated combat footage posted on March 16 confirms that Russian forces have additionally made marginal advances near Kurdiuvivka, 13km southwest of Bakhmut.[41] Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley noted that while Russian forces may be making small tactical gains in Bakhmut, they come at a high manpower and equipment cost.[42] Russian milbloggers claimed on March 16 that Russian forces continue to expand their control of territory northwest of Bakhmut after taking Zalizianske and that fighting continues within the AZOM industrial complex.[43] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself; northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (12km northwest), Hryhorivka (7km northwest), and Bohdanivka (5km northwest); and west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west).[44] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty noted that Russian forces have conducted 42 ground attacks in Bakhmut over the last day.[45] The relatively slower pace of Russian attacks on and around Bakhmut on March 16, coupled with relatively fewer Russian claims on advances in this area, supports ISW’s March 15 assessment that the Wagner Group offensive on Bakhmut is likely nearing culmination.[46]

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline on March 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka itself; in the Avdiivka area near Kamianka (4km northeast of Avdiivka), Stepove (7km northwest of Avdiivka); and Severne (5km west of Avdiivka), on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Nevelske, Neytalove, and Pervomaiske; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka.[47] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces completely captured Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka) and that this has worsened the situation for the Ukrainian grouping in Avdiivka.[48] ISW has not observed any visual confirmation of the capture of Krasnohorivka as of March 16. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian troops are continuing ground attacks on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City in the direction of Pervomaiske from the Pisky-Vodyane line.[49] One Russian source claimed that Russian forces in Marinka are anticipating a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the village and are in a constant state of readiness.[50]

Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) and that Russian forces are preparing to resume wider offensive operations on Vuhledar.[51] ISW has previously reported on the very degraded state of Russian forces operating around Vuhledar, and it is highly unlikely that damaged naval infantry and Eastern Military District elements currently deployed to western Donetsk Oblast will be able to resume successful offensive operations here in the near future.[52] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 16 that a Russian Orlan-10 UAV detected and destroyed a Ukrainian platoon as it redeployed to the Prechystivka area just west of Vuhledar.[53]

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



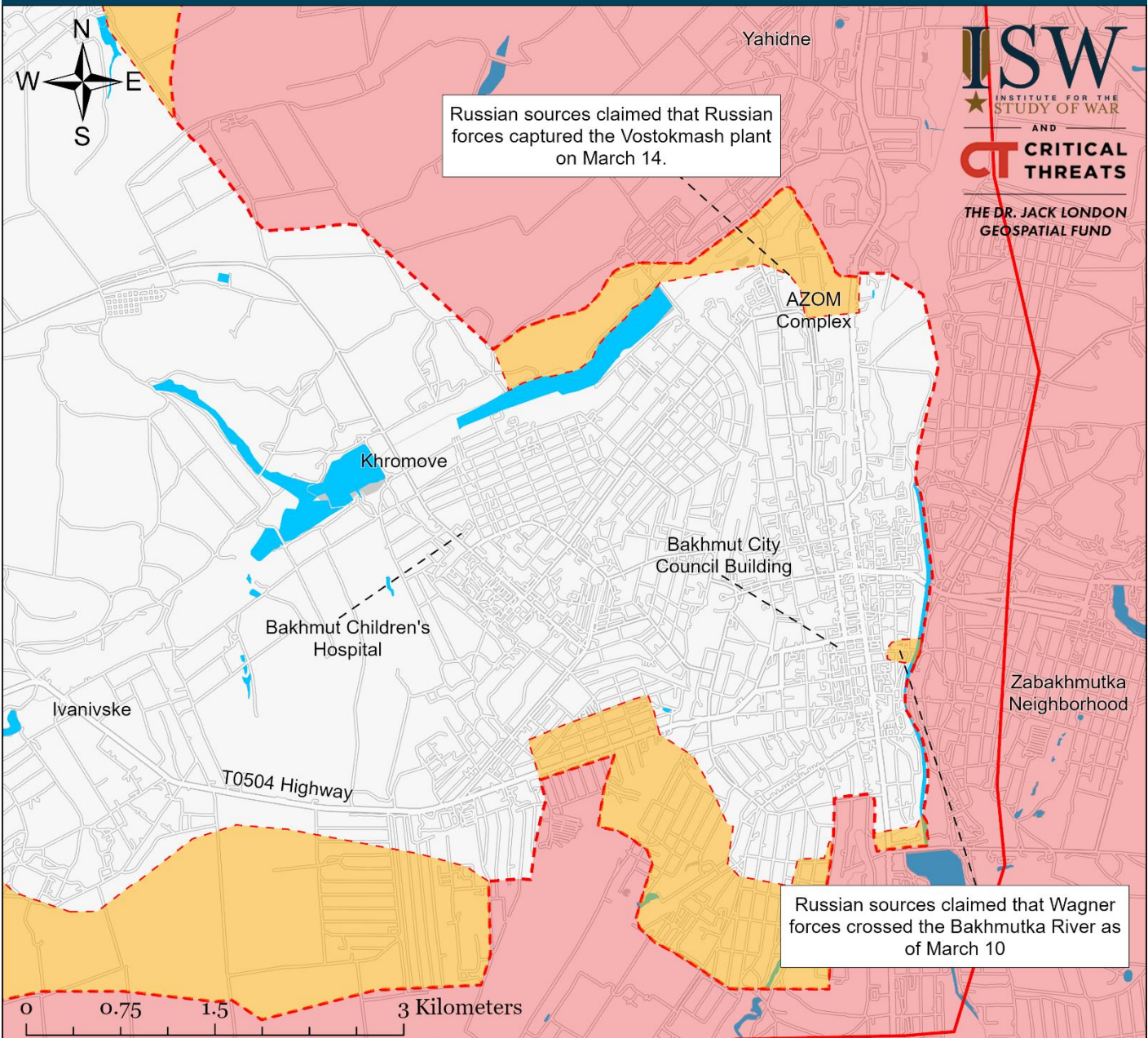
Geolocated footage published on March 15 confirmed Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's claim that Wagner forces captured Zaliznyanske on March 15.

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

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

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of March 16, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

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

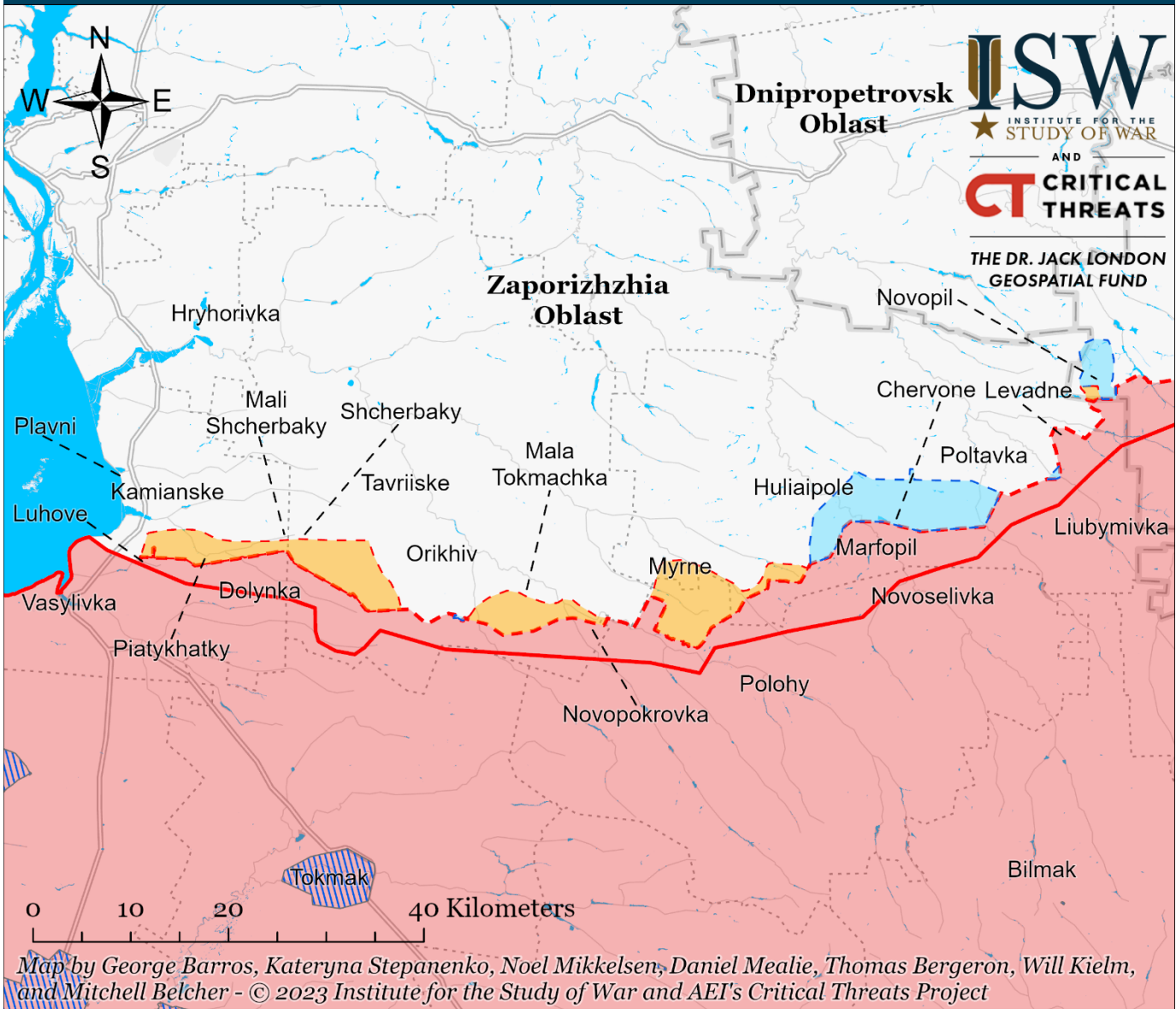
Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized assaults in Zaporizhia Oblast on March 15. Russian milbloggers amplified geolocated footage on March 15 showing Ukrainian forces (likely less than a company) conducting an assault on Russian positions about six kilometers south of Orikhiv.[54] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack positions of the Russian 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) near Novodanylivka (5km south of Orikhiv) and the positions of the 291st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and the 22nd SPETSNAZ Brigade near Polohy (34km southeast of Orikhiv).[55] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled the Ukrainian assaults, destroyed up to five Ukrainian tanks and two armored vehicles, and wounded and killed Ukrainian personnel.[56] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Valdimir Rogov characterized the Ukrainian assaults near Polohy as a reconnaissance-in-force operation.[57] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on March 16 that Ukrainian forces transitioned to positional fighting in the Hulyaipole area following the alleged failed assaults in the Orikhiv and Polohy areas and that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group near Vasylivka (38km southwest of Orikhiv).[58] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults IVO Polohy on March 16.[59]

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are expanding fortifications in Zaporizhia Oblast amid ongoing Russian discussions about a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive in the area. A prominent Russian milblogger reportedly visited Russian-occupied Zaporizhia Oblast on March 16 and claimed that Russian forces have established extensive fortifications in the area.[60] The milblogger claimed that he passed kilometers of anti-tank trenches and as many as 50 rows of dragons teeth along a route from Enerhodar to Melitopol to Tokmak (likely the T0805 and T0401 highways).[61] The milblogger claimed that he also met with elements of the 83rd Air Assault Brigade and the Shairmuratov Volunteer Battalion from Bashkortostan in an unspecified area of Zaporizhia Oblast.[62] Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are planning to conduct a counteroffensive in southern Ukraine that would cut off the Russian land corridor to Crimea.[63] ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are significantly expanding field fortifications in the wider Melitopol area to protect Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) that connect to logistics nodes in Tokmak and Enerhodar as well as the E58 highway that passes through Melitopol in the event of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces increased their naval presence in the Black Sea on March 16. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have 21 naval vessels on combat standby in the Black Sea, 5 of which carry 32 Kalibr missiles.[64] The current Russian naval presence in the Black Sea marks a notable increase from the reported 13 Russian naval vessels in the Black Sea on March 15.[65] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that the larger-than-usual Russian naval presence may be a demonstrative response to US statements about retrieving the MQ-9 reaper drone that two Russian Su-27 aircraft forced down over the Black Sea on March 14.[66] A US Defense official reportedly stated that Russian naval vessels are at the site where the US MQ-9 Reaper drone fell into the Black Sea.[67]

Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Dnipropetrovsk and Kherson oblasts on March 16.[68] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces struck targets near Kherson and Zaporizhzhia cities.[69]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of March 16, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

* 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 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)

Russian authorities appear to be continuing efforts to make up for defense industrial base (DIB) production shortcomings by covertly procuring equipment from abroad. Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky stated on March 16 that Russia is seeking shell suppliers in Africa and Asia to fill its ammunition shortage.[70] Skibitsky noted that Russia is actively working with Iran and negotiating with Myanmar and unspecified countries in Africa and the Middle East.[71] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 16 that the equipment inside Russian T-90 M tanks captured in September 2022 indicates that Russia places its markings on imported electronics within tanks to mask the fact that it does not produce electronics for its own tanks.[72] The Ukrainian General Staff added that Russian forces only have 100 T-90 M tanks remaining and increasingly rely on T-62 and T-72 tanks or sometimes use engines from the 1937 B-2 and B-92S2 model tanks.[73]

The Russian State Duma adopted a bill increasing Russian commanders' authority to punish soldiers without a court decision, likely supporting a crackdown on growing soldier complaints and insubordination, on which ISW has extensively reported.[74] A major Russian state-owned news agency claimed on March 15 that the Russian State Duma adopted a bill granting Russian military commanders the power to detain Russian soldiers without a court decision during a period of mobilization, martial law, or combat. Commanders may exercise this power under a broad range of circumstances, including general "evasion of military service duties." [75]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov continued efforts to project power within Russia by promoting the Chechen special forces (SPETSNAZ) on March 16. Kadyrov claimed he held an "extended meeting" with Russian national guard (Rosgvardia) and Chechen Internal Ministry leaders to discuss increasing Chechen SPETSNAZ effectiveness in Ukraine, improving SPETSNAZ training, and measures to ensure public safety.[76]

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to promote Wagner Group recruitment efforts targeting Russian youth. The Grusha Martial Arts Club in Moscow on March 15 posted videos of Prigozhin signing autographs and meeting with potential recruits.[77]

Prigozhin confirmed on March 15 that there are small numbers of Afghan fighters in the Wagner Group that are focused on targeting American artillery systems. Prigozhin claimed these fighters are also trained to work with captured or purchased US Javelin anti-tank missile systems.[78] The presence of limited numbers of such mercenaries is unlikely to grant the Wagner Group significant new capabilities.

Some Russians continue limited resistance to Russian mobilization, Russia's war in Ukraine, and Russian coverage of the war in Ukraine. A Russian news outlet reported on March 15 that the Kazan, Tatarstan district court by March 9 began to consider the case of an eleventh-grader in Kazan charged with conducting an unsuccessful arson attack on a military recruitment facility in Kazan, Tatarstan.[79] A Russian opposition news source reported on March 15 that residents from near Efremov, Tula Oblast and local politicians from the Yabloko Party staged a demonstration in a courthouse to demand the return to her family of a girl sent to an orphanage after her father voiced opposition to the war in Ukraine.[80] *Meduza* reported on March 16 that the Novokuibyshevsk, Samara Oblast city court fined oblast deputy and Communist Party member Mikhail Abdalkin 150,000 rubles (\$1,934) for "discrediting" Russian forces by wearing noodles on his ears — a cultural symbol of being lied to — while watching Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 22 address.[81] An independent Russian news outlet stated that the Khabarovsk garrison military court on March 16 sentenced a Russian soldier to a 5.5-year suspended prison sentence for spreading "false information" discrediting Russian forces by confessing to murdering a Ukrainian civilian in Andriivka, Kyiv Oblast as part of a report published on August 15, 2022.[82]

Russian authorities continue to conduct covert mobilization and require residents to update their data with military enlistment offices, possibly setting conditions for a future wave of mobilization.[83]

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 authorities are continuing efforts to eradicate the notion of a distinct Ukrainian national identity from occupied territories. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 16 that Russian occupation authorities are attempting to create a pseudo-Cossack organization called "Cossack Khortysya" in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast in an effort to encourage the replacement of the Ukrainian identity with the Russian identity in occupied territories.[84] The Center reported that the non-profit Tavrika Center, which is registered in Crimea and is funded by the Russian President's Fund, received over 11 million rubles (\$14,100) to hold "mass cultural events" and film a historically revisionist documentary on

how Ukrainian Zaporizhian Cossacks are members of a larger Russian-dominated Cossack community. [85] The Center emphasized that Russia previously used similar tactics to impose Russian influence in Ukraine, particularly after the Orange Revolution in 2004–2005.[86] This effort seeks to destroy the Ukrainian historical identity of the Zaporizhian Sich (an autonomous polity that existed between the 16th to 18th centuries) by framing all Cossacks — including Ukrainian Cossacks — as a culturally Russian monolith. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin uses Russian Cossack organizations (paramilitary formations that perform state services, including law enforcement and military administrative tasks in accordance with Russian law) to support Russian force-generation efforts.[87]

Russian occupation authorities continue to exploit the Port of Berdyansk to integrate occupied territories into the Russian economy. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 16 that Russian officials exported looted grain by barge boat from the Port of Berdyansk.[88] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky claimed on March 16 that Russian occupation authorities have begun preparing the Port of Berdyansk to export grain, noting that that since the port is not designated on international registers as Russian, the grain export process will face challenges.[89]

Russian occupation authorities are intensifying passportization efforts by threatening to deport residents of occupied territories to Russia and settlements deep in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 16 that Russian occupation authorities and personnel of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) threatened to deport Ukrainian children living in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast to eastern regions of Russia should their parents refuse to obtain Russian passports.[90] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian occupation authorities threatened residents in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast with deportation to Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast.[91]

Russian sources reported that Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) officials stopped humanitarian aid delivery to occupied Kherson Oblast. A Russian milblogger responded to the reports that MVD officials stopped volunteers from delivering aid and detained them claiming that the vehicles delivering aid were stolen.[92] Another milblogger reported that MVD Representative Irina Volk said that the MVD Main Directorate is checking on the legality of its employees' actions and the reports of the detention of volunteers.[93] These reports suggest that the occupation administration in Kherson Oblast, particularly law enforcement entities, are likely dealing with high levels of corruption within their own ranks.

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

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

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. Unspecified elements of the Belarusian 19th Mechanized brigade conducted live fire exercises with T-72 tanks at the 227th Combined Arms Training Ground in Borisov, Minsk Oblast, on March 16.[94] Artillery elements of the Belarusian 11th Mechanized Brigade conducted indirect and direct fire training at the Gozhsky Training Ground in Grodno, Belarus, on March 15. [95]

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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