

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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Note: The data cut-off for this product was 2:00pm ET on March 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the March 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed occupied Crimea 10 years ago, setting conditions for the full conquest of Ukraine Putin still seeks. Putin signed an illegal annexation treaty with Crimean occupation officials on March 18, 2014, after Russian soldiers without identifying insignia (also known colloquially as “little green men” and, under international law, illegal combatants) swiftly and quietly invaded Crimea in February 2014.[1] Russian occupation officials staged a false and illegitimate referendum in Crimea on March 16, 2014, calling on Russia to annex Crimea.[2] Putin delivered an annexation speech to the Russian government on March 18, 2014, establishing the same false narratives he later used to set information conditions to justify and launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Putin falsely claimed that Russia was protecting Crimeans from the “oppressive” Ukrainian government, that Ukraine is not a real state, and that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians shared the same culture, civilization, and human values.[3] Putin celebrated the 10th anniversary of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2024, during which he attempted to justify his continued occupation of parts of Donbas and southern Ukraine and to set conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.[4]

Russian occupation authorities have consistently oppressed Ukrainians on the peninsula — the same charge of which Putin accused the Ukrainian government to justify his invasion — and Russia has since militarized Crimea to support its broader territorial ambitions against Ukraine. Putin militarized Crimea for eight years and used it to launch a large-scale invasion of southern Ukraine in February 2022.[5] Russia also began efforts in 2014 to materially change the ethnic demographics of Crimea by resettling thousands of Russians in the peninsula and sought to eradicate both the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar national identities to further integrate Crimea into Russia and secure Russia's control over the peninsula.[6] Amnesty International released a report commemorating the 10th anniversary of Crimean occupation on March 18 stating that Russian authorities have systematically tried to eradicate the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar national identities in Ukraine over the past 10 years by interrupting, limiting, and prohibiting the use of the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages.[7] Amnesty International also reported that Russian occupation authorities have suppressed religious and cultural rights in Crimea, and extensively restricted freedom of speech. ISW has previously assessed that Russia is using a similar occupation playbook to establish permanent control over newly occupied territories in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.[8] Putin's aims were never limited to the annexation of Crimea, and his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 under the amorphous stated goals of “demilitarizing,” “denazifying,” and rendering Ukraine “neutral,” indicates that Putin sought nothing less than regaining full Russian control of Ukraine and still maintains this objective today. The conditions of occupied Ukraine suggest, however, that prolonged Russian occupation of already occupied territories or the rest of Ukraine will be accompanied by oppression and ethnic cleansing to consolidate permanent Russian control.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use claimed record levels of voter turnout and support for his presidential candidacy to set informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine. The Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) claimed on March 18 that Putin won the presidential election with 87.28 percent of the votes.[9] Russian CEC Chairperson Ella Pamfilova claimed that the Russian election had a record voter turnout of 77.44 percent.[10] The CEC claimed that the 2018 Russian presidential election had a 67.47 percent voter turnout and that Putin won with 76.67 percent of the vote.[11] Putin and senior Russian officials claimed that the reported record voter turnout and high public support for Putin demonstrated Russia's unity and trust in Putin.[12] The CEC claimed that Putin won 88.12 to 95.23 percent of the vote in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts, and Crimea.[13] Russian occupation officials have likely falsified record high support for Putin in occupied Ukraine and likely coerced Ukrainian citizens to participate in the elections, which were inherently coercive given the large number of Russian forces operating in occupied Ukraine.[14] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that 99.8 percent of the personnel in the Russian armed forces voted in the presidential election of whom 97.27 percent voted for Putin.[15] Putin claimed that he did not expect such high election results in occupied Ukraine and that the results demonstrate that people in occupied Ukraine are “grateful for Russian protection” and, therefore, he said that Russia will do everything to ensure the “protection” of occupied Ukraine.[16] Putin is likely continuing efforts to set informational conditions to justify a protracted conflict and long-term occupation of Ukraine under the guise of “protecting” civilians in occupied Ukraine who are only in danger because of the Russian invasion.[17]

Putin responded to French President Emmanuel Macron's recent proposals to send Western troops to Ukraine by claiming that NATO personnel are already in Ukraine. Putin stated on March 18 that military personnel from NATO member countries are already in Ukraine, including personnel who speak French and English, and acknowledged Macron's claim that Western personnel would perform “secondary functions.”[18] Putin also reiterated

Kremlin talking points about the possibility of full-scale conflict between Russia and NATO and Russia's feigned interest in peace negotiations aimed at undermining Western support for Ukraine and convincing Western countries to push Ukraine into negotiations that would ultimately undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[19] *Politico* recently reported that France is prepared to build a coalition of countries that are open to sending Western military personnel to Ukraine following Putin's recent claims that "Western escalations," such as sending NATO military contingents to Ukraine, could risk nuclear conflict.[20] Putin's claim that Western military personnel are already operating in Ukraine suggests that Putin believes that the West has already violated this purported "red line," and thus that Western concern over Russia's response to the violation of the "red line" (if it ever existed at all) is baseless. ISW previously noted that Ukrainian forces and Western assistance to Ukraine have crossed Russia's supposed "red lines" several times over the course of the war without drawing a significant Russian reaction, indicating that many of Russia's "red lines" are most likely information operations designed to deter Ukrainian and Western actions.[21]

Putin re-emphasized the idea of a "sanitary zone" in Ukraine in a manner congruent with Russian Security Council Deputy Chair Dmitry Medvedev's recent call for the total elimination of Ukrainian statehood and absorption into the Russian Federation. Putin responded to a media question on March 18 on whether Russia needs to occupy Kharkiv Oblast to ensure security of Belgorod Oblast, stating that he does "not rule out" the idea of establishing a demilitarized "sanitary zone" in Ukrainian-controlled areas in response to recent "tragic events" along the Ukrainian-Russian international border. Putin was likely referring to recent pro-Ukrainian Russian cross-border raids in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[22] Putin called the depth of this demilitarized zone a "separate issue" and refused to discuss which areas Russia needs to occupy and when, but noted that Russia may need a demilitarized zone that is difficult for Ukraine to "overcome" using "primarily foreign made" weapons.[23] Putin has previously emphasized the idea of a demilitarized zone that would push Russia and Russian-occupied of Ukraine out of range of both Ukrainian and Western-provided weapons, a goal that is unobtainable as long as Ukraine remains independent with any capability of fighting because Putin would likely lay claim to any Ukrainian territory in the demilitarized zone.[24] Putin's demilitarized zone narrative is subtler than Medvedev's direct calls for the total annihilation of the Ukrainian state but is still congruent with the goals outlined in Medvedev's sardonically-named seven point "peace plan." [25] Medvedev reiterated the Kremlin's calls for Ukrainian "demilitarization," "denazification," and total defeat that Putin has highlighted as the Kremlin's war aims since February 2022, and Medvedev's seven points have a strong ideological basis in Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," as ISW has previously reported.[26]

Putin admitted that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces are comprised of Russian citizens amid the continuation of cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 18. Putin stated on March 18 that "four groups of traitors" (likely referring to the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR), Siberian Battalion, and Ichkerian volunteers) are conducting cross-border raids into Russia and insinuated that Russia will execute the traitors.[27] Putin claimed that Russian forces have destroyed 800 of the 2,500 all-Russian pro-Ukrainian personnel he estimated to be involved in conducting the attacks into Russia.[28] Putin previously accused "Ukrainian forces" of conducted the cross-border raids on March 12 to 15.[29] Russian milbloggers praised Putin and agreed that Russian "traitors" need to "eliminated," despite previously also claiming that "Ukrainian forces" were conducting the raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts.[30] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the volunteer forces continued limited ground attacks near Spodaryushino and Kozinka, Belgorod Oblast and the Siberian Battalion posted a photo claiming to show volunteer forces operating in Kozinka.[31] The Russian MoD recently added a section to its daily situational report to account for the "Belgorod direction," suggesting concern within the Russian MoD regarding how long these cross-border raids will continue.[32] Pro-Russian all-Ukrainian volunteer forces conducted isolated cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 22, June 1, and June 4–5 in 2023.[33] The previous raids appear to have been more limited than the current raids, which began on March 12 and have continued over the past six days.[34]

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova baselessly accused Ukraine of conducting the reported March 17 drone strike against a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Moldova, likely as part of an ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova. Zakharova claimed on March 17 that the drone strike in Transnistria was a Ukrainian "attempt to shake [up] the situation in Transnistria and sow panic among Russian voters in Transnistria." [35] Zakharova additionally claimed that official Moldovan statements denying Ukraine's involvement in the strike are "ridiculous," and Transnistrian authorities accused Moldovan authorities of an "inadequate reaction" to the strike and previous "terrorist attacks" in Transnistria.[36] The Moldovan Bureau of Reintegration previously stated that the drone strike was deliberately meant to spread fear and panic in Transnistria, implying that the strike was part of an adversarial information operation targeting Moldova, and the Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation accused Russia of conducting the strike to manipulate the information space.[37] ISW cannot independently verify the details of the singular drone strike in Transnistria or identify the responsible actors, but it is unlikely that Ukrainian forces conducted the strike given the limited means used in the strike and the insignificance of the target. Russia or Russian-linked actors could benefit from the strike in order to further the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to set information conditions to justify a variety of Russian hybrid operations aimed at destabilizing Moldova.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed occupied Crimea 10 years ago, setting conditions for the full conquest of Ukraine Putin still seeks.**
- **Russian occupation authorities have consistently oppressed Ukrainians on the peninsula – the same charge of which Putin accused the Ukrainian government to justify his invasion – and Russia has since militarized Crimea to support its broader territorial ambitions against Ukraine.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to use claimed record levels of voter turnout and support for his presidential candidacy to set informational conditions for a protracted war in Ukraine.**
- **Putin responded to French President Emmanuel Macron’s recent proposals to send Western troops to Ukraine by claiming that NATO personnel are already in Ukraine.**
- **Putin reemphasized the idea of a “sanitary zone” in Ukraine in a manner congruent with Russian Security Council Deputy Chair Dmitry Medvedev’s recent call for the total elimination of Ukrainian statehood and absorption into the Russian Federation.**
- **Putin admitted that the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces are comprised of Russian citizens amid the continuation of cross-border raids into Belgorod Oblast on March 18.**
- **Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova baselessly accused Ukraine of conducting the reported March 17 drone strike against a military base in Transnistria, the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Moldova, likely as part of an ongoing Kremlin hybrid operation aimed at destabilizing Moldova.**
- **Russian forces recently made a marginal confirmed advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia needs to form a veteran-led Russian “Administrative Corps” as part of the “Time of Heroes” initiative, which will incorporate Russian veterans into the Russian workforce.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



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, Mitchell Belcher, Shaylei Dauphinais, Tom Thacker, and Kaitlyn Thomas.
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* 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 these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

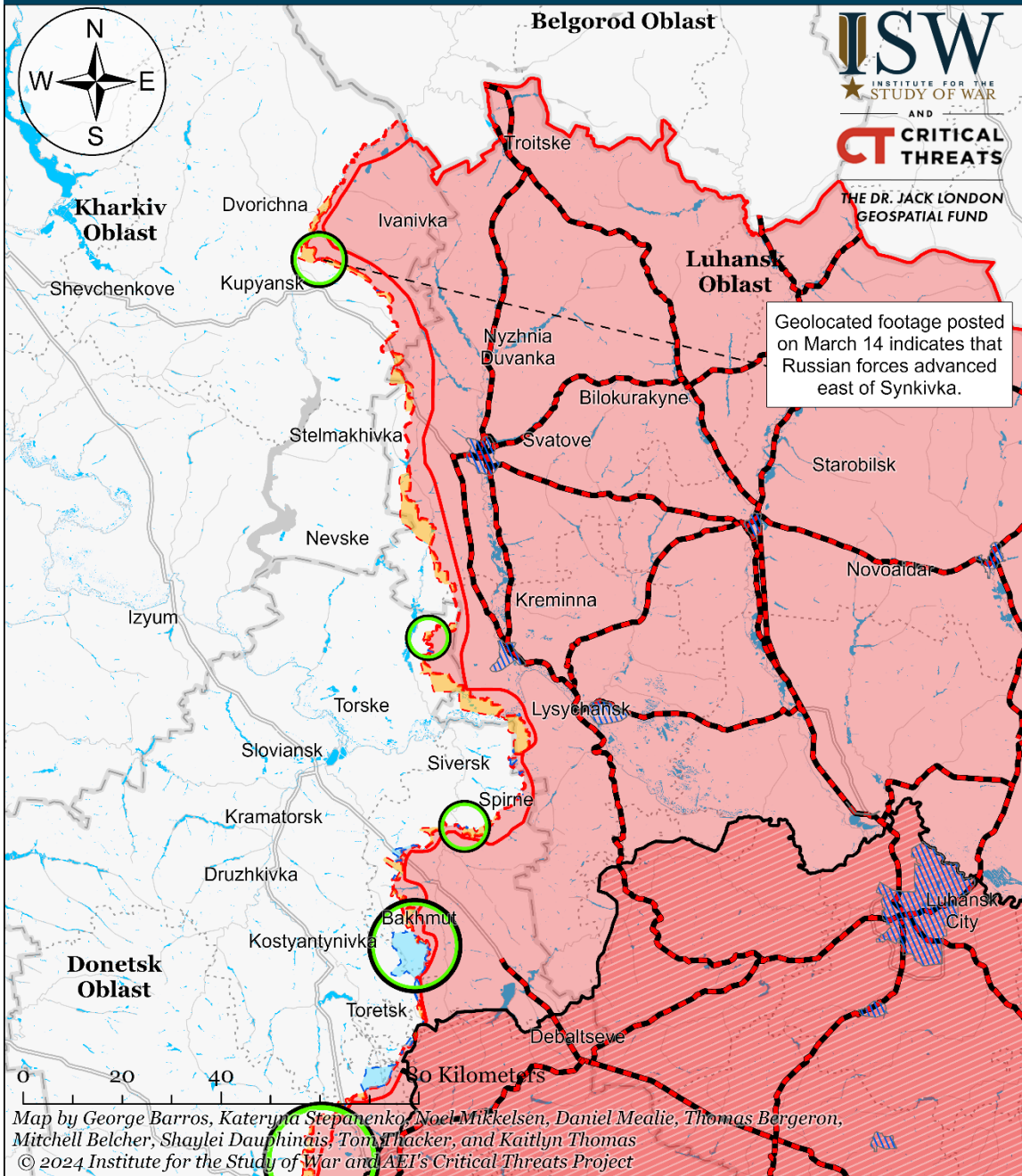
- Russian Main Effort — Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 — Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 — Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort — Southern Axis
- Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Ukrainian Defense Industrial Base Efforts
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives
- Significant Activity in Belarus

Russian Main Effort — Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 — Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces reportedly unsuccessfully attacked along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka and west of Kreminna near Terny.[39] Elements of the Russian 7th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People’s Republic [LNR] Army Corps [AC]) and the Chechen “Aida” detachment of the 204th “Akhmat” Spetsnaz Regiment are reportedly operating near Bilohorivka (south of Kreminna).[40]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



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

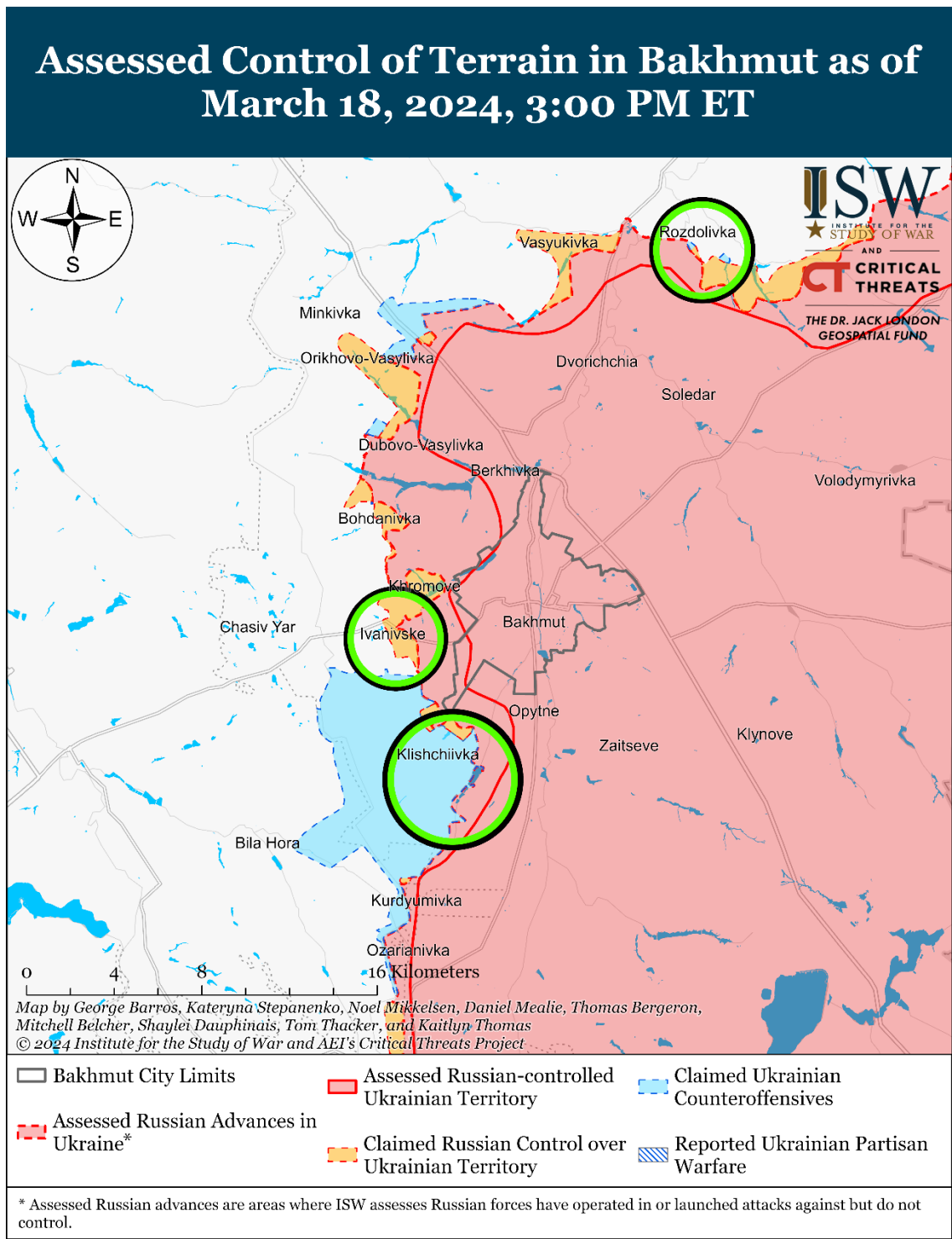
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on March 15 that Russian forces advanced 300 meters in the area east of Yampolivka and Terny between March 13 and 14.

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 reportedly unsuccessfully attacked in the Siversk direction (northeast of Bakhmut) on March 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled two Russian attacks near Rozdolivka (southwest of Siversk).[41]

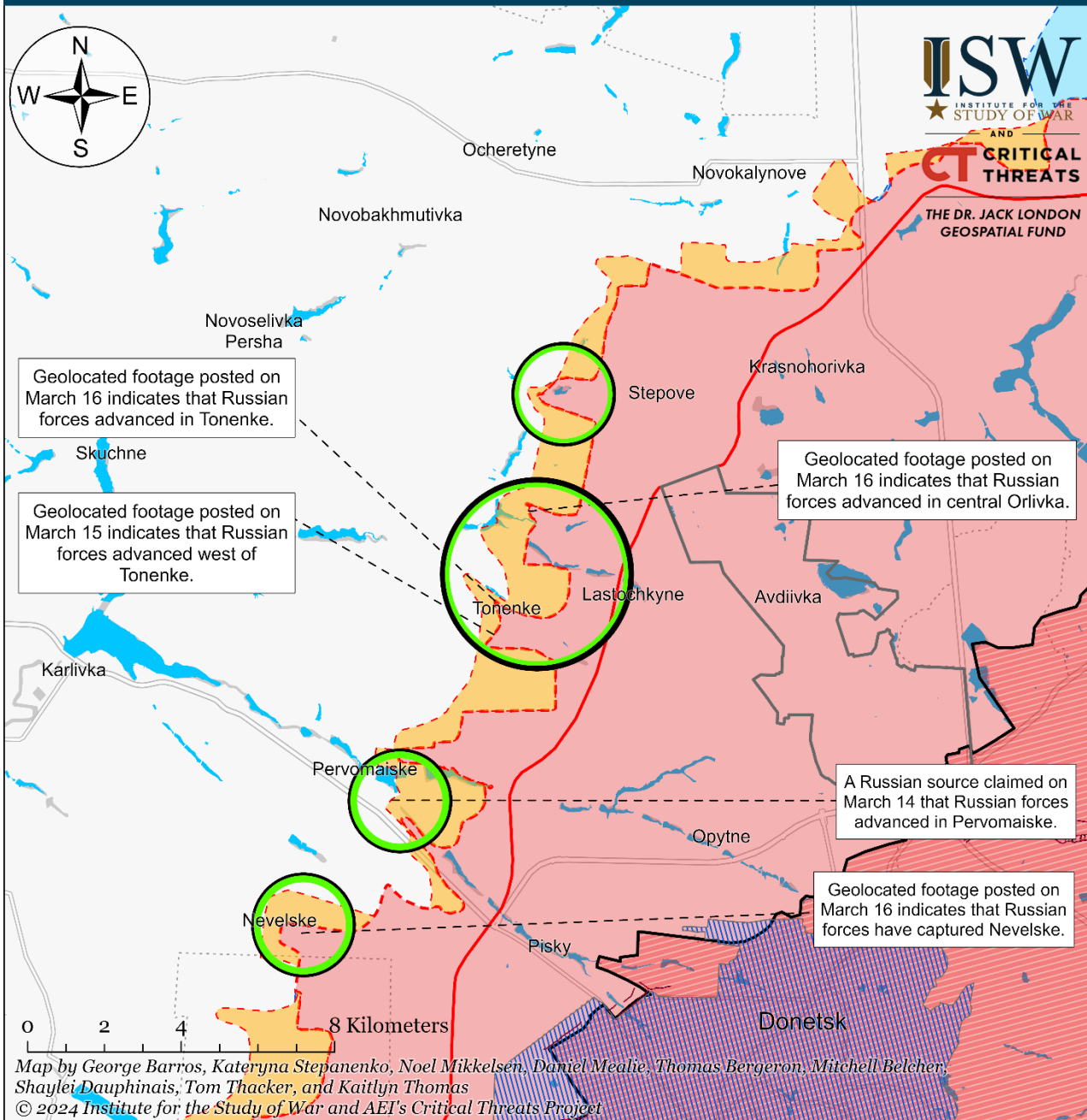
Positional engagements continued near Bakhmut on March 18, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. Positional engagements continued west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske and in the direction of Chasiv Yar; and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[42] Elements of the Russian 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division reportedly continue operating northwest of Bakhmut; and elements of the “Vostok” Volunteer Reconnaissance and Assault Brigade are reportedly operating in the direction of Chasiv Yar.[43]



Russian forces reportedly advanced near Avdiivka on March 18, but there are no confirmed changes to the frontline. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced several hundred meters northwest of Avdiivka near Berdychi and Orlivka and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, although ISW has not observed visual evidence of these claims.[44] A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces captured several positions near Novokalynove (north of Avdiivka), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.[45] Positional engagements continued northwest of Bakhmut near Oleksandropil, Berdychi, Semenivka, and Orlivka; west of Avdiivka near Tonenke; and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske and Nevelske.[46]

Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on March 18 that the Russian Central Grouping of Forces is deployed and operates along two main directions: Toretsk (northwest of Horlivka) and Pokrovsk (northwest of Avdiivka).[47] Mashovets specified that the Central Grouping of Forces includes Russian elements of the 1st Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Army Corps, and 2nd Combined Arms Army (CAA), 41st CAA, and 90th Tank Division (all Central Military District [CMD]). Mashovets stated that the Russian elements of the 1st DNR Army Corps including five regiments and four battalions are operating in the direction of Toretsk. Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 2nd CAA, 41st CAA, 90th Tank Division, and 1st DNR Army Corps consisting of up to 23 regiments, 13 battalions, and four detachments — including some Storm (likely referring to Russian convict assault units) and BARS (Russian Combat Reserve) units — are operating in the Pokrovsk direction. Mashovets stated that the Russian Central Grouping of Forces is prioritizing offensive operations in the Pokrovsk direction but could regroup to focus its offensive efforts in the Toretsk direction.

Assessed Control of Terrain near Avdiivka as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



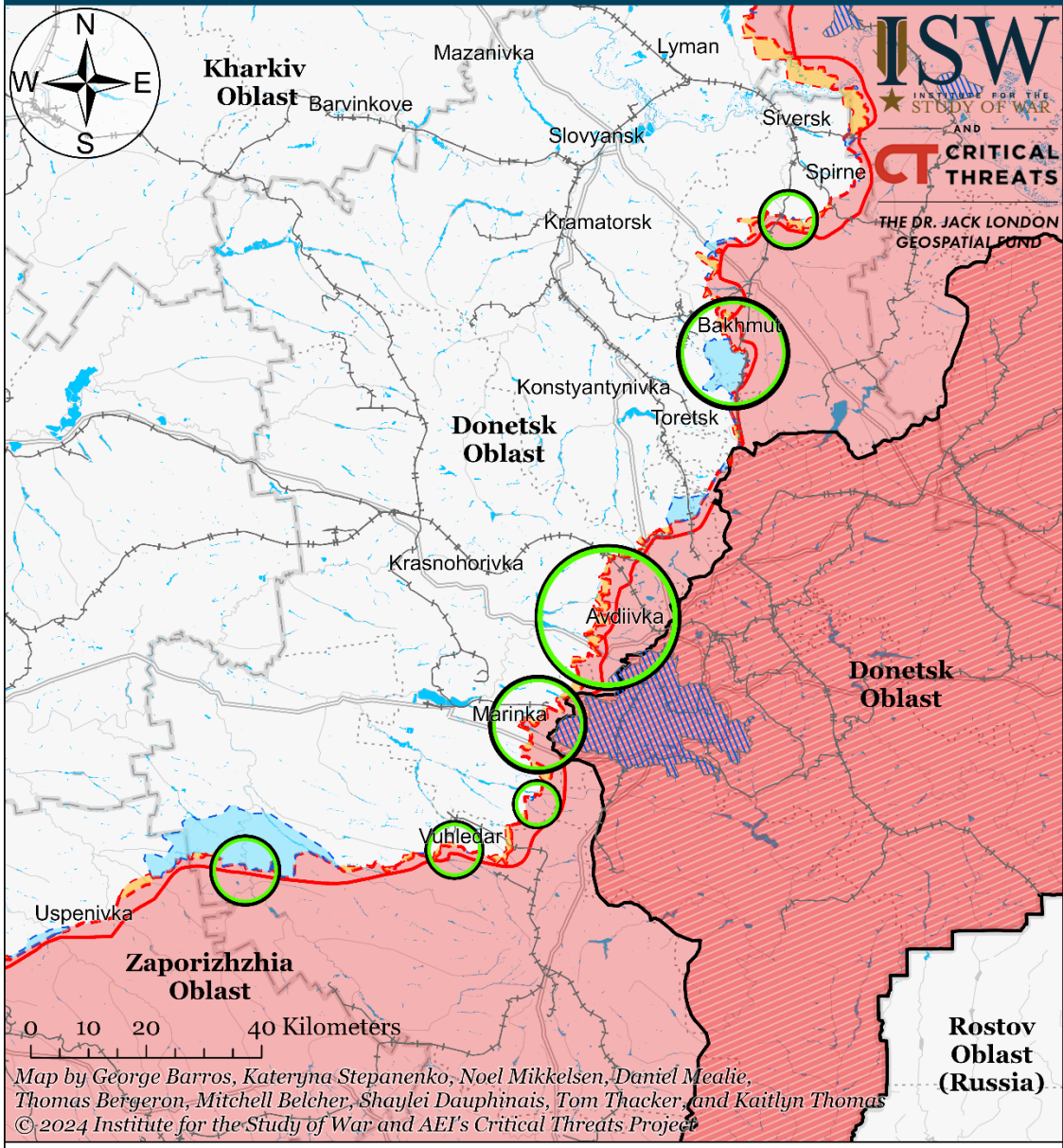
- Avdiivka City Limits
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Russian Field Fortifications

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on March 17 that Russian forces advanced 400 meters wide and 730 meters deep within Tonenke. A Russian source claimed on March 15 that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers north of Novomykhailivka. A Russian source claimed on March 14 that Russian forces advanced 400 meters between Tonenke and Orlivka.

Positional engagements continued west and southwest of Donetsk City on March 18, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. Positional engagements continued west of Donetsk City near Krasnohorivka and Heorhiivka and southwest of Donetsk City near Novomykhailivka and Pobieda.[48] Elements of the Russian 238th Artillery Brigade (8th CAA, Southern Military District [SMD]) are reportedly operating near Krasnohorivka.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET

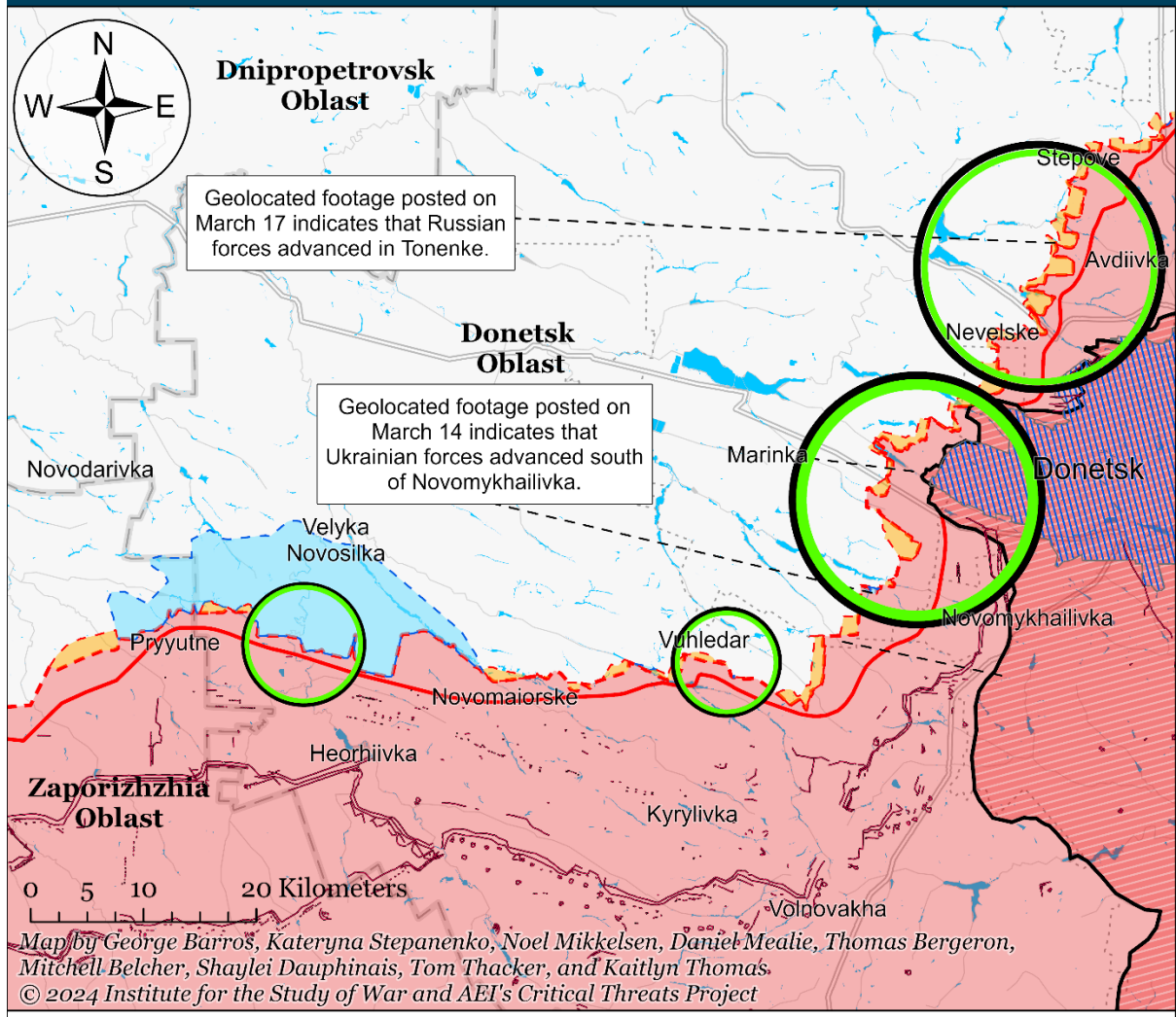


- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads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

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

Positional engagements continued in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on March 18, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. Positional engagements continued south of Velyka Novosilka near Urozhaine and Staromayorske, and southeast of Velyka Novosilka near Vodyane.[50] Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 5th CAA, 29th CAA, 36th CAA (all Eastern Military District [EMD]), and 40th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) are operating in the Velyka Novosilka area and amount to at least nine separate brigades, 11 regiments, and six battalions.[51]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Donetsk Oblast as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

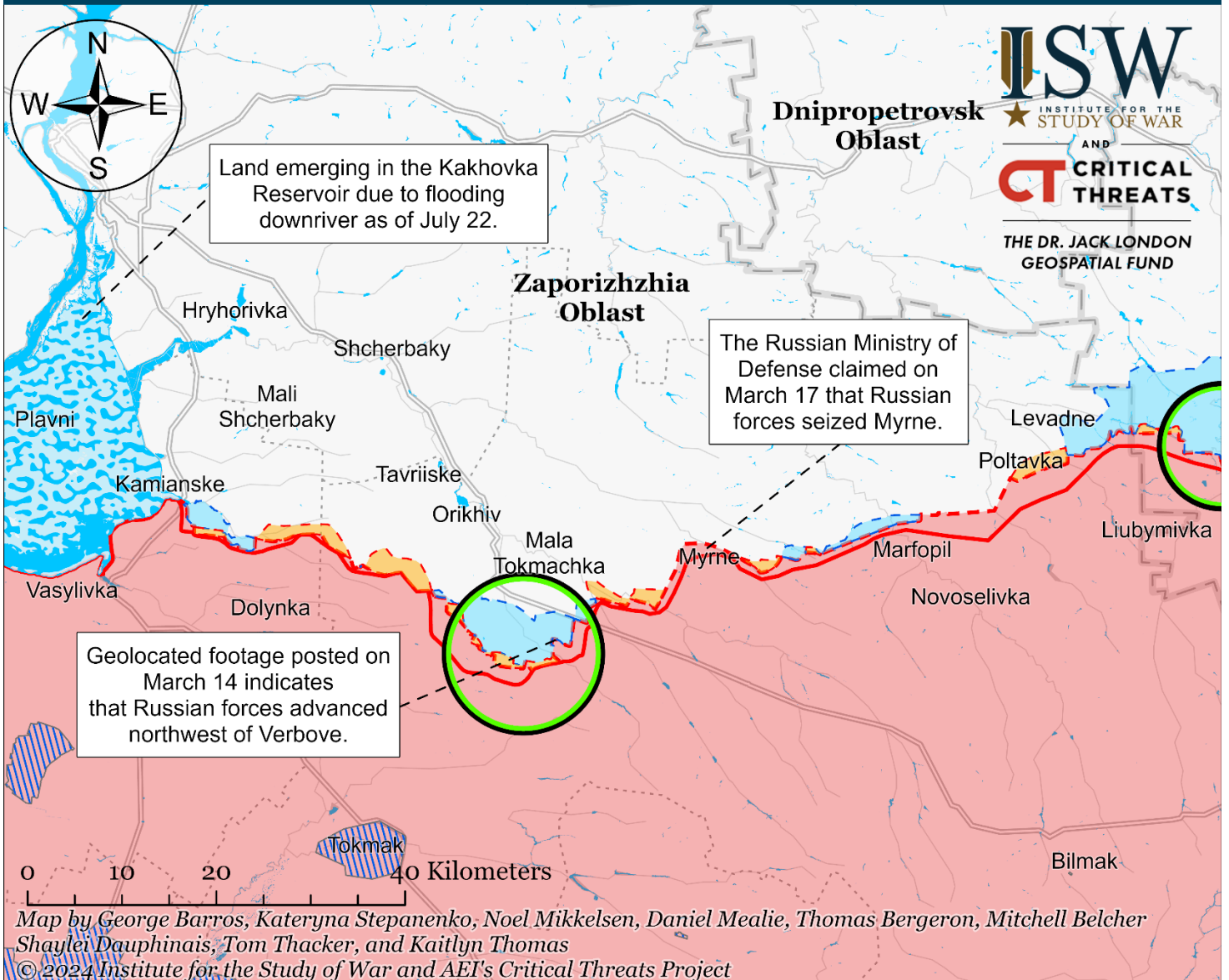
Note: A Russian source claimed on March 15 that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers north of Novomykhailivka.

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

Russian forces recently marginally advanced in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast amid continued positional fighting in the area on March 18. Geolocated footage published on March 17 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced east of Luhivske (northeast of Robotyne).[52] A Russian milblogger claimed on March 17 that Russian forces have captured half of Robotyne.[53] Positional fighting continued near Robotyne, Verbove (east of Robotyne), and Myrne (northeast of Robotyne).[54] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported that elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army ([CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]), and 7th and 76th airborne (VDV) divisions are fighting as part of the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces in the Orikhiv direction in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Mashovets stated that the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces consists of two separate motorized rifle brigades and “combined brigade tactical groups of military bases” (presumably brigade-sized tactical formations created from one or more bases outside of doctrinal unit structures); up to 19 motorized rifle and VDV regiments; and at least 18 battalions and battalion-sized units of different types.[55] Elements of the Russian 291st Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th CAA) and the 38th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (35th CAA, Eastern Military District [EMD]) also continue operating in the Zaporizhzhia direction.[56] Elements of the Russian 70th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division) continue operating near Robotyne.[57]



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 18, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



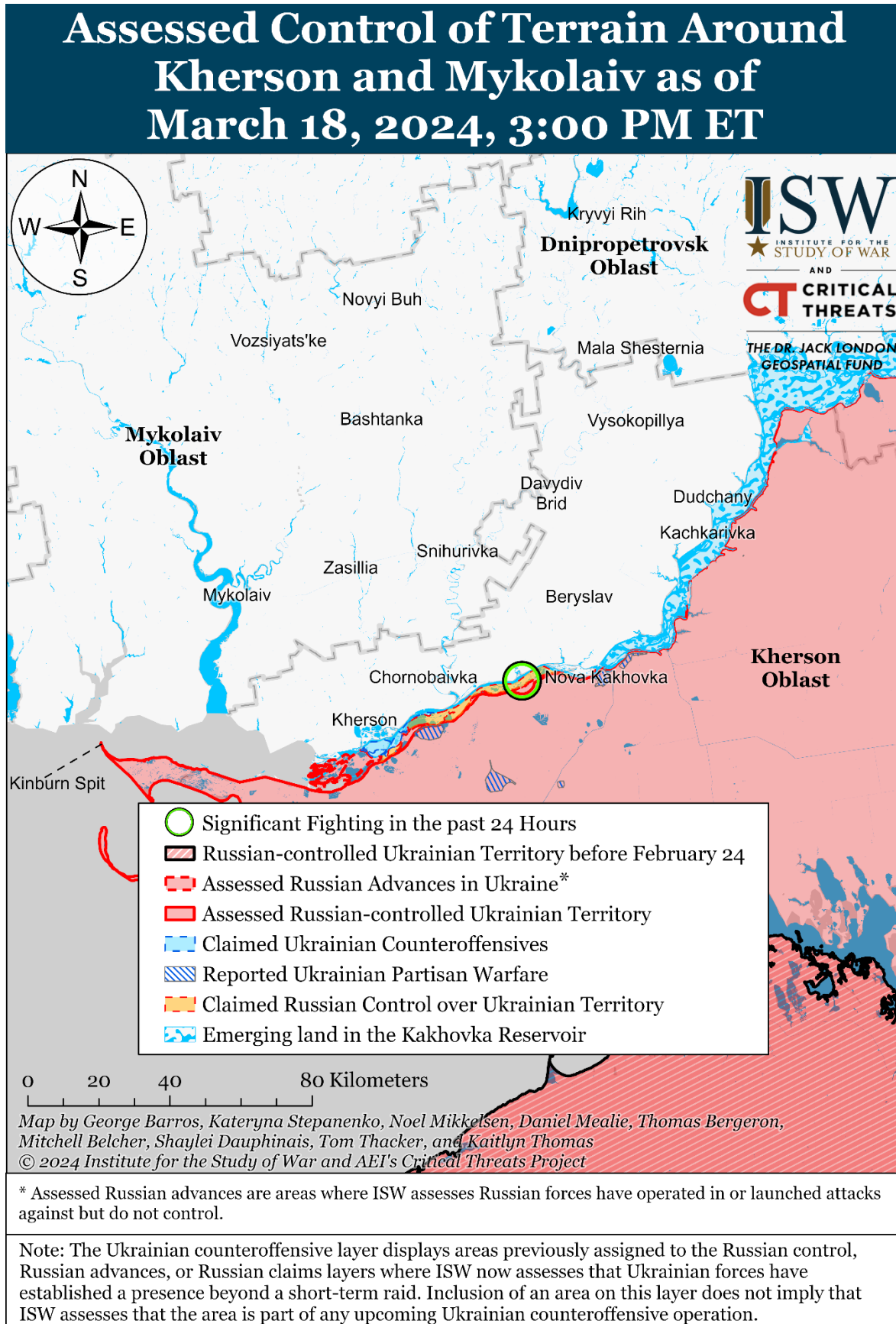
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, Shaylei Dauphinais, Tom Thacker, and Kaitlyn Thomas
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| Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours | Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory | Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare |
| Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24 | Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory | Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir |
| Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine* | Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives | |

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on March 17 that Russian forces seized half of Robotyne.

Positional fighting continued in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast near Krynyky on March 18.[58] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain limited positions near the Antonivsky bridge, likely referring to the Antonivsky roadway bridge.[59]



Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign (Russian Objective: Target Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure in the rear and on the frontline)

Russian forces launched missile and drone strikes targeting Ukraine overnight on March 17 and March 18. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched five S-300/400 missiles against Kharkiv Oblast and two Kh-59 cruise missiles against Sumy Oblast.[60] Ukrainian military officials also reported that Russian forces launched 22 Shahed 136/131 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and that Ukrainian forces shot down 17 Shaheds over Kyiv, Poltava, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Kirovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Zaporizhia, and Rivne oblasts.[61] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down one Shahed over Zaporizhia Oblast and two Shaheds over Kryvyi Rih area in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, but that an unspecified number of Shaheds struck and damaged private industrial facilities and residential buildings in Kirovohrad Oblast.[62] A Russian milblogger claimed that explosions were heard in Volyn Oblast and that Russian forces struck the Svitlovodsk Oil Depot in Svitlovodsk, Kirovohrad Oblast.[63]

Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces likely adopted a new missile strike tactic targeting Ukrainian emergency personnel who respond to the aftermath of Russian missile strikes. Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Colonel Nataliya Humenyuk assessed that Russian forces likely paused between two Iskander-M missile strikes against the same location in Mykolaiv City on March 17 to strike Ukrainian emergency personnel who would have arrived at the scene after the first strike.[64] Humenyuk added that Russian forces employed a similar tactic when launching missile strikes on Odesa City on March 15.

Russian forces have reportedly dropped over 16 times more aerial bombs in the first months of 2024 than in all of 2023. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Lieutenant General Ivan Havryliuk stated that Russian forces have dropped more than 3,500 aerial bombs on Ukraine since the beginning of 2024.[65]

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia needs to form a veteran-led Russian "Administrative Corps" as part of the "Time of Heroes" initiative, which will incorporate Russian veterans into the Russian workforce.[66] Putin stated during his post-election press interview overnight on March 17 and March 18 that Russia must prepare veterans who fought in Ukraine by providing them with higher education to pursue careers in medicine, national defense and security, or government. The "Time of Heroes" initiative may be part of ongoing Russian efforts incentivizing Russians to sign military service contracts in an exchange for promises of compensation and state benefits.

The Russian State Duma approved the second reading of a bill on March 18 that will free individuals of criminal liability if they sign contracts for military service.[67] The bill, which is likely to pass, will allow Russian authorities to expand their recruitment efforts beyond existing prisoner recruitment schemes.

South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik reported that North Korea shipped has about seven thousand containers with ammunition and other military equipment to Russia since unspecified timeframe in 2023.[68] Shin stated that North Korea likely received over 9,000 containers with aid from Russia.[69] South Korean officials and private experts stated that North Korea may have received food and economic aid and military assistance in upgrading its forces in exchange for its weapon deliveries to Russia.[70]

Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

Russian state media claimed that Russian company "Kaysant" developed a system to shield Russian armored vehicles from first person vision (FPV) drones.[71] A Kaysant representative stated that the company developed a dome-type drone jammer that is designed for installation on vehicles and weighs only two kilograms. The system reportedly jams drones at 800 and 900 megahertz frequencies, and Kaysant plans to develop similar systems that will operate on three to four frequencies. Kaysant reportedly began production of these systems and had received orders from the Moscow government, and there are currently talks about mass deliveries of these systems to the frontlines.

Ukrainian Defense Industrial Efforts (Ukrainian objective: Develop its defense industrial base to become more self-sufficient in cooperation with US, European, and international partners)

Ukraine's partners continue providing military assistance to Ukraine, including through the Czech artillery ammunition initiative. Bulgarian Defense Minister Todor Tagarev stated on March 14 that Bulgaria is sending 100 armored personnel carriers (APCs) built in the 1960s and 1970s to Ukraine and that the first batch of 30 APCs arrived on March 7.[72] German defense giant Rheinmetall announced on March 14 that it intends to open at least four factories in Ukraine.[73] The

Portuguese government announced that it will allocate 100 million euros (about \$108.7 million) to the Czech artillery ammunition procurement initiative.[74] Greek outlet *Kathimerini* reported on March 15 that Greek officials stated that Greece and the Czech Republic are negotiating a deal in which the Czech government will buy weapons from Greece and Greece will ship these weapons directly to Ukraine.[75] The deal includes 2,000 Zuni rockets, 75mm rocket ammunition, 90,000 rounds of anti-tank ammunition, four million small arms ammunition cartridges, and 70 155mm M114A1 howitzers. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and they discussed supplying more artillery ammunition to Ukraine through the Czech initiative and providing more long-range rocket artillery systems through a possible long-range artillery coalition.[76]

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Note: ISW will be publishing coverage of activities in Russian-occupied areas twice a week in the Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. ISW will continue to track activities in Russian-occupied areas daily and will refer to these activities in assessments within the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment and other ISW products when necessary.

ISW is not publishing coverage of activities in Russian-occupied areas today.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Kremlin officials and mouthpieces condemned Western leaders who refused to recognize Russian President Vladimir Putin's rigged victory in the Russian presidential election and widely amplified congratulatory messages from other foreign leaders. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Germany of Russophobia in response to the German MFA's statement that Russia's "elections" in occupied Ukraine are invalid and violate international law.[77] Russian milbloggers also ridiculed the German government for not congratulating Putin.[78] Kremlin newswire TASS reported on March 18 that a number of former Soviet and authoritarian leaders friendly with Russia congratulated Putin on the election.[79]

Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov reiterated Kremlin narratives on March 18 intended to undermine Western support for Ukraine and additional US aid to Ukraine.[80] Antonov claimed that the US has abandoned restrictions on the supply of weapons to Ukraine and accused the US of directly participating in the war — a narrative that Kremlin officials routinely use to discourage further military aid to Ukraine.

Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Nothing significant to report.

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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