

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 21, 2023

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Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be setting conditions to weaponize the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a method of Russian power projection in advance of Russia’s accession to the rotating UNSC presidency in April. Russian UN Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya stated during a press conference on March 21 that Russia plans to hold an informal UNSC meeting in early April to discuss the “real situation” of “Ukrainian children taken to Russia.”[1] Nebenzya claimed that Russia planned to hold the meeting before the announcement of the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) arrest warrants for Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[2] Nebenzya’s announcement, as well as vitriolic denials of the ICC’s accusations by Russian officials, come as Kremlin-appointed occupation officials continue to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under a variety of schemes and guises.[3] Putin additionally made a number of notable comments proclaiming Russia’s commitment to the UN, UNSC, and the UN charter during his press conference with Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 21.[4] Taken in tandem, Nebenzya’s and Putin’s comments suggest that Russia continues to use its position on the UNSC as a base of power projection as the UNSC prepares for Russia to take the UNSC presidency in April.[5] By setting information conditions to posture about Russia’s supposed commitment to the UNSC, Putin is positioning himself to continue to weaponize and exploit Russia’s UNSC veto power in the coming months.

The second day of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to suggest that Putin has not been able to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for. Putin and Xi signed a “Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation, Entering a New Era” on March 21, which stressed that Russian–Chinese relations are comprehensive, strategic, and at the highest level in history.[6] The Joint Statement outlines a variety of bilateral intentions and affirms the commitment of Russia and China to each other’s state sovereignty and territorial integrity, among other diplomatic promises.[7] The commitments made by Xi and Putin were notably lopsided, however, indicating the Xi is agreeing to a more reserved version of Russian–Chinese relations than Putin likely desires, as ISW observed on March 20.[8] Xi praised Putin, reaffirmed China’s commitment to Russia in the UNSC, and amplified China’s position on a political settlement of the war in Ukraine; but Xi did not go much further than offering those statements.[9] Putin, by contrast, announced a number of measures that signal Russia’s continued orientation towards and dependence on China in the energy and economic sectors, which appear very one-sided compared to Xi’s relatively tempered commitments.[10] Xi additionally did not signal an intent to provide support for Russia’s war in Ukraine beyond vague diplomatic assurances, which is likely a step down from what Putin hoped to secure in negotiations. Putin has likely failed to secure the exact sort of partnership that he needs and desires, and Xi will likely leave Moscow having secured assurances that are more one-sided than Putin intended them to be. Putin observed that Russia and China had “a very substantive and candid exchange of views” on the prospects for the further development of the Russian–Chinese relations. Such rhetoric notably lacks the language normally used in diplomatic readouts to indicate that the two parties have come to definitive and substantive agreements.

Putin portrayed the Western provision of depleted uranium ammunition to Ukraine as a significant escalation in order to bolster information operations aiming to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine and to place the onus for negotiations on the West. Putin claimed on March 21, while discussing the Chinese peace plan, that the West is beginning to use weapons with a “nuclear” component in a response to the UK’s announcement that it would provide Ukraine with shells with depleted uranium.[11] Putin claimed that the UK’s provision of depleted uranium shells indicated that the West is not ready for a “peaceful settlement.”[12] Anti-tank munitions in the West are commonly made of depleted uranium—that is, uranium that is less radioactive than natural uranium—due to its high density and the penetrative effect it generates. Such munitions cannot be used to produce either nuclear or radiological weapons. Putin seeks to portray the provision of depleted uranium shells as escalatory in order to deter Western security assistance despite the shells not containing any fissile or radiological material.

The Wagner Group may lose most of its convict force in the upcoming weeks as convicts finish their six-month military contracts. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that thousands of Wagner convicts who were

recruited during fall 2022 will be pardoned and released, given that Wagner appears to be sticking to its promise of releasing convicts after six months of service.[13] The UK MoD forecasted that the exodus of convict forces would worsen Wagner personnel shortages as the Kremlin has also blocked Wagner from recruiting additional prisoners. The Kremlin had previously confirmed on January 27 that Russian President Vladimir Putin is issuing preemptive pardon for convicts who serve in Russian combat operations in Ukraine.[14] The Kremlin's announcement aligns with the ISW-established timeline of Putin's decision to completely distance himself from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin following the fall of Soledar, Donetsk Oblast, on January 12–13.[15] The Kremlin had likely deliberately authorized publicization of preemptive pardons to incentivize more Wagner convicts to leave following the expiration of their contracts to further erode the Wagner force. Prigozhin has developed a brand consistently mocking the Russian MoD for its disregard for the troops' wellbeing and is unlikely to anger a convict force by retaining them on the frontlines past the expiration of their contracts.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) launched a criminal investigation into the Deputy Commander of the Rosgvardia's Central District, Major General Vadim Dragomiretsky on March 20.[16] Russian State Duma Parliamentarian Aleksandr Khinshtein stated that Dragomiretsky is suspected of receiving multimillion dollar bribes and abusing his power and will face subsequent dismissal from his position. Khinshtein said that officials forced Dragomiretsky to admit his guilt in a written confession. Dragomiretsky was suspected of having received bribes from a contractor who reconstructed a military unit in the Moscow Oblast.[17] The accusations follow Russian President Vladimir Putin's bill on March 18 that increased fines and jailtime for the misappropriation of Russian military assets.[18] Khinshtein stated that the Rosgvardia leadership's investigation proves its dedication to "purifying their ranks." The Kremlin may use the premise of misappropriation of military funds to oust officials who have fallen out of favor.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced on March 20 that it authorized a presidential drawdown to provide an additional \$350 million of security assistance to Ukraine.[19] The DoD stated that the package will include ammunition for HIMARS, 155mm artillery rounds, HARMs missiles, and other critical military equipment.[20]

Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be setting conditions to weaponize the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a method of Russian power projection in advance of Russia's accession to the rotating UNSC presidency in April.**
- **The readouts of the second day of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit with Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to suggest that Putin has not been able to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for.**
- **Putin falsely portrayed the Western provision of depleted uranium ammunition (not suitable for use in nuclear or radiological weapons) to Ukraine as a significant escalation in order to bolster information operations aiming to deter Western security assistance to Ukraine and to place the onus for negotiations on the West.**
- **Wagner Group may lose most of its convict force in the upcoming weeks as convicts finish their six-month military contracts.**
- **The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) launched a criminal investigation into the Deputy Commander of the Rosgvardia's Central District, Major General Vadim Dragomiretsky.**
- **The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced that it authorized a presidential drawdown to provide around \$350 million of security assistance to Ukraine.**
- **Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces did not make any confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut and continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **The Kremlin continues crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit men across Russia for contract service to avoid declaring second mobilization wave.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 21, 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.

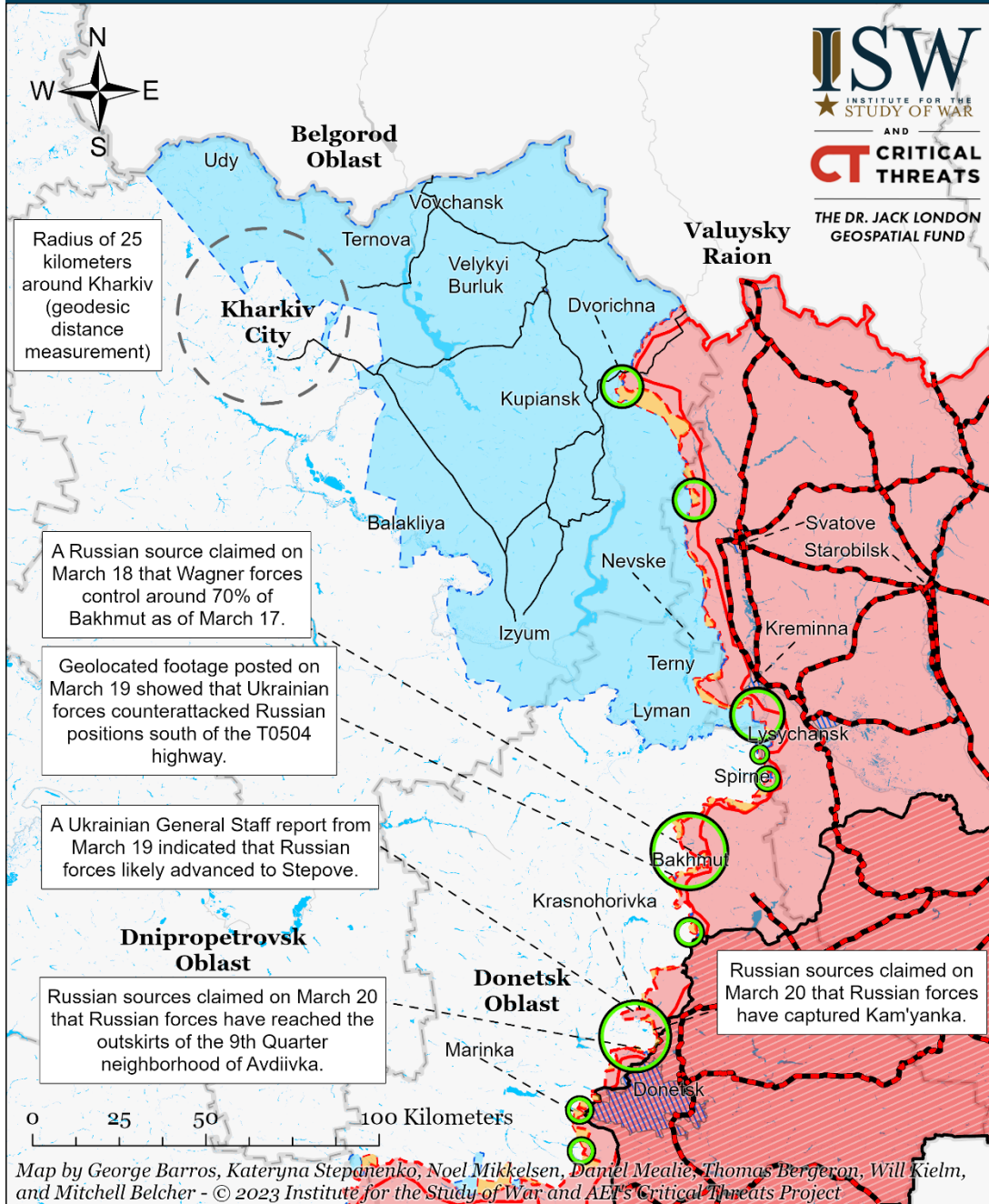
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of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

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Masyukivka (15km northeast of Kupyansk), Novoselivske (15km northwest of Svatove), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), and Verkhokamyanske (20km south of Kreminna). [21] Geolocated footage published on March 20 indicates that Russian forces have advanced towards Terny, about 15km northwest of Kreminna.[22] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that the Kupyansk-Lyman direction is under the heaviest Russian artillery fire and that Russian forces use Soviet-era armored vehicles and older tanks more actively on this line.[23] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 21 that unspecified motorized rifle units disrupted two Ukrainian troop rotations near Dvorichna (17km northeast of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk) and discovered two Ukrainian sabotage groups near Berestove (24km northwest of Svatove) and Novoselivske.[24] A Russian milblogger claimed that positional battles continue west of Ploshchanka and near the Zhuravka gully, within 18km northwest of Kreminna.[25] A milblogger claimed that Russian forces attempted to break through Ukrainian positions in Novoselivske and conducted offensive operations towards Yampolivka, Terny, Nevske, and Makiivka.[26] Another milblogger published footage on March 21 reportedly of the 4th Brigade of the 2nd Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Army Corps operating in the forests near Kreminna.[27]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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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)

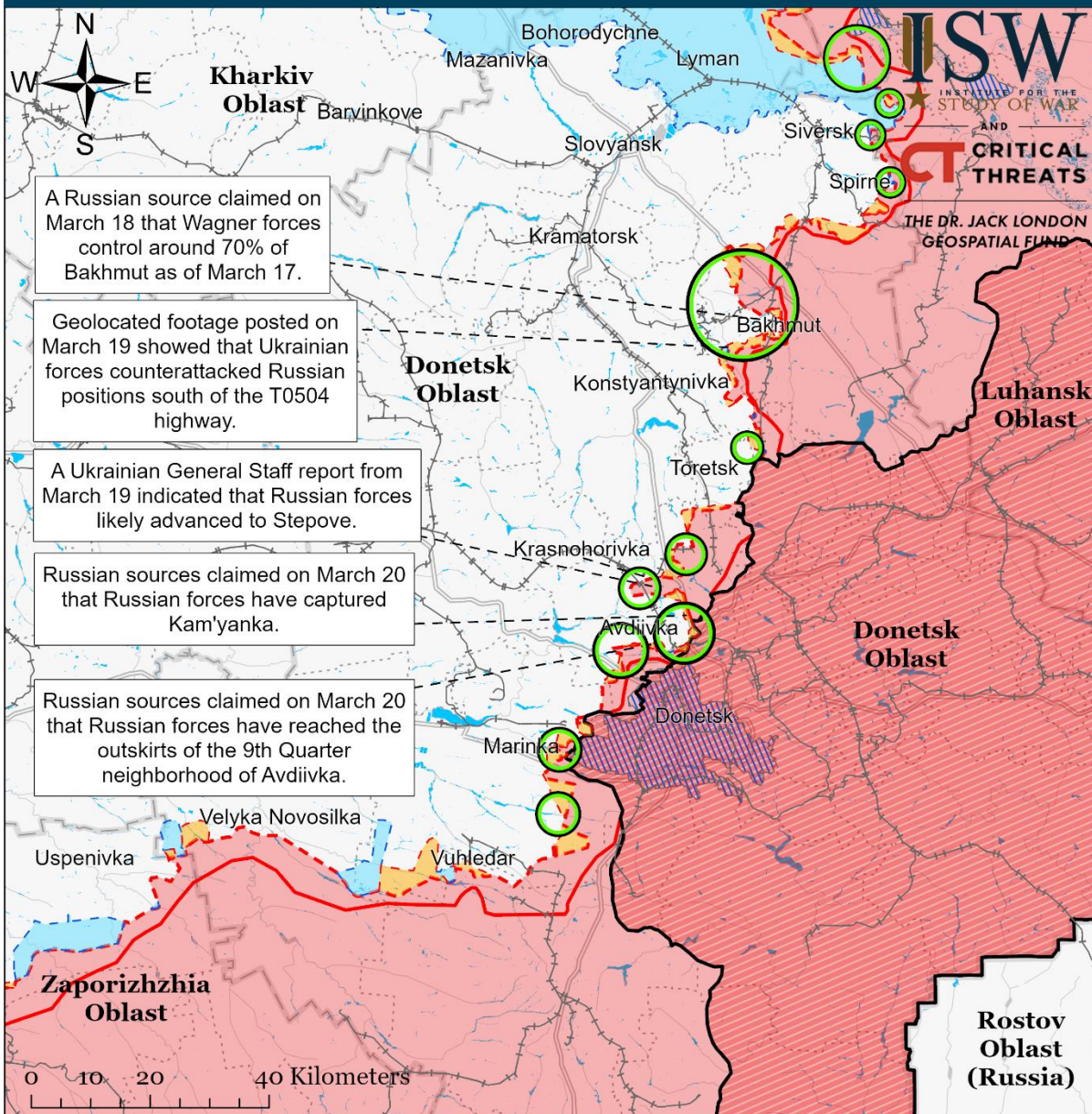
Russian forces did not make any confirmed gains in or around Bakhmut on March 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut; within 11km northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka, Hryhorivka, and Bohdanivka; and within 22km southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske, Predtechyne, and Pivnichne.[28] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that there were 13 combat clashes in Bakhmut, a notable decrease from the 24 combat clashes in the city that he reported on March 16.[29] The Ukrainian General Staff specified that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults in northern Bakhmut, likely suggesting that Russian forces are concentrating offensive operations on the northern part of the city.[30] Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters continued assaults in the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut and that they control most of the complex, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims.[31] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced from southwestern areas of Bakhmut towards the city center on March 19 and 20, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation that Russian forces have done so.[32] The Lystyan volunteer battalion of the Cossack Don Brigade published footage on March 18 claiming to show the formation fighting in Bakhmut itself, possibly indicating that the Cossack Don Brigade has ties with the Wagner Group in the area.[33] A Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner fighters conducted an assault towards Khromove (2km west of Bakhmut) and broke through Ukrainian defenses in the direction of Hryhorivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut).[34] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults west of Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut) and that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful counterattacks southwest of Bakhmut.[35]

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City on March 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka; within 14km north of Avdiivka near Novobakhmutivka, Berdychi, and Krasnohorivka; and within 36km southwest of Avdiivka near Sieverne, Pervomaiske, Marinka, Pobieda, and Novomykhailivka.[36] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are attempting to advance towards Orlivka (8km northwest of Avdiivka) following the likely Russian capture of Stepove (9km northwest of Avdiivka).[37] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces still hold positions in Stepove.[38] ISW assesses that Russian forces likely captured Stepove based on a Ukrainian General Staff report of Russian assaults near Berdychi (10km northwest of Avdiivka, and 1km west of Stepove) on March 19.[39] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced near Stepove and Kamianka as well as towards the southern outskirts of Avdiivka, where fierce fighting has reportedly been ongoing for the past five days.[40] Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces are trying to advance north of Vodyane (8km southwest of Bakhmut).[41] A Russian milblogger purportedly in contact with personnel from the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) 1st Slavic Brigade claimed that the formation has suffered heavy losses and conducts assaults without artillery support in the Avdiivka area.[42] ISW previously reported that the increased tempo of Russian operations in the Avdiivka area has led to major losses and is likely a misguided effort to pull Ukrainian forces away from other areas of the front.[43]

Russian sources offered diverging views on the Russian military’s ability to encircle Avdiivka and the significance of the settlement. Some Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are threatening to encircle Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka from the north, east, and south and that the capture of Stepove cut the railway line that Ukrainian forces used to supply its grouping in Avdiivka.[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are attempting to advance towards Orlivka to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that lead from Orlivka, Lastochkyne (4km northwest of Avdiivka), and Tonenke (7km west of Avdiivka) into Avdiivka and will soon encircle Avdiivka.[45] Other prominent milbloggers argued that Russian forces are not close to encircling Avdiivka and called on other Russian sources to stop premature conversations about the topic.[46] One milblogger stated that the current difficulties of the Russian advance in the Avdiivka area confirms that Russian forces are not closer to victory.[47] Russian sources offered diverging views on the importance of capturing Avdiivka, with one Russian milblogger arguing that the settlement is a significant industrial area while another questioned how capturing Avdiivka would significantly change the operational situation along the outskirts of Donetsk City when Ukrainian positions in Karlivka (16km northwest of Avdiivka) and Kurakhove (25km west of Donetsk City) are just as fortified as those in Avdiivka.[48] ISW continues to assess that Russian advances could prompt Ukrainian command to decide to withdraw from Avdiivka although that does not appear likely at this time.

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 21.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



A Russian source claimed on March 18 that Wagner forces control around 70% of Bakhmut as of March 17.

Geolocated footage posted on March 19 showed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked Russian positions south of the T0504 highway.

A Ukrainian General Staff report from March 19 indicated that Russian forces likely advanced to Stepove.

Russian sources claimed on March 20 that Russian forces have captured Kam'yanka.

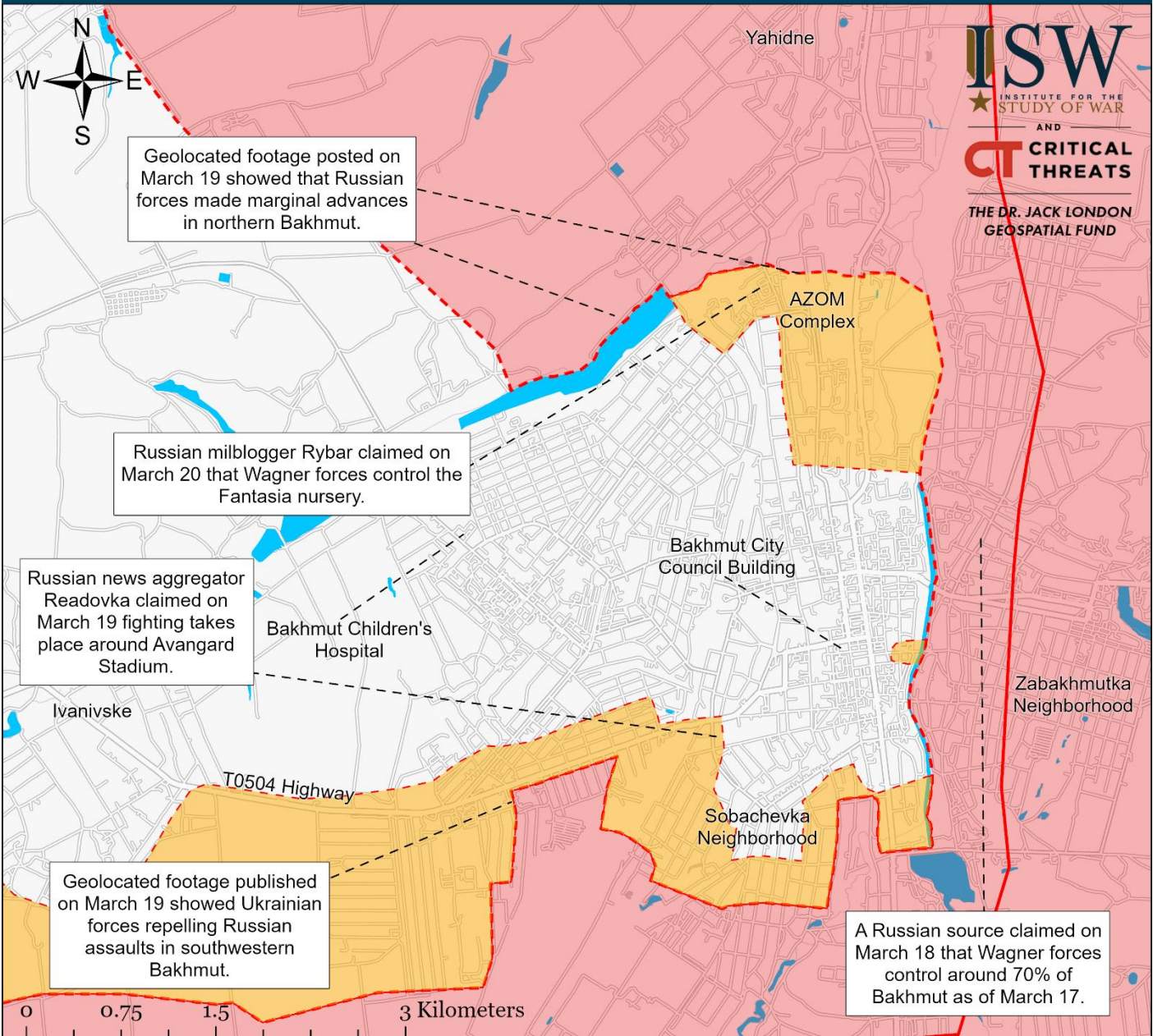
Russian sources claimed on March 20 that Russian forces have reached the outskirts of the 9th Quarter neighborhood of Avdiivka.

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kiern, 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 21, 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)

Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on March 20 that explosions in occupied Dzhankoy, Crimea destroyed Russian Kalibr NK cruise missiles during their transport via railroad.[49] Russian milbloggers published footage purportedly showing explosions and the aftermath of explosions in Dzhankoy and claimed that if a drone had struck a supply of missiles, a secondary explosion should have been visible.[50] The Russian Investigative Committee notably announced it is opening an investigation into drone activity following the reported drone strike in Dzhankoy.[51]

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts on March 21.[52]



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

The Kremlin continues crypto mobilization campaigns to recruit men across Russia for contract service to avoid declaring a formal second mobilization wave. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Andriy Yusov stated that Russia recruits 20,000 servicemen per month via crypto mobilization schemes.[53] Yusov noted that Russia continues to lack trainers and is using Belarusian training grounds to train the mobilized servicemen. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian conscripts from Krasnodar Krai are signing contracts to deploy to Ukraine in August 2023.[54] Russian recruitment officials are likely coercing conscripts into signing contracts, and Russian independent media reported that the Moscow Aviation Institute withheld diplomas from graduates who refused to sign military contracts.[55] Russian local outlets reported that military enlistment offices are threatening private companies with fines if they do not provide personal information about their male employees up to 50 years of age.[56] Russian outlets also reported that Russian recruitment officials continued to distribute summonses to students and civilian men to clarify their personal information.[57] The Wagner Group also continues to expand its recruitment campaigns across Russia and opened another recruitment center in Rostov-on-Don.[58]

Russian milbloggers are increasingly assessing that the Kremlin is unlikely to declare another mobilization wave and is instead in favor of a contract service recruitment campaign. A milblogger noted that the Kremlin will only declare mobilization if regional authorities are unable to generate the desired quota of volunteers.[59] The milblogger noted that the Kremlin is advertising contract service to regenerate forces without mobilization. Another milblogger noted that the Kremlin's recruitment campaign is set up for failure, stating that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) had not been effective in promoting recruitment drives.[60] The milblogger noted that the Kremlin is unlikely to generate the desired 400,000 troops because most of the volunteers that wanted to fight in the war already enlisted during previous recruitment drives. The milblogger noted that Wagner Group and Chechen "Akhmat" units are the only formations that have been able to effectively recruit volunteers and speculated that the Russian MoD only was able to mobilize 230,000 servicemen in September 2022. The milbloggers' observations support previous ISW's assessments that the renewed volunteer recruitment campaign is unlikely to fulfill Russia's ongoing need for timely reinforcements.

Russian servicemen who joined regional volunteer battalions over summer 2022 revealed that the Russian military command treats Russian volunteers like cannon fodder. Russian independent outlet *Important Stories (iStories)* interviewed a Russian volunteer from Kazan's "Alga" volunteer battalion who is currently accused of desertion.[61] The volunteer revealed that his battalion suffered tremendous losses on the west (right) bank Kherson Oblast during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in November 2022. The servicemen, alongside some other elements of the battalion, received permission from company and battalion commanders to quit after four months of contract service, but commanders of the 72nd Brigade refused to dismiss them. ISW could not locate any information about a Russian 72nd Brigade, which was named in the *iStories* report. The subordination of the volunteer battalion to a brigade may indicate that some Russian volunteer battalions were embedded in existing or new units. The volunteer also revealed that Ukrainian forces largely destroyed the "Alga" volunteer battalion near Vuhledar on February 6, 2023.

Russian involuntary recruitment campaigns, if declared again, would further worsen brain-drain problems in the country. *Radio Liberty* and *Current Time* uncovered that 250 of Russia's most prominent doctors fled the country on September 27, 2022, six days after Russian President Vladimir Putin declared mobilization.[62]

The Russian Supreme Court developed and presented a draft resolution that explains which activities the court would rule as a crime against military service.[63] The court proposed on March 21 to introduce punishments for "attempted unauthorized abandonment of a military unit and desertion." The draft would allow the court to punish servicemen who were absent from their units for less than two days, which is currently not an offense under existing law. The draft defined desertion as an offense in which a serviceman intends to evade his military duties, and the court will be able to prosecute anyone who evaded service within 15 years after reaching the age limit of being in reserve. The draft also noted that Russian servicemen should fully resist capture and fulfill military obligations even in a complete encirclement. A Russian human rights advocate noted that any Russian serviceman who is captured would be investigated under the Russian criminal code.

Chinese entities reportedly continue to supply drones and drone parts to Russia. *The New York Times* reported that official Russian customs data shows that nearly 70 Chinese exporters sold 26 brands of drones and drone parts worth more than \$12 million to Russian entities since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[64] The Chinese drone maker Autel has reportedly sold two million dollars' worth of drones to Russian entities alone.[65] Chinese firms appear to be increasing their sale of commercially available drones to Russia, which have dual use purposes that Russian forces can employ on the battlefield in Ukraine. These commercially available drones likely do not have payload capacities that would allow Russian forces to employ them in significant combat or high-precision strike roles. It still remains uncertain whether Chinese leadership will decide to allow Chinese defense industry to sell lethal equipment to Russia.

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 forces continue to conduct law enforcement operations in occupied areas to target pro-Ukrainian sentiment and coerce compliance with passportization measures. Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov posted footage on March 21 of Chechen riot police of the “Akhmat-1” formation conducting a law enforcement sweep in an unnamed occupied village that shows them entering a small private residence and finding Ukrainian flags and Ukrainian “training manuals for sabotage and subversive work.”[66] While the video appears highly staged and choreographed, it demonstrates that law enforcement operations in occupied areas particularly target anything and anyone deemed to show pro-Ukrainian sentiments. The Ukrainian Resistance Center remarked on March 21 that Russian forces raided homes in the Azov village near Berdyansk, occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, to conduct “preventative searches” and threaten residents who do not hold Russian passports, arbitrarily detaining those who refuse to apply for Russian citizenship.[67]

Russian occupation officials continue to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. Kherson Oblast occupation Head Vladimir Saldo reported on March 21 that he signed an agreement with All-Russian Children’s Center “Okean” Director Natalya Solovey that stipulates that children from occupied Kherson Oblast will go to “rest and study” at the “Okean” camp near Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai.[68] “Okean” is funded and directed by the Russian government and Ministry of Education, according to its website.[69] Vladivostok is closer to the American state of Alaska (approximately 5,000km) than it is to Kherson Oblast (over 7,000km).

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to consolidate bureaucratic and administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine. The Kherson Oblast Occupation Administration stated on March 21 that people with disabilities will need to undergo re-examination under Russian legislation for the re-issuance of their disability status.[70] Occupation authorities are therefore weaponizing the issuance of disability status to require individuals to register and provide personal information to occupation organs. Russian occupation authorities also continue to push for the issuance of Russian passports in occupied territories. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation Head Yevgeny Balitsky claimed on March 21 that 30 percent of residents (164,577 people) of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast have received Russian passports and that there are 16 stationary and two mobile departments operating in the oblast for the receipt and issuance of passport documents.[71] The Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) similarly claimed on March 21 that it opened a checkpoint for passport application and issuance in Bilolutsk and that the checkpoint received over 200 passport applications on the day of its opening.[72] The number of Russian passport applications and holders are likely purposefully overblown by occupation officials, and the actual process for application is likely becoming increasingly coercive. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Military Administration noted that Russian occupation officials have greatly accelerated the process for renouncing Ukrainian citizenship in Luhansk Oblast, likely to expedite the Russian passport application process.[73]

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.

The Ukrainian General Staff continued to note on March 21 that Belarus is providing its military infrastructure for the training of Russian troops and that Russia maintains a significant military presence in Belarus.[74]

Belarusian forces continued various military exercises on March 21. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that the 103rd Vitebsk Separate Airborne Brigade started brigade-level tactical exercises to practice unit maneuver, combat fire, and UAV operation.[75] The Belarusian MoD also noted that the Belarusian Signal Corps is holding tactical and special training classes until March 25 under Head of the Belarusian Communications Department, Colonel Vadim Romaniv.[76] Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko additionally held a meeting on external and internal security threats.[77]

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

- [1] <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-abducted-children-un-security-council-667a131be7ba09157e0ac21b0545bccb>
- [2] <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-abducted-children-un-security-council-667a131be7ba09157e0ac21b0545bccb>
- [3] https://t.me/SALDO_VGA/573
- [4] <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70750>
- [5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>
- [6] <http://kremlin dot ru/supplement/5920>
- [7] <http://kremlin dot ru/supplement/5920>
- [8] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-20-2023>
- [9] <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70750>; https://www.fmprc.gov dot cn/zyxw/202303/t20230321_11045492.shtml; https://www.fmprc.gov dot cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202303/t20230321_11045969.html
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- [13] <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1638068626761580544?s=20>
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