

**Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 23, 2023**  
**Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Nicole**  
**Wolkov and Frederick W. Kagan**  
**March 23, 9:30 pm 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.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has softened his rhetoric towards the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely out fear of completely losing his mercenary force in Bakhmut.** Prigozhin emphasized his concerns about a possible Ukrainian counteroffensive in eastern Ukraine during a 23-minute interview on March 23.<sup>1</sup> Prigozhin claimed that Ukraine has 200,000 reserves concentrating to attack along the entire eastern frontline, into Belgorod Oblast, and in Bakhmut. Prigozhin also claimed that the Ukrainians currently have 80,000 troops in Bakhmut, Slovyansk, and Kostyantynivka to counterattack Bakhmut – a claim that former Russian officer Igor Girkin observed was dubious.<sup>2</sup> Prigozhin’s exaggerated statements about the imminent threat to Russian forces are likely an attempt to secure more supplies and reinforcements from the Russian MoD to save his forces in Bakhmut. Prigozhin made several positive statements about the Russian MoD, even acknowledging that Russian MoD forces are fighting alongside Chechen units in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast. Prigozhin also surprisingly promoted both Russian MoD-controlled volunteer recruitment efforts and recruitment into Wagner, instead of only advertising service with Wagner formations as he has usually done. Prigozhin expressed some generalized criticism of the Russian military bureaucracy – namely the defense industrial base (DIB) - but such criticisms echo the current state propaganda narrative. Prigozhin had been an avid critic of the Russian military command, and the softening of his rhetoric may indicate that he may be attempting to partially appease the Russian MoD to gain supplies or reinforcements for Wagner forces in Bakhmut.

**Prigozhin denied the Kremlin’s claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the Kremlin constantly claims.** Prigozhin stated that Russia is fighting “exclusively with Ukrainians” who are equipped with NATO-provided equipment and some “russophobic” mercenaries who voluntarily support Ukraine - but not NATO itself.<sup>3</sup> Prigozhin also noted that Russian officials most likely knew that NATO would offer Ukraine military aid, because “it is ridiculous to think that when [Russia] decided to conduct this special military operation it did not account for NATO’s help to Ukraine.” Prigozhin noted that he is unsure about the “denazification” objectives in Ukraine, because he does not know if there are “Nazis” in Ukraine. Prigozhin also noted that Russia will “demilitarize” Ukraine only when all of the Ukrainian military is destroyed, claiming that this effort is ongoing, but that it is unclear if it will be successful. Prigozhin stated that Russia can avoid an exhausting protracted war by deciding now which borders it wants to capture. Prigozhin also called on the Russian military and media to stop underestimating Ukrainian forces and engaging in internal conflicts. Prigozhin effectively rejected the Kremlin’s pre-war and post-war claims that Russia needed to defend itself against a NATO threat in Ukraine and

undermined the necessity and probability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's stated maximalist objectives for this invasion.

**Bloomberg reported that Prigozhin is preparing to scale back Wagner's operations in Ukraine after the Russian military leadership succeeded in cutting key supplies of personnel and munitions, citing unspecified people familiar with the matter.** Bloomberg's sources stated that Wagner is planning to shift focus back to Africa but that there is no current indication that Prigozhin is planning to redeploy the Wagner Group to Africa.<sup>4</sup> Bloomberg reported, citing sources close to the Kremlin and intelligence services, that top Russian military commanders worked to undermine Prigozhin's position with Russian President Vladimir Putin by claiming that Prigozhin achieved limited and slow success despite sending waves of Russian convicts to their deaths around Soledar and Bakhmut. ISW assessed on March 12 that Putin ultimately turned away from Prigozhin following Wagner's inability to capture Bakhmut.<sup>5</sup> Bloomberg's sources claimed that the Russian MoD will not allow Prigozhin to take credit for the fall of Bakhmut in state-run media, which is consistent with the MoD's ongoing effort to diminish and supplant the role of Wagner forces in territorial gains in the area.<sup>6</sup> Prigozhin notably denied Bloomberg's claim of scaling back and shifting focus to Africa.<sup>7</sup>

**A Ukrainian intelligence official supported ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces are unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.**<sup>8</sup> Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated on March 23 that Russian forces have demonstrated in the last year of the war that Russian forces are unable to maintain large-scale, strategic-level offensives on multiple axes of advance.<sup>9</sup> Skibitsky stated that Russian forces failed to achieve expected quick or significant advances in the Donbas offensive that began in early 2023. Skibitsky stated that Ukrainian forces fixed Russian forces to multiple areas on the front line, and that Russian forces in occupied Crimea and Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts are on the defensive. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated on March 21 that Russian forces will try to start another offensive, possibly even on multiple different axes, in the coming weeks.<sup>10</sup>

**Russian forces may be shifting their missile strike tactics to focus on Ukrainian military facilities as overall Russian missile strikes decrease, indicating the depletion of Russia's stocks of high precision missiles.** Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated that Russian forces may be reorienting their strikes to focus on Ukrainian military facilities and force concentrations while continuing to strike Ukrainian energy infrastructure, as opposed to prioritizing striking energy infrastructure as Russian forces did in fall 2022.<sup>11</sup> Skibitsky said that the GUR assessed that currently only 15 percent of Russia's pre-February 24, 2022 high-precision weapons stocks remain. Skibitsky stated that Russia's higher end Kalibr, Kh-101, and Kh-555 cruise missiles comprise less than 10 percent of Russia's total remaining stocks. Skibitsky stated that Russian forces cannot conduct missile attacks more than twice a month due to the growing need to conserve missiles, in contrast with how Russian forces conducted large air attacks at a higher frequency of about once a week in October 2022. Skibitsky stated that Russia's defense industrial base can produce only produce 20 to 30 Kalibr and Kh-101 cruise missiles per month and that Russia's production of Iskander ballistic missiles is even lower. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces are depleting their missile arsenal, which may constrain Russian missile strikes frequency and intensity<sup>12[06]</sup>.

**Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin outlined various measures to support Russian military personnel, the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), and Russian independence from the West in an address to the State Duma on March 23.**<sup>13</sup> Mishustin claimed that Russia aims to produce over 100 aircraft, likely including military aircraft, with unspecified modifications by 2026. Mishustin also claimed that Russia has made significant progress towards mobilizing the DIB for increased production and implementing social support measures to support Russian military personnel, particularly mobilized personnel, and their families. Mishustin used the bulk of his address to claim that Russia has done well but will improve even further despite needing to implement additional economic, social, political, technological and diplomatic measures to both counteract the effects of significant Western sanctions and decrease Russian dependence on the West. Mishustin's speech follows Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's March 22 speech at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) collegium, and both Mishustin and Shoigu are attempting to portray Russia as capable of maintaining a prolonged war effort at a pace and scope likely beyond Russia's actual capability, as ISW has previously assessed.<sup>14</sup>

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Rosatom may be working to restore three power lines at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) that would increase Russian control over the ZNPP.** IAEA General Director Rafael Grossi on March 22 commented on Russian reports that Russia's state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom is working to restore three powerlines at the thermal power plant switchyard to incorporate into the grid system in Russian occupied territory, but that the IAEA has not been able to verify this information.<sup>15</sup> Grossi stated that the IAEA personnel at the ZNPP observed Russian NPP workers training with experienced ZNPP staff in the main control room of the ZNPP. Russian authorities claimed that the purpose of the training is to ensure that adequate staff are available to work at the plant in case of licensed staff shortages. ISW has previously reported on Russian efforts to use Rosatom's management and personnel to establish control over the ZNPP to force the IAEA into accepting Russian control over the ZNPP.<sup>16</sup>

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has softened his rhetoric towards the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely out fear of completely losing his mercenary force in Bakhmut.**
- **Prigozhin denied the Kremlin's claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the Kremlin constantly claims.**
- **Bloomberg reported that Prigozhin is preparing to scale back Wagner's operations in Ukraine after Russian military leadership succeeded in cutting key supplies of personnel and munitions.**
- **Ukrainian officials supported ISW's prior assessments that Russian forces are unable to conduct large-scale, simultaneous offensive campaigns on multiple axes.**
- **Russian forces may be shifting their missile strike tactics to focus on Ukrainian military facilities as overall Russian missile strikes decrease, indicating the depletion of Russia's stocks of high precision missiles.**
- **Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin outlined various measures to support Russian military personnel, the Russian defense industrial base (DIB), and Russian independence from the West in an address to the State Duma.**

- **The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Rosatom may be working to restore three power lines at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) that would increase Russian control over the ZNPP.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces are continuing to attack Bakhmut City and areas in its vicinity and around Avdiivka.**
- **Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids over the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.**
- **The Kremlin continues efforts to coerce Russian reservists, conscripts, and other personnel into contract service.**
- **Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that Russia is continuing efforts to integrate newly-occupied Ukraine into Russian institutions and infrastructure.**
- **Russian forces in Belarus recently redeployed back to Russia ahead of Russia's spring conscription call-up on April 1.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 23, 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.



***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

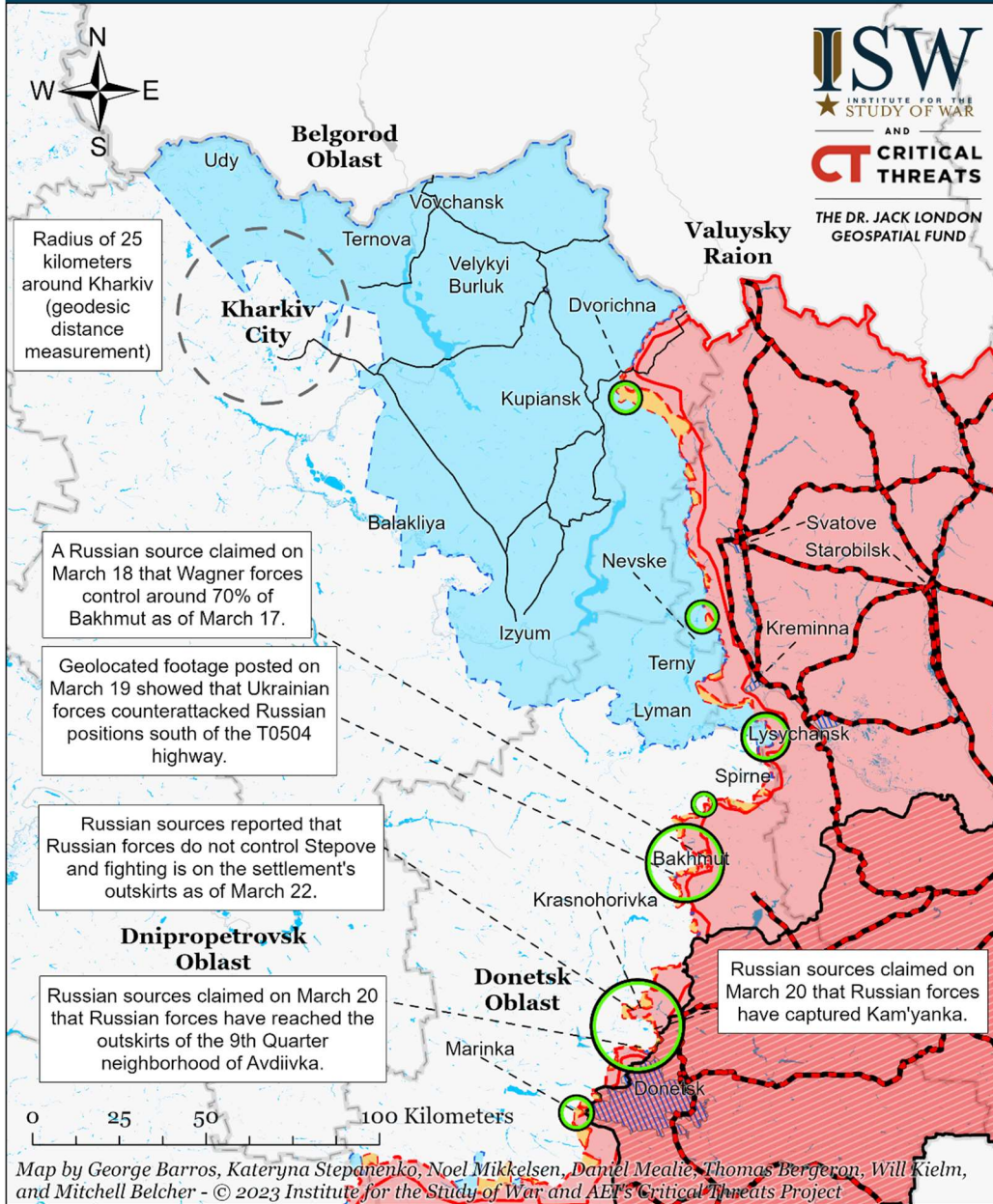
### **Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine**

#### **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 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk), Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), and Verkhokamianske (21km south of Kreminna).<sup>17</sup> The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian forces likely aim to capture Kupyansk, expand their security zone westward, and integrate the Oskil River into their defensive lines.<sup>18</sup> Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces have destroyed many pieces of new Russian equipment in the past several weeks as Russian forces use more conventional forces and armored vehicles in the Lyman and Kupyansk directions.<sup>19</sup> Geolocated footage published on March 23 indicates a limited Russian advance southeast of Bilohorivka.<sup>20</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Terny (17km west of Kreminna), Makiivka, and Bilohorivka but advanced toward the Siverskyi Donets River in the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna)<sup>21</sup> Another milblogger amplified footage purportedly showing the 331st Airborne Regiment of the 98th Airborne Division operating near Kreminna.<sup>22</sup> Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov published footage claiming that Akhmat Special Forces Commander and 2nd Luhansk People's Republic Army Corps Deputy Commander Aпти Alaudinov captured a Ukrainian prisoner of war near Bilohorivka.<sup>23</sup>

Russian forces continue building fortifications in the border areas of Bryansk and Kursk oblasts. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continue to engineer terrain in Bryansk and Kursk oblasts and conduct unspecified demonstrative actions in Belgorod Oblast in an attempt to prevent the transfer of Ukrainian forces to other areas of the frontline.<sup>24</sup>

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- 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

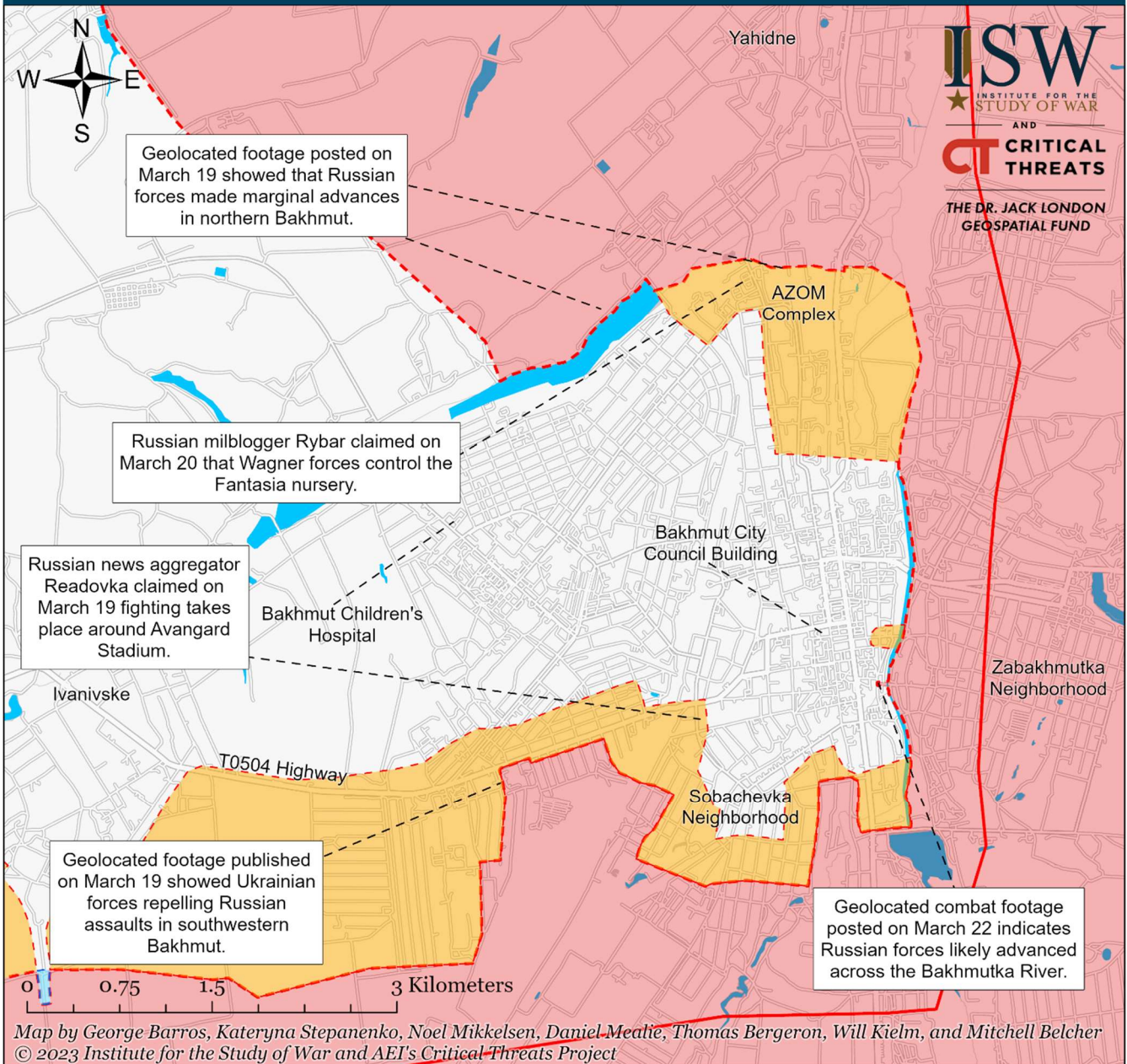
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

**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 attacking Bakhmut City and its environs on March 23. Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Oleksandr Syrskyi stated that Wagner Group elements remain the main Russian force operating in the Bakhmut direction, and that they have not yet lost their offensive capabilities.<sup>25</sup> Syrskyi noted that while Wagner forces still have a numerical advantage on the frontline Ukrainian forces continue to exhaust the mercenaries, which will enable Ukrainian forces to pursue unspecified future offensive operations. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian and Ukrainian forces made contact 35 times on the entire Bakhmut frontline, 29 of which occurred in the city or its immediate vicinity.<sup>26</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that there are constant positional battles in Bakhmut, and that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults northwest of Bakhmut in Oleksandro-Shulytne and Bohdanivka; northeast of Bakhmut in Vasyukivka; and south of Bakhmut in Predtechyne.<sup>27</sup> Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces have completely cleared the industrial zone in northern Bakhmut and are continuing to fight in central and southern Bakhmut.<sup>28</sup> Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting is ongoing southwest of Bakhmut in Ivanivske and that Wagner mercenaries are attacking Krohmalne just northwest of Bakhmut.<sup>29</sup> Geolocated footage posted on March 22 showed Ukrainian forces engaging nearby Russian forces on the western bank of the Bakhmutka River with small arms, which likely indicates that some Russian have forded the river.<sup>30</sup>



# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of March 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher  
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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.

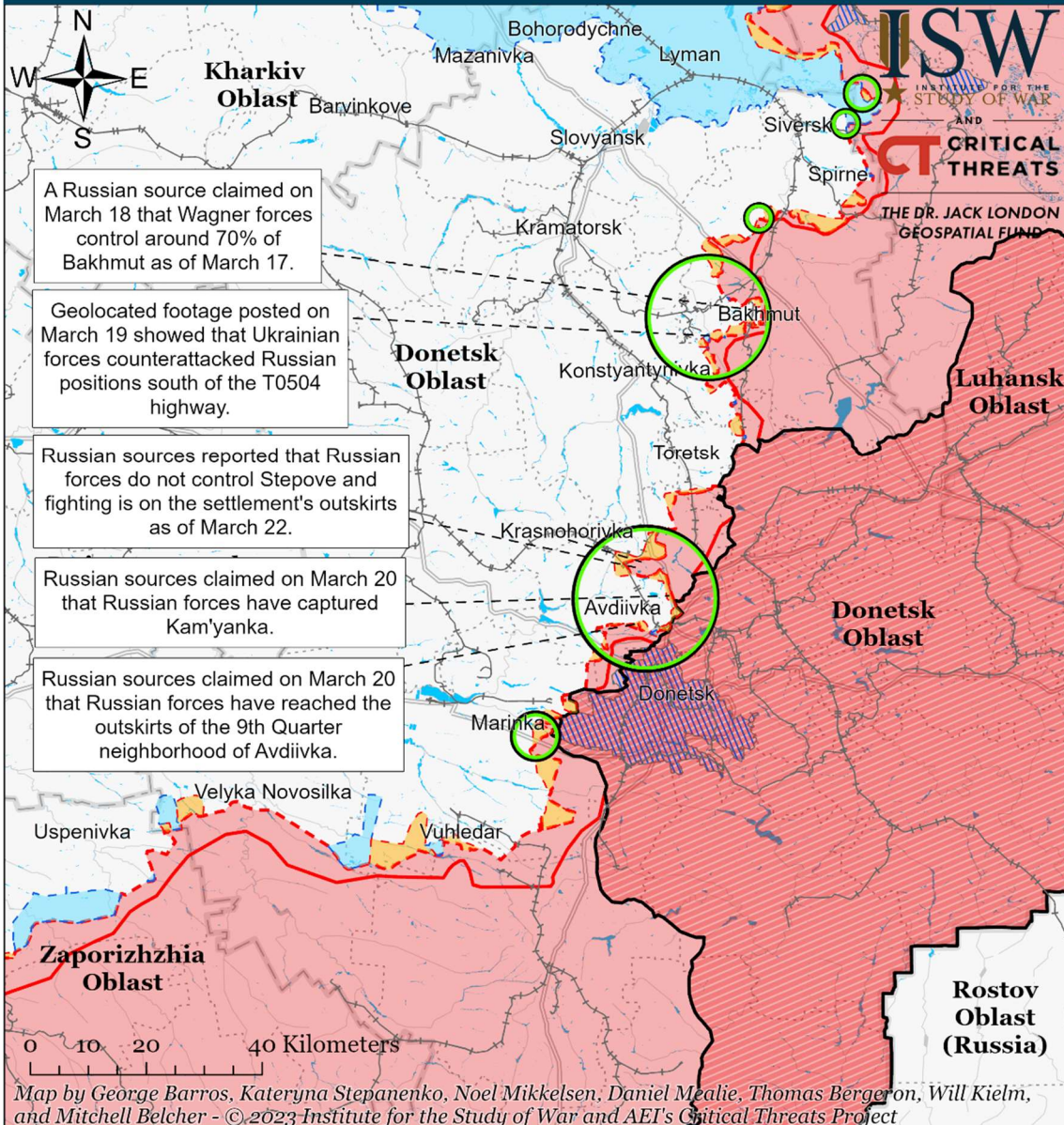
Russian forces continued to attack Ukrainian positions around Avdiivka on March 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched unsuccessful assaults north of Avdiivka in Novokalynove, Stepove, Lastochkyne, and Berdychi; northwest of Avdiivka in Lastochkyne; west of Avdiivka in Sieverne, Vodyane, Nevelske, Pervomaiske; and Avdiivka itself.<sup>31</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian artillery established fire control over the Ukrainian supply route via Orlivka.<sup>32</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces cleared the western outskirts of Novobakhmutivka (about 12km northeast of Avdiivka) and continued to advance on Pervomaiske and Sieverne from the south.<sup>33</sup> Another Russian source expressed doubt that Russian forces captured Novobakhmutivka and Stepove, and noted that Russian forces are also fighting for Kamianka (about 5km northeast of Avdiivka).<sup>34</sup> A Russian source claimed that it is too early to speculate about Russian efforts to create a cauldron around Avdiivka and about operational successes in the area.<sup>35</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Novokalynove and reached an unspecified elevated position in the area.<sup>36</sup> Russian sources also claimed that the elements of the Russian 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps of the Northern Military District) attacked Tonenke (7km northwest of Avdiivka).<sup>37</sup>

Russian forces continue to form new brigades from legacy standing DNR units and mobilized personnel in the Avdiivka direction. A Russian source claimed that the former DNR 9th Separate Mariupol-Khingan Marine Assault Regiment reformed into the Russian 9th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade and is now operating in the Avdiivka direction.<sup>38</sup> The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) indicated that elements of the 14th Artillery "Kalmius" Brigade and the 1st "Slavic" Brigade of the DNR's 1st Army Corps are operating in the Avdiivka direction.<sup>39</sup> ISW previously observed numerous appeals from Russian mobilized servicemen about their subordination under DNR units, indicating that Russian military command is likely reinforcing and/or expanding DNR units with mobilized personnel. The Russian military is also reactivating brigades from the World War II era such as the Red Army's 9th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade.<sup>40</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense may form some of the new divisions it announced on January 17 by officially integrating the DNR and Luhansk People's Republic proxy forces into the Russian Armed Forces as opposed to generating wholly new divisions from scratch.<sup>41</sup> The current suite of observed force generation efforts suggests that Russian military command is apparently prioritizing the formation of motorized rifle infantry units as opposed to reconstituting tank units. ISW has not observed the reconstitution or recommitment of a number of elite tank regiments and brigades destroyed in combat, and the re-activation of disbanded Red Army motorized rifle units rather than the reconstitution of current tank units may reflect the reality that the Russian military lacks the tanks needed to rebuild tank units.

Russian forces continued conducting offensive operations west of Donetsk City but have not resumed offensives near Vuhledar as of March 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked Marinka and Pobieda, 22km and 25km southwest of Donetsk City, and Russian sources echoed similar reports.<sup>42</sup> A Russian source claimed that elements of the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade are continuing combat missions in the vicinity of Vuhledar, and recently posted footage from the area indicating that Russian and Ukrainian forces are engaged in positional battles near Vuhledar.<sup>43</sup>



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 23, 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.

Russian sources reported that Russian forces do not control Stepove and fighting is on the settlement's outskirts as of March 22.

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 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.

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

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that all Russian units deployed to Nova Kakhovka left the city as of March 22.<sup>44</sup> The phrasing of the Ukrainian General Staff report explicitly mentions that Russian forces “left” and does not lend itself to an interpretation of a Russian rotation, as some observers have suggested. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces remained in the city.<sup>45</sup> ISW has not observed visual confirmation that supports either claim. ISW currently assesses that the Russian military still likely controls Nova Kakhovka.

Ukrainian forces continue to conduct raids over the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and are continuing to strike Russian positions on the east (left) bank of the river. Geolocated combat footage published on March 20 shows Russian forces striking Ukrainian forces operating in the southeast of Velykyi Potemkin Island.<sup>46</sup> Geolocated combat footage published on March 23 shows Ukrainian drones striking Russian positions near Vynrozsadnyk on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>47</sup> Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Head Serhiy Khlan amplified a claim from Kherson Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo that Russian forces have tripled the number of personnel on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of a Ukrainian counteroffensive.<sup>48</sup> Khlan criticized Russian forces’ defensive measures, claiming that they have only established three lines of defense.<sup>49</sup>

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian milblogger claimed on March 22 that Ukrainian forces control about half of Novodanylivka (53km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City) and that the settlement was previously an unoccupied grey zone.<sup>50</sup> Another milblogger claimed on March 23 that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the Robotyne (66km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City) direction.<sup>51</sup>

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Kherson, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts.<sup>52</sup>

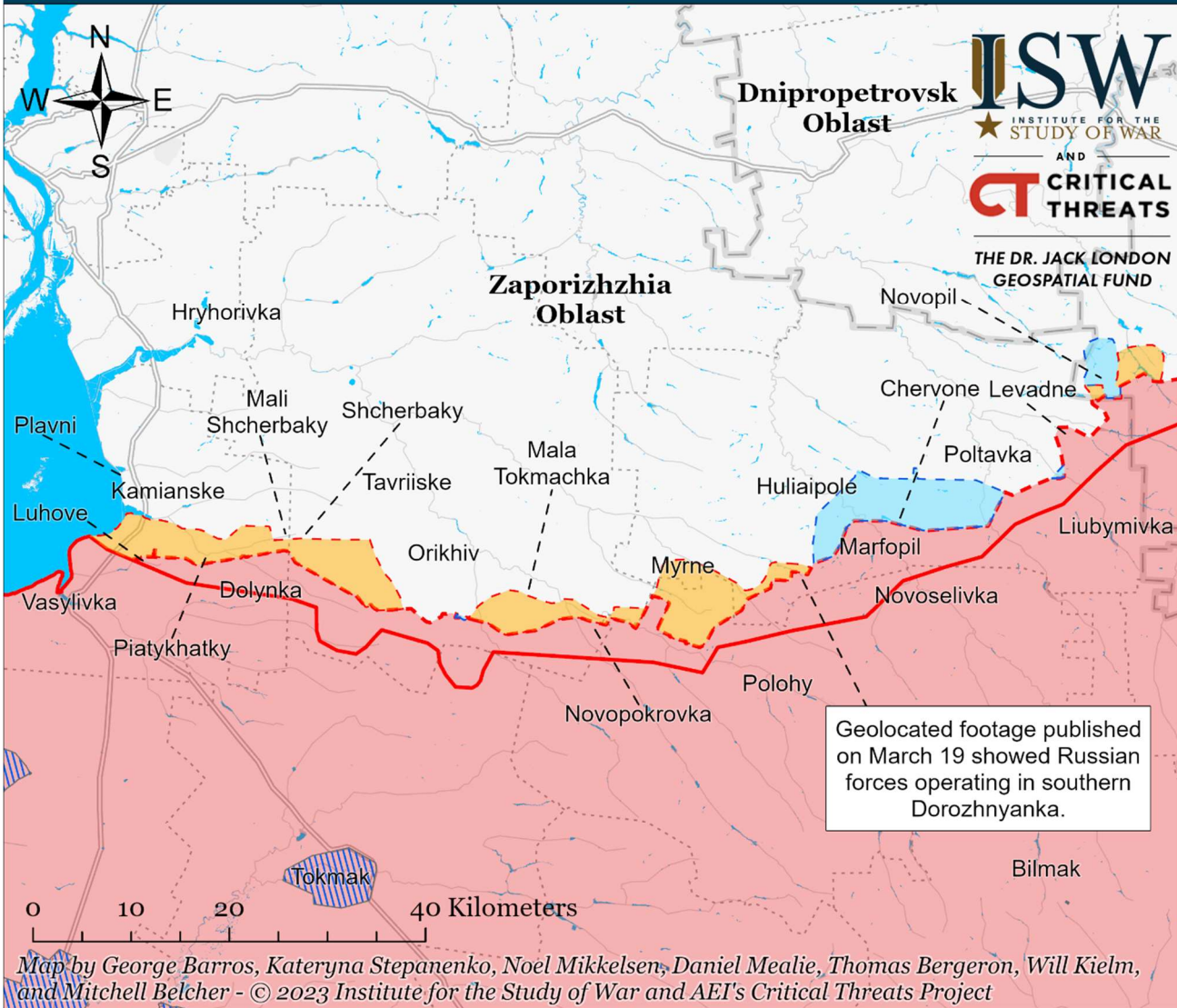


# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

The Kremlin continues efforts to coerce Russian reservists, conscripts, and other personnel into contract service. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on March 23 establishing two new military honors “For Bravery” that Russia can award to combat participants, including foreigners and stateless persons who may not be part of Russia’s conventional military, either alive or posthumously for bravery on the battlefield.<sup>53</sup> This award is likely a continuation of the Kremlin’s effort to encourage enlistment among stateless persons and foreigners. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated that Russian authorities will try to recruit reservists called up for the April 1 regular conscription cycle into contract service and are continuing efforts to recruit for contract service through other unspecified methods.<sup>54</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian authorities are trying to recruit conscripts from South Ossetia into contract service and managed to recruit 50 new contract personnel between March 1 and March 10.<sup>55</sup>

The Kremlin may begin leveraging a larger number of smaller private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies to reduce its dependency on the Wagner Group and prevent a monolithic PMC – such as the Wagner Group – from gaining leverage against the Russian Ministry of Defense in the future. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 23 that the Kremlin seeks to recruit up to 2,000 mercenaries from the “GvardService” private security company. The Resistance Center reported that “GvardService” is the first Belarusian private security company, which Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko established in 2019 to recruit former Belarusian special forces. The Resistance Center’s report also claims that about 100 mercenaries from Angola arrived in Russia, and that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov negotiated their participation in the war in Ukraine after visiting Angola in January 2023.<sup>56</sup> A prominent Russian milblogger stated that the Wagner Group’s success in Ukraine in 2022 piqued Russian society’s interest in PMCs and forecasted that Russia will develop a large marketplace for PMCs.<sup>57</sup> The milblogger suggested this marketplace will include many competing companies ranging from small boutique PMCs and private intelligence firms to one-to-two large PMCs with the “full-fledged capabilities of private armies.”<sup>58</sup> The Kremlin may use such a model in the future to continue reaping the benefits of using PMCs while ensuring that no single PMC can gain too much influence, as the Wagner Group likely did.

Russia’s defense industrial base is unlikely to manufacture 1,500 main battle tanks in calendar year 2023 despite Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev claims on March 23.<sup>59</sup> Russia reportedly loses 150 tanks a month in Ukraine while Russia’s sole tank production factory, UralVagonZavod, reportedly produces 20 tanks a month.<sup>60</sup> *Business Insider* and *The Economist* previously noted that 18 Russian factories are refurbishing old tanks and that two more repair plants will soon join the efforts.<sup>61</sup> ISW concurs with the *Business Insider*’s conclusion that Russian production remains unlikely to meet demand; Russia would have to produce or refurbish at least 125 tanks per month (over six times greater than UralVagonZavod’s current production) to manufacture 1,500 tanks in 2023.<sup>62</sup> Former Russian militant commander and nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin scoffed at Medvedev’s statement and sarcastically observed that Medvedev’s claims would have been more believable if he clarified that the tanks would be made from plastic or paper.<sup>63</sup>



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

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced that Russia is continuing efforts to integrate newly-occupied Ukraine into Russian institutions and infrastructure. Mishustin stated on March 23 that the Russian government is reviewing a draft law to create a free economic zone in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson Oblasts to submit to the State Duma for further consideration.<sup>64</sup> Mishustin claimed that Russia has repaired over 900km of roads and over 8,500 objects, including residential buildings and infrastructure facilities, in occupied Ukraine. Mishustin claimed that Russia will finish construction of a water conduit between Rostov Oblast and occupied Donetsk Oblast within the next week.

The Save Ukraine Foundation, a Ukrainian non-governmental organization, reported that Russian authorities treat Ukrainian children in Russian detention abysmally. The Save Ukraine Foundation reported on March 23 that 17 Ukrainian children kidnapped from occupied Kherson and Kharkiv oblasts returned to Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> The Foundation noted that Russian authorities refused to return the children to their parents and did not specify the mechanism by which the children returned. The Foundation amplified statements from the children, who claimed that employees at a Russian children's camp beat the Ukrainian children, lied to the children about Ukrainian counteroffensives, and claimed that their parents abandoned the children and that Russian parents would adopt the children.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian authorities are filtering Ukrainian civilians from Bakhmut into remote areas of Russia. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 23 that Wagner Group forces are taking Ukrainian civilians from residential areas in Bakhmut and deporting them to filtration centers in occupied Luhansk Oblast, where occupation authorities further filter Ukrainian civilians into remote areas such as Perm Krai in the Far East of Russia.<sup>66</sup>

Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against a Russian occupation law enforcement officer in Melitopol on March 23, injuring the officer.<sup>67</sup> Russian occupation officials reported that the officer is in stable condition as of this publication.<sup>68</sup>

**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.)**

Russian forces in Belarus recently redeployed back to Russia ahead of Russia's spring conscription call-up on April 1. Commercial satellite imagery collected on March 17 and 23 shows that significant Russian elements previously deployed at the 230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, are no longer at the training ground. Satellite imagery collected on February 12 shows the equipment in place. Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skibitsky stated on March 23 that there are about 4,200 Russian servicemen currently in Belarus, indicating a drawdown.<sup>69</sup> Russia had about 12,000 personnel deployed in Belarus in late 2022.<sup>70</sup> Ukrainian Border



Guard Spokesman Andriy Demchenko previously stated on March 4 that the Russian force size in Belarus fluctuates but generally does not exceed 9,000–10,000 personnel at any given time.<sup>71</sup> Demchenko stated that replacement Russian forces will likely deploy to Belarus after Russian forces redeploy from Belarus, keeping the overall number of Russian personnel in Belarus more or less equal over time.<sup>72</sup> These Russian forces likely deployed back to Russia to free up Belarusian training capacity ahead of Russia’s spring conscription cycle. Russian forces may send more mobilized forces or possibly conscripts for training in Belarus given that many of the tents at the training ground remained in place in the recent satellite imagery. Russia will likely maintain permanent military forces in Belarus around ongoing training deployments; Skibitsky also stated that Russian forces left an Iskander battery in Belarus.<sup>73</sup>



230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Collected March 23, 2023  
Satellite image ©2023 Maxar Technologies.

# Russian Military Equipment Drawdown at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, in March 2023



Graphic by George Barros  
Satellite image ©2023 Maxar Technologies

Location: 35UMU 21331 79489  
Imagery courtesy of Maxar Technologies

230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Collected March 17, 2023  
Satellite image ©2023 Maxar Technologies.



## Russian Military Equipment Drawdown at the Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, in March 2023



230th Combined Arms Obuz-Lesnovsky Training Ground in Brest, Belarus. Collected February 12, 2023  
Satellite image ©2023 Maxar Technologies.

The Belarusian military announced the completed formation of a new Belarusian air defense regiment equipped with S-300 air defense systems in Luninets, Brest Oblast, Belarus, on March 23.<sup>74</sup> Belarusian media reported that the new unit may be a resurrection of the Belarusian 56th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment, which Belarus disbanded in 2014.<sup>75</sup>

This unit's reformation in Brest Oblast indicates a heightened air defense postured against NATO's eastern flank to defend Russian and Belarusian airspace. Russia already permanently deployed S-300 systems (elements of Russia's 210th Air Defense Regiment) to Grodno, Belarus, in August 2021 as part of the formation of the permanent joint Russian-Belarusian air defense and air combat training center in Grodno that Moscow and Minsk agreed to create in March 2021.<sup>76</sup> The recent addition of more S-

300 systems in Brest completes Russian-Belarusian air defense coverage over Poland and much of western Ukraine and further indicates the Belarusian military's operational subordination to the Russian Western Military District.

The Kremlin has long sought to establish more Russian-controlled air defense assets in Belarus. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that Russia “gave” Belarus an unspecified number of S-400 air defense systems during his meeting with Putin in Minsk on December 19, 2023, confirming ISW’s 2021 forecast that Russian-made S-400 systems would begin operating in Belarus.<sup>77</sup> ISW warned Putin likely seeks to deploy and control Russian anti-access/area denial weapon systems in Belarus in September 2020.<sup>78</sup>

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. Elements of the Belarusian 38th Air Assault Brigade conducted a company tactical exercise at the Brest Training Ground in Brest, Belarus, on March 23.<sup>79</sup> An unspecified battalion of the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade conducted a company tactical exercise at the Gozhsky Training Ground in Grodno, Belarus, on March 23.<sup>80</sup>

**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.**

**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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