

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 25, 2023

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March 25, 10 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.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the predictable next information operation to discourage Ukrainian resistance and disrupt Western support for Ukraine as Russian offensives culminate and Ukraine prepares to launch counter-offensives in an interview with a state-owned Russian news channel on March 25.[1]

Putin claimed that the West cannot sustain weapons provisions to Ukraine and exaggerated Russia's potential to mobilize its own defense industrial base (DIB) to create the false impression that further Ukrainian resistance and Western support to Ukraine is futile. Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces expend up to 5,000 shells a day, while the United States produces an average of 14,000–15,000 shells a month. Putin alleged that planned Western defense production increases will not match Russian planned increases. Putin announced that Russia will build over 1,600 new tanks by the end of 2023 and that Russia will have more than three times the number of tanks as Ukraine at that time.[2] Putin likely seized the opportunity to advance this narrative based on *The Financial Times's* March 19 report that European arms manufacturers are “hobbled” by an explosives shortage.[3] Putin argued that continued Western weapons provisions to Ukraine are merely an attempt to prolong the war.[4]

Putin compared the state of the Russian wartime DIB with current Western military industrial outputs, stating that the West would need to make significant sacrifices to civilian projects to increase military production to support war in Ukraine. Putin added that unlike the West, Russia does not need excessive militarization of the economy to expand its DIB capabilities. These claims are not supportable. The US GDP alone is 10 times the size of Russia's. Germany, the UK, and France together have economies nearly five times the size of Russia's.[5] The US and its allies certainly must make choices when considering spending the large sums required to support Ukraine, but the choices they face are nothing like as hard as those confronting Russia. The balance of overall available resources and industrial capacity is decisively weighted toward the West. Russian military industrial potential is, in fact, hopelessly outmatched by Western military industrial potential. Putin's messaging is intended to persuade the West to commit less of that potential to supporting Ukraine by convincing the West, falsely, that it cannot match Russia. Russia must move to a full war footing to sustain its current military operations—something Putin has been very reluctant to do. The West does not need to shift to a wartime footing to continue to support Ukraine if it chooses to do so.

Putin's stated goals for Russian tank production in 2023 and comparisons with Ukrainian tank stocks also disregard Russia's limited industrial capacity to produce more advanced tanks rapidly and ignore Russian tank losses on the battlefield. Russia's sole tank production factory, UralVagonZavod, reportedly produces 20 tanks a month.[6] It would take over six years to meet Putin's goal at that rate. UralVagonZavod is unlikely to expand production of modern tanks such as the T-90 rapidly enough to meet these targets in nine months due to international sanctions and shortages of skilled labor.[7] The Kremlin will thus likely continue to pull archaic tanks from storage and may attempt to refurbish some older tanks to meet the stated quota. A Kremlin pundit stated on a live broadcast on March 25 that Russia would pull old T-34 tanks from storage and monuments if needed for the war effort while attempting to justify Russia's recent deployments of the T-54 and T-55 tanks to the frontlines.[8] These tanks are not comparable to modern Abrams, Challenger, or Leopard tanks, or even to T-72s, in either armament or armor protection.

Even Putin's announced (and unrealistic) production targets are actually close to the minimum level required to replace Russian battlefield losses. Russia has reportedly been losing 150 tanks per month and so would need to produce 1,350 tanks in the next nine months merely to remain at current levels.[9]

Putin's observations also ignore the fact that the West has been providing Ukraine with smaller numbers of technologically advanced systems in part to offset the requirement to send masses of ammunition and equipment. Western militaries have historically held lower stocks of conventional artillery rounds, for example, because they rely on precision long-range fires such as the HIMARS systems the US has provided Ukraine. The Ukrainian military and its Western backers can confidently expect that loss rates in tank duels between M1s, Leopards, and Challengers, on the one hand, and T-55s, T-62s, or even T-

72s, on the other, will be far from one-to-one. The US military, after all, has repeatedly demonstrated the relative effectiveness of M1s and T-72s on the battlefields of Iraq.

Putin's comments are an information operation designed to revive the aura of Soviet-era military industry and massed forces. They do not reflect current Russian realities or the balance of economic power or military industrial capacity between Russia and the collective West.

Putin advanced another information operation by announcing that Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by July 1 and renewed tired information operations about the potential for nuclear escalation. Putin implied that the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to send munitions containing depleted uranium – uranium that is significantly less radioactive than natural uranium – to Ukraine triggered his decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus for fear of nuclear escalation. Putin rejected Western statements that such munitions are safe to use and do not contain radioactive components. Putin insisted that the projectile core releases “radiation dust” and may sicken Ukrainian citizens and damage Ukraine's environment.[10] Western anti-tank munitions commonly contain depleted uranium, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) notes is “very suitable for military uses.”[11] Such munitions cannot be used to create either nuclear or radiological weapons.[12] Putin's argument is false-to-fact, and even some domestic audiences likely realize it. A prominent Russian milblogger on March 25 challenged Putin's argument and stated that it the Western provision of depleted uranium rounds is not a “real problem.”[13] Putin's concern for the well-being of the environment in Ukraine, furthermore, appears somewhat misplaced considering the massive damage Russian forces have inflicted on Ukraine's agricultural lands, to say nothing of Ukraine's cities and people. If Putin really is so concerned about the future of Ukraine's ecology he could best serve it by withdrawing from Ukraine and allowing Ukraine and the rest of the world to begin repairing the damage the Russian invasion has caused.

The announcement of the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is irrelevant to the risk of escalation to nuclear war, which remains extremely low. Putin is attempting to exploit Western fears of nuclear escalation by deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. Russia has long fielded nuclear-capable weapons able to strike any target that tactical nuclear weapons based in Belarus could hit. ISW continues to assess that Putin is a risk-averse actor who repeatedly threatens to use nuclear weapons without any intention of following through in order to break Western resolve.[14] The *Financial Times* further reported on March 24 that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell stated that Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Russia reduced the chance that Russia forces would use nuclear weapons because Xi made it “very, very clear” to Putin that he should not deploy nuclear weapons.[15]

Putin has likely sought to deploy Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus since before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and has likely chosen this moment to do so in order to serve the immediate information operation he is now conducting. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko offered to host Russia nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory on November 30, 2021, and Belarus removed the constitutional clause enshrining Belarus' neutral status in a referendum in February 2022.[16] ISW forecasted in January and February 2022 that Putin might seek to deploy tactical or strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus as part of a broader effort to deepen Russian control over Belarus.[17] Putin likely refrained from deploying the weapons to Belarus at the start of the 2022 invasion in order to preserve the option to deploy them as part of a future Russian information operation to manipulate the West.

Putin likely chose to push these narratives now in hopes of diminishing Ukrainian morale and Western aid to diminish the effectiveness of a rumored pending Ukrainian counteroffensive. Many prominent Russian milbloggers and officials warned that Ukrainian forces will likely attempt a major counteroffensive soon.[18] Putin's actions suggest that he agrees and that he fears the potential success of a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Putin and senior Kremlin officials have previously leveraged narratives around Russian heightened nuclear readiness, false flag warnings, and vague statements about negative battlefield developments claiming that Russia is entitled to use nuclear weapons to defend itself in Ukraine in order to deter further Western support for or military aid to Ukraine.[19] ISW has previously reported on Putin's escalation of nuclear rhetoric in September and October 2022 followed by a de-escalation in early November 2022 before the Russian loss of Kherson City and west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and assessed that the Kremlin might leverage further nuclear escalation rhetoric to coerce Western states to negotiate with Russia and halt further military aid to Ukraine.[20] ISW assesses that Putin's March 25 announcement is part of this effort and continues to assess that Russia is very unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or elsewhere.

Ukrainian and Western officials offered various views of the state of the Russian offensive in Bakhmut on March 25, but all are consistent with the assessment that the Russian effort around Bakhmut is likely culminating. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed on March 25 that the Russian offensive against Bakhmut is stalling and that Russian forces may shift their focus to the Avdiivka and Svatove-Kremlinna areas.[21] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty cautioned that the recent decrease in reported Russian ground assaults near Bakhmut needs further analysis. Cherevaty also stated that unspecified Russian conventional forces

are reinforcing Wagner Group forces, suggesting that Russian conventional forces are intervening to prevent the Wagner offensive from culminating prematurely.[22] Cherevaty noted that Russian forces conducted 18 ground attacks near Bakhmut on March 25 but recently conducted 40–50 attacks a day in the area, suggesting that exhausted Wagner forces are unable to sustain their prior tempo of operations alone but may increase their tempo to earlier levels with assistance from Russian conventional forces.[23] Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander in Chief General Valery Zaluzhny stated that the Bakhmut situation is stabilizing.[24] These statements are not mutually exclusive, however, and the Russian effort against Bakhmut is likely culminating. Russian forces may continue to attack Bakhmut frequently and aggressively even if the offensive has culminated with little to no success, as ISW has previously assessed, as culmination does not mean the absence of fighting.[25] Russian attacks in and around Bakhmut may resume at high levels without generating significant new gains if conventional Russian forces do, in fact, enter the fray. The commitment of conventional reserves could even prevent the attack from culminating and generate operationally significant advances or persuade Ukrainian forces to withdraw, although ISW regards those eventualities as unlikely at this time.

Russian forces do not have the degree of fire control over Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and likely other areas of the front that Russian milbloggers claim, further undermining the Russian effort to take Bakhmut. Recent footage shows that Ukrainian forces remain able to drive on the Bakhmut-Chasiv Yar and Bakhmut-Khromove roads despite Russian artillery targeting the Ukrainian vehicles.[26] Russian milbloggers likely based their fire control claims on Russian artillery system ranges, but even Russian ground advances close to these GLOCs have failed to prevent Ukrainian vehicles from using them at least on a small scale. Geolocated footage posted on March 25 shows that Wagner Group forces have crossed the T0504 but remain unable to establish sustained positions that would cut the GLOC.[27]

Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the predictable next information operation to discourage Ukrainian resistance and disrupt Western support for Ukraine as Russian offensives culminate and Ukraine prepares to launch counter-offensives in an interview with a state-owned Russian news channel on March 25.**
- **Putin pushed the false narrative that the West cannot sustain weapons provision to Ukraine due to limited Western production and hyperbolized Russia’s potential to mobilize its own defense industrial base (DIB).**
- **Putin advanced another information operation by announcing that Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus by July 1 and renewed tired information operations about the potential for nuclear escalation.**
- **Russian conventional forces may intervene in Wagner Group’s offensive around Bakhmut to prevent the offensive from culminating prematurely.**
- **Russian forces do not have the degree of fire control over Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and likely other areas of the front that Russian milbloggers claim.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and gained limited ground in the city.**
- **Russian forces reportedly conducted a mass rotation of forces in Nova Kakhovka on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin accused Russian authorities on March 25 of rewriting history to cut out Wagner by forcing state-controlled media outlet *RT* to cut some coverage of the Wagner Group.**
- **The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 24 that Moscow elites are competing for funding to “restore” occupied territories and really plan to use the projects to further their own interests.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 25, 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

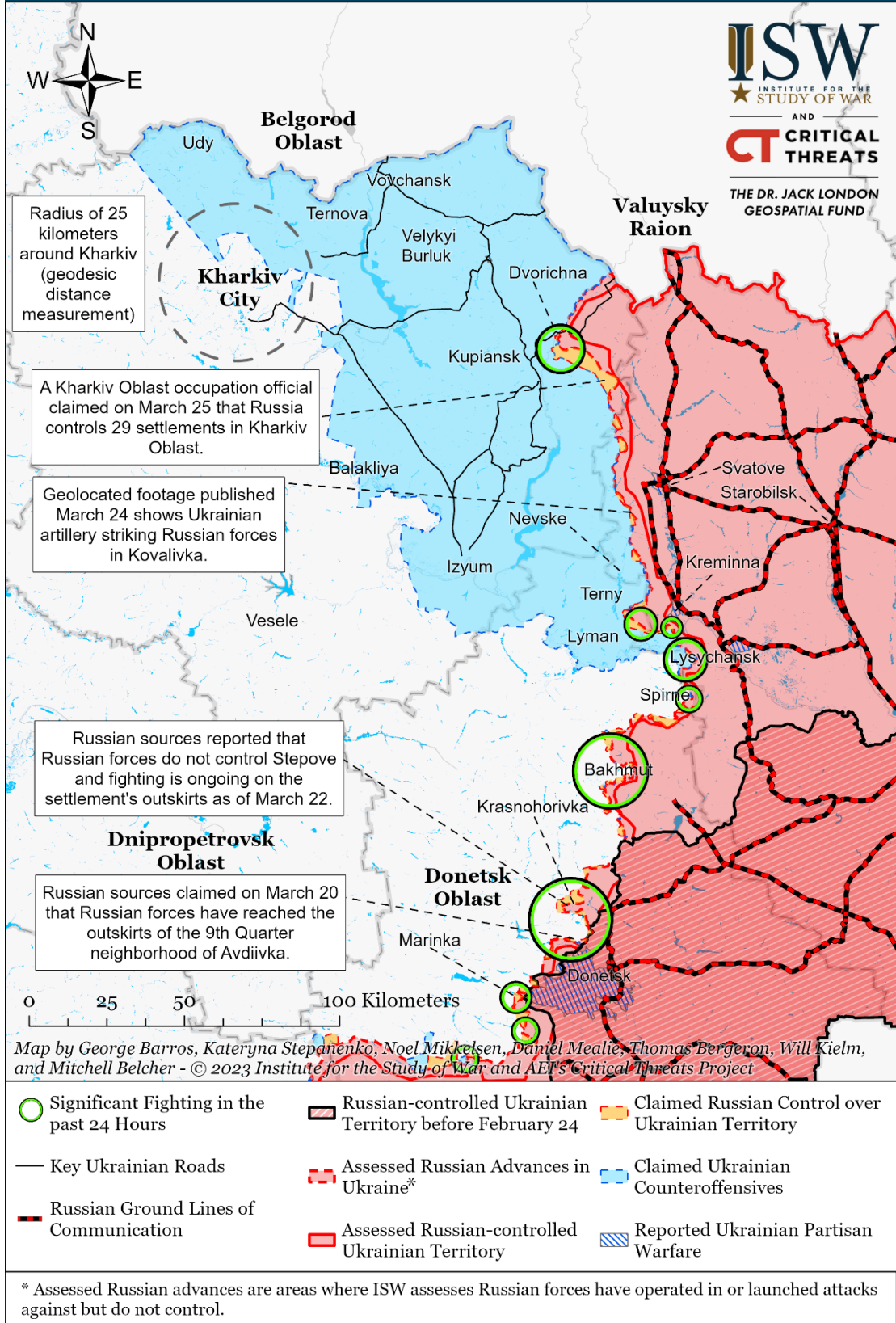
Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

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 northeast of Kupyansk on March 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk).[28] Footage published on March 25 purportedly shows drone operators of the 138th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) striking Ukrainian positions in an unspecified location in Kharkiv Oblast.[29] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Russian forces are failing to make decisive advances along the Kupyansk-Lyman line despite using conventional units that act more cautiously, conduct reconnaissance, and use artillery.[30] Russian Western Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Sergey Zybinsky claimed that Russian forces destroyed five Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups in the Kupyansk direction and prevented Ukrainian forces from transferring troops to the Dvorichna (17km northeast of Kupyansk) area.[31] Zybinsky also claimed that Russian forces disrupted three Ukrainian forces' troop rotations near Synkivka, Berestove (26km southeast of Kupyansk), and Myasozharivka (35km southeast of Kupyansk).[32] Kharkiv Oblast Occupation Administration Head Vitaly Ganchev claimed that Russian forces control 29 settlements in Kharkiv Oblast, claiming that Russian forces seized an additional nine settlements since Ganchev's last statement on February 15.[33]

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kremmina line on March 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (11km south of Kreminna), Spirne (25km south of Kreminna), and Vyimka (26km south of Kreminna).[34] Geolocated footage published on March 24 indicates that Russian forces made a limited advance near Kovalivka (10km southwest of Svatove) and Verkhokamianske (21km south of Kremmina).[35] A Russian milblogger claimed on March 25 that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the direction of Terny, Nevske, and Makiivka (within 21km northwest of Kreminna) and made marginal advances near Bilohorivka.[36]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

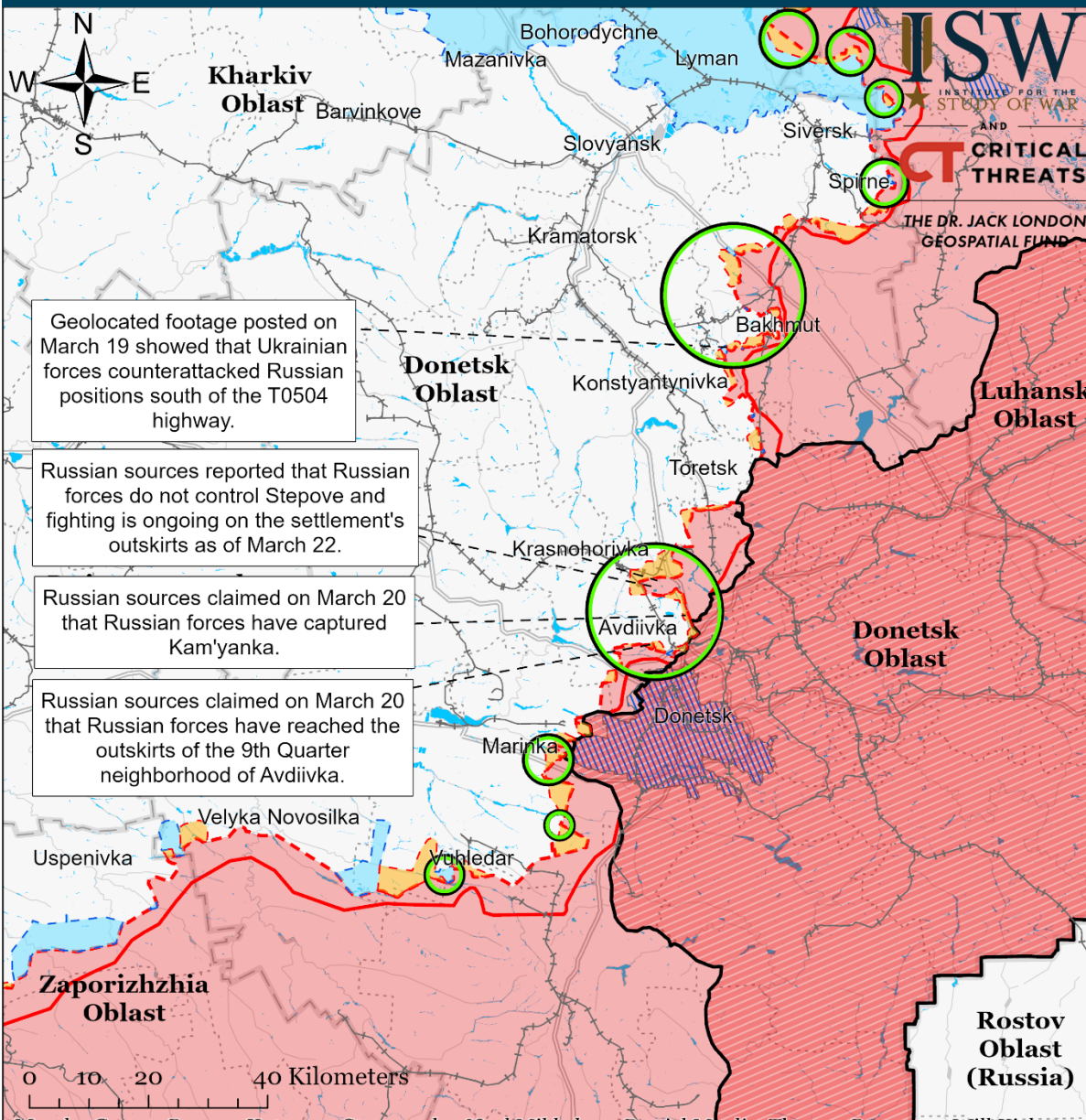
Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and gained ground in the city on March 25. Geolocated footage posted on March 25 shows that Russian forces have advanced up the T0513 highway in Bakhmut towards the city center and marginally in southwestern Bakhmut.[37] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in Bakhmut, northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest) and Bohdanivka (5km northwest), and southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (3km southwest), Stupochky (10km southwest), and Predtechyne (12km southwest).[38] Russian milbloggers also claimed that fighting is ongoing north of Bakhmut, in the Bakhmut city center, and southwest of Bakhmut, and that Russian forces gained ground in southwestern Bakhmut.[39] One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced north of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka and Bohdanivka.[40] Geolocated footage posted on March 24 shows that Ukrainian forces regained some ground along the E40 highway north of Bakhmut during a recent counterattack, however.[41]

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on March 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Keramik (10km north of Avdiivka), Stepove (5km northwest of Avdiivka), Avdiivka, Tonenke (6km west of Avdiivka), Sieverne (5km west of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske, (11km southwest of Avdiivka) and Marinka.[42] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continue attempting to approach Avdiivka from the north near Berdychi, Novobakhmutivka, Novokalynove, and Stepove, and from the south rather than conduct frontal assaults directly against the city.[43] Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting continues in western Marinka (4km west of Donetsk City).[44] Former Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) People’s Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that Ukrainian defenses in both Avdiivka and Bakhmut will collapse once Russian forces cut all GLOCs to the cities, and former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin attacked Basurin for stating the obvious.[45]

Russian forces continue to integrate irregular DNR forces into conventional Russian formations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area. A group of Russian soldiers of the “Shtorm” formation claimed to be part of the 5th Brigade (1st Army Corps, 8th Guards Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District), indicating that Russia continues to formally integrate DNR and Russian conventional forces and deploy them along the same axes of advance.[46] Other Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense and DNR, claimed that Russian Southern Military District elements and the 1454th Self Propelled Artillery Regiment, 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade, and 58th Spetsnaz Battalions (all of the 1st Army Corps) continue to operate in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City direction.[47]

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Vuhledar and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City).[48] Russian forces continued to strike frontline areas in western Donetsk Oblast.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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 ongoing on the settlement's outskirts as of March 22.

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

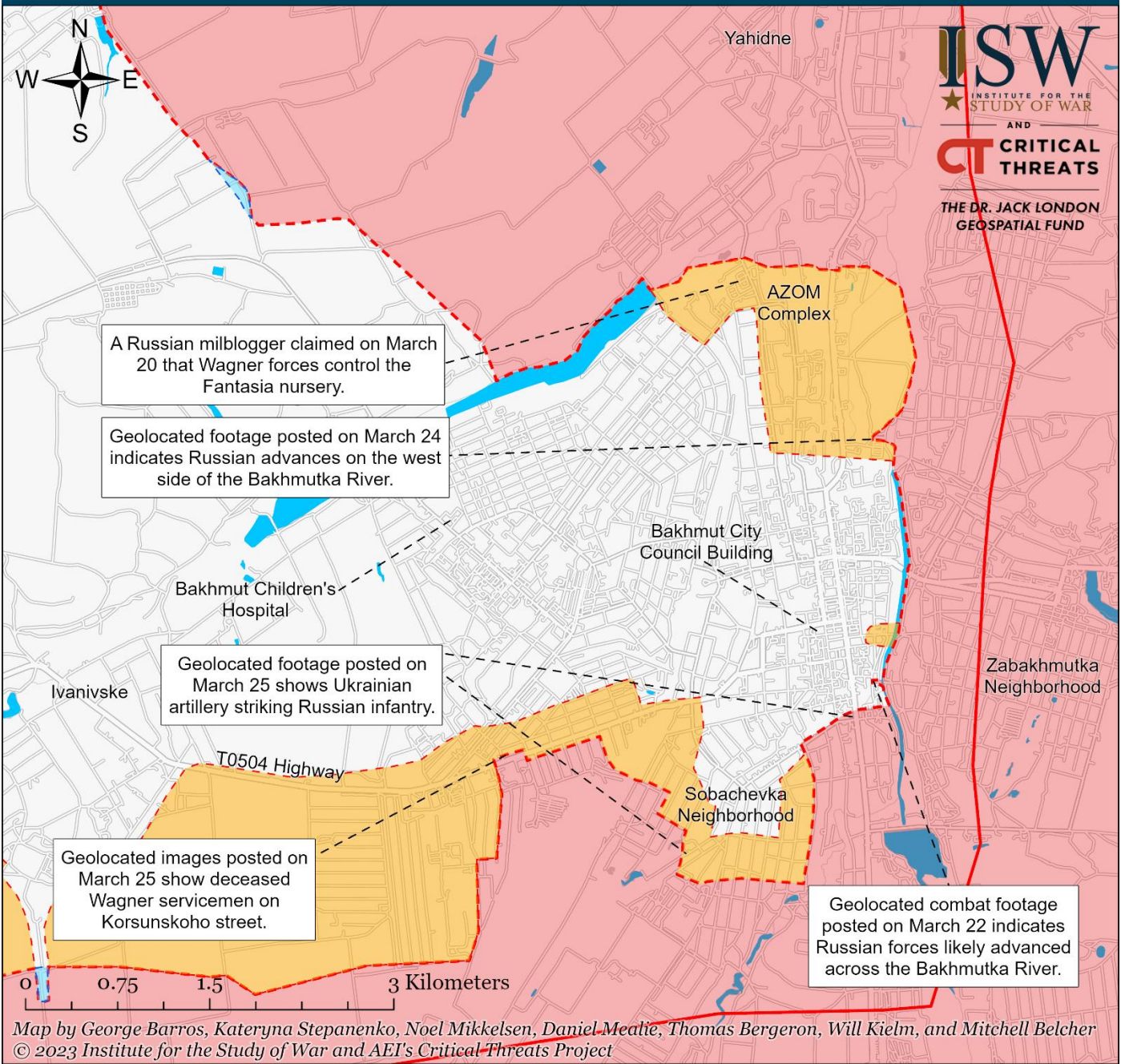
Russian sources claimed on March 20 that Russian forces have reached the outskirts of the 9th Quarter neighborhood of Avdiivka.

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
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- 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 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

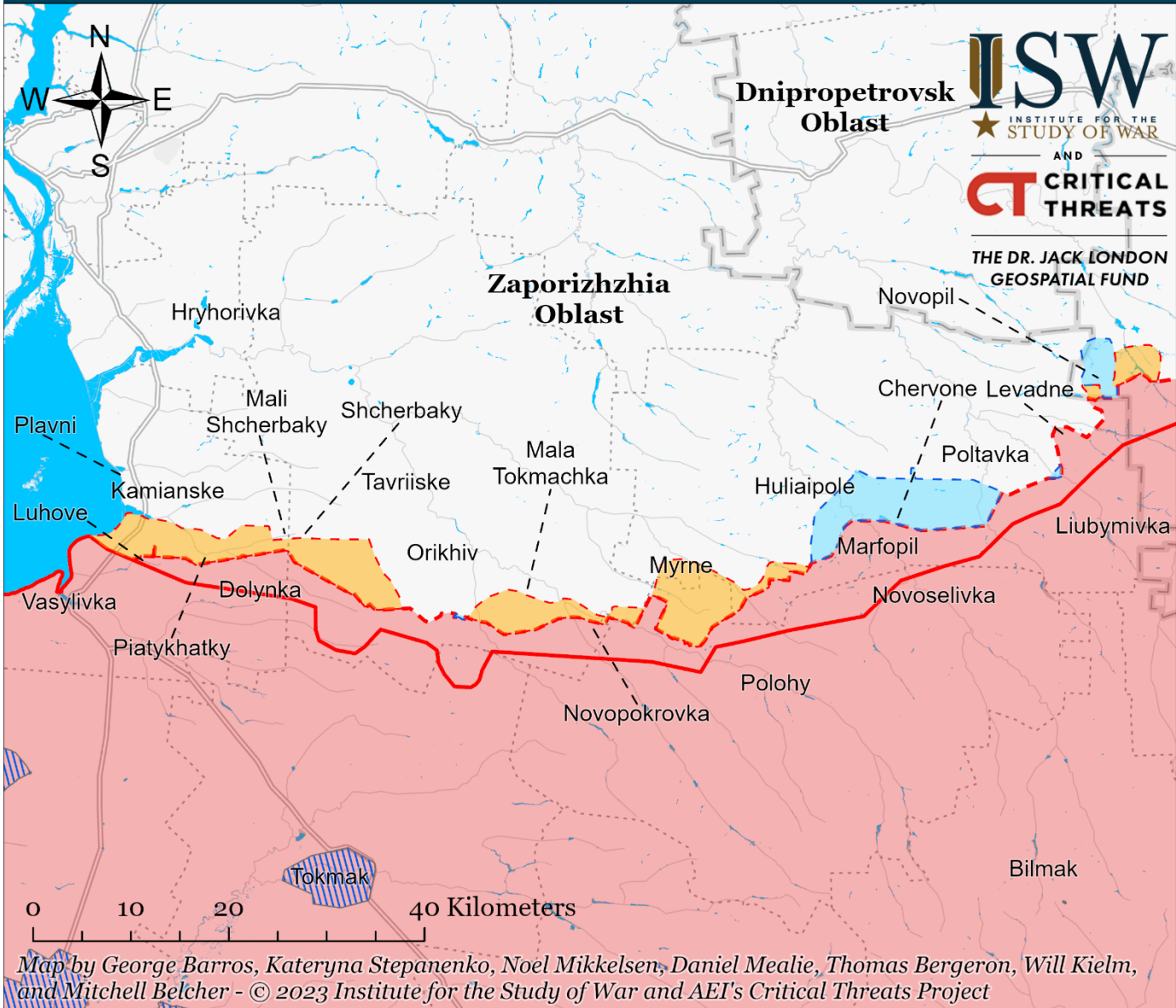
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces reportedly conducted a mass rotation of forces in Nova Kakhovka on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River. Head of the Ukrainian Southern Forces Joint Coordination Press Center Nataliya Humenyuk stated on March 25 that Russian forces conducted a mass rotation in Nova Kakhovka, which led Ukrainian military command to conclude that Russian forces had left city and share incorrect information.[50] Humenyuk noted that Russian forces usually arrive as part of a rotation, which Russian forces use to restore combat units that have returned from hot spots. The Ukrainian General Staff previously reported that Russian forces had left Nova Kakhovka on March 22, and quickly corrected itself to say that Russian forces maintain positions in the settlement.[51]

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Head Rafael Grossi will travel to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) next week. The IAEA announced on March 25 that Grossi will travel to the ZNPP to assess the nuclear safety and security at the facility and emphasize the need to protect it.[52] Grossi stated that the situation at the ZNPP has evolved since he last visited in September 2022, and he plans to talk with unspecified personnel operating the ZNPP. The IAEA also stated that Grossi's visit aims to make sure the IAEA conducts its regular personnel rotation, as its prior rotation was delayed by over a month due to security issues.

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts on March 25.[53] Geolocated footage published on March 24 shows Ukrainian forces striking a Russian fuel depot in Nova Zburivka (24km southwest of Kherson City) and a Russian missile system south of Hola Prystan (21km southwest of Kherson City).[54]

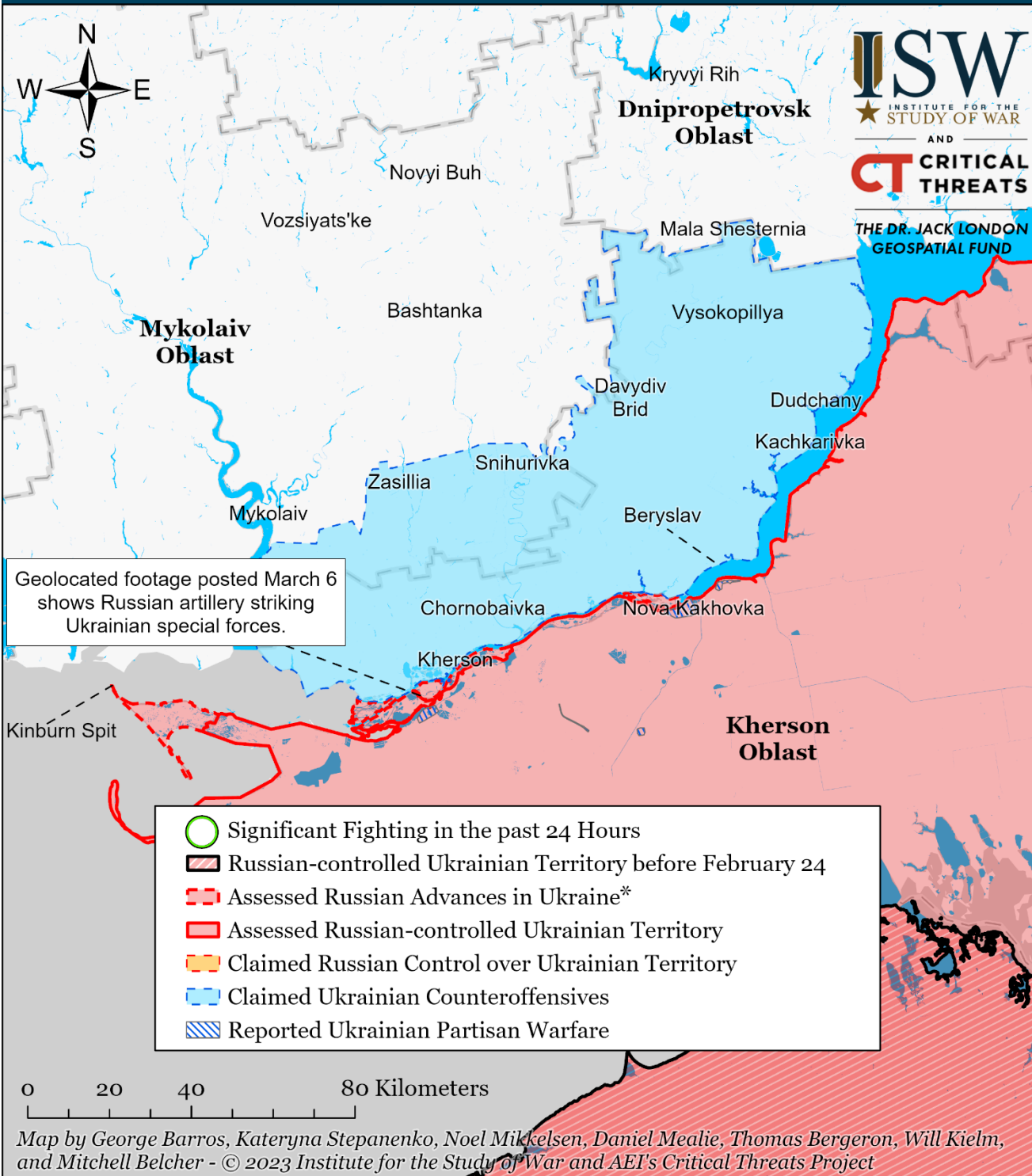
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of March 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- 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
- 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.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 25, 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)

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin accused Russian authorities on March 25 of rewriting the history of the war in Ukraine to cut out Wagner. Prigozhin claimed that unspecified Russian authorities forced state-controlled media outlet *RT* – which has consistently promoted Wagner operations in Ukraine – to cut the first half of a film on the role of Russian convicts in the war because it centered on the Wagner Group. Prigozhin claimed that Russian authorities want to convince the populace that “pomaded generals” in fancy offices really won the war.[55] This allegation, if true, may represent a new Kremlin strategy for limiting Prigozhin’s influence. Such censorship may also indicate that the Kremlin is becoming more sensitive to Prigozhin’s use of select Russian state media platforms to advertise himself and his forces.

Prigozhin continued to attack those who question the legitimacy of Wagner convict-soldiers and to fight for increased privileges for convict-soldiers. Prigozhin claimed on March 25 that Wagner’s 5,000 released convict-soldiers have a 0.3 percent recidivism rate within the first month of returning from the front lines in Ukraine.[56] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that this rate is far lower than the average for Russian criminals.[57] Prigozhin attacked a St. Petersburg local news outlet for calling the former Wagner soldiers “pardoned criminals” and amplifying the number of pardoned criminals released rather than their allegedly low recidivism rates.[58] Prigozhin’s statements also indicate that Wagner forces have likely released at least 5,000 servicemen at the end of their six-month contracts. The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) had previously assessed that Wagner would begin to experience personnel shortages as more convicts finish their contracts in the upcoming weeks.[59] Prigozhin also claimed that he appealed to Moscow Oblast Governor Andrey Vorobyov to allow him to construct a psychological treatment center for former convict soldiers in one of Moscow’s most upscale neighborhoods.[60]

Russian Head of the Foundation for the Defense of National Values – a Wagner Group public relations arm – Maxim Shugaley appealed to Russian Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrey Kartopolov on March 25 and asked Kartopolov to consider legislation allowing contract and mobilized soldiers to serve in private military groups (PMCs) instead of in the Russian Armed Forces.[61] A prominent Russian milblogger amplified this open letter and implied that the freedom to choose to serve in PMCs would likely reveal shortcomings in the Russian Armed Forces if many soldiers chose to transfer, since soldiers would not seek to transfer out of good divisions.[62] Shugaley claimed that he “constantly” receives requests from contract and mobilized soldiers seeking to transfer to Wagner.[63] The European Union imposed sanctions on Shugaley in February 2023 due to his deep ties to Wagner.[64]

Russian leaks channel *VChK-OGPU* claimed on March 24 that Russian Duma deputy Dmitry Sablin will head a new Russian Combat Army Reserve (BARS) volunteer detachment intended for Russia’s political elite to check the box of participating in the war in Ukraine.[65] Russian politicians will likely keep this unit far from the front lines or any unpleasant task while using their “service” to combat criticism that they are detached from the war.

Some Russian soldiers and civilians continue limited resistance to mobilization, criticism of mobilization implementation, and protests against the war in Ukraine.[66]

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)

The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 24 that Moscow elites are competing for funding to “restore” occupied territories and really plan to use the projects to further their own interests.[67] Members of the Russian elite likely plan to divert funding to their own accounts while complying with the Kremlin’s primary interest: creating propaganda about Kremlin infrastructure projects. The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that the Kremlin may be destroying infrastructure in occupied cities deliberately to blame the destruction on Ukrainians and create an ideal situation for restoration propaganda. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that top Kremlin officials have plans to construct “dummy” infrastructure to simulate investment in rebuilding efforts.

Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov stated on March 25 that Russian occupation authorities and Ukrainian collaborators held a secret meeting wherein they prepared plans to evacuate from Zaporizhia Oblast.[68] Such preparations are understandable due to pervasive Russian fear of a pending Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast, on which ISW has previously reported.[69] The reported readiness of occupation authorities to evacuate suggests that occupation authorities may have low confidence in the ability of Russian forces to stop a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine released a report on March 24 investigating Russian and Ukrainian treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) and the impacts of the war on civilians.[70] The mission found that some soldiers in both Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted extrajudicial executions and mistreated some POWs.

Russian human rights violations and violations of the international rules of war were significantly more severe and expansive than Ukrainian violations, however, according to the report. Multiple articles of the Geneva Conventions hold states rather than individuals responsible for war crimes depending on the state's willingness to identify, investigate, and punish individual violators and take measures to prevent violations.[71] **The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission noted that Ukrainian officials provided full access to the mission's investigators and launched investigations into allegations raised by the UN.[72] Russian authorities refused to cooperate with investigators.[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 Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 24 that the active phase of special training of the Belarusian signal forces is ending. The Belarusian MoD claimed that this training will support Belarusian command and control in the 2023 Belarusian-Russian Union Shield exercise scheduled for September 22-26.[74]

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://tass dot ru/politika/17369311>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369319>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369337>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/17369347>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369361>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369369>; <https://tass dot ru/ekonomika/17369385>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369391>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/17369419>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/17369429>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/17369451>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/17369429>; <https://tass dot ru/ekonomika/17369477>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369519>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369527>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369527>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/17369587>

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