

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 27, 2023
Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan
March 27, 7:15pm 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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Rumors about the dismissal of Russian Eastern Group of Forces (Eastern Military District) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov on March 27 generated a muted and cynical response in the Russian information space. The milbloggers claimed that Russian military authorities dismissed Muradov from his position as Eastern Group of Forces commander, but ISW cannot currently verify these claims.[1] Muradov took command of the Russian Eastern Military District (EMD) on October 6, 2022, and has overseen a series of disastrous offensive operations led by EMD elements in western Donetsk Oblast over the past five months.[2] One milblogger claimed that Muradov is on "vacation," which the milblogger noted is tantamount to resignation. Others claimed that Muradov's removal is a positive step but stated that Muradov's replacement is more important than his removal.[3] Some milbloggers noted that Muradov was responsible for significant Russian military failures in western Donetsk Oblast, including the high casualties suffered in the assault against Pavlivka in October-November 2022 and the prolonged and failed effort to take Vuhledar.[4] Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* (iStories), citing sources close to the Russian General Staff, reported that the Russian General Staff accused Muradov of being inept due to battlefield failures and significant losses in western Donetsk Oblast, including the near obliteration of the Tatarstan "Alga" volunteer battalion.[5] One prominent milblogger claimed that military authorities are also considering dismissing Western Military District Commander Colonel General Yevgeny Nikiforov, whose forces operate along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line in eastern Ukraine.[6]

ISW cannot confirm the rumors of either Muradov's or Nikiforov's dismissals, but it is noteworthy that Russian milbloggers are discussing potential dismissals of commanders associated with areas of operation in which Russian forces have been largely unable to secure substantial gains or have suffered major losses. Russian milbloggers do not appear to be hypothesizing about the removal of either the Central Military District (CMD) Commander Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev or Southern Military District Commander (SMD) Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev.[7] Neither the CMD nor the SMD are heavily committed in critical areas of the front, and Mordvichev and Kuzovlev have therefore likely avoided becoming targets of Russian command skepticism because they are not currently responsible for significant failures. The muted information space response to the reported firings is additionally indicative of broader disillusionment with Russian military command, which milbloggers have argued for months needs systemic overhauls. Many milbloggers have consistently praised former Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin despite the fall of west (right) bank Kherson Oblast under his command, however. One milblogger claimed on March 27 that Surovikin may be responsible for defending against a future Ukrainian counteroffensive and claimed that Surovikin's military strategy is better than that of Russian Chief of the General Staff and current Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Valery Gerasimov.[8] Russian authorities and some milbloggers have fixated on identifying and punishing individual commanders for the failures of their troops, rather than interrogating and resolving endemic issues in Russian command and control, force structure, and deployment patterns.

Russian milbloggers also had a muted response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 25 announcement that Russia will deploy tactical nukes to Belarus, suggesting that Putin's messaging is aimed at Western rather than domestic Russian audiences. Many milbloggers and news aggregators simply amplified various points from Putin's March 25 interview that artificially inflate the capabilities of the Russian military and defense industrial base (DIB) to sustain a prolonged war effort, as well as the nuclear weapons deployment announcement itself.[9] One milblogger correctly noted that deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus does not improve Russia's military situation in Ukraine, claiming that Russian forces need to instead prepare for a future Ukrainian counteroffensive, and criticized continued Russian military command and organization issues.[10] Another milblogger recognized that Putin targeted his nuclear weapons deployment announcement at the West and praised the prospect of being the "nightmare" of the US.[11]

Russian military leadership likely committed limited higher quality Wagner Group elements to the offensive on Avdiivka, potentially to reinforce recent limited tactical successes in the area. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivyskyi stated on March 25 that Ukrainian intelligence forecasts that Wagner may appear in the Avdiivka direction.[12] A Russian VK user posted an obituary on March 26 announcing the death of Wagner Group fighter Yevgeny Malgotin in Avdiivka on March 20.[13] The obituary claims that Malgotin had prior military experience and fought with the 2nd Russian Volunteer Detachment of the Army of Republika Sprska (commonly referred to as the Bosnian Serb Army) in 1992.[14] Malgotin appears to have been a seasoned fighter, and likely represents the higher caliber of fighter that comprises Wagner's special operations forces. While Wagner has heavily committed a majority convict-based force to operations near Bakhmut, there is likely a contingent of higher-quality operators at various locations in Ukraine. Russian military leadership may have decided to deploy certain Wagner elements to the Avdiivka area in recent weeks to support exhausted and lower-quality Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) elements in their efforts to take the settlement. If such Wagner fighters have been fighting near Avdiivka, their involvement may help explain the limited tactical gains made in the area over the past week.

Key Takeaways

- **Rumors about the dismissal of Russian Eastern Group of Forces (Eastern Military District) Commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov on March 27 generated a muted and cynical response in the Russian information space.**
- **Russian milbloggers also had a muted response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 25 announcement to deploy tactical nukes to Belarus, underscoring that Putin's messaging is aimed at Western rather than domestic Russian audiences.**
- **Russian military leadership likely committed limited higher quality Wagner Group elements to the offensive on Avdiivka, potentially to reinforce recent limited tactical successes in the area.**
- **Russian forces made marginal gains around Svatove and Russian forces continue ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut and made gains within Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.**
- **Russia appears to be increasingly deploying elements of conventional formations in a piecemeal fashion along the entire frontline, including in southern Ukraine.**
- **Russian authorities continue forming new volunteer battalions subordinate to irregular formations.**
- **Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against an occupation law enforcement officer in Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 27, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

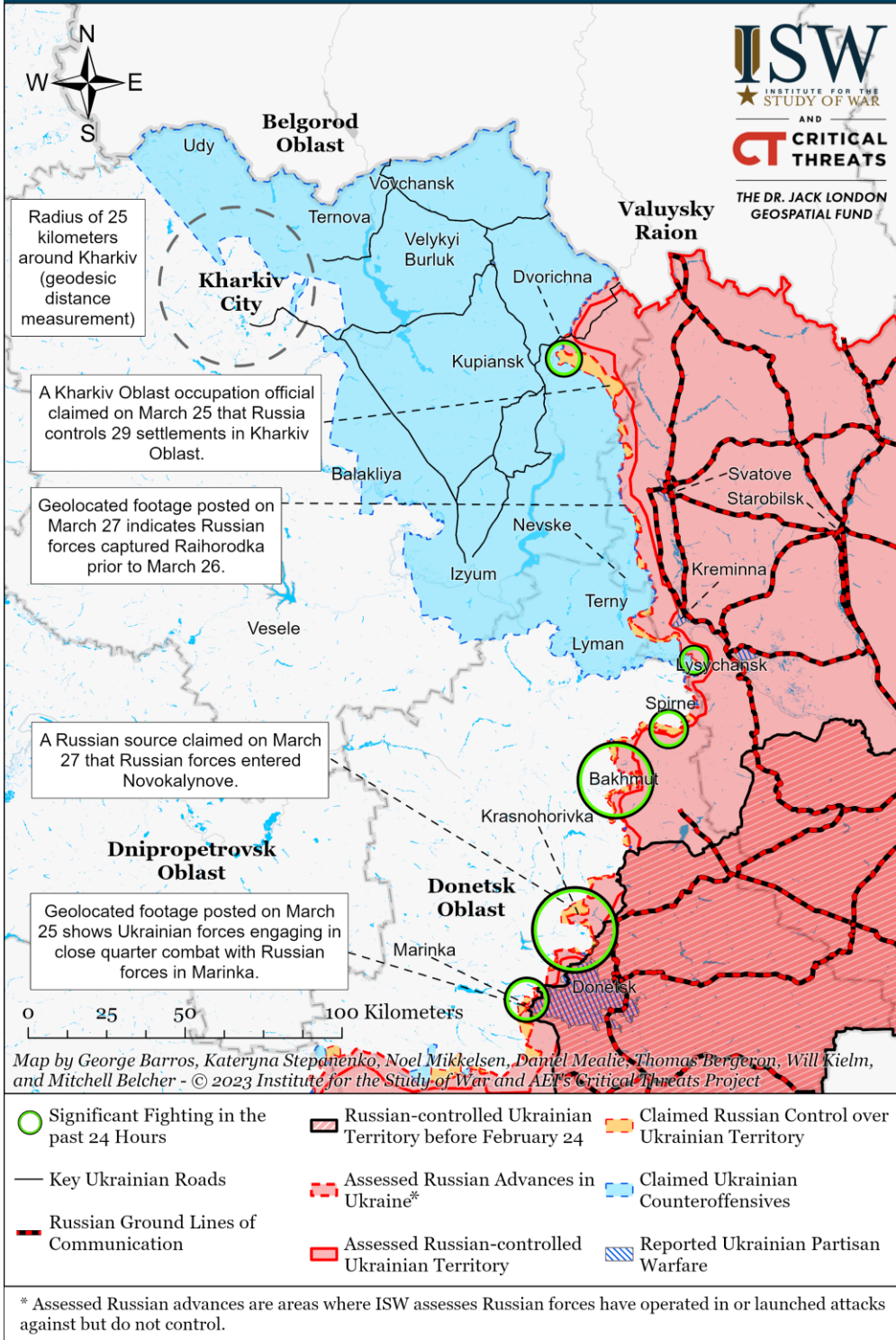
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

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 continued ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 26 and 27 and have made marginal gains in the Svatove area as of March 27. Geolocated footage posted on March 27 indicates that Russian troops have advanced into Raihorodka, 12km west of Svatove.[15] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations near Synkivka (10km northeast of Kupyansk), Kreminna, Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), Vyimka (25km south of Kreminna), and Vesele (30km south of Kreminna) on March 26 and 27.[16] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 26 that elements of the Western Grouping of Forces (Western Military District) destroyed Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Stelmakhivka, 12km northwest of Svatove.[17] Russian milbloggers reported that elements of the Russian 331st Airborne (VDV) Regiment (98th Guards Airborne Division) and 76th Guards VDV Division are operating in forest areas near Kreminna.[18] A Russian military correspondent reportedly embedded with Russian troops near Kreminna claimed on March 26 that Russian paratroopers and unspecified naval infantry elements are advancing 500 meters per day near Kreminna and capturing Ukrainian fortified positions.[19] A Russian milblogger noted on March 27 that Russian forces are additionally continuing attempts to push west of Ploshchanka (15km north of Kreminna).[20] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty reported on March 26 that Russian forces are conducting the highest number of artillery strikes along the entire Kupyansk-Lyman line and that there were 10 combat clashes on this line over the past day.[21]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 27, 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)

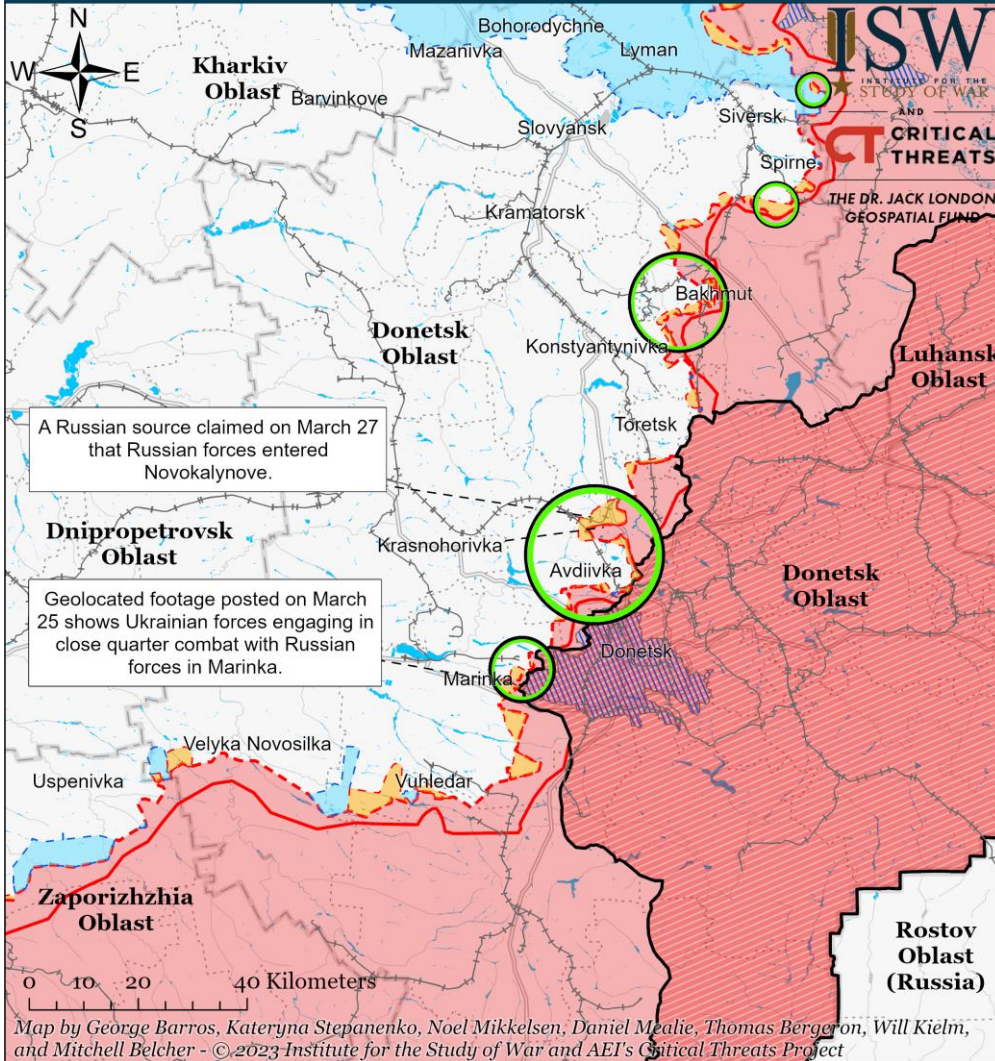
Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut on March 26 and 27 and made gains within Bakhmut as of March 26. Geolocated footage posted on March 24 and 26 shows that Russian forces have likely advanced along Zelena Street and Oleksandry Kolpakovoi streets in northwestern Bakhmut.[22] Russian media outlet *RIA Novosti* additionally posted footage on March 26 confirming

that Wagner Group fighters have advanced within the AZOM complex in northern Bakhmut.[23] Geolocated footage posted on March 27 shows Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin visiting School No.5 near central Bakhmut.[24] Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters reached the rail line in northern Bakhmut on March 26 and continued advancing within urban areas of northern and southwestern Bakhmut in an effort to reach Bakhmut's city center on March 26 and 27.[25] A prominent milblogger noted on March 26 that Wagner is advancing in Bakhmut with support from unspecified conventional Russian elements, supporting ISW's assessment that conventional formations are increasingly supporting Wagner's offensive on Bakhmut.[26] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself; northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka (6km northwest); west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west); and southwest of Bakhmut near Predtechyne (15km southwest) between March 26 and 27.[27] Ukrainian Eastern Group Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty noted on March 26 that the number of Russian attacks on Bakhmut is decreasing and suggested that Russian forces may be "maneuvering with reserves" in the area.[28]

Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on March 26 and 27. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 26 and 27 that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka itself; in the Avdiivka area near Novokalynove (10km north of Avdiivka), Severne (5km west of Avdiivka), Tonenke (5km west of Avdiivka), Stepove (8km northwest of Avdiivka), and Novobakhmutivka (11km northwest of Avdiivka); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Vodyane, Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Krasnohorivka; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka.[29] Avdiivka Military Administration Head Vitaly Barbarash announced on March 27 that communal service workers are evacuating Avdiivka and that the military administration will turn off mobile communications in the city due to the presence of Russian informants in the city.[30] Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated on March 25 that elements of the Russian 10th Regiment (likely a Donetsk People's Republic formation newly subordinated to Russian command) are fighting in the Avdiivka area.[31] Russian milbloggers continued to discuss Russian operations towards Avdiivka on both March 26 and March 27.[32] One milblogger claimed that Russian forces entered Novokalynove and are attacking towards Keramik.[33] Russian sources additionally claimed that Russian forces advanced on the northern outskirts of Marinka on March 26 and continued fighting for the settlement on March 27.[34] Geolocated footage posted on March 26 additionally shows that Russian forces have advanced north of Novomykhailivka, about 10km south of Avdiivka.[35] Dmytrashkivskyi noted that elements of the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) have recently engaged in Marinka.[36]

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 26 or 27.[37] A Russian milblogger claimed on March 26 that Russian forces resumed offensive operations in the dacha area south of Vuhledar.[38] Geolocated footage posted on March 27 shows minor Russian advances in the southern dacha area about 3km southeast of Vuhledar.[39]

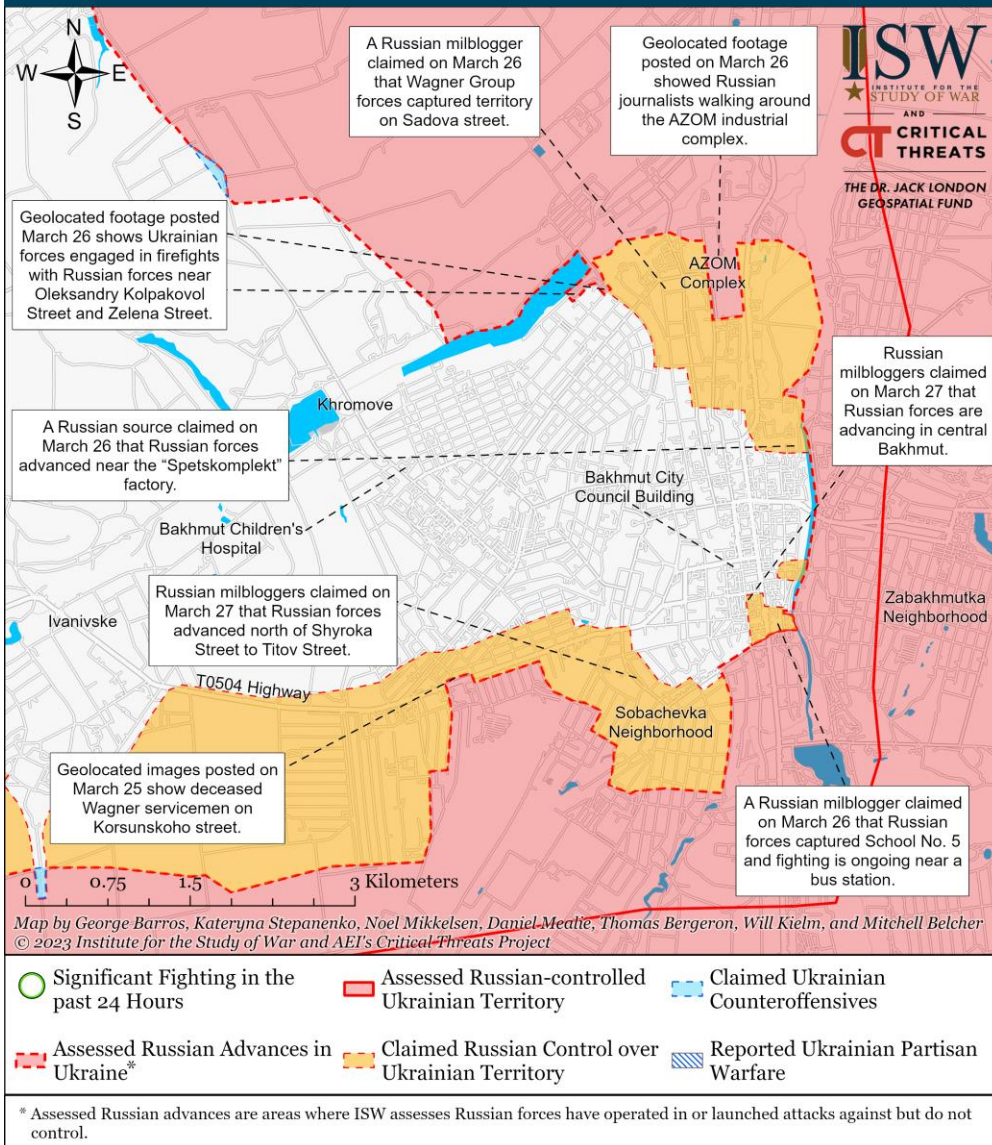
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 27, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours		Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory		Major Railroads
	Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24		Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory		Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
	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 in Bakhmut as of March 27, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



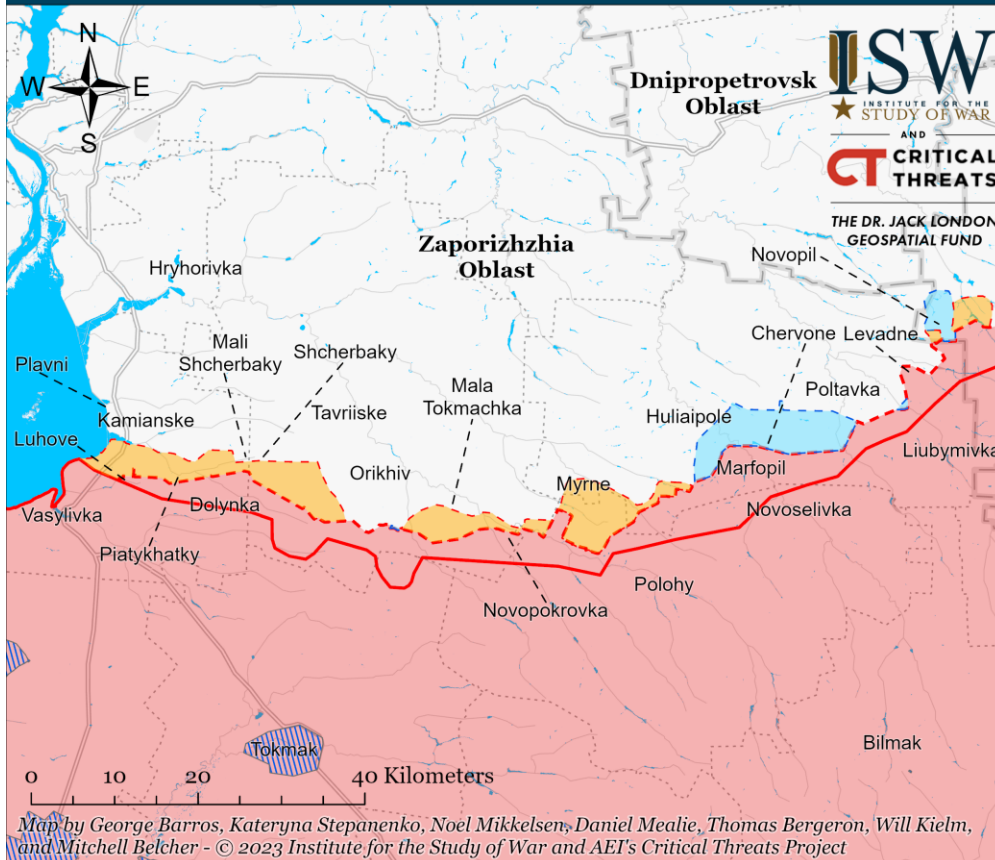
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russia appears to be increasingly deploying elements of conventional formations in a piecemeal fashion along the entire frontline, including in southern Ukraine. Russian sources claimed on March 27 that the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) is operating in the Zaporizhia direction.[40] Personnel of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade previously claimed they would deploy to the Vuhledar direction to relieve the exhausted 155th Naval Infantry Brigade which is committed to the area, but a Russian milblogger claimed on March 21 that unspecified elements of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade are instead operating in the Avdiivka direction.[41] The apparent simultaneous commitment of elements of the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade to two disparate areas of the frontline is notably not a doctrinally sound pattern of deployment. Other Russian sources claimed that unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) personnel are operating near Hulyaipole, Zaporizhia Oblast.[42] Russia has deployed various VDV formations across the theater, further indicating that Russia has not concentrated its most elite forces for any concerted push in one discrete area of the front.

A Ukrainian official reported that Russian forces are shifting to the use of guided aerial bombs to strike areas in southern Ukraine.[43] Head of the United Coordination Press Center of the Southern Defense Forces, Nataliya Humenyuk, stated on March 26 that Russian forces have been testing guided aerial bombs along the contact line in Kherson Oblast for the past few days, and conducted a strike against Beryslav with these bombs on March 24.[44] Humenyuk also noted that Russian forces have decreased their tempo of shelling in Kherson Oblast from 90-100 instances to 50-60 instances per day. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat announced on March 25 that Russian forces are converting FAB-500 unguided aerial bombs into guided missiles to use as replacement for expensive cruise missiles.[45] Ihnat stated that these new aerial bombs have a range of 50 or more kilometers.

Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian forces in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces conducted a HIMARS strike against a dormitory quartering Russian military and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) personnel in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.[46] Russian sources claimed that the technical school next to the dormitory held classes at the time of the strike.[47] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces struck three Russian force concentration areas in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.[48]

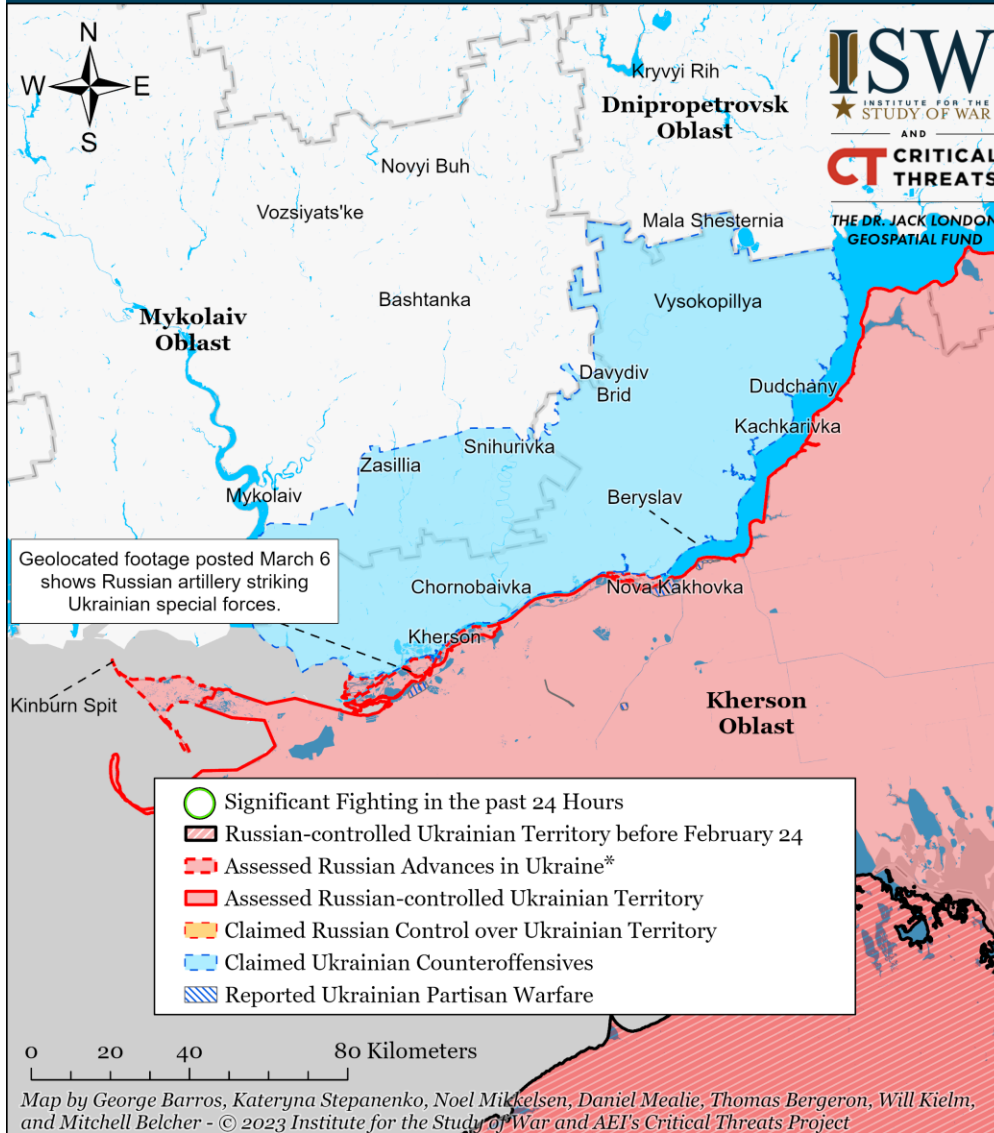
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of March 27, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- 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 27, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

Russian authorities continue forming new volunteer battalions subordinate to irregular formations. Russian sources amplified recruitment advertisements for the “Uragan” volunteer battalion subordinate to the “Wolves” Sabotage and Reconnaissance Brigade, which operates in the Avdiivka direction.[49]

The Russian federal government reportedly has delegated the establishment of a new contract force to Russian federal subjects, suggesting that the Russian government has not learned from the failures of partial mobilization. Independent Russian media outlet *SOTA* claimed on March 24 that Russian authorities tasked Moscow City authorities with recruiting 27,000 contract personnel and threatening a second formal wave of partial mobilization if such recruitment efforts fail.[50] Russian sources previously claimed that Russia aims to recruit 400,000 contract personnel, as ISW has previously reported.[51] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev called for Russia to

establish a large contract army of 1.5 million personnel, but a milblogger criticized this effort and called for Medvedev to fix endemic issues in the Russian contract system.[52] The milblogger claimed that true contract armies are highly trained, motivated, and experienced, whereas Russian contract forces are not.[53]

The impacts of the Wagner Group's prior prison recruitment effort have generated discord in some areas in Russia, suggesting that Russian domestic efforts to stimulate support for the war are not as all-encompassing as Russian authorities may have hoped. Latvian-based Russian-language opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on three conflicts between residents of villages in Bashkortostan, Transbaikal, and Rostov Oblast in which the residents and settlement village authorities argued among themselves on whether to bury convicted murderers who died in Ukraine while fighting for Wagner with military honors.[54] Some residents praised the deceased convicts as heroes, while others noted that they had not forgotten the grief from the murders these men committed prior to fighting in Ukraine. Some Russians' refusals to overlook the convicts' past crimes for their service in Ukraine suggests that the war remains distant for significant swaths of Russian society, and additionally suggests that the reintegration of Wagner convicts into domestic society may be a source of considerable friction.

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)

Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against an occupation law enforcement officer on March 27. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that local partisans wounded Russian occupation police chief Mykhailo Moskvyn after blowing up his car in Mariupol on March 27.[55] Russian sources posted photos and video footage on March 27 showing the aftermath of the attack on Moskvyn, who reportedly survived with a concussion.[56]

Russian officials and occupation authorities approved a draft law on March 26 on the creation of a free economic zone (FEZ) in occupied territories. Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan reported on March 27 that Russian occupation authorities plan to implement a FEZ in occupied Kherson Oblast, building on existing factories to produce single products such as tomato paste.[57] Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin claimed on March 26 that the Russian government met to discuss a draft law on creating a FEZ in occupied territories and establishing a simplified procedure for urban planning and land use.[58] A Russian source claimed that the Russian Cabinet of Ministers approved the draft law on March 26.[59]

Russian occupation authorities continue to announce preparations for the September referendum in occupied territories. United Russia Secretary Andrey Turchak claimed on March 26 that preliminary voting is underway in occupied territories and that over 2,500 residents of occupied Kherson Oblast have already registered with the United Russia political party.[60] Turchak called for the creation of a People's Program in the coming months for social support, which he claimed will allow political candidates to understand the most acute problems and propose specific budget allocations for their resolutions.[61]

Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to eliminate the circulation of the Ukrainian hryvnia in occupied territories. Nova Kakhovka municipal district occupation administration head Pavel Filipchuk claimed on March 27 that anyone using the Ukrainian hryvnia in the Nova Kakhovka municipal district may face criminal charges and a possible prison sentence.[62]

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.

Ukrainian Border Guard Spokesman Andriy Demchenko stated on March 27 that the number of Russian forces in Belarus has decreased to 4,000.[63] Demchenko also stated that Russian command has partially transferred units previously trained in Belarus to eastern Ukraine.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on March 27 that Belarusian forces are strengthening the security of their air borders.[64]

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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 - [2] <https://tass dot .com/defense/1519217>
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