

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 28, 2023

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan
March 28, 6:30pm 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 forces have likely taken the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut and continue to make gains within the city. Russian milbloggers widely claimed on March 28 that Wagner fighters have captured the AZOM complex and are working to clear the area of remaining Ukrainian forces.[1] These claims are relatively consistent with available visual evidence of Russian presence in the AZOM complex. Geolocated footage posted on March 26 shows a military correspondent from Russian outlet *RIA Novosti* moving around the territory of the complex with apparent ease, indicating that Wagner likely controls enough of the plant to host media personalities in relative safety.[2] *RIA Novosti* correspondent Sergei Shilov additionally visited AZOM on March 28 and indicated that fighting has now moved to the industrial zone south of AZOM.[3] Several Russian milbloggers also claimed on March 28 that Wagner fighters have advanced closer to Bakhmut's city center, taken control of the city market, and reached the Palace of Culture.[4] These claims are plausible considering geolocated visual evidence of Wagner's advances towards the city center posted on March 28, as well as combat footage of Ukrainian infantry engaging in small arms exchanges with Russian forces near the Palace of Culture and central market area in Bakhmut city's center.[5] Wagner is likely working to consolidate gains in northern and central Bakhmut to push towards the city center and expand its zone of control into western Bakhmut. ISW assesses that Russian forces have advanced into an additional five percent of Bakhmut in the last seven days and that they currently occupy roughly 65 percent of the city.

Russian and Ukrainian sources speculated that Lieutenant General Sergei Kuzmenko will replace Colonel General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.[6] Kuzmenko previously served as the commander of the 6th Combined Arms Army from 2015 to 2019 and more recently as a department head at the Russian Armed Forces General Staff Academy.[7] Kuzmenko has never held a command position comparable to the role of a military district commander, and his appointment as EMD commander would be an unusual step. Russian military authorities reportedly dismissed Muradov due to battlefield failures and significant losses in western Donetsk Oblast, and Kuzmenko would likely inherit expectations to reverse the total lack of progress in the EMD's zone of responsibility in Ukraine.[8] There is no indication that Kuzmenko would be better equipped to succeed in overseeing offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast with even further degraded forces than the more experienced Muradov. ISW has not observed any confirmation that Russian military officials have dismissed Muradov as EMD commander or that Kuzmenko has assumed the role.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be using his influence in Russia's mainstream media landscape to present himself as a contender in Russia's 2024 presidential elections. Prigozhin's own *Federal News Agency* published an interview that Prigozhin conducted with Russian journalists from *Russia Today*, *RIA Novosti* and *Federal News Agency* on March 14.[9] This interview was noteworthy for its unique format--during the interview Prigozhin seemed to mimic the way that Russian President Vladimir Putin films his choreographed public meetings, either to mock Putin quietly or to suggest subtly that Prigozhin could become Russian president like Putin. The choreography and staging of Prigozhin's interview places Prigozhin in the camera's frame at Prigozhin's desk across from his audience in the same way that Putin's filmed meetings and photo ops usually do.[10] This film style is unusual for Prigozhin, as Prigozhin's public video statements typically do not employ such a sterile format; Prigozhin has usually opted to film himself with wide shots on battlefields or in dynamic but staged videos that strive to appear candid and gritty.[11] Prigozhin also used this interview to reiterate his previous arguments about the need to instill hardline ideology in Russian fighters and insinuate that the Russian Ministry of Defense is deliberately depriving the Wagner Group of artillery ammunition.[12]

Prigozhin may seek to parody Putin's cinematography style as part of a larger trolling campaign to attack the Kremlin or draw tacit parallels between Prigozhin and the office of the Russian presidency. Prigozhin has previously insinuated that he could replace Putin. Prigozhin made a sarcastic announcement on March 11 that he will run for the Ukrainian presidency in 2024 -- a statement that a prominent Kremlin-linked Russian scholar argued implicitly promoted a narrative that Prigozhin would run in Russia's presidential elections which are also scheduled for 2024.[13] Prigozhin directly attacked Putin's presidential administration on January 18 and insinuated that some officials working there are traitors who want Russia to lose the war in Ukraine -- one of Prigozhin's boldest attacks against the Kremlin to date.[14] Prigozhin also denied the Kremlin's claims that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine and questioned whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine as the

Kremlin — and specifically Putin — constantly claims.[15] Prigozhin’s recent behavior — regardless of its intent — is advancing a narrative among Russian society that Prigozhin has larger political aspirations in Russia. Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin (one of Prigozhin’s critics) joked on March 26 that Prigozhin is like Julius Caesar, except that Julius Caesar first achieved military victories before agitating for his political advancement — likely referring to Prigozhin’s failure to deliver on his reported promise to capture Bakhmut by September 2022.[16]

High-ranking Russian officials continue a campaign begun in December 2022 to set domestic conditions for a protracted war both in private and in public. *The Guardian*, citing anonymous internal sources, reported on March 28 that Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told a group of Russian political and cultural elite that “things will get much harder” and that the current situation (in reference to the war) “will take a very, very, long time” during a private dinner in December 2022.[17] Peskov’s reported warning supports ISW’s assessment that Russian authorities have been preparing multiple aspects of Russian society for a protracted war through careful setting of information conditions and engagement of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) since the end of 2022.[18] Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu relatedly visited artillery shell production facilities in Chelyabinsk and Kirov oblasts on March 28 and claimed that Russian ammunition production has increased significantly over the past year, promising that production will increase a further seven to eight times for certain unspecified artillery products by the end of the year.[19] Shoigu’s visit to artillery factories is the latest in a slew of choreographed visits to DIB facilities by various Russian officials and is part of a concerted effort to present the Russian DIB as effective in advance of a protracted war effort.[20]

The Russian budget continues to reflect the overall costs of Russia’s war in Ukraine. *Bloomberg* reported on March 28 that Russia has classified an unprecedented one-third of its entire budget expenditures and noted that classified spending as of March 24 is twice as high as it was during the same period in 2022.[21] *Bloomberg* also found that Russian defense and security spending is the second largest budget category after spending on social programs.[22] *Bloomberg* concluded that the classified share of the Russian budget will account for nearly a quarter of all expenditures for the whole of 2023 and will be due to an increase in expenses classed as “other expenses in the field of national defense.”[23] Russian outlet *RBC* relatedly reported on March 28 that the Russian Ministry of Finance plans to submit a proposal to reduce the number of federal state institutions subordinate to federal authorities in order to increase the efficiency of budget expenditure management.[24] Such expenditure manipulations suggest that Russia is trying to cut spending in a variety of spheres to support increased defense spending, further responding to costs associated with the war and setting conditions for a long war.

Key Takeaways

- **Wagner Group forces have likely taken the AZOM industrial complex in northern Bakhmut and continue to make gains within the city.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian sources speculated that Lieutenant General Sergei Kuzmenko will replace Colonel General Rustam Muradov as Eastern Military District (EMD) commander.**
- **Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be using his influence in Russia’s mainstream media landscape to present himself as a potential contender in Russia’s 2024 presidential elections.**
- **High-ranking Russian officials continue to set domestic conditions for a protracted war.**
- **The cost of Russia’s war in Ukraine is likely continuing to consume a substantial portion of the Russian Federal Budget.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized ground attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree removing the upper age limit for Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) servicemen serving in occupied Ukraine until January 1, 2026.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue efforts to expand Russia’s bureaucratic and administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine.**
- **The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed on March 28 Belarus’ intent to host Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus as Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on March 25.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 28, 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.

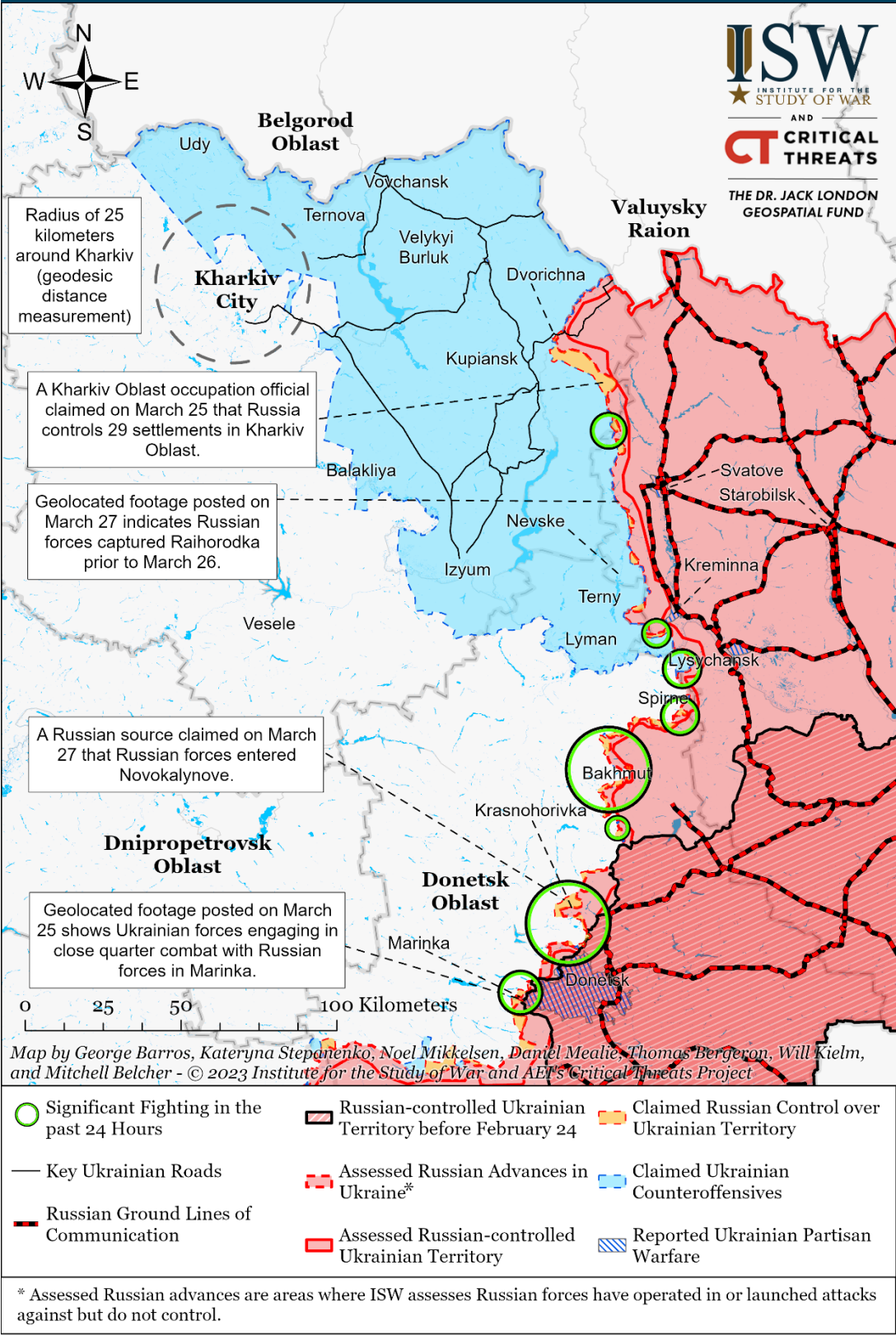
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of 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 continued ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 28. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Krokhmalne (20km northwest of Svatove), Kuzmyne (3km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), Verkhokamyanske (18km south of Kreminna), and Berestove (30km south of Kreminna).[25] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported on March 28 that there were 13 combat clashes along this line in the last day and that while Russian forces have concentrated some of their best troops in this area, they are suffering widespread shortages in armored vehicles.[26] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that elements of the Russian Western Grouping of Forces (Western Military District) disrupted the transfer of Ukrainian reserves northeast of Kupyansk near Hryanykivka (20km northeast of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (7km northeast of Kupyansk).[27] Geolocated footage posted on March 28 indicates that Ukrainian forces have made a limited advance in a forest area near Dibrova, about 6km west of Kreminna.[28] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed that Russian forces have recently made unspecified advances west of Kreminna in the Lyman direction.[29]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 28, 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)

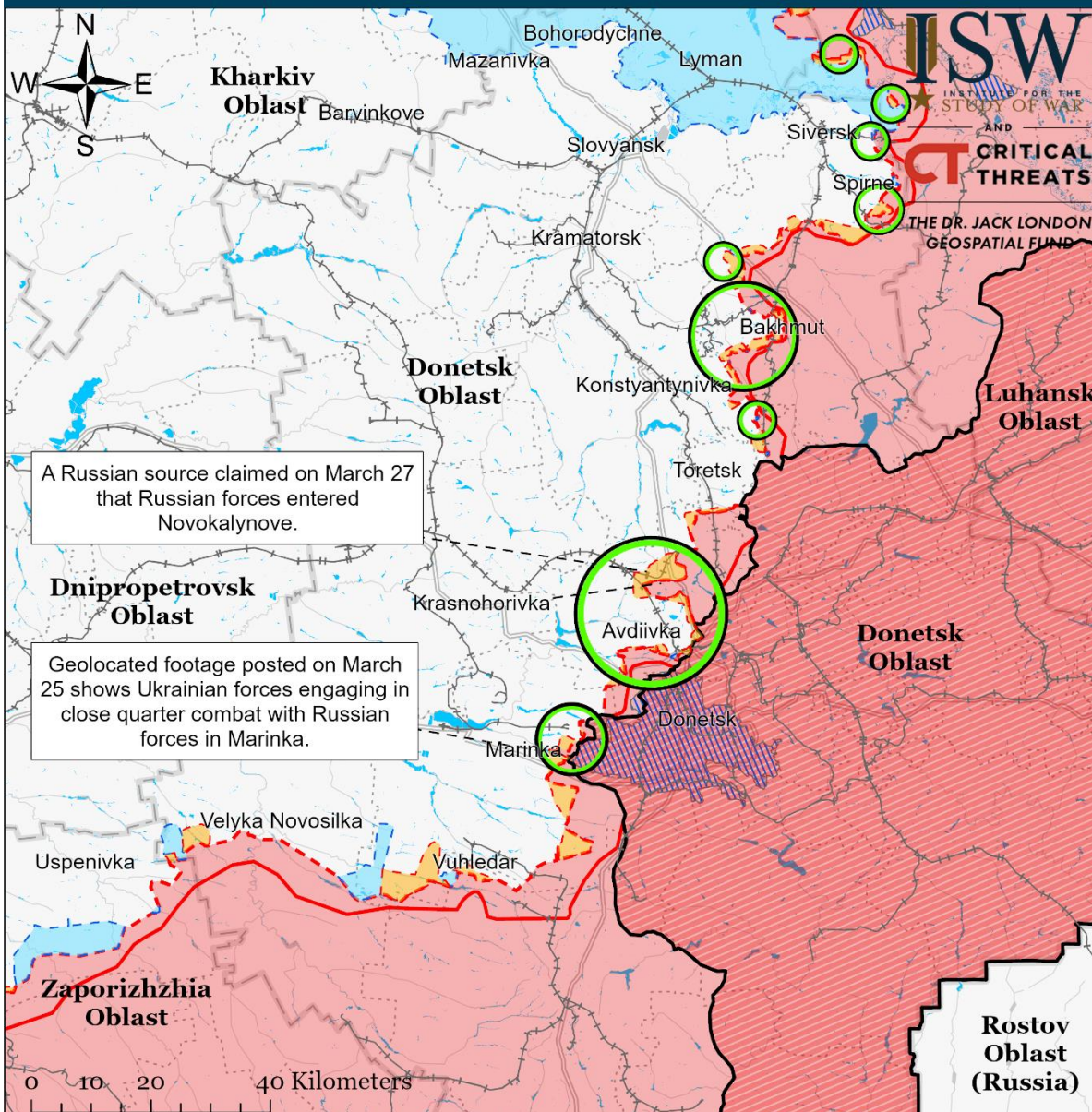
Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut on March 28 and have made advances within the city. Geolocated footage published on March 28 suggests that Russian forces likely advanced in southern Bakhmut and up to the Bakhmut City Market in Central Bakhmut.[30] A Russian milblogger claimed on March 27 that Russian forces established sufficient river crossings across the Bakhmutka river and that fighting in Bakhmut is increasingly shifting to western parts of the city.[31] The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces continued offensive operations south and east of Ivanivske but have not managed to advance closer to the T0504 highway as of March 27.[32] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin claimed on March 28 that the Russian grouping of forces near Mayorsk (20km southwest of Bakhmut) does not currently have immediate orders for offensives.[33] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations on Bakhmut itself, within 11km northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka and Bohdanivka, and within 16km southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske and Ozarianivka.[34] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported on March 28 that there were 19 combat clashes in the Bakhmut area with 14 directly in Bakhmut itself.[35]

Russian forces may be regrouping in the Bakhmut area. Cherevaty reported that the tempo of Russian offensive operations in and around Bakhmut has decreased over the past three days and that this may indicate that Russian forces are regrouping.[36] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may be diverting Russian forces and resources away from the Bakhmut area to intensify offensives on Avdiivka, although Russian forces may choose to recommit personnel and resources to offensive operations on Bakhmut after a potential regrouping their forces.[37] Russian forces may need to regroup around Bakhmut because the Wagner Group has increasingly expended its pool of convict recruits, both during attritional assaults on the battlefield and as a large portion of convicts complete their six-month contracts and return to Russia.[38] Russian forces could conduct a regrouping in and around Bakhmut and add a larger proportion of conventional forces to what remains of the Wagner Group contingent in the area. Such a Russian regrouping would likely allow Russian forces to intensify offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and possibly secure gains at a more significant rate.

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City frontline on March 28. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka itself, Stepove (7km northwest of Avdiivka), and within 27km southwest of Avdiivka near Sieverne, Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Marinka.[39] A Russian milblogger claimed on March 27 that Russian forces are attempting to move further west of Kamianka (5km northeast of Avdiivka) aiming to encircle Avdiivka.[40] Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskiy reported on March 27 that Russian forces are considering the withdrawal of the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th Army Corps, Northern Fleet) and the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps, Western Military District) from the Avdiivka-Marinka area combat zone for replenishment.[41] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported on March 28 that the 10th Tank Regiment (3rd Army Corps, Western Military District) likely lost a large portion of its tanks in efforts to surround Avdiivka from the south in recent days.[42] Elements of the 3rd Army Corps likely suffered significant losses during Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast in September of 2022, and the formations deployed to the outskirts of Donetsk City may be the remaining combat effective elements of the 3rd Army Corps or other already degraded formations.[43] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed that elements of the DNR 1st Army Corps including the “Sparta” Battalion, the “Somali” Battalion, and the 11th Regiment are conducting assault operations in various directions in the Avdiivka area but that Russian forces are not close to capturing Avdiivka.[44] A Russian milblogger amplified footage of the DNR 9th Brigade (formerly the 9th regiment of the DNR People’s Militia) operating near Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka).[45] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied Ukrainian reports that Wagner Group fighters are planning to deploy to the Avdiivka area and stated that Wagner fighters have never fought in the area, although an obituary for a seasoned Wagner fighter claims that the fighter died in the Avdiivka area.[46]

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 28. Pushilin claimed that there are positional battles near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) and that Ukrainian forces continue to conduct reconnaissance-in-force operations in the area.[47] Dmytrashkivskiy reported that Russian forces recently introduced two unspecified tank units and a special unit of the 98th Airborne (VDV) Division to replenish elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet in the last week.[48] The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade previously suffered significant losses in offensive operations in the Vuhledar area in early 2023, and Russian forces may be attempting to reconstitute the unit to resume offensive operations on Vuhledar. Russian forces have reportedly reconstituted the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade as many as eight times, and it is unlikely that another reconstitution would result in the combat effectiveness needed for resumed offensive operations.[49] The commitment of limited Airborne elements, on the other hand, might support resumed tactical offensives of limited scope and duration.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

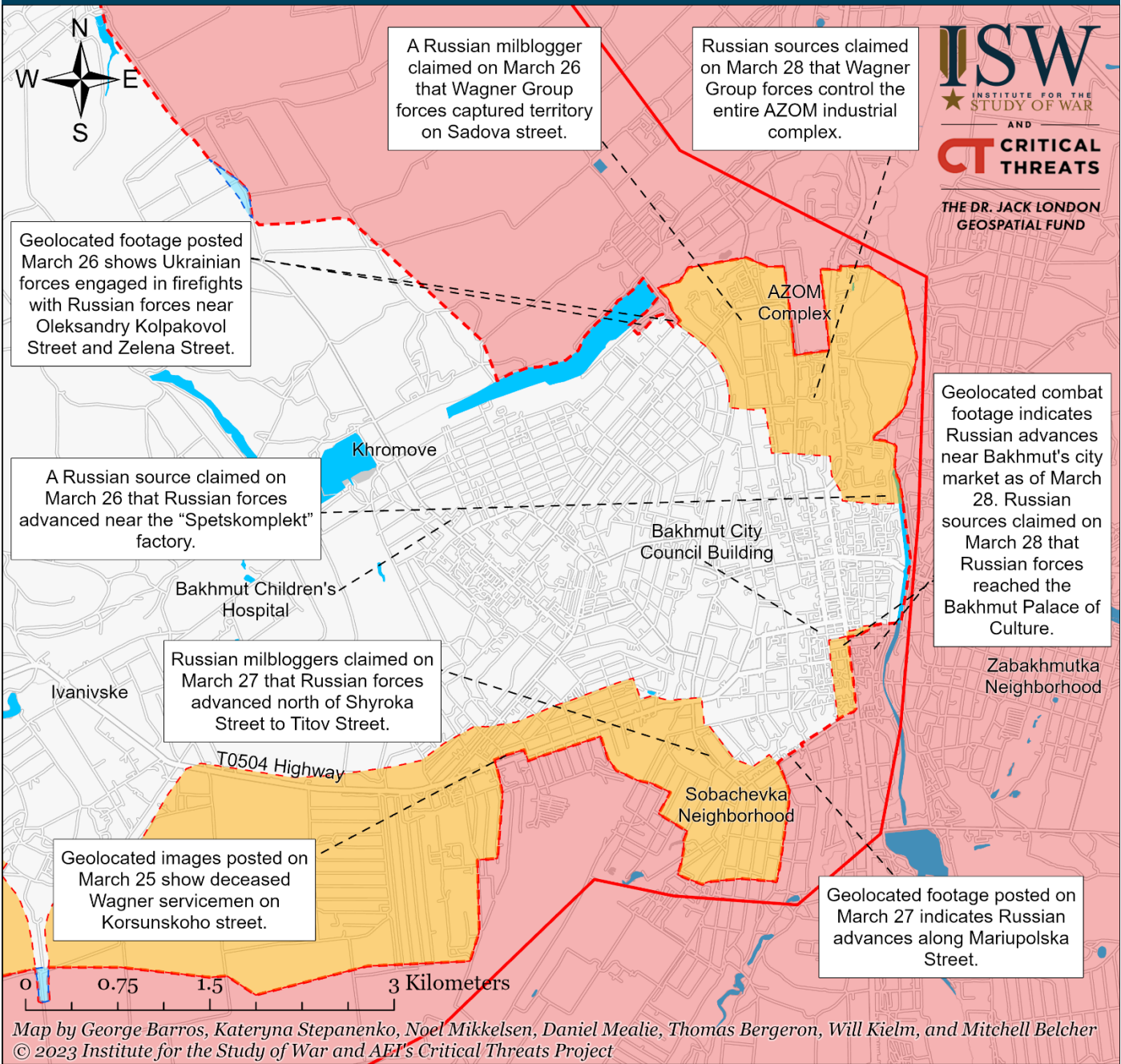


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- 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
- 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 28, 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.

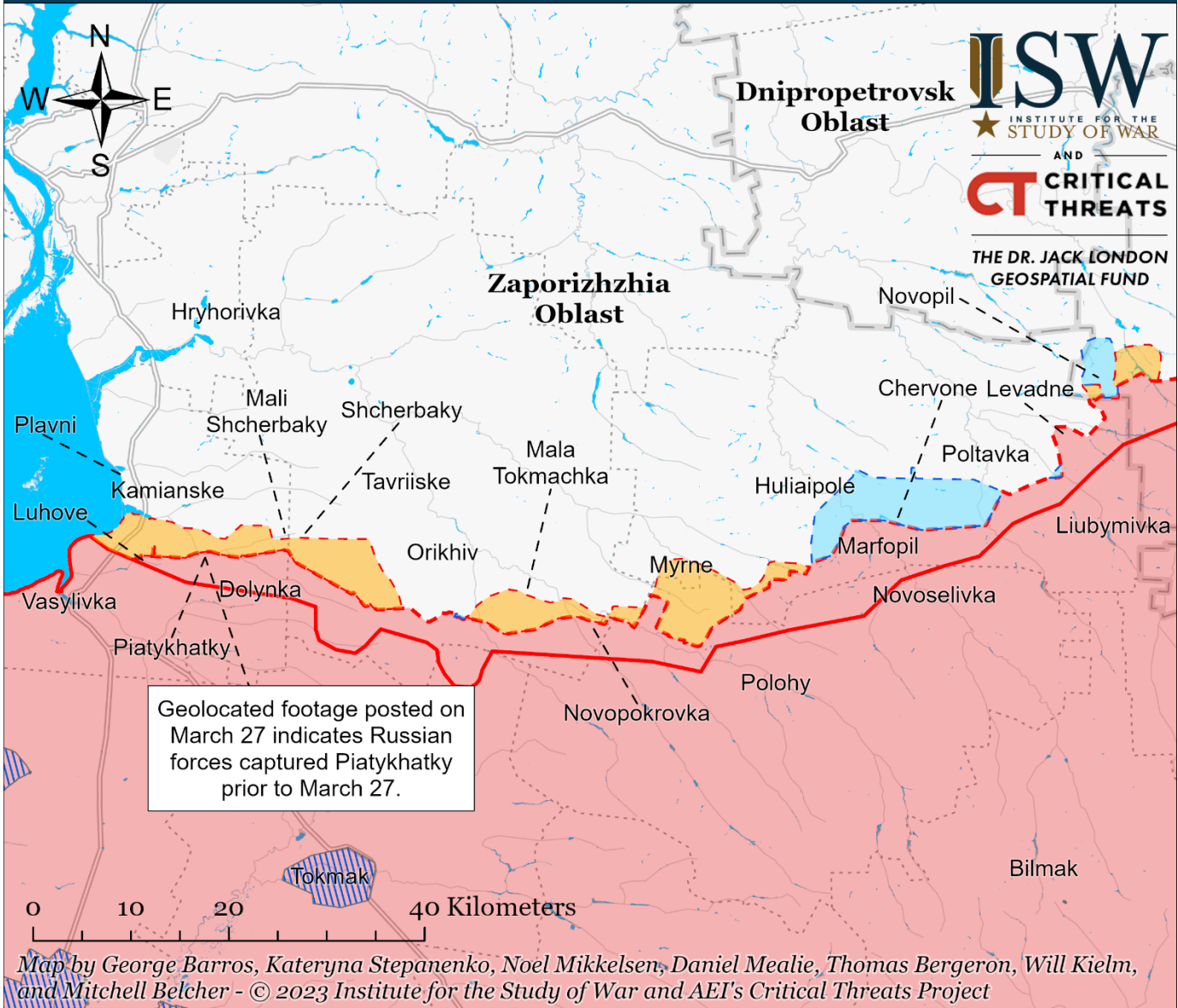
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted localized attacks in Zaporizhia Oblast. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance towards unspecified Russian positions from Lukyanivske (about 32km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City).[50] The Russian MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces sought to exploit poor weather in the area to advance on the frontline. Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Head Yevgeny Balitsky claimed that Russian forces are continuing to repel Ukrainian reconnaissance-in-force attempts in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[51] Balitsky claimed that Ukrainian forces launched six HIMARS rockets at an educational facility in Melitopol on March 27, and Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian force concentration area in the city.[52] Fedorov also reported on March 28 that a power substation exploded in Fedorivka (about 17km northwest of Melitopol) under unspecified circumstances.[53]

Russian forces are continuing to fortify and reinforce their positions in southern Ukraine out of concerns for a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Balitsky claimed that the Russian military command staffed Russian regiments at 15% of their usual strength in fall of 2022.[54] Balitsky noted that he could not assess how well-prepared Russian forces are for a claimed future Ukrainian counteroffensive and stated that combat will reveal the level of Russian preparations in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast. Satellite imagery also showed Russian forces digging new trenches along the roads leading into northern Crimea.[55]

Russian forces reportedly decreased the intensity of shelling in Kherson Oblast. Head of the United Coordination Press Center of the Southern Defense Forces, Nataliya Humenyuk, stated on March 28 that Russian forces have not shelled the Dnipro-Bug Estuary from the Kinburn Spit over the past three days due to poor weather conditions.[56] Humenyuk noted that Ukrainian strikes on Russian ammunition warehouses and artillery systems are undermining Russian logistics and forcing Russian forces to decrease their activities on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of March 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

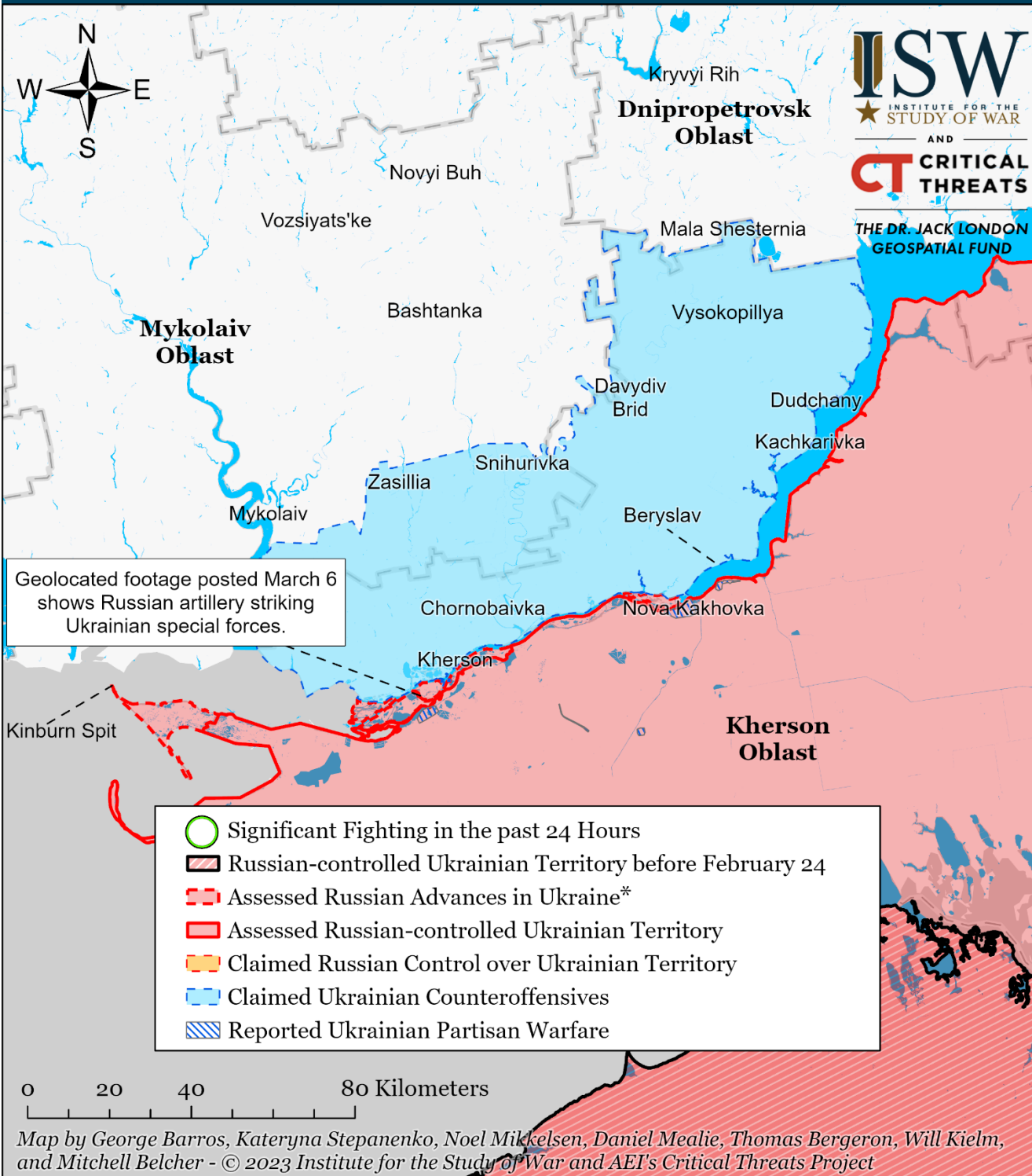


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- 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.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 28, 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 President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on March 27 removing the upper age limit from Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) servicemen serving in occupied Ukrainian territories until January 1, 2026.[57] The decree also notes that prospective Rosgvardia servicemen in occupied territories may undergo military medical examination *in absentia* to determine their eligibility for service. The decree notes that men interested in Rosgvardia service will not undergo psychological assessments and can provide alternative personal documents and testimonies to those previously specified in the 2011 law on service in Russian law enforcement organizations. Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko noted that this decree allows the Kremlin to recruit residents of occupied territories without a Russian passport.[58] This decree likely seeks to expand recruitment into Rosgvardia alongside the Kremlin's other recruitment campaigns.

The Kremlin continues to recruit contract servicemen in Russia and to conduct crypto-mobilization in occupied Ukraine. The Republic of Bashkortostan is forming two more volunteer battalions: the "Severnye Amury" and "Dayan Murzin" battalions.[59] The Tyumen Oblast military recruitment center opened 52 employment vacancies offering military contract service, and ISW previously observed similar recruitment advertisements on employment websites over the summer of 2022.[60] Russian officials are also continuing to financially incentivize men and their families to sign military contracts.[61] The Luhansk Oblast Military Administration reported on March 28 that the Russian occupation administration is refusing to demobilize students. The Luhansk Oblast Military Administration added that Russian officials mobilized 654 students of whom 300 are currently fighting in Ukraine.

Russian independent outlet *Novaya Gazeta Europe* described the current force composition of Russian irregular and volunteer armed formations operating in Ukraine. The outlet, citing an unnamed Russian expert, reported that there are 12 BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) battalions with 400 to 500 people each and eight BARS detachments of 150 to 250 people each fighting in Ukraine.[62] The expert noted that BARS is subordinated to the Union of Donbas Volunteers but legally operates under the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). BARS reportedly trained at the Chechen SPETSNAZ University before arriving in Ukraine and has received ammunition from the Russian MoD. The expert noted that former Donbas commanders usually command BARS units, which can make them more effective than volunteer battalions directly subordinated to the Russian MoD. The expert also noted that Russian volunteer units are placed under Russian military commanders upon their arrival at a specific frontline. Russian volunteers arriving in Donbas would be placed into the central grouping of Russian forces, for example. These volunteers are treated as reinforcements, and it is likely that the Russian military command will continue to use incoming volunteers to patch up units on the frontlines.

Novaya Gazeta Europe also described the summer 2022 volunteer recruitment campaign. One expert told the outlet that the Russian military command decided to form the 3rd Army Corps likely without legal grounds and without following necessary regulations. The Russian military command ordered Russian federal subjects to recruit between 120 and 1,400 volunteers each, and *Novaya Gazeta Europe* estimates that 10,000 to 15,000 Russian volunteers deployed to Ukraine over summer 2022 prior to mobilization. *Novaya Gazeta Europe* noted that the Russian MoD and the presidential administration likely did not keep official track of volunteer formations. The expert observed that volunteer units received different treatment on the battlefield if regional heads endeavored to advocate for their armed formations to the Russian MoD. The expert also recalled instances when regional officials entered their own last names on volunteer lists and received veteran statuses without fighting in the war. Regional officials stopped releasing information about deceased volunteers and silenced families by threatening to remove social benefits relating the death of their relatives.

Russian ultranationalist publication *Tsargrad* criticized the Russian MoD and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu for the poor treatment and exclusion of Russian volunteer forces amidst the renewed Russian volunteer recruitment campaign. *Tsargrad* accused the Russian MoD of failing to recognize the participation of at least a third of all volunteers in the war, and claimed that Russian conventional forces abandoned volunteers on collapsing frontlines in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman in fall 2022. Chairman of the Union of Donbas Volunteers, State Duma Parliamentarian Alexander Boroday noted that the Russian MoD's selection and limitations on volunteers "cuts off from volunteering a number of combat-ready people, veterans." Another representative of the Union of Donbas Volunteers stated that the Russian MoD is continuing to adapt to "inappropriate peacetime norms." *Tsargrad's* numerous references to members of the Union of Donbas Volunteers, including Boroday, are peculiar, given that Boroday reportedly manages the BARS forces.[63] The criticism resembles that of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, who had used attacks on the Russian MoD to promote recruitment into Wagner.

Russian security and bureaucratic measures in Rostov Oblast are likely slowing down the transfer of Russian supplies to the frontlines. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian customs detained cargoes with drones and other supply transfers due to bureaucratic processes.[64] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin also noted that Russia had not resolved issues with long lines at checkpoints between occupied Donetsk Oblast and Russia.[65]

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that a convoy of five Russian Z-STS armored vehicles belonging to the 34th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 49th Combined Arms Army crashed due to speeding on the Kerch Strait Bridge.[66] The incident resulted in significant damage to four of five vehicles.

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 occupation officials continue efforts to expand Russia's bureaucratic and administrative control of occupied areas of Ukraine. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky stated during a live Rossiya-24 broadcast on March 27 that the occupation administration must rapidly develop infrastructure in Zaporizhia Oblast to accommodate the influx of teachers, civil servants, doctors, and law enforcement personnel arriving from Russia.[67] The apparent immigration of Russian citizens to staff administrative and law enforcement roles in occupied areas suggests that occupying officials are struggling to fill these positions using willing and loyal local collaborators and also may suggest that Russian officials are trying to repopulate areas of Ukraine with imported Russian citizens as part of a wider depopulation-repopulation campaign.[68] Balitsky also claimed that 40 percent of citizens of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast hold Russian passports and that the occupation administration is facing the issue of effective distributing of passports in a way that matches high demand.[69] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin similarly claimed that the passport distribution system in occupied Donetsk Oblast is overwhelmed with interest in Russian passports.[70]

Russian occupation officials continue to pursue increased connectivity between occupied areas of Ukraine and Russia. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated that Russian officials hope to open a railway between occupied Kherson Oblast and occupied Crimea before the start of the summer tourist season.[71] Balitsky similarly claimed that his administration has already allocated funds for the construction of a four-lane road along the Sea of Azov that will connect Dzhankoi, occupied Crimea, to Rostov Oblast through Berdyansk, occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[72] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin similarly lauded efforts to create a ferry line between Mariupol, occupied Donetsk Oblast and areas in occupied Crimea and Sochi, Krasnodar Krai.[73]

Russian occupation officials are struggling to fully implement the use of rubles in occupied areas of Ukraine. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration warned locals on March 28 that anyone who refuses to accept rubles or attempts to sabotage ruble use in occupied Kherson Oblast will face criminal prosecution.[74] The punitive approach to coercing ruble use indicates that occupation officials have largely failed to otherwise incentivize the rubleization process.

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 Foreign Affairs confirmed on March 28 Belarus' intent to host Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus as Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on March 25.[75] The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that a Russian deployment of tactical nuclear weapons would not violate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and would not represent a departure from the norms of "military cooperation between non-nuclear and nuclear powers." [76] ISW continues to assess that a Russian deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is irrelevant to Russia's nuclear strike capabilities; Russia has long fielded nuclear-capable systems able to strike any target that tactical nuclear weapons based in Belarus could hit.[77] A Russian tactical nuclear weapons deployment to Belarus would represent a milestone in the Kremlin's longstanding campaign to establish more permanent Russian basing in Belarus, however.

Belarusian maneuver elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. An unspecified airborne infantry element of the Vitebsk-based Belarusian 103rd Air Assault Brigade conducted tactical heliborne exercise in an unspecified location on March 28.[78]

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://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>; https://t.me/smotri_z/12818; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46370>; <https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20273>; <https://t.me/bayraktar1070/930>

[2] <https://ria.ru/20230326/artemovsk-1860697725.html>
; https://t.me/rian_ru/198008; https://twitter.com/War_cube_/status/1639923570536054785?s=20; <https://twitter.com/Circonscripiti18/status/1639913105026166785?s=20>; https://twitter.com/War_cube_/status/1639928925659750401?s=20

[3] <https://t.me/rybar/45151>; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/81608; <https://t.me/vysokygovorit/11147>

[4] https://t.me/smotri_z/12818; <https://t.me/epoddubny/15302>; https://t.me/z_arhiv/19926 <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46370>; https://t.me/basurin_e/386

[5] <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640723997674426370?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640726018351681538?s=20>;
. <https://twitter.com/umfteam/status/1640434381419425792?s=20>; <https://t.me/umfteam/78>; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640454646547329025?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/klinger66/status/1640473623675785216?s=20>; https://twitter.com/chris__759/status/1640473033247981568;
<https://twitter.com/PowerPigeon2/status/1640621730145157121>

[6] <https://t.me/milinfoolive/98547>; <https://t.me/operativnoZSU/87589>; https://vk.com/wall-212320493_59721?lang=en

[7] <https://vagsh.mil.ru/Struktura-akademii/Kafedra-voennogo-upravleniya/item/48203>

[8] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032723>

[9] https://riafan.ru/23940551-prigozhin_rasskazal_v_chem_kroetsya_prichina_snaryadnogo_goloda

[10] <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70795>; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70758>; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70753>

[11] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11622303/Putins-chef-mercenary-chief-stands-captured-salt-Russia-claims-Soledar.html>; <https://twitter.com/clashreport/status/1633441600201191424?lang=en>; <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/14182>; <https://twitter.com/Spriter99880/status/1640406738657591305>; <https://twitter.com/VSlajd/status/1640294881032634374>; <https://twitter.com/GwarWorin/status/1638282617958158377>

[12] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-11-2023>; https://riafan.ru/23940551-prigozhin_rasskazal_v_chem_kroetsya_prichina_snaryadnogo_goloda

[13] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-13-2023>;
<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-11-2023>

[14] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-18-2023>;
https://t.me/concordgroup_official/288

[15] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-23-2023>

[16] <https://t.me/strelkovii/4352>; <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-26-2023>; <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/vadim-skubitskiy-rosiya-mozhe-vesti-viynu-1679493967.html>

[17] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/28/putin-prepares-russia-for-forever-war-with-west-as-ukraine-invasion-stalls>

- [18] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isw.pub/UkrWar032623>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar031623>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar031423>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar030823>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar022323>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar022123>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar020923>
- [19] <https://iz dot ru/1489736/2023-03-28/shoigu-proveril-proizvodstvo-snariadov-opk-cheliabinskoi-i-kirovskoi-oblastei>; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/81596
- [20] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar011523>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032223>; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar031423>
- [21] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-28/war-and-secretive-spending-is-eating-away-at-russia-s-budget#xj4y7vzkg>
- [22] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-28/war-and-secretive-spending-is-eating-away-at-russia-s-budget#xj4y7vzkg>
- [23] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-28/war-and-secretive-spending-is-eating-away-at-russia-s-budget#xj4y7vzkg>; <https://meduza.io/news/2023/03/28/rossiya-zasekretila-tret-rashodov-byudzheta>
- [24] <https://www.rbc dot ru/economics/28/03/2023/64217afc9a7947666c28a70e>
- [25] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidokuU5D7muYxbDogYv3iq9MiGmkrxRayVrs6V6NjXgCh2s3dhPZNTtn4hyjEC8e96Dl>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid034AAANwWemXCqpSdYz11H473YceGVxmy5fyCxFkTTHEQ12wRHG3Lj58dFUF66KgLYl>
- [26] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/28/na-kupyansko-lymanskomu-napryamku-rosiyany-mayut-serjoznyj-deficyt-suchasnoyi-bronetehniky-sergij-cherevatyj/>
- [27] https://t.me/mod_russia/25162
- [28] <https://t.me/sashakots/39080>; <https://twitter.com/GertVHoecke/status/1640626529179664386>
- [29] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>
- [30] <https://twitter.com/umftteam/status/1640434381419425792?s=20> ; <https://t.me/umftteam/78> ; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640454646547329025?s=20> ; <https://twitter.com/klinger66/status/1640473623675785216?s=20>; https://twitter.com/chris__759/status/1640473033247981568; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640723997674426370?s=20> ; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1640726018351681538?s=20>
- [31] <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46370> ;
- [32] <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46370> ;
- [33] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>
- [34] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid034AAANwWemXCqpSdYz11H473YceGVxmy5fyCxFkTTHEQ12wRHG3Lj58dFUF66KgLYl> ; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidokuU5D7muYxbDogYv3iq9MiGmkrxRayVrs6V6NjXgCh2s3dhPZNTtn4hyjEC8e96Dl>
- [35] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/28/vorog-ne-prypynyaye-masovani-obstrily-bahmuta-u-poyednanni-z-shturmovymy-diyamy-sergij-cherevatyj/>
- [36] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/28/vorog-ne-prypynyaye-masovani-obstrily-bahmuta-u-poyednanni-z-shturmovymy-diyamy-sergij-cherevatyj/>
- [37] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032223> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032523>
- [38] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032123>

[39] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid034AAANwWemXCqpSdYz11H473YceGVxmy5fyCxFkTTHEQ12wRHG3Lj58dFUF66KgLYl> ; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidokuU5D7muYxbDogYv3iq9MiGmkrxRayVrs6V6NjXgCh2s3dhPZNTtn4hyjEC8e96Dl>

[40] <https://t.me/rybar/45123>;

[41] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/27/na-napryamku-avdiyivka-maryinka-dvi-brygady-rf-zaznaly-velykyh-vtrat/>

[42] <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1640591697858969606>

[43] <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept18> ; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/09/15/the-russians-spent-months-forming-a-new-army-corps-it-lived-days-in-ukraine/?sh=753bc13256e6;%C2%AOhttps://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/09/15/the-russians-spent-months-forming-a-new-army-corps-it-lived-days-in-ukraine/?sh=6c64d38056e6>

[44] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>

[45] https://t.me/boris_rozhin/81566

[46] <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032723> ; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/657

[47] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287> ; <https://t.me/readovkanews/55625>

[48] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/27/na-napryamku-avdiyivka-maryinka-dvi-brygady-rf-zaznaly-velykyh-vtrat/>

[49] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign...> <https://sprotyv.mod.gov dot ua/2023/02/27/rosiyany-trymayut-trupy-svoyih-soldativ-na-skladah-aby-ne-vyplachuvaty-groschi-ridnym-spovid-okupanta/> ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VyogLhqX9E&ab_channel=Центрнаціональногоспротиву

[50] https://t.me/mod_russia/25160

[51] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>

[52] <https://t.me/CITeam/3238>; <https://t.me/uniannet/93568>;

[53] https://t.me/ivan_fedorov_melitopol/1587

[54] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>

[55] <https://twitter.com/bradyafr/status/1640454897328877574?s=20>

[56] <https://armyinform.com dot ua/2023/03/28/na-livomu-berezi-dnipra-j-na-kinburnskij-kosi-vorog-znyzyv-svoyu-aktyvnist-nataliya-gumenyuk/>

[57] <http://publication.pravo dot gov.ru/Document/View/0001202303270011>; <https://twitter.com/NOELreports/status/1640592399654166528>; <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-removes-upper-age-limit-conscripts-national-guard-ukraine-1790807>

[58] <https://t.me/andriyshTime/8100>

[59] <https://www.idelreal.org/a/32337845.html>

[60] <https://ura dot news/news/1052636567>

[61] https://t.me/news_74ru/49691; https://74 dot ru/text/politics/2023/03/27/72167000/?utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=messenger&utm_campaign=74; <https://t.me/CITeam/3238>; https://t.me/Baikal_People/2173; https://t.me/Govorit_NeMoskva/6259

- [62] <https://novayagazeta dot eu/articles/2023/03/26/gubernatorskie-armii>
- [63] <https://novayagazeta dot eu/articles/2023/03/26/gubernatorskie-armii>
- [64] <https://t.me/akashevarova/6251>; <https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/23700>; <https://t.me/BPLAROSTOV/84> ; <https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20254>; <https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20250>
- [65] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>
- [66] <https://gur.gov dot ua/content/piat-broneavtomobiliv-rosiiskykh-terorystiv-z-sts-akhmat-ne-doikhaly-do-zony-boiovykh-dii.html>; https://t.me/Bratchuk_Sergey/33962; https://twitter.com/bayraktar_1love/status/1640413875425411073?s=20; <https://t.me/DIUkraine/2133>
- [67] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>
- [68] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>
- [69] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>
- [70] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>
- [71] https://t.me/VGA_Kherson/8111
- [72] <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/913>
- [73] <https://t.me/pushilindenis/3287>
- [74] https://t.me/VGA_Kherson/8123
- [75] https://mfa.gov dot by/press/news_mfa/d73d30578e49412b.html
- [76] https://mfa.gov dot by/press/news_mfa/d73d30578e49412b.html
- [77] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-25-2023>
- [78] <https://t.me/modmilby/24885>