

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 17, 2023

Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 17, 2023, 7pm 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 map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 3pm ET on May 17. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 18 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Important Note: ISW has reindexed its map layer for reported Ukrainian counteroffensives on May 12, 2023. We removed reported Ukrainian counteroffensive coded before May 1, 2023, in order to delineate more clearly new Ukrainian territorial gains from gains secured in previous Ukrainian counteroffensives. ISW retained a few reported Ukrainian counteroffensives polygons from before May 1, 2023, specifically on the Dnipro River Delta south of Kherson Oblast, to preserve context in that complex area of operations. May 1, 2023, is an arbitrary date and does not mark the beginning or end of any assessed Ukrainian or Russian effort. ISW has reindexed its map layers before and similarly removed old reported Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts following the conclusion of the Battle of Kyiv in April 2022.

Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces are advancing in unspecified areas on Bakhmut's flanks.[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces advanced up to 500 meters in the Bakhmut direction in the past day and continue to attack Russian flanks.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) made marginal advances but acknowledged continued Ukrainian counterattacks against Bakhmut's flanks near Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).[3] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied the MoD's claim of territorial gains, however, and criticized the MoD for falsely portraying a retreat as capturing new positions.[4] One prominent milblogger complained that Russian forces must now react to Ukrainian actions, implying that Russian forces are losing the initiative in the Bakhmut area despite the limited nature of Ukrainian counterattacks in the area.[5]

Ukrainian officials reported that terrain features constrain Ukrainian offensive operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian Southern Forces Joint Press Center Head Nataliya Humenyuk acknowledged that the width of the Dnipro River hinders Ukrainian territorial advances in Kherson Oblast and called for the information space to "forget" about Ukrainian offensive activities in the Kherson direction.[6] Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) Colonel Roman Kostenko stated on May 14 that the Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces back from the islands close to Kherson City and stated that the islands have poor terrain, no trenches, limited shelter, and that the ground is always wet.[7]

US officials reported that a Patriot air defense system is operational after Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian missile strikes on Kyiv destroyed the system on May 16. *CNN* cited three US officials as stating that a Patriot air defense system is still operational despite the Russian MoD claims that a Kinzhal missile destroyed it.[8] An unidentified US defense official had previously told *CNN* that the Patriot system likely suffered damage, but three officials specified that the system suffered minimal damage that does not impede its operations.[9] Officials did not specify if Russian missiles or debris caused the damage.

The Kremlin reportedly accused three hypersonic missile scientists of treason. Employees of the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mathematics of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science published an open letter on May 15 in defense of three of their scientists — Anatoly Maslov, Alexander Shipliyuk, and Valery Zvegintsev — whom Russian authorities reportedly arrested in the past year under suspicion of committing "high treason." [10] The open letter also noted that these arrests deter the younger generation from pursuing careers in science, which contributes to a decrease in the quality of scientific research. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the Kremlin was aware of the open letter and that Russian security services are involved.[11]

Select Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) are likely attempting to signal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin that he must cease his political ambitions in Russia. Prigozhin responded to a media inquiry on May 17

about several allegations from Russian Telegram channels — which are reportedly affiliated with the Russian Presidential Administration and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) — about Prigozhin’s political aspirations in Russia.[12] These channels claimed that Prigozhin is using the battle for Bakhmut and war in Ukraine to become a political figure in Russia rather than actually fighting for Russia’s interests.[13] The journalist directly asked Prigozhin if he thinks that Russian *siloviki* are trying to signal to him via these Telegram channels.[14] Prigozhin confirmed that he had an interaction with an unnamed Russian senior official “recently” who had accused Prigozhin of deliberately acting in his own self-interest.[15] Prigozhin emphasized that this official was not Russian President Vladimir Putin but indirectly implied that these sentiments are widespread in the Russian Presidential Administration — noting that the Telegram posts reflect the collective opinion of the bureaucratic community.

The Russian *siloviki* may be intimidating Russian officials affiliated with Prigozhin to discourage their cooperation with Wagner. One of the Telegram channels mentioned in the media inquiry noted that Prigozhin is losing contact with Chairperson of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin and had a fight with First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko who originally supported his initiatives.[16] Volodin, for example, reportedly stopped pushing Wagner’s agendas to avoid a conflict with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The channel observed that a member of the Russian Communist Party, Viktor Sobolev, originally supported a bill that favored Wagner only to later denounce Wagner as an “illegal armed formation” on May 15.[17] The channel noted that Prigozhin still has contact with Putin’s administration via Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Executive Office Anton Vaino and noted that Prigozhin’s fate lies entirely in Putin’s hands. Shoigu is reportedly unsuccessfully attempting to convince Putin to eliminate Prigozhin due to Prigozhin’s failure to secure battlefield victories — which likely indicates that Prigozhin’s bloody efforts to capture Bakhmut are in fact an attempt to compete with Shoigu for self-preservation.

The *siloviki* appear to be unsuccessful in their attempts to scare Prigozhin into obedience. Prigozhin stated that he is ready to take on the “bureaucrats” and accused them of attempting to gain more authority while using Wagner to fight the war. Prigozhin also accused unnamed officials of being apathetic about Russian deaths on the frontlines and sarcastically stated that the future Russian defense minister has been in Bakhmut for over a week when responding to a question asking if Shoigu had accepted his invitation to visit the Bakhmut frontline.[18] Prigozhin had been recently publicizing his cooperation with former Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, and it is possible that Prigozhin may be attempting to promote Mizintsev as a replacement for Shoigu.[19] Prigozhin is likely aware that Putin is not entirely convinced of Shoigu’s ability to win the war and may be hopeful that a decisive victory in Bakhmut would give him the leverage to replace Shoigu with Wagner-affiliated officials. Both Prigozhin and Shoigu likely perceive this feud as an existential matter.

Russian authorities continue to crack down against domestic anti-war dissent in an effort to strengthen domestic repressions and prepare Russian society for a long-term war effort. *BBC*’s Russia service reported on May 17, citing anonymous interlocutors, that the Russian General Prosecutor’s office and the Federal Service for the Supervision of Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor) conducted an unscheduled inspection at the European University in St. Petersburg as part of counterterrorism and counter-extremism measures.[20] *BBC* noted that the investigators investigated the dissertation topics and personal files of undergraduate and graduate students as well as the publications and classes of faculty in at least four departments: anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. *BBC* stated that the investigation affected several dozen faculty members and hundreds of students. *BBC* reported that Russian authorities have been conducting similar inspections at three other Moscow universities since 2021. One of the interlocutors stated that Russian authorities regularly conduct these inspections, resulting in faculty and curricula changes.

The Astrakhan Oblast “A Just Russia” party faction voted out faction head and former Russian State Duma Deputy Oleg Shein on May 16 after Shein resigned from the post on April 18.[21] Shein cited disagreements with federal “A Just Russia” faction co-leader Sergey Mironov — who is notably connected with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin — for the Astrakhan faction’s vote and claimed that the party forced him out of his role due to his anti-war sentiment.[22] Shein later quipped that the faction had not yet “invented” the reason for his ousting.[23]

Russian authorities are likely forcefully integrating Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine. Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill and the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) announced the adoption of the Berdyansk and Prymorsk UOC dioceses into the ROC on May 16.[24] [25] The ROC claimed that Berdyansk and Prymorsk dioceses, clergy, and parishioners voted to join the ROC after UOC leadership “abandoned” the dioceses.[26] [27] ISW has previously reported on Russia’s religious oppression in occupied Ukraine, including the detention or assassinations of at least 29 Ukrainian clergy or religious leaders since the start of the war.[28] [29]

Key Takeaways

- Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17.
- Ukrainian officials reported that terrain features constrain Ukrainian offensive operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- US officials reported that a Patriot air defense system is operational after Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian missile strikes on Kyiv destroyed the system on May 16.
- The Kremlin reportedly accused three hypersonic missile scientists of treason.
- Select Russian strongmen (*siloviki*) are likely attempting to signal to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin that he must cease his political ambitions in Russia.
- The Russian *siloviki* may be intimidating Russian officials affiliated with Prigozhin to discourage their cooperation with Wagner but appear to be unsuccessful in their attempts to scare Prigozhin into obedience.
- Russian authorities continue to crack down against domestic anti-war dissent in an effort to strengthen domestic repressions and prepare Russian society for a long-term war effort.
- Russian authorities are likely forcefully integrating Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) dioceses in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as part of a wider religious persecution campaign in occupied Ukraine.
- Russian and Ukrainian officials acknowledged continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks near Bakhmut on May 17.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued to make incremental gains in Bakhmut and conducted limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued to target west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and islands at the Dnipro River delta out of fear of planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.
- The Kremlin continues crypto-mobilization efforts by recruiting regional volunteer battalions and criminals.
- The Russian State Duma adopted amendments to the martial law on May 16 that authorize the forced and controlled movement of citizens from territories under the martial law to the territories without martial law.
- Russian ultranationalists are speculating about the fate of Belarus' independence in case of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's severe illness or death.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 17, 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.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 the Ukrainian 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.

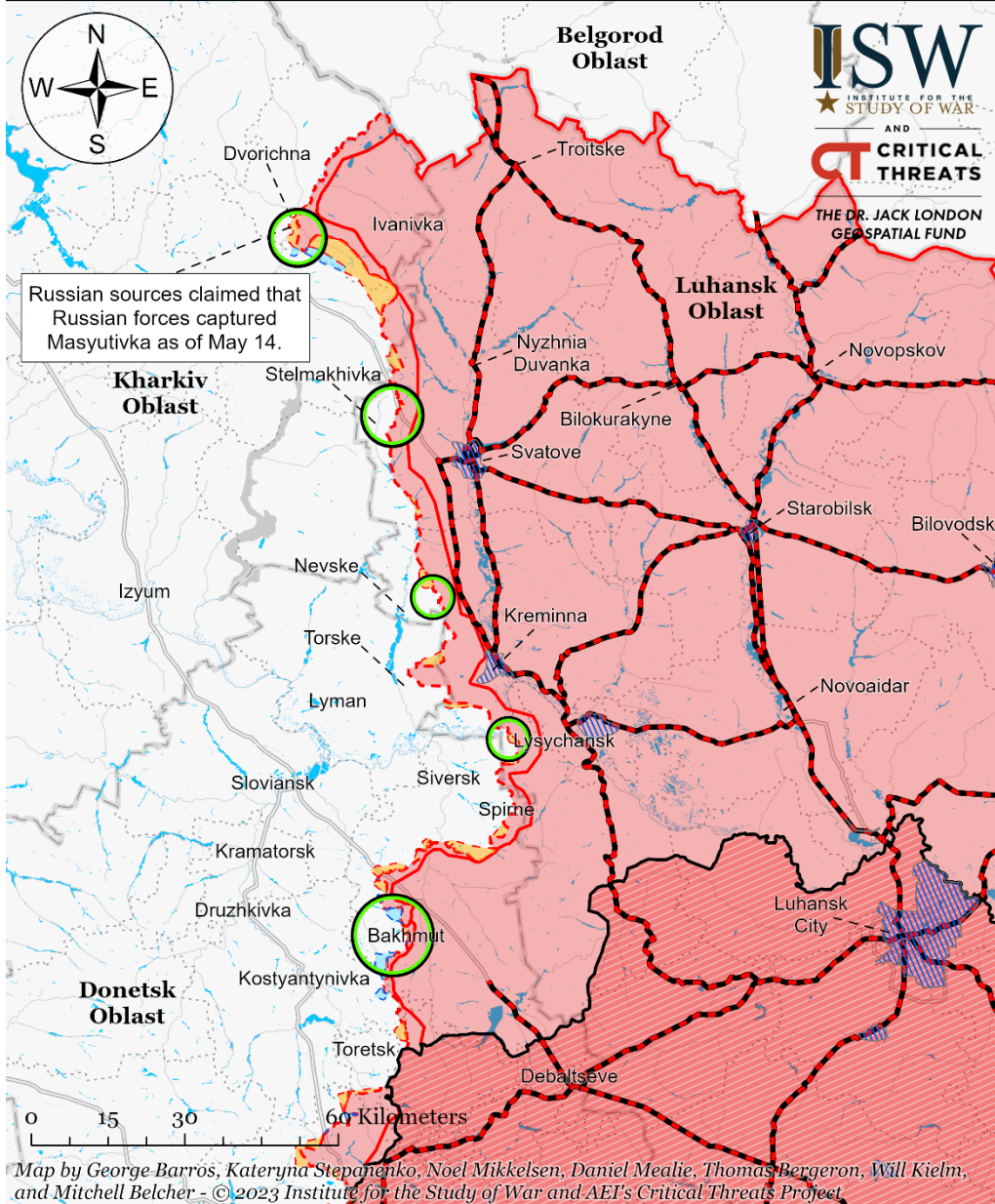
- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety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

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on May 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Masyutivka (13km northeast of Kupyansk), Novoselivske (14 km northwest of Svatove), Stelmakhivka (15km northwest of Svatove), Nevske (19km northwest of Kreminna), and Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna).[30] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Synkivka (about 7km northeast of Kupyansk) and Novoselivske, and pushed Ukrainian forces to the Oskil River after taking Masyutivka.[31] ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation that Russian forces have captured Masyutivka. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that the 252nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (3rd Motorized Rifle Division, 20th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) repelled two Ukrainian ground attacks near Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna).[32] Geolocated footage published on May 16 shows artillery elements of the Russian 20th Combined Arms Army (Western Military District) striking a bridge over the Zherebets River in Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna).[33]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of May 17, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- - - Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- 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 are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

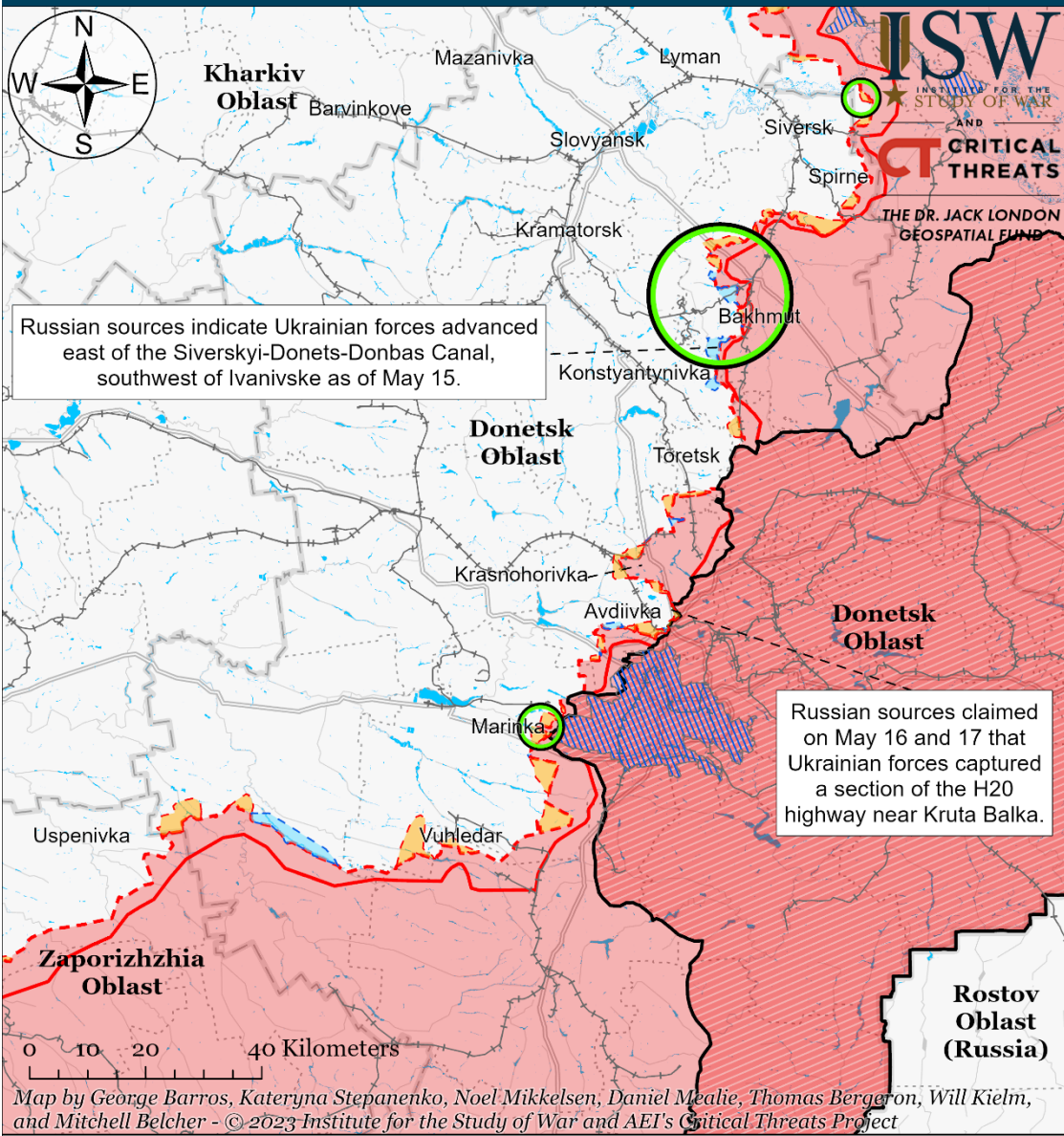
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued to make incremental gains in Bakhmut on May 17. Geolocated footage posted on May 17 shows that Wagner Group forces made incremental advances in southwestern Bakhmut.[34] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a failed ground attack west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) but advanced northwest of Bakhmut near the Bakhmut-Khromove highway, Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest), and Mynkivka (13km northwest).[35] Another milblogger claimed that Wagner forces completed the capture of a Ukrainian fortified area in western Bakhmut and began pressuring Ukrainian forces in an adjacent contested area.[36] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on May 16 that Wagner forces advanced 200 meters and that Ukrainian forces only control 1.46 square kilometers of territory in Bakhmut.[37] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar acknowledged on May 17 that Russian forces made incremental advances in Bakhmut.[38]

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line on May 17. The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces did not conduct any ground attacks near Avdiivka, but one milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground attack on the southwestern approach to Avdiivka.[39] The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces repelled multiple Russian ground attacks in Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).[40] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced 100 meters in Marinka and that Ukrainian forces control less than one square kilometer of Marinka.[41]

Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on May 17. Ukrainian Defense Forces Tavriisk Direction Spokesperson Valeriy Shershen stated that Russian forces conducted 16 ground attacks against Ukrainian positions on unspecified areas of the western Donetsk–Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.[42] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to break through Russian defensive lines near Vuhledar.[43]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of May 17, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

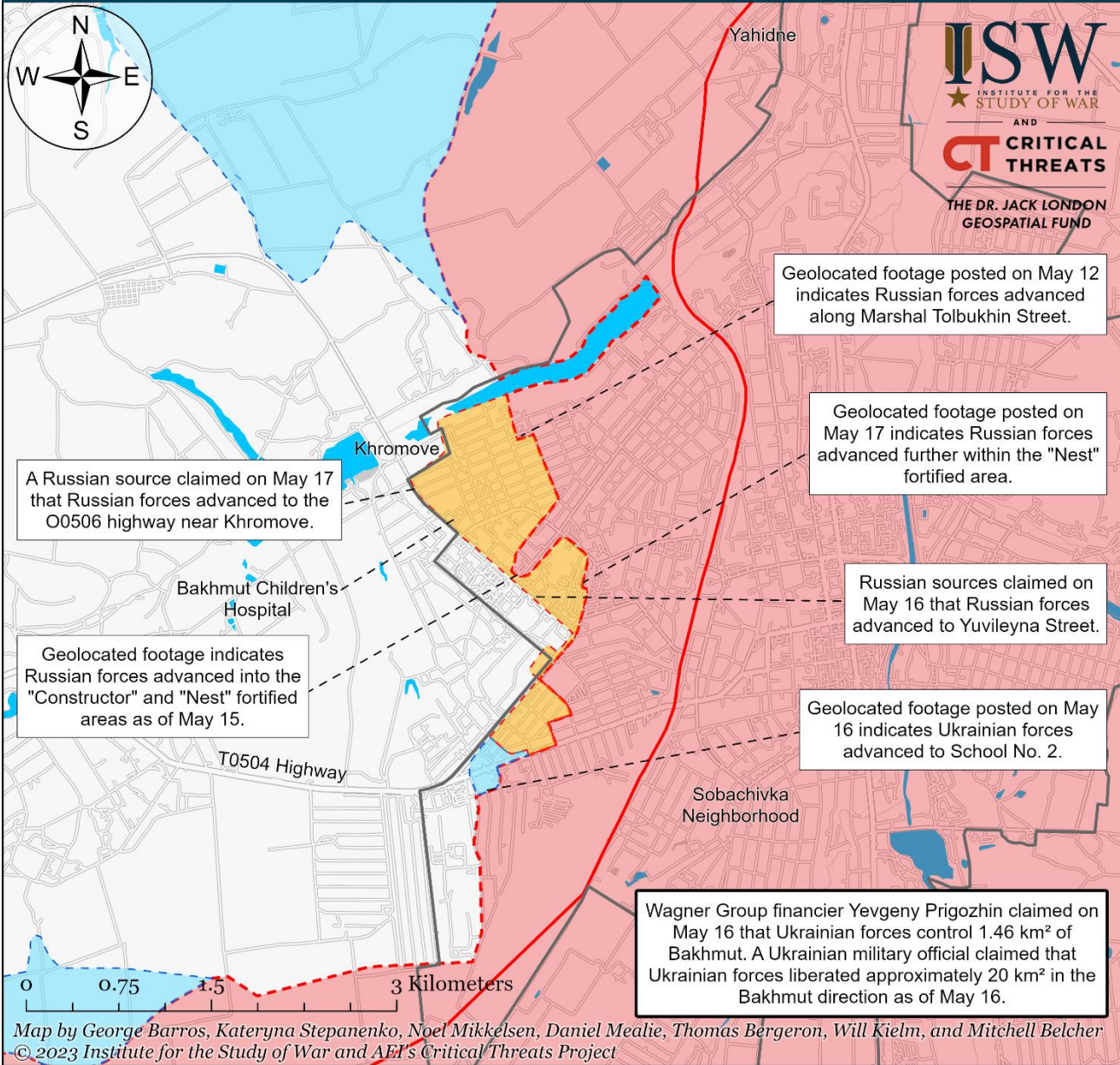


- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads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

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

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of May 17, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Bakhmut City Limits
- 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.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

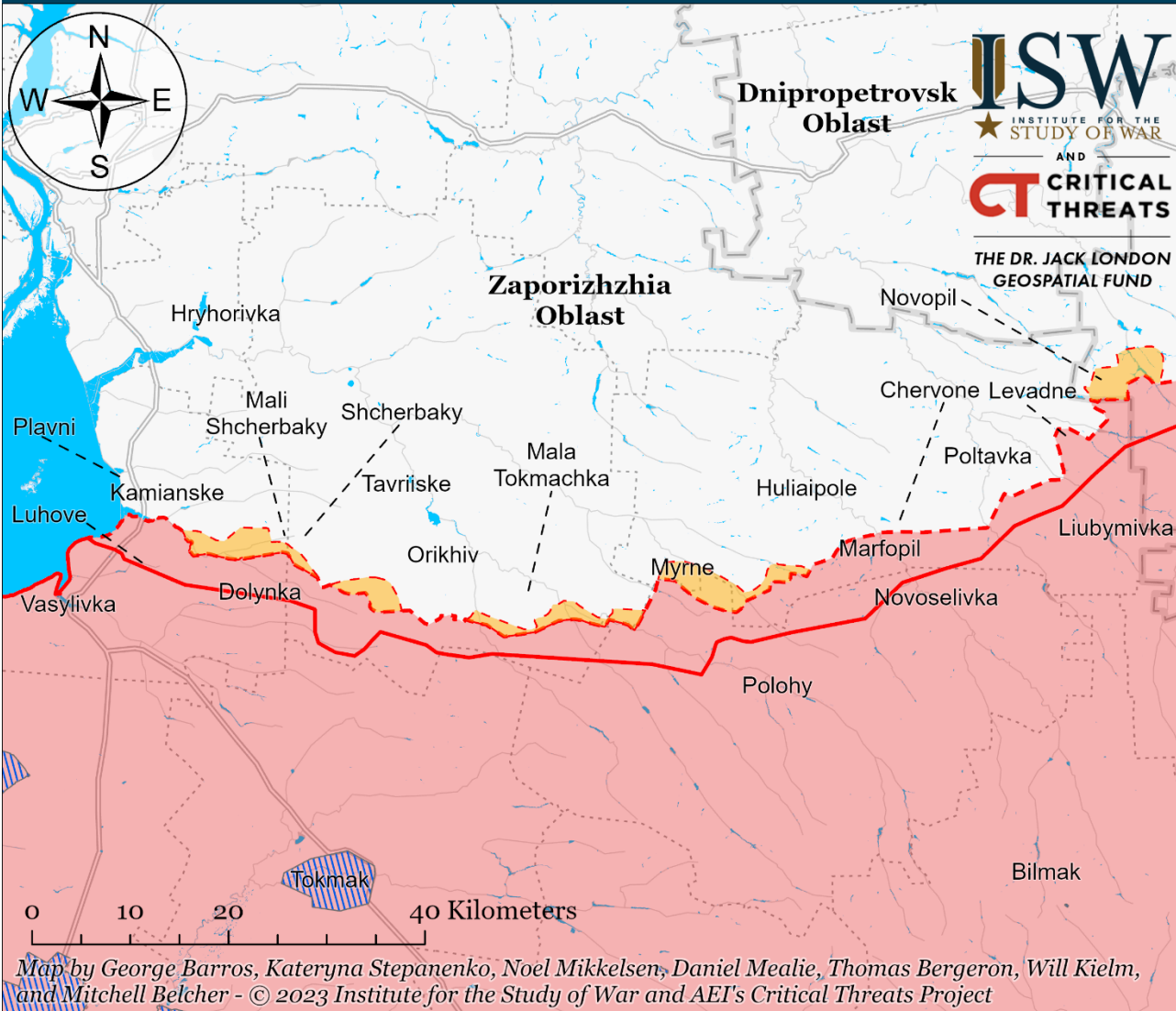
Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces continued to target west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and islands at the Dnipro River delta on May 16 out of fear of planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. Kherson Oblast Administration shelled Kherson Oblast 79 times between May 16 and May 17.[44] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the Russian Air Force struck Ukrainian units in Kizomys and Velentenske on west (right) bank Kherson Oblast with FAB-500 aerial bombs.[45] The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces struck Ukrainian military equipment on Malyi Potemkin Island southwest of Kherson City with Kh-22 and Kalibr missiles.[46] The Ukrainian Border Guard Service indicated that elements of the Russian 8th Separate Artillery Regiment of the 22nd Army Corps has been involved in large-scale artillery fire against Kherson City.[47]

Russian forces launched a missile strike on Mykolaiv City on the night of May 16. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces used Kalibr cruise missiles to strike a shopping mall in Mykolaiv City.[48] A Russian source claimed that a Russian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) struck an unspecified object in the Inhulskiy Raion of Mykolaiv City, as well as a Ukrainian warehouse on the territory of a gas turbine in Mykolaiv City.[49]

Ukrainian forces reportedly continue to strike areas along critical logistics lines in southern Ukraine. Russian sources, including Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky, claimed on May 17 that Ukrainian forces shelled Tokmak, Vasylivka, and Polohy in Zaporizhia Oblast.[50]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of May 17, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



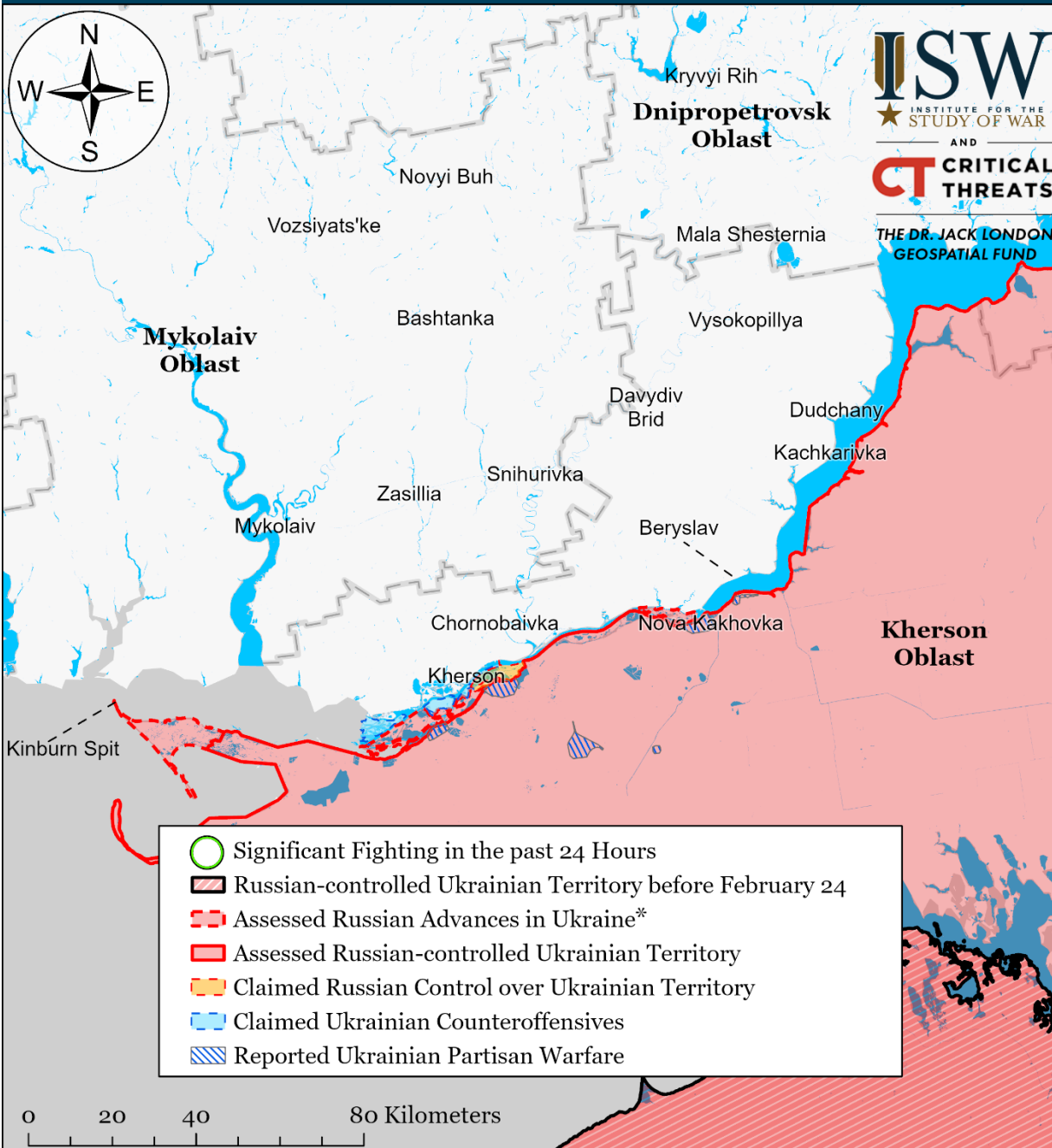
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kiern, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

-  Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
-  Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
-  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.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 17, 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.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

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

The Kremlin continues crypto-mobilization efforts by recruiting regional volunteer battalions and criminals. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* Volga region service *Idel Realii* reported that Ulyanovsk Oblast Governor Alexei Russkikh and Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan Radiy Khabirov announced the creation of new unspecified battalions that will fight in Ukraine.[51] Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Russian forces have started using assault companies called “Storm Z” consisting of criminals recruited who are awaiting their trials.[52] ISW has previously reported on the structure of “Storm Z” formations and their likely use in highly attritional ground assaults in western Donetsk Oblast.[53]

The Kremlin continues efforts to mobilize Russia’s defense industrial base (DIB) in order to replenish destroyed equipment. Russian military machine-building company Uralvagonzavod General Director Alexander Potapov reportedly announced the completion of state qualification tests on a 2S43 Malva self-propelled howitzer.[54] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are in urgent need of this howitzer since the Russian military is “completely deprived” of wheeled self-propelled artillery.[55] General Director of Tekhmash (a subsidiary of Russian state defense conglomerate Rostec) Alexander Kochkin announced that Russia has begun mass production of the “Broneborshik” (“armor-piercer”) air-launched missile that will be used in Ukraine in 2023.[56] Kochkin claimed that the “Broneborshik” model is designed for Su-25 attack aircraft, Mi-8 helicopters, and other aircraft equipped with unguided missile launchers. ISW previously reported that Rostec announced modifications to Su-25 attack aircraft.[57]

Activities 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 Russian State Duma adopted amendments to the martial law legislation on May 16 that authorize the forced and controlled movement of citizens from territories under the martial law to territories without martial law.[58] The amendments allow Russian officials to transport civilians from occupied Ukrainian territories that are currently under the Russian martial law to Russian regions that are not subjected to the martial law.[59] The amendments allow for the detainment of individuals who refuse to comply with martial law restrictions for up to 30 days.[60] The amendments also allow Russian officials to postpone regional elections in territories under martial law, which ISW continues to assess indicate that Russian officials and occupation authorities may be setting informational conditions for September regional elections in case Russia loses more occupied territories as a result of Ukrainian counteroffensives.[61]

Ukrainian, Russian, and Turkish officials announced that the Black Sea grain deal has been extended for two more months. Ukrainian Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov stated on May 17 that Russia and Ukraine agreed to extend the Black Sea Grain Initiative until July 18 following several unsuccessful rounds of negotiations in Istanbul, Turkey.[62] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova confirmed that Russia agreed to extend the grain deal to ensure global food security but claimed that there are “distortions” in the implementation of the deal that must be resolved as quickly as possible.[63] Turkish President Recep Erdogan reported on May 17 that Russia agreed not to restrict Turkish ships from entering the ports of Mykolaiv and Olbia.[64] No party specified what, if any, concessions Russia received to accept the extension. Russia will likely continue to attempt to gain further concessions from the West in July after the extension expires.

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.

Russian ultranationalists are speculating about the fate of Belarus’ independence in case of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s severe illness or death. A leader of the small-scale Russian ultranationalist “Civil Solidarity” movement, Georgiy Fedorov, stated that the Union State of Russia and Belarus will change significantly if Lukashenko is no longer in power and claimed that unspecified “external forces” may attempt to seize power in a similar style to the 2020–2021 protests against Lukashenko’s government.[65] Fedorov claimed that Russian forces may step in to stabilize the domestic situation in Belarus, which would overstretch the Russian military and weaken Russian forces operating in Ukraine.[66]

The Belarusian Constitution defines two presidential succession protocols: one in case the president dies from natural causes and the other in case the president dies from violence. The Belarusian Constitution stipulates that, in the event of the president's natural death, presidential powers transfer to Chairman of the Belarusian Council of the Republic of Belarus (Belarus' upper house of parliament) until the next presidential election.[67] The Belarusian Constitution's second presidential succession protocol stipulates that a state of emergency immediately goes into effect and presidential powers transfer to the Belarusian Security Council under the leadership of the Chairman of the Council of the Republic if the president dies from an assassination, terrorism, military aggression, or other external violent actions.[68] Lukashenko loyalist Natalya Kochanova, who has been closely affiliated with Lukashenko at least since she was appointed Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus in 2014, currently chairs the Council of the Republic. According to current Belarusian law, Kochanova is positioned to influence if not outright control much of Belarus' executive authority in the event of Lukashenko's ill health or death. It should also be noted that, Lukashenko's eldest son, Viktor Lukashenko, is a member of the Belarusian Security Council and may be Lukashenko's favored successor.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on May 17 that conscripts of an unspecified Belarusian special forces brigade conducted a battalion tactical exercise as part of the ongoing combat readiness check.[69]

The Belarusian MoD also reported on May 17 that the International Exhibition of Armaments and Military Equipment (MILEX-2023) has begun in Minsk and will last from May 17–20.[70]

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/annamaliar/753>

[2] <https://suspilne dot media/478615-zniseni-vijskovi-rf-tehnika-ta-skladi-z-boepripasami-naslidki-boiv-za-dobu-na-bahmutskomu-ta-limanskomu-napramkah/>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/10563>

[3] https://t.me/mod_russia/26631

[4] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/983

[5] <https://t.me/rybar/47193>

[6] <https://suspilne dot media/478189-treba-na-deakij-cas-zabuti-pro-hersonskij-napramok-i-dati-silam-oboroni-pracuvati-gumenuk/>

[7] <https://suspilne dot media/473776-sili-oboroni-vidtislili-armiu-rf-na-dalni-castini-ostroviv-poblizu-hersona/>

[8] <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/16/politics/patriot-missile-damage-ukraine/>; https://t.me/mod_russia/26608

[9] <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-16-2023>

[10] <http://www.itam.nsc dot ru/about/news/2023-05-15.html>

[11] <https://www.interfax dot ru/russia/901834>

[12] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/985

[13] https://t.me/olen_nn/6652; https://t.me/moscow_laundry/13252 ; https://t.me/moscow_laundry/13254

[14] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/984

[15] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/984

[16] https://t.me/olen_nn/6652

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