

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 21, 2023

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May 21, 2023, 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 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 12:30pm ET on May 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Wagner Group mercenaries likely secured the western administrative borders of Bakhmut City while Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize counterattacks on Bakhmut's outskirts. Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces control an "insignificant" part of southwestern Bakhmut City around the T0504 highway — a tacit acknowledgement that Russian forces have secured the rest of western and northwestern Bakhmut, if not all of it.[1] These officials' statements indicate that Ukrainian forces withdrew from the remaining areas in Bakhmut except those adjacent to the two highways into the city. Geolocated footage published on May 21 showed Wagner forces raising Russian and Wagner flags over a residential building in westernmost Bakhmut.[2] The Wagner Group's likely capture of the last remaining small area of western Bakhmut does not impact ongoing Ukrainian counterattacks north or south of Bakhmut, nor does it impact Ukrainian control over the ground lines of communications (GLOCs) around Bakhmut that exhausted Wagner forces would need to reach in order to conduct further offensive operations. Russian forces will likely need additional reinforcements to hold Bakhmut City and its flanks at the expense of operations in other directions. ISW has observed artillery units of the 132nd Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (which was previously observed in the Avdiivka area) operating in the Bakhmut direction.[3]

Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces lost part of the dominant heights around Bakhmut and noted that sustained Ukrainian advances could lead to a tactical encirclement of Wagner forces in Bakhmut.[4] The Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade stated on May 20 that the brigade's counterattacks have expanded the Ukrainian salient in the Bakhmut area to 1,750 meters wide by 700 meters deep in an unspecified area.[5] Geolocated footage showed the Ukrainian 3rd Separate Assault Brigade striking unspecified Russian forces south of Klishchiiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), and engaging with the Russian 200th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 14th Army Corps (Northern Fleet) northeast of Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut).[6] Russian conventional forces such as the 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade are unsuccessfully attempting to regain lost positions and respond to Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks, actions that are consistent with ISW's assessment that Ukrainian forces regained the tactical initiative around Bakhmut.[7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian conventional forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations south of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), in the direction of Hryhorivka (about 6km northwest of Bakhmut), and in the direction of Bila Hora (12km southwest of Bakhmut), and Russian milbloggers also noted the failed Russian assaults on Bakhmut's flanks.[8]

ISW previously forecasted that Wagner offensive operations would likely culminate after months of attritional urban combat, and it is unlikely that Wagner will continue fighting beyond Bakhmut at its current depleted state. ISW assessed that Wagner forces were nearing culmination when they decided to fight through Bakhmut City. Wagner forces were enabled to continue offensive operations past that culmination point as Russian regular forces took responsibility for Bakhmut's flanks, allowing Wagner to concentrate on the urban fight. Wagner forces began showing signs that they would be unable to pursue offensive operations beyond Bakhmut City from at least late December 2022.[9] A Russian milblogger claimed on May 21 that Wagner forces have not directly attacked Khromove and Ivanivske — settlements immediately west and southwest of Bakhmut — since capturing Bakhmut." [10] Commander of the Vostok Battalion Alexander Khodakovsky stated that, "driven in [their] head by the inertia of the offensive, [Russian forces] did not want to promptly recognize the depletion of [Russian] offensive potential and did not take care to set up necessary defenses" in captured areas.[11] Former Russian officer Igor Girkin stated that all Russian forces are now exhausted after decisively committing to win an unnecessary battle for Bakhmut and claimed that exhausted Wagner mercenaries stopped immediately at the outskirts of Bakhmut "as they crawled" to the city's administrative border.[12] Russian regular forces situated on Bakhmut's northern and southern flanks are also unlikely to push west towards Kostyantynivka or north towards Slovyansk amid Ukrainian counterattacks in the Bakhmut area any time soon. Russian conventional forces will be even more unlikely to pursue offensive operations if Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin delivers on his stated intent to withdraw Wagner personnel from Bakhmut City on May 25.[13] It is currently unclear if Prigozhin will actually withdraw his forces from Bakhmut, but some milbloggers are speculating that Prigozhin will commit Wagner to a different "critical"

frontline at the end of the month.[14] Russian forces faced a similar culmination following highly attritional infantry attacks in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in June–July 2022.

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated the Wagner Group and the Russian military on May 21 for capturing Bakhmut.[15] Putin directly attributed the capture of the city to Wagner mercenaries, while noting that Russian regular forces provided “necessary support and flank protection” for the Battle of Bakhmut. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) similarly announced that Russia captured Bakhmut because of Wagner assaults in the city and aviation and artillery support from the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces.[16] Putin and the MoD likely directly acknowledged Wagner’s responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut to avoid a repetition of the backlash that followed their immediate failure to do so when Wagner captured Soledar on January 12.[17] Putin’s acknowledgement of Wagner’s role in Bakhmut is the first time that he himself has directly credited Wagner with a battlefield victory. Putin likely took this step because Prigozhin has thoroughly established Wagner’s responsibility for operations in Bakhmut within the Russian information space. Putin and the MoD likely sought to mitigate Prigozhin’s ability to claim sole responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut by emphasizing that regular Russian forces aided in the effort.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin predictably claimed the victory over Bakhmut City entirely for himself and his forces. Prigozhin stated on May 21 that “it is a total lie” that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) helped Wagner capture the city and said that no one from the Russian MoD was in Bakhmut.[18] Prigozhin claimed that Wagner practically received no help from the Russian military except from former overall theater commander Army General Sergey Surovikin and Russian Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics-turned-Wagner-Group-deputy-commander Colonel General Mikhail Mizinstev.[19] Prigozhin claimed that the 305th Artillery Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) helped Wagner after being subordinated to Wagner’s command. Prigozhin also acknowledged that the 57th Motorized Infantry Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) played a “satisfactory” role in controlling one of the flanks around Bakhmut.[20] Prigozhin argued that the Russian command will attempt to claim the victory over Bakhmut when Wagner transfers the city to regular Russian forces and stated that the situation will be similar to how the MoD took much of Wagner’s alleged credit for capturing Palmyra, Syria, in 2016.[21]

Prigozhin is likely attempting to solidify Wagner as solely responsible for Bakhmut’s capture before the Kremlin and the MoD can craft a response. Russian sources widely congratulated Wagner for the capture of Bakhmut and accepted Prigozhin’s May 20 claim — rather than Putin’s statement — as the official announcement of the city’s capture.[22] Russian sources also amplified footage of Wagner forces placing a Wagner Group flag — not a Russian flag — at the highest point in Bakhmut, likely an intentional snub of the MoD.[23] Prigozhin will likely use Wagner’s perceived responsibility for Bakhmut’s alleged capture to advocate for more supplies, responsibilities, and privileges for Wagner as he did following Wagner’s involvement in the capture of Popasna in May 2022.[24] Prigozhin will also likely use Wagner’s role in the alleged capture of Bakhmut to intensify his efforts to establish himself as the central figure of the Russian ultranationalist community.

Russian reactions to the claimed capture of Bakhmut illustrate an increasingly growing divide between the Kremlin’s domestic presentation of the war and the ultranationalist milblogger community’s coverage of Russian operations in Ukraine. Russian state television portrayed the alleged capture of Bakhmut as a seminal historic event and claimed that the city’s capture would facilitate Russian operations to capture Slovyansk (41km northwest of Bakhmut) and Kramatorsk (35km northwest of Bakhmut) and even Dnipro City (roughly 215km west of Bakhmut).[25] The Kremlin likely attempted to oversell the significance of the capture of Bakhmut as a historical victory due to the continued lack of tactical success in Ukraine, with one Russian state media outlet outrageously commenting that Wagner personnel in Bakhmut must feel like “their grandfathers in Berlin.”[26]

Russian ultranationalist milbloggers celebrated the alleged capture of Bakhmut but emphasized that “Bakhmut is not Berlin” and that the capture of the city would be simply another step in ongoing difficult operations to achieve Russian objectives in Ukraine.[27] Russian milbloggers responded to the alleged capture of Bakhmut by discussing more immediate possible Russian operations to capture Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut), Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), and Chasiv Yar (12km west of Bakhmut).[28] Other prominent Russian milbloggers responded to the capture of Bakhmut by focusing on possible imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations instead of possible future Russian offensive operations.[29] Russian milbloggers shifted to more conservative expectations of Russian operations as the attritional offensive to capture Bakhmut continued from winter into spring of 2023, and they have largely abandoned their previous high expectations that the capture of Bakhmut would lead to a collapse of Ukrainian lines in the area and Russian advances up to Slovyansk and Kramatorsk.[30] Russian milbloggers’ more realistic views about both Russian capabilities in Ukraine and the relevance of the Bakhmut offensive highlight the divergence between two very different segments of the pro-war Russian information space: the more *optimistic* presentation of the war offered by the Kremlin and the more *informed* presentation of the war offered by milbloggers. These growing differences will likely continue to undermine the Kremlin’s ability to shape the Russian information space.

US President Joe Biden stated on May 21 that the US will train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation aircraft, including F-16s, to augment Ukraine’s defense capabilities in the long term. Biden stated that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky gave him a “flat assurance” that Ukrainian forces will not use Western-provided F-16s to strike Russian territory.[31] Biden reiterated that Ukraine will not use F-16s in its anticipated counteroffensive and framed the provision of F-16s as part of a longer-term effort to augment Ukraine’s defensive capabilities as Ukraine’s operational needs evolve.[32] Biden expanded on this argument, stating that the US did not pledge to send Ukraine tanks earlier because Ukraine did not need tanks earlier.[33] ISW has assessed that the need to send Ukraine Western tanks, including M1s, became apparent in June 2022.[34]

ISW previously assessed in January 2023 that delays in the provision to Ukraine of Western long-range fires systems, advanced air defense systems, and tanks have limited Ukraine’s ability to take advantage of opportunities for larger counter-offensive operations presented by flaws and failures in Russian military operations.[35] The inevitable delay between the pledge to send such systems and the Ukrainians’ ability to use them calls for the provision of such systems at the earliest indications that they will be required, not when the situation becomes dire.[36] Had Western leaders started setting conditions for Ukraine to use Western tanks in June 2022, when the first clear indicators appeared that Western tanks would be needed, Ukrainian forces would have been able to start using them in November or December. The continual delays in providing Western materiel when it became apparent that it is or will soon be needed have thus contributed to the protraction of the conflict.[37]

Former Russian officer Igor Girkin’s “Club of Angry Patriots” social movement opened a St. Petersburg chapter with an inaugural event on May 21. The event’s speakers discussed their dissatisfaction with the way elements of Russia’s “military-political elite” are not trying to decisively defeat Ukraine and instead are focusing efforts on maintaining current Russian gains in Ukraine and holding negotiations with the West.[38] They also discussed how the Club of Angry Patriots is creating an “alternative center of power” that should help achieve the final destruction of the Ukrainian state and the further mobilization of the Russian nation to that end.[39] Speakers also discussed how the Russian elite that formed against the backdrop of the 1990s period of privatization and “the post-Soviet catastrophe” has “rotted.”[40]

The opening of the club in St. Petersburg is likely a continuation of Igor Girkin’s political feud with Prigozhin and the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group opened its first official national headquarters in St. Petersburg in November 2022.[41] The Angry Patriots Club accused Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin of supporting efforts to freeze the war in Ukraine in April 2023.[42] Girkin launched the “Club of Angry Patriots” social movement as a new effort in April 2023 likely aimed at protecting the influence of the Russian pro-war faction within the Kremlin.[43]

Key Takeaways

- **Wagner Group mercenaries likely secured the western administrative borders of Bakhmut City while Ukrainian forces are continuing to prioritize counterattacks on Bakhmut’s outskirts.**
- **ISW previously forecasted that Wagner offensive operations would likely culminate after months of attritional urban combat, and it is unlikely that Wagner will continue fighting beyond Bakhmut at its current depleted state.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated the Wagner Group and the Russian military on May 21 for capturing Bakhmut.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin predictably claimed the victory over Bakhmut City entirely for himself and his forces**
- **Russian reactions to the claimed capture of Bakhmut illustrate an increasingly growing divide between the Kremlin’s domestic presentation of the war and the ultranationalist milblogger community’s coverage of Russian operations in Ukraine.**
- **US President Joe Biden stated on May 21 that the US will train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation aircraft, including F-16s, to augment Ukraine’s defense capabilities in the long term.**
- **Former Russian officer Igor Girkin’s “Club of Angry Patriots” social movement opened a St. Petersburg chapter with an inaugural event on May 21.**
- **Russian forces continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline but have not made any verifiable territorial gains.**

- **Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a deep strike against a Russian headquarters at an airfield in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, with a Storm Shadow missile.**
- **Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that seven regiments and four battalions from Chechnya are operating in Ukraine as of May 20.**
- **Russian occupation authorities are reportedly intensifying filtration measures in occupied Ukraine to find Ukrainian partisans.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 21, 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

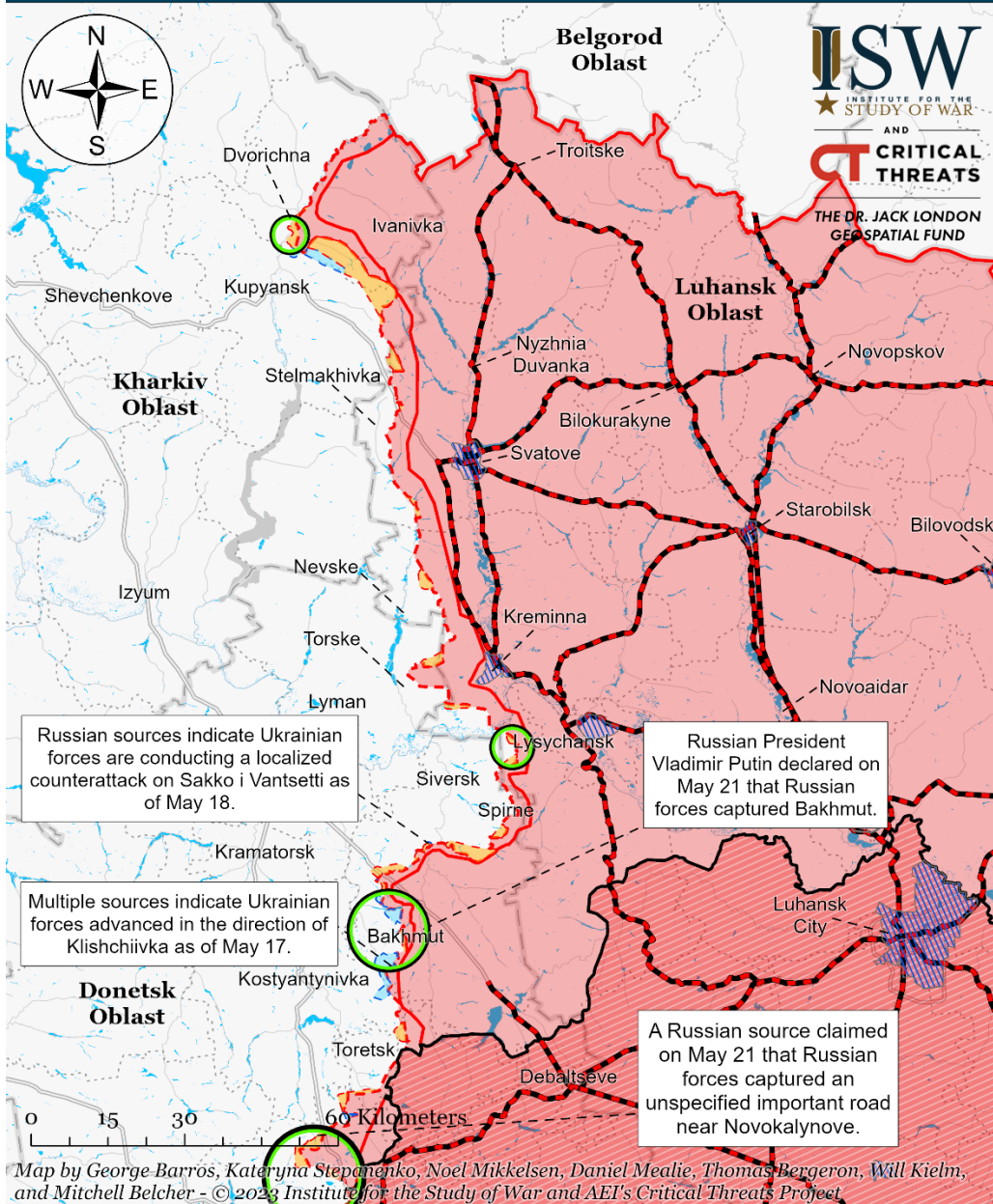
Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

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 continued limited offensive operations northeast of Kupyansk and south of Kreminna on May 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Masyutivka (13km northeast of Kupyansk) and Ivano-Dariivka (23km south of Kreminna).[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Stelmakhivka (16km west of Svatove), Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna), Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), and Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).[45] A Russian source claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Hryhorivka (11km south of Kreminna) on May 20, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.[46]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck rear Russian positions in Kalynove-Borshuvate, Luhansk Oblast (34km south of Severodonetsk) with HIMARS rockets on the night of May 20 to 21.[47]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of May 21, 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.

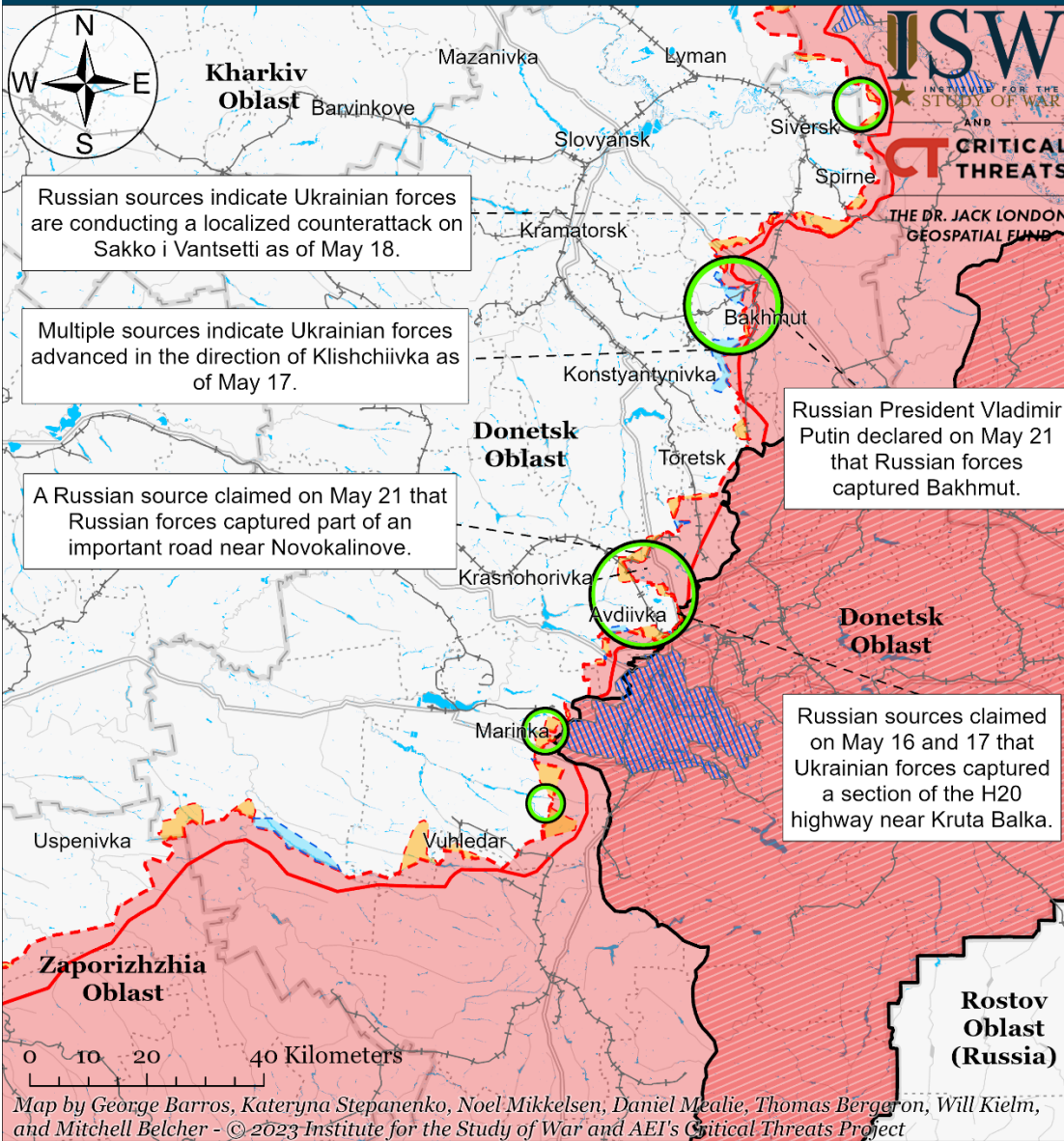
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

See topline text on Bakhmut.

Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline but have not made any verifiable territorial gains on May 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the directions of Avdiivka, Marinka (18km west of Donetsk City), Pervomaiske (15km northwest of Donetsk City), Novokalynove (12km north of Avdiivka), and Sieverne (14km northwest of Donetsk City).[48] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces intensified offensive operations on the Donetsk City frontline and attacked: in western and northern parts of Marinka; in the direction of Pervomaiske; on the southwestern and eastern approaches to Avdiivka; and in Novokalynove.[49] The milblogger added that Russian forces only advanced in Novokalynove and captured an unspecified nearby road – likely the T0511 highway.[50] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Sieverne from the Vodyane (7km southwest of Avdiivka) direction, and that fighting is ongoing in Pervomaiske, Opytne (just east of Vodyane and Sieverne), and Marinka.[51] ISW has not observed any visual confirmation of these claims. Geolocated footage published on May 20 showed Ukrainian forces striking Russian positions near the H-20 highway northeast of Krasnohorivka.[52]

Russian forces continued localized attacks on settlements southwest of Donetsk City on May 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults on Novomykhailivka (about 30km southwest of Donetsk City) and continued to use aviation and artillery to target nearby settlements.[53] Kremlin-affiliated sources claimed that Russian forces attacked Ukrainian positions near Novomykhailivka.[54]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of May 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

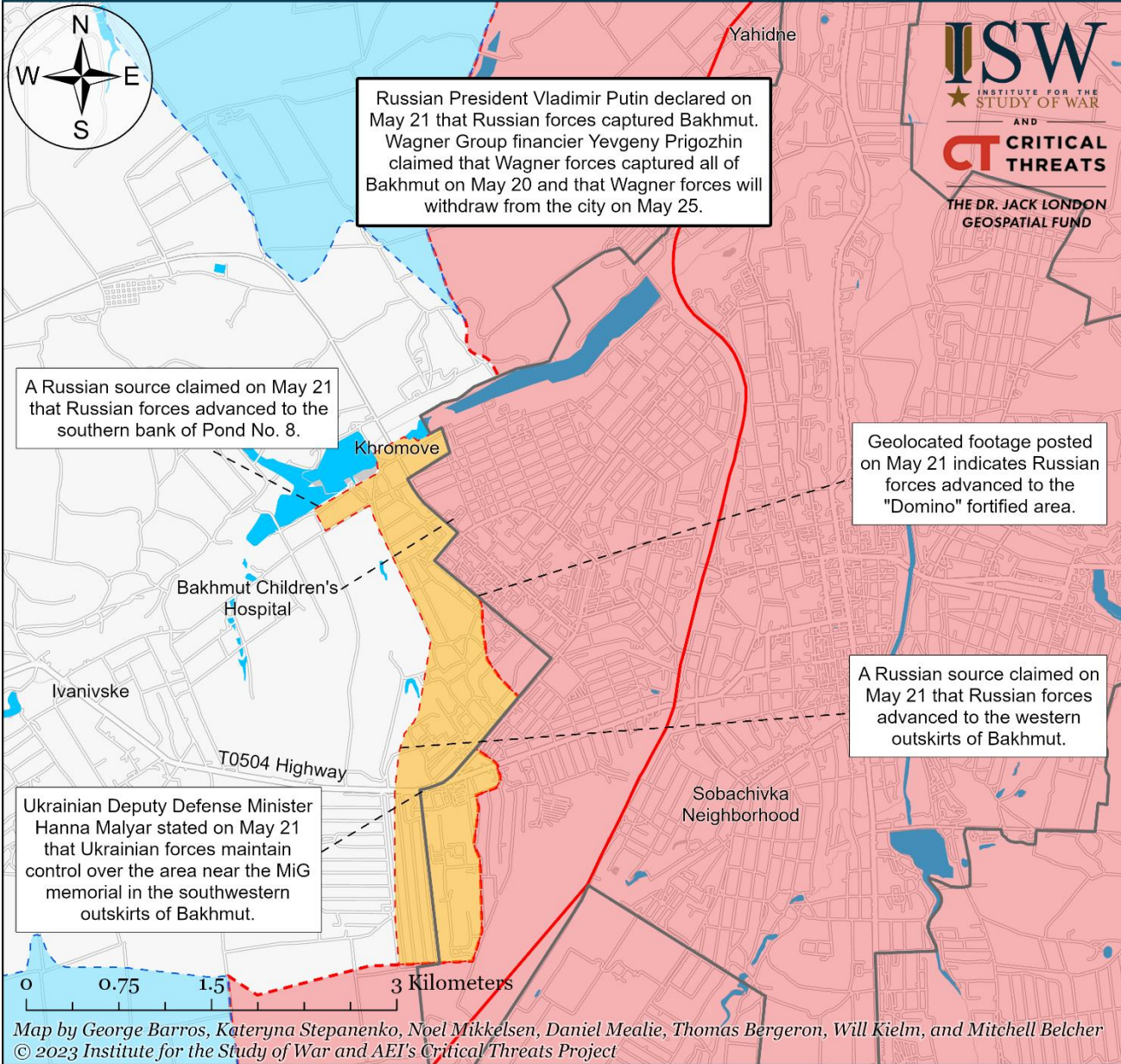


- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Major Railroads
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*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

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

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 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Bakhmut City Limits
- ▭ 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.

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)

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a deep strike against a Russian headquarters at an airfield in Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, with Storm Shadow missiles on May 21. Ukraine’s Strategic Communications Center reported that Ukrainian forces struck an unspecified Russian headquarters in Berdyansk on May 21.[55] Geolocated pictures show smoke rising in the direction of the Berdyansk airfield.[56] Russian milbloggers reported that Ukrainian forces struck the mess hall at the Berdyansk airfield with a Storm Shadow missile in the early morning on May 21.[57] Battle damage from the strike is unclear as of this publication; one prominent Russian source reported that the struck mess hall had already been vacated by the time of the strike’s impact.[58] A Russian source reported that Ukraine’s recent deep strikes against the airfield in Mariupol on May 19 and the airfield in Berdyansk on May 21 are part of a new Ukrainian effort to “thin out” Russian aviation stationed along the Sea of Azov Coast.[59] Berdyansk is a coastal town on the Sea of Azov and is located about 100km from the frontline — well outside of the operational range of US-provided HIMARS.

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in Kherson or Zaporizhia oblasts on May 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts continued conducting defensive operations across the frontline.[60] Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported on May 21 that Russian forces in southern Ukraine continue establishing defensive positions and that Ukrainian forces have not observed any significant change in Russian forces’ composition or positions.[61]

Russian forces continue shelling Ukrainian positions in Zaporizhia Oblast and west (right) bank Kherson Oblast.[62] Geolocated footage posted on May 21 shows elements of the Russian 503rd Motor Rifle Regiment (19th Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army) shelling Ukrainian forces north of Nesteryanka, Zaporizhia Oblast (about 11km southwest of Orikhiv).[63] Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces “remind” Ukrainian forces of their presence on the Kinburn Spit by shelling Ochakiv and Kutsurub hromadas in Mykolaiv Oblast and the Dnipro–Bug River estuary.[64] A Russian source claimed that Russian fires destroyed a Ukrainian observation post in an unspecified area on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River used to adjust fires against east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on May 21.[65]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of May 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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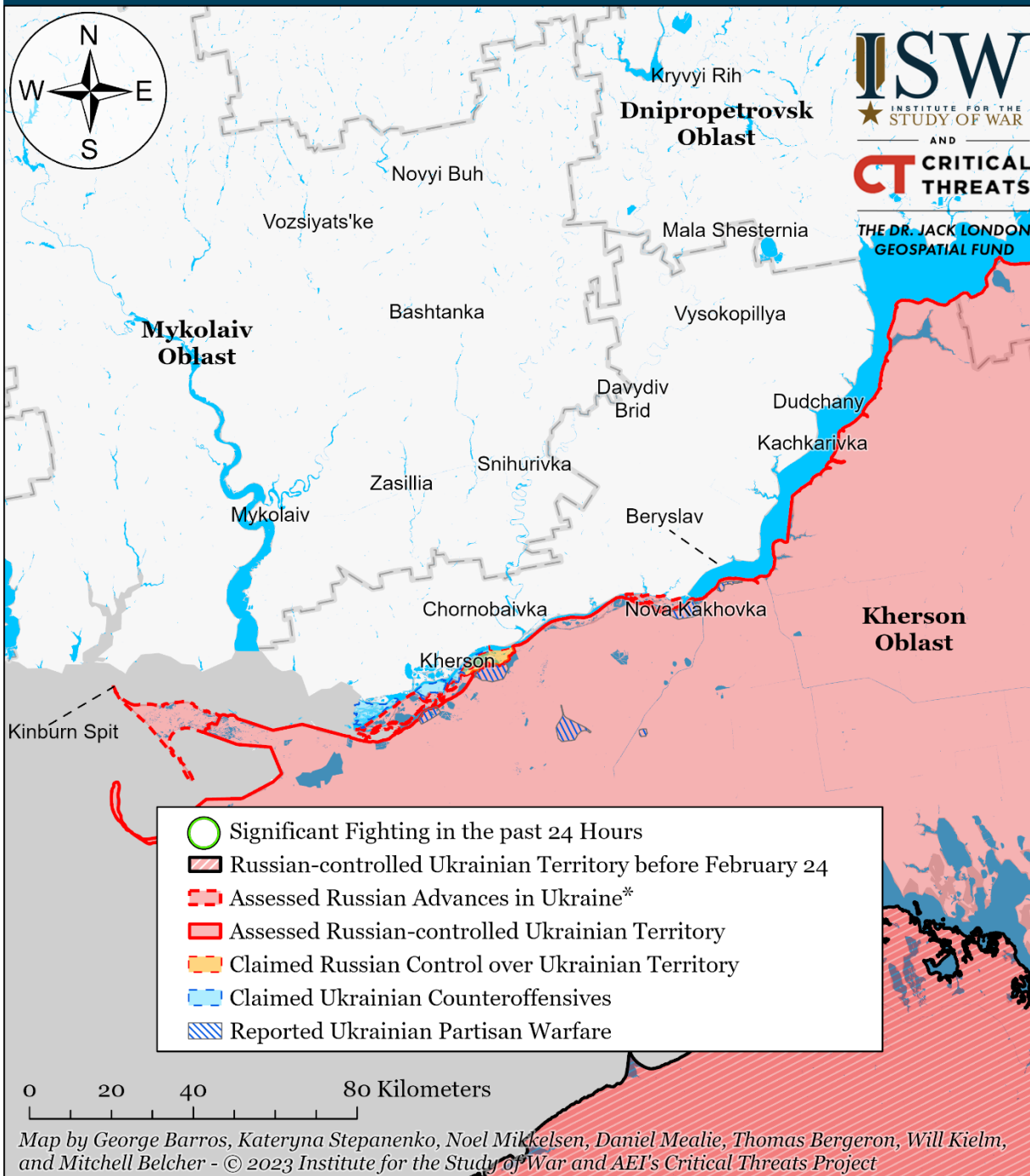
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- 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 21, 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.

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)

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that seven regiments and four battalions from Chechnya are operating in Ukraine as of May 20 during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Pyatigorsk, Stavropol Krai.[66] Kadyrov claimed that this figure encompasses Chechen units with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard), including volunteers with Kadyrov's "Akhmat" special forces.[67] Kadyrov also claimed that roughly 200 volunteers from Chechnya deploy to the front in Ukraine every week after training.[68] Kadyrov recently claimed on May 8 that 3,300 personnel comprise the "Sever Akhmat" Special Purpose Regiment, and if the claimed seven Chechen regiments are all nominally this size then Kadyrov's figure for Chechen forces in Ukraine could total roughly a nominal 25,000 personnel not accounting for losses.[69] The real number of Chechen forces in Ukraine in these claimed formations would likely be far lower due to combat losses and degradation. ISW has only observed Akhmat special forces battalions operating in Ukraine and has not seen visual confirmation of Chechen formations at the echelon of a regiment operating in Ukraine.[70] ISW has previously observed Chechen units in offensive operations around Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast and likely in internal security roles in Zaporizhia Oblast — operations that are consistent with a force composition of at most 25,000 personnel.[71] This figure, if accurate, would represent a relatively disproportionate number of personnel serving in Ukraine from a single Russian federal subject but would be less than the more significant force that Kadyrov has previously tried to portray Chechen forces as fielding.[72] ISW previously assessed that Kadyrov is likely attempting to increase Chechnya's role in operations in Ukraine and the wider Russian military sphere to retain favor with Putin.[73]

Russian pundits on state television stated on May 21 that Russia needs three to four million personnel in Ukraine to achieve Russia's military objectives.[74] These comments are likely a part of domestic information operations aiming to set conditions for the Kremlin's widespread contract service recruitment campaign and the ongoing information operation to portray the war in Ukraine as existential. These comments do not reflect any real intention in the Kremlin to conduct a wider mobilization that would produce an amount of personnel anywhere near these figures.

A Russian milblogger claimed on May 21 that an Iranian Il-76TD military cargo plane flew to Moscow and regularly does so.[75] Russian forces have been increasingly using Iranian-made Shahed-136/131 drones in its new limited air campaign in Ukraine over the past month, and it is likely that Russian forces are increasingly reliant on Iranian deliveries of the drone systems.[76] ISW assesses that the Kremlin will likely continue to pursue mutually beneficial military-economic programs with Iran in order to ensure continued Iranian material support for Russian operations in Ukraine.[77]

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)

Russian occupation authorities are reportedly intensifying filtration measures in occupied Ukraine to find Ukrainian partisans. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on May 21 that Russian occupation forces significantly increased the number of checkpoints in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast and that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel are searching cars with dogs to find partisans.[78] Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko reported on May 21 that Russian occupation authorities are installing new equipment throughout Mariupol to track civilians' cell phone connections and listen to calls made to Ukrainians outside of Russian-occupied areas.[79]

Russian occupation authorities are reportedly strengthening their passportization regimes in occupied Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on May 21 that Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify repressive measures against the residents in occupied territories who have not received Russian passports. The report states that non-passport holders cannot go to the hospital and that Russian authorities threaten to confiscate cars of Ukrainian civilians who do not hold Russian passports when they pass through checkpoints.[80] Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lusohor reported on May 21 that Russian occupation authorities are requiring school-age children to have Russian passports to obtain educational certificates.[81] Lusohor noted that Russian occupation authorities originally required students to have Russian passports to take exams.[82]

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.

Nothing significant to report.

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/772>; <https://t.me/annamaliar/774>; <https://t.me/bbcrossian/46590>; https://t.me/notes_veterans/9548

[2] https://twitter.com/200_zoka/status/1660150439898144768?s=20; <https://twitter.com/Monstas/status/1660153858264317957?s=20>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-23-2023>; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/47772>; <https://t.me/milinfoolive/100993>

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