

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 23, 2023

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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.

**The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions for false flag operations on the Chernihiv Oblast international border and in Moldova ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.** Ukrainian Northern Operational Command reported on February 23 that Russian forces are preparing possible false flag operations in the international border areas of Chernihiv Oblast.<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian intelligence has already observed Russian convoys with unmarked military equipment and personnel dressed in uniforms resembling those worn by the Ukrainian military move to areas near the Chernihiv Oblast border. The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command stated that the purpose of these false flag operations would be to accuse Ukrainian forces of violating the territorial integrity of an unspecified country, very likely referring to Belarus. The Kremlin may be preparing false flag attacks to coerce Belarus into the war following Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko February 16 statement that Belarus would only enter the war if attacked by Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> The Belarusian Ministry of Defense also notably claimed on February 21 that Belarusian forces observed a buildup of Ukrainian forces at its borders.<sup>3</sup> ISW continues to assess that Belarusian or Russian attack on northern Ukrainian regions is highly unlikely, but Russia seeks to force Lukashenko's hand or blame Ukraine for expanding the war to undermine support for Kyiv. Such a false flag operation could also aim to fix Ukrainian forces at the northern border in an effort to weaken Ukrainian defenses in eastern Ukraine and preparations for counter-offensive operations.

The Kremlin also appears to be setting information conditions to stage a false flag operation in occupied Transnistria, Moldova. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on February 23 that Ukrainian forces are planning to conduct an armed provocation against Transnistria in the near future.<sup>4</sup> The MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces would dress as Russian military personnel and stage an alleged Russian offensive from positions in Transnistria.<sup>5</sup> The Moldovan government denied the Russian MoD's allegations.<sup>6</sup> The MoD likely sought to foster this false narrative to twist Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's warning to Moldovan President Maia Sandu that the Kremlin was preparing provocations in Moldova and his offer to help Moldova if Russian forces in Transnistria threaten the territorial integrity of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> The MoD's dissemination of this false narrative does not indicate that Putin intends to attack Moldova—an undertaking for which he lacks military capability—although it points toward an escalation in his ongoing efforts to undermine the Moldovan state.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to deliver boilerplate rhetoric in public addresses that offered him opportunities he did not take to shape the Russian information space ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.** Putin marked Defenders of the Fatherland Day on February 23 with a video address in which he reiterated tired Kremlin talking points arguing that the Russian military is fighting neo-Nazism in Ukraine and protecting “our people in our historical lands.”<sup>8</sup> Putin delivered vague remarks that the Russian military is improving the training of its units and continuing to supply advanced equipment to its forces.<sup>9</sup> Putin also asserted that Russian industry is quickly increasing the production of a broad range of conventional weapons and preparing for the mass production of advanced models of military equipment, although ISW assesses that Russia continues to gradually prepare its defense industrial base (DIB) for a protracted war instead of engaging in wider rapid economic mobilization.<sup>10</sup> Putin's speech did not offer specific goals or objectives for the war on Ukraine, but instead continued generic rhetorical lines of effort aiming to prepare the Russian public for a protracted war in Ukraine. Putin's refusal to use the public address to issue specific goals or policies ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine suggests that Putin

remains uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space through a dramatic speech that represents a significant inflection in his rhetoric.<sup>11</sup>

**Putin likely attempted to downplay recent surges of criticism regarding the integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics’ (DNR/LNR) into the Russian Armed Forces.** Putin attended a wreath-laying ceremony to mark Defenders of the Fatherland Day, during which a Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Lieutenant Colonel Roman Chermukhin asked him questions concerning the status of DNR and LNR militias and their inability to access state benefits for combat veterans.<sup>12</sup> Putin responded that the Russian government will include DNR and LNR militia personnel who served from 2014 onward to the list of those eligible for combat veteran benefits, in what was likely an orchestrated performance similar to past exchanges between Putin and servicemembers.<sup>13</sup> Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Andrey Turchak’s announcement that DNR and LNR personnel who fought in Ukraine since 2014 would receive the status of combat participant further suggests that the incident was staged.<sup>14</sup> The Kremlin is likely attempting to gain favor with the newly-integrated DNR and LNR militias – who have expressed concern over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) imposing military command changes within their units – by offering them the prospect of having state benefits.

**Putin seems more concerned with appealing to ultranationalist pro-war ideologues and tired rhetorical gestures than with presenting any new approach to achieving the Kremlin’s objectives in Ukraine.** Putin’s only specific remark in his public address concerned the operation of the Borei-A nuclear powered submarine and how it would allow the Russian Navy’s strategic nuclear forces to operate at 100 percent capacity.<sup>15</sup> Putin’s remarks concerning the Russian Navy’s strategic nuclear forces were likely meant to support ongoing Russian information operations aimed at discouraging Western support to Ukraine by fueling hyperbolic concerns about nuclear escalation, as well as to display Russian military might to a domestic audience by highlighting capabilities that are not involved with Russian military failures in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> Putin also engaged in a likely staged interaction with a representative from the Russian Orthodox Church in which he stated that he would do everything to address the concerns of the Orthodox clergy serving with Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> Putin’s appeals to nuclear armaments, DNR and LNR proxy forces, and Orthodoxy indicate that he is continuing to rely on rhetoric that he knows appeals to the Russian ultranationalist pro-war community.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin likely continues to suffer from confirmation bias in his belief that Russia’s will to fight will outlast the West’s will to support Ukraine.** The *Financial Times (FT)* cited unnamed officials close to the Kremlin stating that Putin assesses that “Russia is more committed to the war than the West is to Ukraine and [is] resilient enough to see out the economic pain.”<sup>18</sup> Unnamed Kremlin sources also told *FT* that Putin’s demands for loyalty over competence among elites is forcing them to refrain from being honest with him about the progress of the war, and noted that Putin gets information of “poor” quality as a result. Sources also revealed that most of Putin’s presidential administration and economic cabinet expressed that they do not support this war but use lies as a survival tactic, with only a small number of officials resigning since the start of the invasion. One longtime insider also observed that Putin is of “sound mind” and is “reasonable,” which supports ISW’s February 5 assessment that he is a highly calculated actor who places considerable emphasis on eliminating risks.<sup>19</sup> Insiders also revealed that Putin also withheld his plans to launch a full-scale invasion in February 2022 and his plans to occupy Crimea in 2014 from his closest advisors, with his circle of advisors recently tightening even more. The insider information indicates that Putin is prepared for Russia to suffer through a costly and exhausting protracted war under the conviction that the war will tire out Western support. Putin is also likely misinformed about the effectiveness of the Western equipment on the frontlines and its ability to impede his plans for a protracted war of attrition. **The combination of Putin’s beliefs about Russian staying power and expectations of the collapse of Western will with the shrinking circle of advisors and the apparent unwillingness of insiders to contradict him likely create a strong confirmation bias in Putin’s observations of Western statements and outreach. Putin is likely to prioritize any indications of waning Western support or hesitancy over statements or indications of Western toughness or determination if this hypothesis is correct.**

**Western leaders would do well to consider the likelihood that confirmation bias of this sort is shaping Putin's perceptions in their own public and private statements and actions.**

**A Russian source attempted to preempt Western discussions about releasing classified information regarding China's considerations to provide lethal aid to Russia.** A prominent Russian milblogger responded to Chinese Foreign Minister Yi Wang's denial that China intends to supply weapons to Russia and stated that China provides Russia the opportunity to purchase various types of ammunition, industrial drones, field medicine, and protective gear on a commercial basis.<sup>20</sup> The Russian milblogger claimed that Chinese-made equipment is abundantly available in Russia and is present throughout the front in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> The milblogger is likely referring to commercially available dual-use technology from China, which ISW has observed various Russian volunteer groups purchase and send to the Russian military as part of crowdfunding efforts. ISW has not observed any evidence of Russian forces using lethal aid from China in Ukraine. US officials are reportedly considering releasing intelligence that they believe shows that China is weighing whether to supply weapons to support Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg stated on February 23 that NATO has seen signs that Chinese officials may be planning to send lethal aid to Russia.<sup>23</sup>

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) fulfilled Wagner Group's complete artillery ammunition request on February 23 following immense support for Prigozhin in the Russian information space.**<sup>24</sup> Prigozhin thanked many unspecified figures for helping to solve Wagner's ammunition shortage problems, including unspecified individuals in positions of power who "exerted pressure and made decisions" in favor of Wagner, and claimed these individuals helped save hundreds of Wagner personnel from dying in combat operations. Prigozhin likely aimed to further undermine the Russian MoD by thanking individuals rather than the MoD itself for providing Wagner with all its requested ammunition. Prigozhin's February 23 resolution did not generate significant discussion within the information space, unlike Prigozhin's escalation on February 22.<sup>25</sup> Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov stated on February 23 that the Russian military command is trying to oust Prigozhin from the information space after his continuous resistance to subordinate to the Russian MoD.<sup>26</sup> Prigozhin's claims about Wagner receiving ammunition, if true, may suggest that the Kremlin fears Prigozhin's influence over the information space and might have attempted to appease him before he exposed more inner workings of the Kremlin and the Russian MoD. The provision of ammunition to Wagner would also indicate that the Russian MoD continues to suffer significant resistance when attempting to subordinate and integrate irregular forces into its structure despite their reliance on the Russian MoD. It is also possible, however, that Prigozhin was pressured by the Kremlin or the MoD to make this statement defusing the informational crisis he had created.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **The Kremlin appears to be setting conditions for false flag operations in Chernihiv Oblast and Moldova ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to deliver boilerplate rhetoric in public events that present him opportunities to shape the Russian information space ahead of the year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.**
- **Putin likely attempted to downplay recent surges of criticism regarding the integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR/LNR) into the Russian Armed Forces.**
- **Putin seems more concerned with appealing to ultranationalist pro-war ideologues with meaningless gestures than with presenting any new approach to achieving the Kremlin's objectives in Ukraine.**
- **Putin likely continues to suffer from confirmation bias in his belief that Russia's will to fight will outlast the West's will to support Ukraine.**
- **A Russian source attempted to preempt Western discussions of releasing classified information regarding China's considerations to provide lethal aid to Russia.**

- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) fulfilled Wagner Group’s complete artillery ammunition request on February 23 following immense support for Prigozhin in the Russian information space.**
- **Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Svatove and Kreminna.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Russian authorities announced that they completed the repair of the Kerch Strait Bridge road spans ahead of schedule.**
- **Russian officials continue to offer incremental and insufficient benefits to support Russian military personnel and defense manufacturers.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue efforts to militarize Ukrainian children through the installation of military-patriotic educational programs in occupied areas.**

*We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.*

- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

### **Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine**

#### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1- Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Svatove on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove).<sup>27</sup> Geolocated footage published on February 23 shows Ukrainian forces striking Russian positions north of Novovodiane (15km south of Svatove), indicating a limited Russian advance along the Svatove-Kreminna line.<sup>28</sup>

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near Kreminna on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces carried out unsuccessful offensive operations near Kreminna itself, Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), and in the Serebrianske forest area (10km south of Kreminna).<sup>29</sup> Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are prioritizing the Kreminna direction and that fighting along the frontline has largely died down due to Russian forces sustaining heavy losses.<sup>30</sup> A Russian milblogger posted footage on February 23 purportedly showing BARS-13 (Combat Army Reserve of the Country) commander “Artist” in Bilohorivka claiming that Russian forces continue to attempt to seize the settlement.<sup>31</sup> The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces made unsuccessful efforts to attack Bilohorivka and advance on Zarichne (17km west of Kreminna) from Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna).<sup>32</sup> Geolocated footage published on February 23 reportedly shows a remote-controlled vehicle-borne IED reportedly constructed by the 35th

Separate Guard Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) driving toward Ukrainian positions and failing to detonate near Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna).<sup>33</sup>

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

Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and made tactical gains in the area on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops continue to assault Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut itself, northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (8km northwest), Dubovo-Vasylivka (5km northwest), Berkshivka (2km northwest), Maloiliinivka (on the northern tip of Bakhmut), and Yahidne (directly on the northwestern outskirts of Bakhmut); southwest of Bakhmut near Dylivka (16km southwest); and west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west).<sup>34</sup> Geolocated footage confirms that Russian forces have made incremental advances in eastern, southern, and southwestern sectors of Bakhmut.<sup>35</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) noted that “volunteers of assault detachments” (the wording the Russian MoD uses to describe the Wagner Group without naming them explicitly) and elements of the 76<sup>th</sup> Guards Airborne Division are operating on this sector of the front.<sup>36</sup> ISW has observed reports that elements of the 106th Airborne Division are operating in the Bakhmut area and that elements of both the 106th and the 76th Airborne Divisions are operating near Kreminna in Luhansk Oblast.<sup>37</sup> These reports together indicate that neither division is deployed as an entire formation in either area. Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner troops are succeeding in pushing Ukrainian forces out of Berkshivka and now control the majority of the settlement, from which they are fighting towards Yahidne and the northwestern outskirts of Bakhmut.<sup>38</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian troops have also made advances within Bakhmut itself and in the Soledar area northeast of Bakhmut.<sup>39</sup> Milbloggers also remarked that Wagner has partially regained control over lost positions along the T0504 Kostyatynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway, thereby blocking the route and approaching the southeastern outskirts of Ivanivske.<sup>40</sup> Footage posted by Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on February 23 and later geolocated shows him visiting Wagner troops in eastern Bakhmut within 500m of the current frontline, although Prigozhin claimed he was within 400m of the frontline.<sup>41</sup>

Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Avdiivka area north of Donetsk City on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted 43 unsuccessful attacks in this area over the past day, particularly near Avdiivka itself and northeast of Avdiivka near Novobakhmutivka (10km northeast of Avdiivka) and Kamianka (3km northeast).<sup>42</sup> Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces have made marginal advances north of Avdiivka in the Novobakhmutivka area.<sup>43</sup> The spokesperson for the Ukrainian Defense Forces in the Tavriisk direction Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskiy noted that Russian forces have increased their activity in the Avdiivka and Vuhledar directions. Dmytrashkivskiy remarked that Russian troops are attacking in assault groups of 10 to 15 people and in mechanized units of unspecified echelons likely at or below the battalion level.<sup>44</sup> This likely means that Russian forces are employing roughly squad-sized assault groups supported by company-sized mechanized units. A Russian milblogger posted footage of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) 56th Separate SPETSNAZ Battalion striking Ukrainian positions near Avdiivka and claimed that the battalion is moving forward meter by meter.<sup>45</sup>

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian troops continue attacking Ukrainian positions on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Nevelske and Vodyane; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka, Pobieda, and Novomykhailivka.<sup>46</sup> Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces have advance to Pobieda, indicating that Russian troops have likely made additional gains south of Marinka in order to reach the Pobieda area.<sup>47</sup> Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian troops continue attacks along the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City and that DNR fighters are making territorial gains within Marinka itself.<sup>48</sup>

Russian forces continued ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City in the Vuhledar area on February 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attacked Russian positions near Vuhledar (30km

southwest of Donetsk City) and Prechystivka (35km southwest of Donetsk City) and that elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade in this area are refusing to fight due to recent failed operations.<sup>49</sup> Dmytrashkivsky noted that Russian forces have recently increased their activity in the Vuhledar area, and the United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) warned that Russian forces in this area may be preparing for yet another offensive on Vuhledar.<sup>50</sup> Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are fighting southeast of Vuhledar between Pavlivka and Mykilske.<sup>51</sup>

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

A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian ground attack near Novodanylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast on February 23.<sup>52</sup> Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.<sup>53</sup>

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to reinforce their positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that Russian forces are deploying new equipment near Kakhovka and Nova Kakhovka.<sup>54</sup>

Russian authorities announced that they completed the repair of the Kerch Strait Bridge road spans ahead of schedule on February 23.<sup>55</sup> Russian authorities previously announced that restoration work on the road spans should finish by March 2023.<sup>56</sup> Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin announced on November 15, 2022, that Russian authorities will restore the damaged section of the Kerch Strait rail tracks by December 1, 2023.<sup>57</sup>

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

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces continue to deploy Soviet-era military equipment from storage to the front line in Ukraine. Russian milbloggers amplified images on February 23 showing Russian forces using BTR-50P armored personnel carriers, an amphibious armored vehicle that the Soviet Union produced in 1952, in an unspecified area of Ukraine.<sup>58</sup> ISW previously assessed that the observed absence of several tank units in Ukraine suggests that the Russian military continues to struggle to replace armored equipment, especially tanks, lost during previous failed offensive operations.<sup>59</sup> ISW also assesses that vast equipment losses are likely constraining the Russian military's ability to conduct large-scale mechanized maneuver warfare, and the deployment of old Soviet armored vehicles from storage further suggests that Russian forces lack the necessary armored equipment needed for conducting modern mechanized assaults throughout Ukraine.<sup>60</sup>

Russian authorities reportedly found Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commanders innocent of accusations alleging mistreatment of mobilized Russian personnel from the Republic of Tuva subordinated under their command. Russian outlet *RBK* stated on February 23 that the Russian military prosecutor's office conducted an investigation into accusations that DNR commanders beat and threatened the Tuvan mobilized personnel and failed to assign them to specific military units, following a publicized video from the Tuvan personnel voicing these complaints.<sup>61</sup> The Russian military prosecutor reportedly found no evidence corroborating the complaints, and the former Tuvan Republic Head Sholban Kara-ool reportedly met with the personnel and assessed that none of them showed signs of mistreatment.<sup>62</sup> The current Tuvan Republic Head Vladislav Khovalyg reportedly stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense agreed to transfer the mobilized personnel to the 55<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade of the 41<sup>st</sup> Combined Arms Army of the Central Military District.<sup>63</sup> ISW continues to assess that efforts to integrate DNR formations into the Russian Armed Forces will likely result in command-and-control issues and degraded combat effectiveness.

Russian officials continue to provide insufficient and performative benefits to support Russian military personnel and defense manufacturers. The Russian State Duma passed a law on February 22 on maintaining increased pensions for military pensioners who reentered military service.<sup>64</sup> Sakhalin Oblast Governor Oleg Kozhemyako stated on February 21 that workers in military-industrial complexes in Sakhalin Oblast will receive preferential housing rents.<sup>65</sup> Russian authorities in Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai reportedly presented widows of servicemembers who died in Ukraine with sausages and food packages as social support, and later deleted social media posts publicizing the measure.<sup>66</sup>

Russian sources claimed that Russian officials have reduced training periods for Russian healthcare workers in response to a lack of medical workers among Russian forces in Ukraine. A Russian news source stated on February 20 that Russian officials have shortened the training period for surgeons, anesthesiologists, traumatologists, and orthopedists by an unspecified amount of time to address shortages of medical workers in frontline areas.<sup>67</sup> The Russian news source stated that their sources in the Russian medical field claimed that the training program will produce incompetent doctors and that mobilization intensified medical staffing shortages throughout Russian medical institutions.<sup>68</sup>

**Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian occupation officials continue efforts to militarize Ukrainian children through the establishment of military-patriotic educational programs in occupied areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 23 that Russian-controlled schools in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, are planning to encourage children to take the Yunarmia oath and that schools in occupied areas also intend to form an “All-Russian Rescue Corps.”<sup>69</sup> The Russian Student Rescue Corps has historically galvanized youth to work with the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations and is likely being instituted in occupied areas to encourage youth to work in pseudo-law enforcement and emergency management capacities.<sup>70</sup> Programs such as Yunarmia and the Rescue Corps likely intend to strengthen social control of occupied areas by forcing youth into militarized social programs that advocate for pro-Russian sentiment.

Russian occupation officials continue to secure patronages with Russian regions. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo met with Head of the Sakha Republic on February 22 Aisen Nikolayev to discuss industrial and agricultural programs in Kherson Oblast.<sup>71</sup> Occupation officials continue to pursue such patronages to increase the economic integration of occupied areas and foster dependence of occupied regions on Russian federal subjects.

**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.)**

Belarus continues to provide its territory for the training of Russian troops. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated on February 22 that Russian forces continue to train in Belarus, although the current Russian grouping in Belarus is not large enough to mount an offensive on Ukraine from Belarus.<sup>72</sup> Hromov noted that the current Russian grouping in Belarus is

composed of newly formed and replenished units that previously suffered high losses and are training in Belarus to restore the combat capability of these units.<sup>73</sup> Hromov remarked that a significant portion of Russian forces who trained in Belarus have already deployed to Ukraine and that new units are arriving in Belarus to replace them.<sup>74</sup> Hromov's statements support ISW's assessment that Russia has likely committed majority of available forces to the frontline in Ukraine, including elements that trained in Belarus.<sup>75</sup>

**Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.**



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<sup>1</sup> <https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/02/23/rosiya-gotuye-provokacziyi-na-kordoni-chernigvskoyi-oblasti-ok-pivnich/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-says-ukraine-army-groups-massed-border-risking-its-security-2023-02-21/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://t.me/modmilby/23226>

<sup>4</sup> [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/24367](https://t.me/mod_russia/24367)

<sup>5</sup> [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/24367](https://t.me/mod_russia/24367)

<sup>6</sup> [https://t.me/prima\\_sursa\\_md/461](https://t.me/prima_sursa_md/461); <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/rusia-ucraina-invadarea-transnistria-moldova/32284847.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://tsn dot ua/svit/za-yakoyi-umovi-ukrayina-mozhe-dopomogti-moldovi-z-pridnistrov-yam-vidpovid-zelenskogo-2269273.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70575>

<sup>9</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70575>

<sup>10</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70575> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar020923>

<sup>11</sup> <https://isw.pub/UkrWar011823> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-21-2023>

<sup>12</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70576>

<sup>13</sup> <https://isw.pub/UkrWar010223>

<sup>14</sup> [https://t.me/turchak\\_andrey/1050](https://t.me/turchak_andrey/1050) ;

<sup>15</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70575>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-21-2023>

<sup>17</sup> <http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70576>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/80002564-33e8-48fb-b734-44810afb7a49?accessToken=zWAAAyAAbsjldOAACVkm-hl-9O3NESBcvt6SQ.MEUciHhVuQPrKnAfrTXPmDhUjyRhqEwBOUBuIKSBH86WCNreAiEA5HeBPnukzrxVN91A6a-MDwmkreyy8QaOZfVqalmNBU&sharetype=gift&token=226dca22-fcea-4689-a900-240d03134f0e>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-update-february-5-2023>

<sup>20</sup> [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/78856](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/78856) ; <https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-2-22-23/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/78856](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/78856)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-considers-release-of-intelligence-on-chinas-potential-arms-transfer-to-russia-8e353933> ; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-supply-russia-weapons-arms-ukraine-war-us-release-intelligence-tts035tdx>

<sup>23</sup> <https://english.nv dot ua/nation/china-could-be-preparing-to-supply-russia-with-weapons-ukraine-war-news-50306454.html>

<sup>24</sup> [https://t.me/concordgroup\\_official/498](https://t.me/concordgroup_official/498)

<sup>25</sup> <https://t.me/kommunist/16017>; [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/78834](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/78834);

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-22-2023>

<sup>26</sup> <https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/02/23/kerivnyctvo-rf-pragne-vstanovyty-kontrol-nad-privatnymi-vijskovymi-kompaniyamy-predstavnyk-genshtabu-zsu/>

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<sup>28</sup> [https://twitter.com/SerDer\\_Daniels/status/1628646322839461888](https://twitter.com/SerDer_Daniels/status/1628646322839461888);

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<sup>30</sup> <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/8857>

<sup>31</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/11061>

<sup>32</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/11044>

<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/HKaaman/status/1628799468840648704?s=20>;

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<sup>39</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/43900>; <https://t.me/rybar/43878>

<sup>40</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/43878>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/53344>

<sup>41</sup> <https://twitter.com/EjShahid/status/1628743224847220737>;  
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<sup>47</sup> <https://twitter.com/PaulJawin/status/1628802891669549059?s=20>;

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<sup>51</sup> [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/9581](https://t.me/dva_majors/9581); <https://t.me/readovkanews/53344>; <https://t.me/rezhimbe/2149>

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