Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 3, 2023

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Click <u>here</u> 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 <u>here</u> to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Ukrainian forces appear to be setting conditions for a controlled fighting withdrawal from parts of Bakhmut. Russian forces have been fighting to take Bakhmut, a city with a pre-war population of roughly 70,000 people, since roughly May 2022 and have suffered devastating casualties in the process. Geolocated footage posted on March 3 confirms that Ukrainian troops have destroyed two critical bridges in the Bakhmut area—one across the Bakhmutivka River in northeastern Bakhmut and one along the Khromove-Bakhmut route just west of Bakhmut.¹ The preemptive destruction of bridges is likely an indicator that Ukrainian troops may seek to inhibit Russian movement in eastern Bakhmut and limit potential westward Russian egress routes out of Bakhmut. Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksandr Rodnyanskyi previously stated on February 28 that Ukrainian forces could choose to pull back from positions in Bakhmut as needed.² Rodnyanskyi also noted that Ukraine has fortified the area west of Bakhmut such that even if Ukrainian troops begin to withdraw, Russian forces would not necessarily be able to rapidly take the entire city.³ If the Ukrainian military command deems it necessary to withdraw from Bakhmut it will likely conduct a limited and controlled withdrawal from particularly difficult sectors of eastern Bakhmut judging from Ukrainian statements and reported Ukrainian actions. ISW will continue to monitor the situation and offer updated assessments of the implications of possible Russian courses of action if and when Ukrainian forces begin to pull back.

Russian officials continued to release limited information about the March 2 incursion in Bryansk Oblast but failed to provide clarity about what actually transpired. Russian State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtein claimed on March 2 that a Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) vehicle ran over a mine while clearing the area near Sushany, Bryansk Oblast, and four personnel sustained minor injuries.4 Russian authorities previously claimed that the perpetrators mined the area before leaving.⁵ The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) released edited footage of the purported aftermath on March 3 that shows two civilian cars with substantial damage from bullet holes and deceased drivers as well as man-portable military equipment and mines, all supposedly in the Bryansk Oblast border area.⁶ The footage largely lacks any identifying features of the area that could verify the FSB's claims and has not been geolocated. The head of the Russian Volunteer Corps, which claimed responsibility for the incursion, claimed on March 3 that Ukrainian officials greenlit the incursion.7 The Russian Investigative Committee did not corroborate the Volunteer Corps' claim, instead announcing that it has initiated an investigation into the actions of "Ukrainian saboteurs." Russian officials and milbloggers made additional claims accusing Western states of direct involvement in the incursion. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the perpetrators used NATO-provided weapons during the incursion and accused NATO states of being "accomplices" to the operation.9 State-run media outlet RT amplified a milblogger claim that the Russian Volunteer Corps has indirect affiliations with the UK via the Azov Regiment and accused the UK of involvement.¹⁰ ISW remains unable to confirm any of the Russian or Russian Volunteer Corps' claims about what actually occurred on the ground.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not address the reported situation in Bryansk Oblast in the readout of an emergency meeting with the Russian Security Council on March 3. Russian sources widely claimed that Putin held the meeting to discuss anti-terrorist security measures in response to the Bryansk

incident, but the readout of the meeting instead recycled a number of tired Kremlin talking points and did not use this platform to introduce any new objectives or means for Russian military operations in Ukraine.¹¹ Putin did use the speech to outline new, albeit limited, support measures for Russian soldiers serving in Ukraine and announced that all families of soldiers killed in Ukraine will receive the standard insurance coverage provided for by law, a one-time lump sum allowance of 7.4 million rubles (98,143 USD).¹² Putin also called for "appropriate payments" for those wounded in Ukraine in the form of insurance payments and one-time injury payments.¹³ Putin continues to use public appearances to expand promises of social support for existing servicemembers, potentially to quell domestic discontent and incentivize those already fighting, but does so instead of articulating specific goals or outlining additional resources or measures to be taken for the future of the war.

Russian authorities continued efforts to portray Russia as the only safe operator of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), likely to constrain the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the ZNPP and compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the ZNPP. Advisor to the head of Russian nuclear energy operator Rosenergoatom, Renat Karchaa, claimed that Ukrainian personnel used a machine gun to fire at the Russian personnel during a rotation of IAEA personnel stationed at the ZNPP on March 2.¹⁴ Karchaa also claimed that the Russian security personnel tripped several mines while escorting the IAEA personnel. The IAEA has not corroborated Karchaa's claim, instead characterizing the March 2 personnel rotation as "successful" after previously delaying the rotation for over a month due to security concerns. 15 IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi reported that the final remaining backup power line to the ZNPP was damaged for the third time in a week on March 1, which the IAEA contingent at the ZNPP characterized as "likely because of shelling on the other side of the Dnipro River." 16 Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom reported on March 3 that Russian forces have established machine gun firing positions and erected sandbag fortifications at ZNPP facilities. 17 ISW has extensively reported on Russian efforts to militarize the ZNPP, including prior footage confirming that Russian forces have stored military equipment, including ammunition, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft guns, and other armaments on the ZNPP grounds.18

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces appear to be setting conditions for a controlled fighting withdrawal from parts of Bakhmut.
- Russian officials continued to release limited information about the March 2 incursion in Bryansk Oblast but failed to provide clarity about what actually transpired.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin did not address the reported situation in Bryansk Oblast in an emergency meeting with the Russian Security Council according to the meeting's readout.
- Russian authorities continued efforts to portray Russia as the only safe operator of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), likely to constrain the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence at the ZNPP and compel the de facto recognition of Russian ownership of the ZNPP.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Donetsk Oblast front line as Ukrainian forces appeared to prepare for a controlled withdrawal from at least parts of Bakhmut.
- The Kremlin continues efforts to increase government oversight of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB).
- Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare occupied territories for the September 10 Russian regional elections.

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

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1— Luhansk Oblast (</u>Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 3. Western media reported that Ukrainian officials have ordered the mandatory evacuation of vulnerable civilians from Kupyansk due to Russian shelling of the area.¹⁹ A Russian source claimed that Russian troops have advanced in the Synkivka area (8km north of Kupyansk) and amplified claims made by Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) officer Andrey Marochko that civilians are leaving Kupyansk *en masse* in advance of Russian offensive operations near the city.²⁰ Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian equipment column near Svatove on the night of March 2 to March 3, causing Russian forces to suffer substantial equipment losses in the area.²¹ Haidai also noted that Russian forces in the Kreminna area are increasingly resorting to using heavy equipment such as BMPT Terminators because they have been unsuccessful in conducting effective small group attacks.²² A Russian milblogger posted footage reportedly of elements of the 76th and 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Divisions in the Kreminna area and claimed that BARS-13 (Combat Reserve) elements are also active on this sector of the front.²³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna).²⁴

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around Bakhmut as Ukrainian forces appeared to prepare for a controlled withdrawal from at least parts of the city on March 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled attacks on Bakhmut itself; north of Bakhmut near Vasyukivka (13km north); and northwest of Bakhmut near Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest), Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest), and Bohdanivka (8km northwest). Geolocated footage posted on March 3 shows Ukrainian forces destroying a bridge across the Bakhmutivka River in northeastern Bakhmut and another bridge across the Khromove-Bakhmut route west of Bakhmut, suggesting that Ukrainian troops may be preparing to conduct a controlled withdrawal from parts of Bakhmut. Russian and Ukrainian sources amplified a video posted by a Ukrainian soldier who says that his unit received the order to immediately withdraw from Bakhmut and move into a new combat zone. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces have almost entirely encircled Bakhmut and that Ukrainian troops can only feasibly withdraw along one remaining road (likely in reference to the Khromove-Bakhmut route). Russian milbloggers claimed that clashes

are ongoing in northern Bakhmut near the AZOM industrial plant and within urban areas of southern and eastern Bakhmut.²⁹ One Russian source claimed that Wagner forces broke through Ukrainian defenses in Ivanivske (5km west of Bakhmut along the To504 Kostiantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut road) and are threatening the western outskirts of Bakhmut from the Ivanivske area.³⁰ There is no corroboration of this claim.

Russian forces continued ground attacks in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on March 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful attacks on Avdiivka itself and in the Avdiivka area near Krasnohorivka and Kamianka, as well as on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka and Pobieda.³¹ Geolocated footage posted on March 3 indicates that Russian forces have made incremental advances on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Vodyane.³² Russian sources continued to report on Russian efforts to seize the remainder of western Marinka.³³

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued unspecified offensive operations in the Vuhledar direction (30km west of Donetsk City).³⁴ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces are continuing positional battles in the dacha area southeast of Vuhledar, and another Russian milblogger posted footage reportedly of 40th Naval Infantry Brigade elements assaulting Ukrainian positions near Vuhledar.³⁵

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

Russian forces continued to conduct routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on March 3.³⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces in the Zaporizhia and Kherson directions attempted to improve their tactical positions in order to resume future potential offensive operations.³⁷

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

The Kremlin continues efforts to increase government oversight of the Russian defense industrial base (DIB). Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on March 3 allowing for the "external management" of defense enterprises under martial law.³⁸ The decree states that the Russian government can suspend the powers of shareholders and management bodies in enterprises supplying the DIB in the event of a disruption in military supplies. The decree also states that the Ministry of Industry and Trade would determine the new management of the company and called for the creation of a working group under the Military Industrial Commission to deal with such companies. Russian authorities have repeatedly stated that they do not plan to announce martial law throughout the country and have only introduced martial law in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.³⁹ This decree will likely allow the Russian government greater oversight and direct access to defense enterprises in occupied areas of Ukraine, thus allowing the Kremlin to conduct crypto-nationalization of critical industries.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly continuing to recruit convicts out of prison to fight in Ukraine. Independent Russian news outlet *Vyerstka* reported on March 2 that Russian courts started deferring labor sentences *en masse* for Russian prisoners in Moscow, Saratov, Perm, Amur, and the Jewish Autonomous oblasts if prisoners agreed to fight in Ukraine.⁴⁰ The MoD's efforts to recruit convicts indicates that the Russian MoD is seeking to recreate the Wagner Group's penal recruitment model to sustain force generation efforts, while simultaneously cutting Wagner off from its main recruitment base.⁴¹ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin announced on February 9 that Wagner had completely stopped recruiting prisoners.⁴²

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

Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare occupied territories for the September 10 Russian regional elections. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed on March 3 that residents of occupied Donetsk Oblast will take part in the September 10 Russian regional elections and will elect 90 deputies of the DNR People's Council and 435 deputies to serve in 20 municipalities throughout occupied Donetsk Oblast.⁴³ Pushilin claimed that 12 members of the DNR Election Commission met for the first time on March 2 to discuss the elections of the counting commission, chairman, deputy chairman, and secretary of the DNR Election Commission.⁴⁴ Pushilin announced that the participants elected Vladimir Vysotsky as Chairman of the Election Commission.⁴⁵ Pushilin thanked the leadership of the Russian Central Election Commission for its support in the election efforts in occupied Donetsk Oblast.⁴⁶

Russian occupation authorities continue to use medical infrastructure to integrate occupied areas in the Russian medical system. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed on March 2 that his administration opened the LNR Territorial Fund of Compulsory Medical Insurance, the first such fund in occupied territories, and stated that the organization is a necessary step to fully integrate occupied Luhansk Oblast into the Russian healthcare system.⁴⁷ Pasechnik claimed that the LNR Territorial Fund of Compulsory Medical Insurance will make payments for medical care provided, monitor the quality of care provided, and protect the rights of the insured.⁴⁸ Pasechnik noted that a Russian federal law published on March 1 mandates that all residents in occupied Luhansk Oblast receive free medical care.⁴⁹

Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to bring Ukrainian children to Russia to participate in youth programs in an effort to consolidate societal control in occupied territories. LNR Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed on March 3 that children of occupied Holubivka, Luhansk Oblast, arrived in Irkutsk, Siberia, to participate in the Russian youth program "The Future is Ours," an organization that ostensibly seeks to promote a healthy lifestyle and prevent the use of synthetic drugs.⁵⁰ Pasechnik claimed that Holubivka children will go on excursions, attend classes, and participate in interesting events.⁵¹ ISW continues to assess that Russian authorities are using the cover of youth programs to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (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 forces continue troop and equipment rotations in Belarus. Independent Belarusian monitoring group The Hajun Project reported on March 2 that at least two Russian cargo trains bearing at least 17 T-62M tanks departed from Baranavichy, Brest Oblast for Smolensk Oblast in Russia. ⁵² The Hajun Project also reported that new Russian forces have arrived in Belarus for training and to replace trained forces that left Belarus to deploy to combat zones. ⁵³

The current status of the Russian Aerospace Forces Beriev A-50 airborne early warning and control plane (previously deployed to the Machulishchi Air Base in Minsk, Belarus) remains unclear as of March 3. Belarusian media circulated footage of the A-50 taking off from the airfield on March 2 in order to prove that the plane is still operational despite claims of a Belarusian partisan attack against the aircraft.⁵⁴ The Belarusian Hajun Project, however, noted on March 3 that a Russian Aerospace Force MiG-31K took off from the Machulishchi

airfield without the A-50.⁵⁵ The Hajun Project noted that the absence of the A-50 likely means that the probability of Russian forces launching Kinzhal missiles at Ukraine from Belarusian airspace is slightly decreased.⁵⁶ ISW is unable to verify this assessment.

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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