Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 3

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Mason Clark September 3, 8:00 pm ET

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.

Ukrainian officials directly stated on September 3 that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine is an intentionally methodical operation to degrade Russian forces and logistics, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory. Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksiy Arestovych told the Wall Street Journal on September 3 that the current goal of Ukrainian forces in the south is the "systemic grinding of Putin's army and that Ukrainian troops are slowly and systematically uncovering and destroying Russia's operational logistical supply system with artillery and precision weapon strikes. Arestovych's statement echoes ISW's assessment that the ongoing counteroffensive will likely not result in immediate gains and that Ukrainian forces seek to disrupt key logistics nodes that support Russian operations in the south and chip away at Russian military capabilities.

The Kremlin could intensify its efforts to promote self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who cover the war in Ukraine. Russian authorities arrested and later released prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov (employed by Telegram channel WarGonzo) in Moscow on September 2, due to what WarGonzo described as Pegov drunkenly threatening a hotel administrator. Pegov is an experienced military journalist and WarGonzo has extensive links to the Russian military and access to Russian military operations in Donbas in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Ukraine in 2022. Vision Continues to track anomalous activity regarding Russia's milbloggers. We cannot confirm the circumstances of Pegov's arrest, but WarGonzo's explanation may be correct.

However, ISW previously assessed in July that the Kremlin seeks to promote self-censorship among milbloggers who have undermined Kremlin efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as a decisive Russian victory, and the Kremlin may seek to amplify this censorship. Russian military bloggers have candidly reported on Russian forces' poor performance in Ukraine and have discussed how the Kremlin has attempted to censor their coverage in Ukraine. Prominent milblogger Rybar noted that the relationship between the Russian military command and war correspondents particularly soured after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with war correspondents during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on June 17, during which Putin likely tried to defuse milbloggers' discontent. The Kremlin later likely intensified efforts to promote self-censorship among milbloggers by using a leaked letter from mothers of Russian soldiers who demanded the ban of journalist activity on the frontlines in July.

The Kremlin so far has not escalated to detaining milbloggers for their coverage. Pegov's arrest—if connected to his coverage in Ukraine—would be a significant development in Russian efforts to control the Russian information space. ISW forecasted that the Russian information space would change significantly if the Ministry of Defense cracked down on milbloggers and stopped them from operational reporting since ISW uses milbloggers and Russian war correspondents as sources of Russian claims on a daily basis. Viii We will continue to observe and report on milblogger and war correspondent behavior and will flag significant changes in the Russian information space as we observe them.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials directly stated that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive is a methodical operation to intentionally degrade Russian forces and logistics in the south, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory.
- The Kremlin may be intensifying efforts to foster self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who are covering the war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued positional battles along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline and that Ukrainian troops are focusing on striking Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), equipment and manpower concentrations, and logistics nodes along the Southern Axis.
- Social media footage shows evidence of effective Ukrainian strikes in western and central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian mibloggers continue to claim that Ukrainian forces are fighting in western Kherson Oblast, along the Inhulets River, and in northern Kherson south of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut and north and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces may be conducting localized attacks along the line of contact in Western Zaporizhia Oblast to disrupt ongoing Russian troop deployments.
- Russian authorities continue to generate combat power from recruitment through state-owned enterprises and prisons to circumvent general mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities are increasingly struggling to provide basic services in occupied areas of Ukraine.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



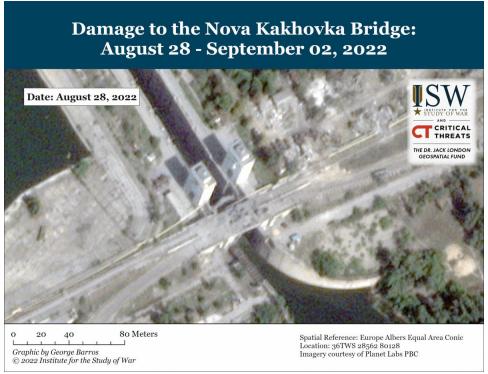
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<u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued positional battles along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline on September 3. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian troops conducted positional battles and artillery strikes against Russian positions in unspecified areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that in response to recent Ukrainian attacks, Russian forces have strengthened the administrative and police regime in occupied areas around the Dnipro River and continued shelling Ukrainian positions and conducting reconnaissance sorties. Ukrainian officials maintain their calls for operational silence surrounding the progress of Ukrainian attacks in the south. Xi

Ukrainian military officials reiterated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to focus on striking Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), equipment concentrations, and logistics nodes on September 3. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces conducted over 22 airstrikes and 400 artillery missions on September 3. These strikes reportedly hit a command and observation post of the Russian 205th separate motorized rifle Cossack brigade in Snihurivka (about 60km east of Mykolaiv City near the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border), a Russian pontoon crossing near Kozatske (about 55km east of Kherson City and across the Dnipro River from Nova Kakhovka), three ammunition warehouses throughout the Kherson and Beryslav districts, and two ammunition supply points in unspecified locations. The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Ukrainian aircraft conducted over 40 sorties to support ground elements that destroyed an unspecified number of Russian command and control points, ammunition warehouses, logistical support systems, and areas of concentrated manpower. The Ukrainian General Staff notably posted footage of Ukrainian Bayraktar TB2s destroying Russian T-72 tanks in an unspecified location along the Southern Axis, which may be indicative of overall insufficient Russian air defense capabilities in Kherson Oblast.

Social media footage from residents of Kherson Oblast provides visual evidence of Ukrainian strikes in western and central Kherson Oblast. Geolocated footage shows the aftermath of a Ukrainian strike on the "Lost World" hotel and sports complex in Kherson City on September 3.xv Ukrainian sources claimed that the complex belonged to the Russian-backed head of the Kherson occupation administration, Volodymyr Saldo.xvi The Ukrainian General Staff noted on September 2 that the Russian company that was based in the "Lost World" sports complex previously looted the property and fled to occupied Crimea.xvii Elements of the Russian-backed occupation regime likely used the "Lost World" complex as some sort of headquarters. Local residents additionally posted footage of the aftermath of a Ukrainian strike on a Russian ammunition depot in Oleshky, about 8km southeast of Kherson City across the Dnipro River.xviii Geolocated footage also shows a destroyed Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense system in Oleshky.xix Social media footage of explosions in Nova Kakhovka (55km east of Kherson City) supports satellite imagery from September 2 depicting that the Nova Khakovka dam bridge has partially collapsed due to Ukrainian strikes.xx The satellite imagery shows a roughly 20m-by-9m segment of the bridge has fallen into the river, which has likely rendered this section of the dam bridge inoperable (see below image).xxi



[Imagery courtesy of Planet Labs PBC]

Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are fighting in three distinct directions as of September 3—northwest of Kherson City along the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border; in western Kherson Oblast near the Inhulets River along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border; and in northern Kherson Oblast south of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.xxii ISW cannot independently confirm whether Ukrainian forces are fighting in these areas.

Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian troops attempted advances in the Posad Pokrovske area, about 25km northwest of Kherson City near the Mykolaiv Oblast border. One Russian source reported that Ukrainian troops are accumulating equipment in Posad Pokrovske and taking up defensive positions in Myrne and Lyubomirivka, just east of Posad Pokrovske.xxiii Another Russian source reported that Russian forces destroyed a Ukrainian armored convoy that attempted to break through Russian defensive lines between Oleksandrivka and Tavriiske, just west of Posad Pokrovske.xxiv Footage posted to social media on September 3 also indicates that Ukrainian troops may have advanced into areas near Myroliubivka, about 5km south of Posad Pokrovske.xxv Several Russian sources also reported that Ukrainian troops attempted to advance in northern Kherson near the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border around Vysokopillya, Olhyne, Petrivka, Novorontsovka, and Osokorivka.xxvi Several prominent Russian milbloggers amplified claims that Ukrainian forces broke through Russian defensive lines in Ternivka (16km northeast of Snihurivka), crossed the Inhulets River, and took control of Blahodativka.xxvii A Russian milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian troops retreated from previously captured positions in Bezimenne and Shchaslyve to Sukhyi Stavok, directly southeast of Blahodativka, and that Kostromka (just southeast of Sukhyi Stavok) remains a contested "grey zone."xxviii

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continued to claim that Ukrainian forces have failed to establish positions along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border. The Russian MoD stated that Russian troops are continuing to inflict damage on Ukrainian troops and equipment and that Ukrainian losses are causing Ukrainian troops to desert in increasing numbers. The Russian MoD also claimed that Russian air defense is successful in intercepting Ukrainian missiles, shells, and attempted strikes over various areas of the Southern Axis. XXXII

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.

- Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Main Effort Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort- Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort 1- Kharkiv City
- Russian Supporting Effort 2- Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Russian Main Effort- Eastern Ukraine

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort- Southern Kharkiv and Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)</u>

Note: We have revised our organization of Russian lines of effort to include Russian operations in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast as part of the Donetsk Oblast effort due to recently observed force allocations indicating the Russian grouping east of Hulyaipole, previously grouped with the Southern Axis, will support efforts southwest of Donetsk City.

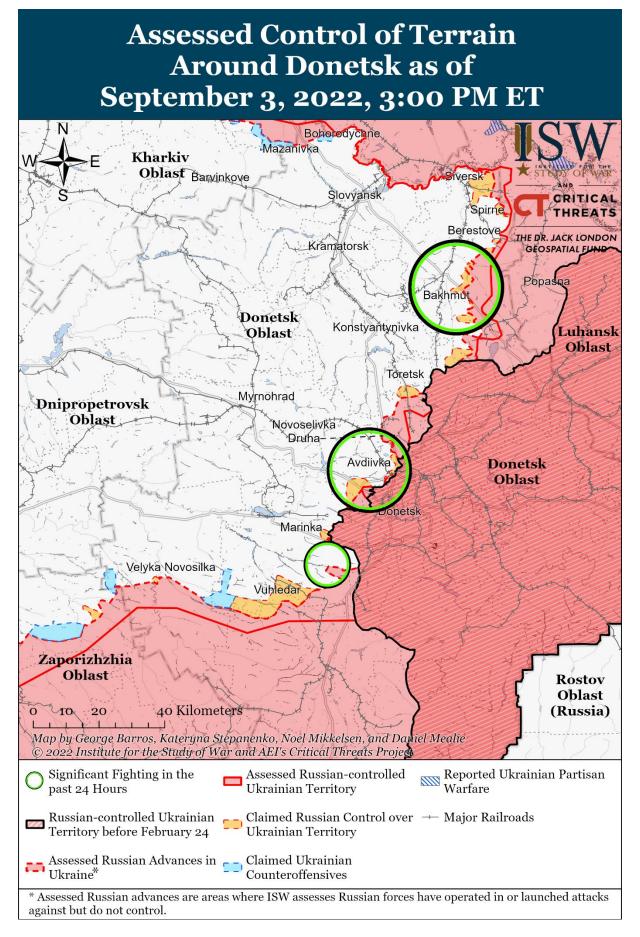
Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks along the Izyum-Slovyansk axis on September 3 and conducted routine shelling in this area. Russian forces likely did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks toward Siversk on September 3 and continued routine artillery strikes on the town and surrounding settlements. Russian sources claimed that Russian and proxy troops, including elements of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 4th Brigade, actively attacked Siversk under the cover of air bombardments and artillery support. Mowever, ISW cannot independently confirm the veracity of the claimed footage, and Russian forces have not conducted confirmed ground attacks toward Siversk over the last week.

Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attacked near Vesela Dolyna (5km southeast of Bakhmut), Kodema (13km southeast of Bakhmut), and Zaitseve (8km southeast of Bakhmut).xxxv Russian and proxy forces continued offensive operations northeast of Bakhmut and reportedly attempted to advance around Soledar (10km northeast of Bakhmut).xxxvi

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks near the northern and southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attempted to advance from Novobakhmutivka (about 15km north of the outskirts of Donetsk City) and attacked around Avdiivka (about 10km north of the outskirts of Donetsk City). Russian troops, including elements of the 42nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division, reportedly conducted ground attacks in

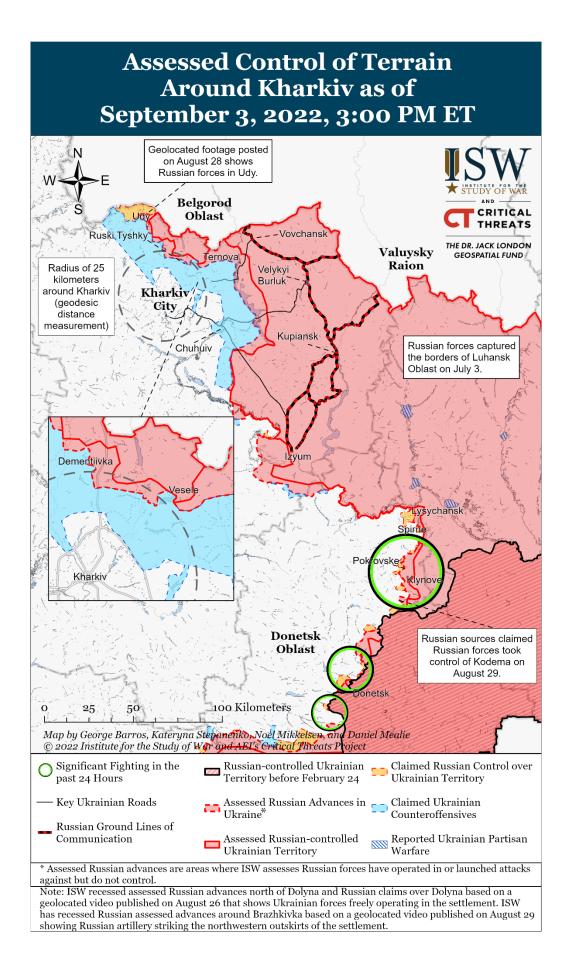
Marinka, directly on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City. xxxviii Russian troops continued routine artillery strikes along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline. xxxix

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City or in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast on September 3 and continued routine artillery strikes in these areas.xl



<u>Supporting Effort #1- Kharkiv City (Russian objective: Defend ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum and prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching the Russian border)</u>

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast on September 3 and continued routine shelling of Kharkiv City and surrounding areas. xli



<u>Supporting Effort #2- Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

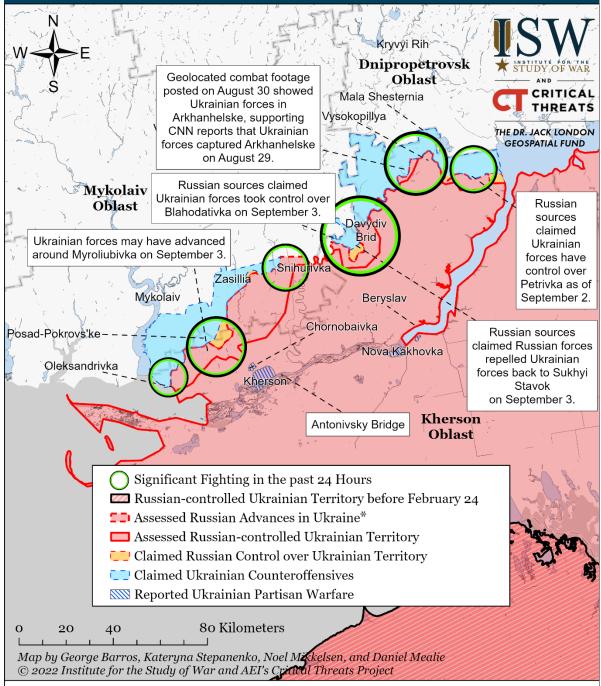
Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground assaults along the frontline in Zaporizhia Oblast, west of Hulyaipole, and continued routine shelling along the line of contact on September 3.xlii The Russian Defense Ministry (MoD) claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian ammunition depot in Orikhiv, roughly 64km southeast of Zaporizhzhia City.xliii

Ukrainian forces are likely conducting localized attacks along the line of contact west of Hulyaipole to disrupt Russian force deployments. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are attacking Russian forces' positions via unspecified means and in unspecified locations along the frontline. The current Ukrainian policy of operational silence about counteroffensive actions in Kherson Oblast may be limiting Ukrainian reporting about offensive actions along the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline as well. A Russian source reported that Ukrainian forces have conducted daily reconnaissance-in-force operations against Russian positions in Nesteryanka (10km southwest of Orikhiv) since August 31 and are heavily shelling the surrounding area, but ISW cannot confirm these reports. XIV Ukrainian forces struck the Melitopol airfield again on September 3. XIVI

The Russian MoD claimed (likely falsely) that Ukrainian forces attempted to storm the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) for the second time on September 2.xlvii The Russian MoD claimed that 250 Ukrainian special forces and foreign personnel attempted to land at positions near Enerhodar but that Russian aviation and artillery pushed back the Ukrainian forces to the north bank of the Kakhovka reservoir.xlviii Russian sources also published an interview of a Russian soldier and pictures of a drone and warhead as evidence of Ukrainian attacks on the ZNPP, but such evidence is inconclusive and easily staged.xlix Ukrainian forces remain unlikely to launch a tactical and unsupported attack against the ZNPP, and Russian forces are likely stepping up information operations to portray Ukrainian threats to the nuclear plant. Russian officials and milbloggers amplified claims on September 3 that Ukrainian forces are preparing for chemical or biological attacks in Ukraine alongside the claims of Ukrainian attacks on the ZNPP.¹ Russian war correspondent Rostislav Zhuravlev reported that *RIA Novosti* provided its journalists with gas masks a month prior in case of a chemical attack.¹ The Kremlin is likely presenting these narratives of nuclear and biochemical provocations in southern Ukraine together to try to degrade Western trust and aid to Ukraine.

Russian forces continued targeting rear areas in Mykolaiv Oblast on September 3. Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces conducted an airstrike on a logistics warehouse in an unspecified area of Mykolaiv Oblast. The Russian MoD reported that Russian forces struck an ammunition depot in Voznesensk, Mykolaiv Oblast, roughly 88km northwest of Mykolaiv City. Iiii

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

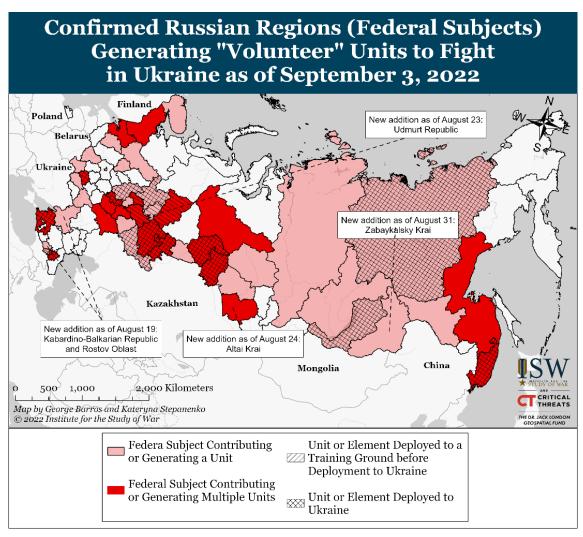


^{*} Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: Ukrainian officials announced on August 29 that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. An unnamed military official of an unspecified country told CNN on August 29 that Ukrainian forces liberated Pravdyne, Nova Dmytrivka, and Tomyna Balka (northwest of Kherson City) and Arkhanhelske (along the Inhulets River). ISW will readjust the maps when more open sources confirm the liberation of these settlements. ISW extended Ukrainian counteroffensives to Sukhyi Stavok based on several claims from Russian milbloggers that Ukrainian forces liberated the settlement on August 29.

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

Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing to recruit, form, and deploy volunteer battalions to Ukraine. Local media reported that the Orenburg Oblast-based "Ermak" Cossack volunteer battalion deployed to a final staging area near the border with Ukraine on September 2. liv Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov announced that the Chechen 78th Motorized Rifle Regiment (subordinate to the Southern Military District's 42nd Motorized Rifle Division) completed its formation on September 3. lv



Russian authorities are reportedly increasingly recruiting employees of Russian state-owned entities for "volunteer" military service in Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on August 3 that the Kremlin provided new unspecified norms to Russian state companies to facilitate the selection of "volunteers" and ordered the Russian Railways company to generate up to 10,000 new candidates for short-term military service contracts among its civilian employees. These efforts represent further attempts by Russian authorities to use existing structures to pressure Russians into signing short-term contracts without having to carry out general mobilization.

Russian authorities are also continuing to recruit volunteers from unconventional sources to circumvent conducting general mobilization. Russian outlet *Vot Tak* reported on September 1 that

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and founder Dmitry Utkin personally visited penal colonies in Rostov and Ivano Oblasts on unspecified dates and recruited approximately 1000 prisoners for the war in Ukraine. Vot Tak added that Prigozhin plans to create a special unit for low-status citizens from Russian prisons. Russian news source *The Insider* reported on September 2 that a former Russian prisoner sentenced to 25 years for gang activity, including five murders, posthumously received high Russian and Luhansk/Donetsk Peoples' Republics honors for military service in Ukraine. Viii Ukrainian forces have previously captured former Russian convicts pressed into military service. Russian news organization *Rotunda* reported that a homeless shelter in Saint Petersburg received requests from recruiters to distribute recruitment pamphlets. Rotunda further cited messages from an unspecified Ministry of Defense recruitment group that they would consider new contracts for servicemembers previously dismissed from the army due to breach of contract.

Ukrainian special forces are reportedly increasingly able to conduct minor raids across the border into Russia, possibly disrupting Russian logistics and forcing Russian forces to redeploy to secure the border. Social media footage on September 2 depicted a Ukrainian raid into Russia from Sumy Oblast, Ukraine, to lay mines and destroy an MDK-3 trench digger. \(^{\text{lxii}}\) One post claimed that Ukrainian forces can "come and go as they please" across the border, though this is almost certainly an exaggeration and Ukrainian cross-border raids likely remain limited. \(^{\text{lxiii}}\) Western news outlets first reported in late June that Ukrainian special forces began conducting operations in Russian territory. \(^{\text{lxii}}\)

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of occupied areas; set conditions for potential annexation into the Russian Federation or some other future political arrangement of Moscow's choosing)

Administration officials in Russian proxy republics continue to struggle with the provision of basic administrative necessities in occupied areas. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin fired an inspector and severely reprimanded the head of Kirovskyi District in Donetsk City on September 3 due to their failure to solve ongoing water supply problems in Kirovskyi District. DNR authorities have previously blamed Ukrainian shelling for damaging or cutting power to water filtration plants. Ixvi Russian and proxy authorities have faced repeated difficulties supplying water to occupied Ukrainian territory, but the degradation of water supplies in Donetsk City itself, which Russian forces have occupied for eight years, indicates mounting challenges.

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to prepare for annexation referenda. Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Head Yaroslav Yanushevich stated that occupation authorities are going door-to-door in residential areas in Velyka Lepetykha, Kherson Oblast (on the left bank of the Dnipro River), and forcing civilians to fill out questionnaires to obtain a Russian passport. Russian authorities can use civilian data to monitor dissent and coerce cooperation with the occupation governments. Ixviii The occupation Election Commission of Zaporizhia Oblast announced that it received samples of voting equipment, including voting booths and transparent ballot boxes, to further prepare for the Zaporizhia Oblast annexation referendum. Ixix Russian occupation authorities are however unlikely to be able to carry out large-scale referenda despite ongoing preparations, as ISW has previously assessed. Ixx

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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v https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-10

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xi https://t.me/khersonskaODA/935

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xiv https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=911510949808190I; https://t.me/landforcesofukraine/3505; https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1565985251305947136

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