

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 20
Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird
April 20, 6pm ET

Russian forces made minor advances in the ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine on April 19, seizing several small towns and advancing into the key frontline towns of Rubizhne and Popasna. Russian forces continued major assaults with heavy air and artillery support but are continuing to build the logistics and command-and-control capabilities necessary for a larger offensive. Russian forces have not achieved any major breakthroughs, nor have they demonstrated any new capability to conduct multiple successful, simultaneous advances. Russian forces additionally made grinding progress against remaining Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Works and announced plans for a May 9 Victory Day parade in the city – indicating Russian forces will declare victory in Mariupol by that date at the latest.

Key Takeaways

- **Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine secured minor gains in the last 24 hours, taking parts of the key frontline towns of Rubizhne and Popasna.**
- **Ukrainian forces reported the presence of small numbers of Syrian or Libyan mercenaries fighting in Popasna (eastern Ukraine), likely individual recruits fighting under the umbrella of the Wagner Group rather than larger units.**
- **Russian forces made incremental advances in Mariupol and continued to set conditions to declare victory in the city by –at the latest – May 9.**
- **Russian forces made minor advances around Izyum but have not secured any major breakthroughs.**

Russian forces may be preparing to conscript Ukrainian citizens amid continuing recruitment challenges. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on April 20 that Russian occupation forces are planning to hold pseudo-referendums in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts to declare a forced mobilization and “throw ‘mobilized’ Ukrainians to the hottest parts of the front.”^[1] If confirmed, this effort is highly unlikely to generate meaningful combat power and will provoke an uptick in protests and partisan actions against Russian forces in these regions. The GUR additionally reported that Russia's FSB is conducting a purge of the political leadership of the LNR in retaliation for its failure to achieve military objectives since February 24.^[2]

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.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 20, 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.

ISW has updated its assessment of the four primary efforts Russian forces are engaged in at this time:

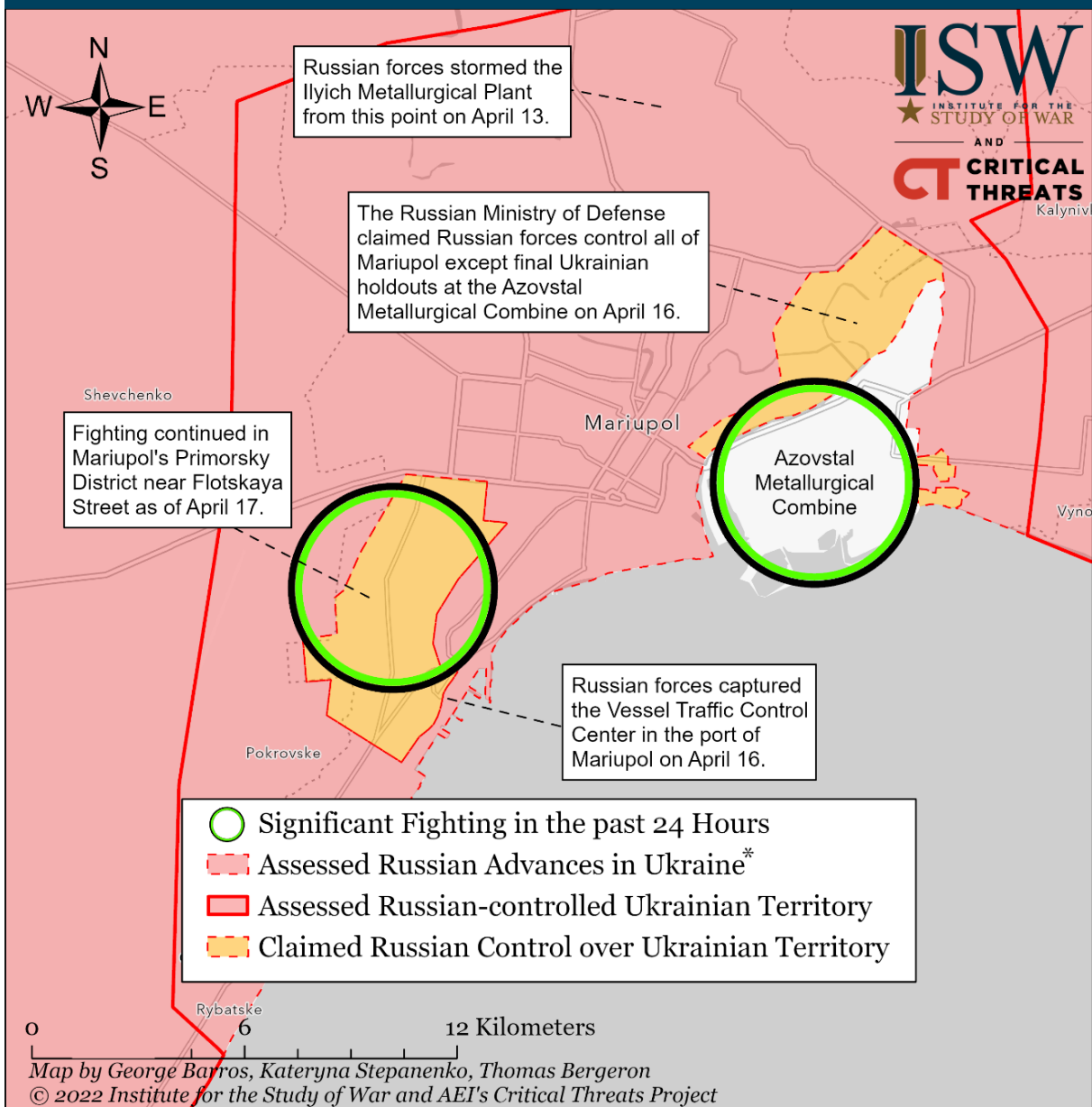
- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate supporting efforts);
- Supporting effort 1—Kharkiv and Izyum;
- Supporting effort 2—Southern axis;
- Supporting effort 3—Sumy and northeastern Ukraine.

Main effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate main effort – Mariupol (Russian objective: Capture Mariupol and reduce the Ukrainian defenders)

Russian forces made marginal gains in assaults against the Azovstal Steel Plant on April 20.[3] Video footage depicted Russian Naval Infantry and other mechanized units fighting on the outskirts of the plant.[4] Russian aircraft continued to heavily target the Azovstal plant.[5] Pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that DNR militia and potentially Russian Special Operations forces are "clearing" the Azovstal Plant of Ukrainian sources, but we cannot confirm if Russian forces have been able to take portions of the plant itself.[6] Notably, DNR-appointed occupation authorities of Mariupol announced on April 20 that Russian and DNR forces will hold a "Victory Day" parade in Mariupol on May 9.[7] Russian forces may undertake hasty and poorly-organized offensive actions to clear Azovstal before this date.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Mariupol as of April 20, 2022, 3:00 ET



Russian forces continue their grinding advance into Mariupol, which they have encircled and are bombarding. Russian forces began penetrating Mariupol's city center on March 24. Ukraine's 36th Marine Brigade reported escaping encirclement at the Ilyich Metallurgical Plant and reuniting with the Ukrainian Azov Regiment on April 12, prompting Russian reports of mass Ukrainian surrender. Russian forces advanced toward the Port of Mariupol from southern and northern directions on April 15 and April 16, likely to encircle the remaining Ukrainian forces. Russia's Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces control all of Mariupol except the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine on April 16. Mariupol's remaining defenders refused a Russian ultimatum to surrender by 1300 local time on April 17. Mariupol's Ukrainian defenders will likely fight to the last man at the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine in the coming hours and possibly days.

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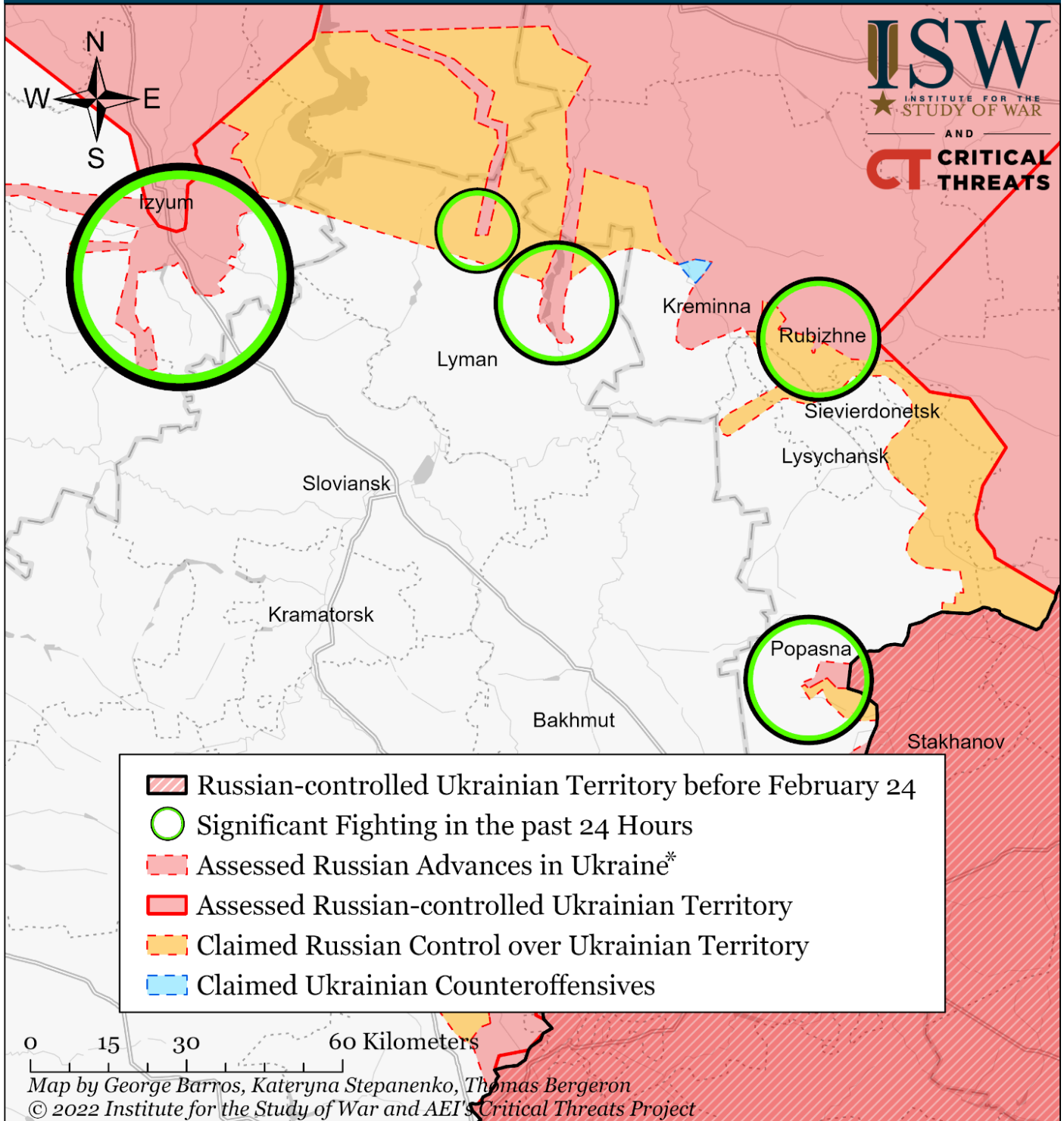
Subordinate main effort – Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations concentrated on Rubizhne, Popasna, and Malinka and likely captured several outlying suburbs of Severodonetsk on April 20.^[8] Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Chechen and LNR troops took full control of Rubizhne on April 20, but ISW is unable to independently verify this claim, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported Ukrainian forces remained in control of Rubizhne an hour before Kadyrov’s claim.^[9] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 20 that Russian forces are actively fighting in Torske and Zelena Dolyna, two towns west of Russian positions in Rubizhne.^[10] Pro-Russian sources additionally claimed that Russian forces took control of Kreminna and Stara Krasnyanka, west of Rubizhne, on April 20.^[11]

Russian forces continued attempts to advance into Popasna and reportedly captured residential sectors of the city.^[12] A Ukrainian officer and military blogger posted images of what he claimed to be dead Libyan mercenaries in Popasna on April 20, and Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov reported that Ukrainian forces killed 20-25 “Libyan and Syrian mercenaries” in Popasna.^[13] Danilov stated he thinks Russia has deployed only 300-500 Syrian and Libyan mercenaries to the frontline. ISW has not observed any deployments of cohesive units of Syrian or Libyan fighters, and these recruits are likely individual fighters operating under the umbrella of the Wagner Group. Russian forces additionally conducted unsuccessful attacks north towards Temirivka and Hulyaipole on April 20, likely attempting to begin an encirclement of Ukrainian forces near Donetsk city.^[14]

Russian forces are continuing to deploy reinforcements to eastern Ukraine and prepare for further offensive actions. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 20 that elements of Russia’s 90th Tank Division, 41st Combined Arms Army, and 232nd Rocket Artillery Brigade deployed into Ukraine from Russia.^[15] The General Staff additionally reported that Russian forces are reconnoitering routes to prep for further offensives towards Lyman and Sloviansk (west of Severodonetsk).^[16]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of April 20, 2022, 3:00 ET



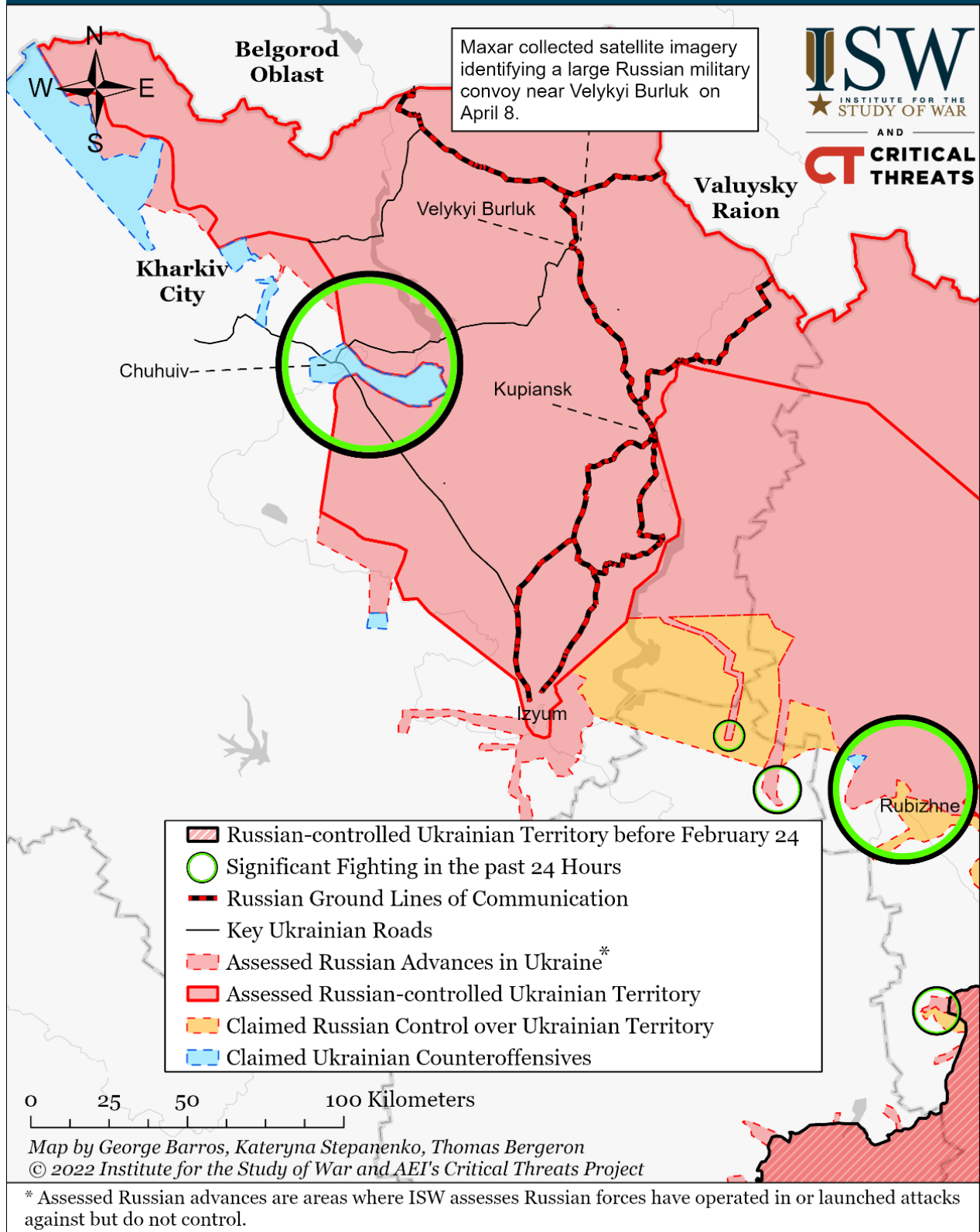
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Thomas Bergeron
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Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum: (Russian objective: Advance southeast to support Russian operations in Luhansk Oblast; defend ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to the Izyum axis)

Russian forces continued to shell areas of Kharkiv Oblast and partially block Kharkiv city on April 20.[17] The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces mounted attacks south and southwest of Izyum with "partial success," indicating localized advances.[18] Russian forces are continuing to take losses over the course of such attempted offensives in Kharkiv Oblast, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that a battalion tactical group (BTG) of the 237th Tank Regiment of the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division withdrew from Kharkiv Oblast back to its permanent deployment point in Belgorod, Russia due to heavy combat losses.[19]

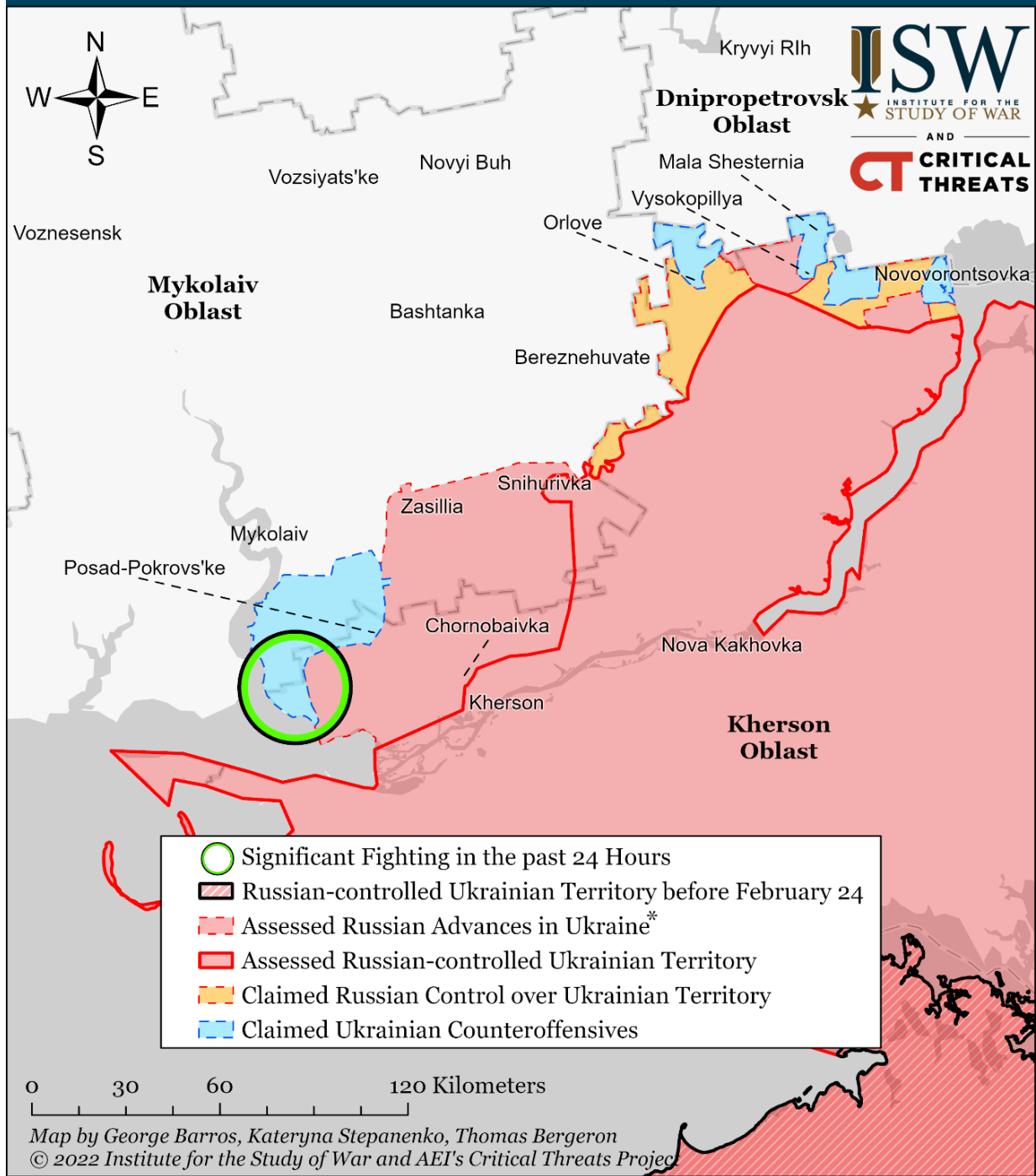
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Supporting Effort #2—Southern axis: (Objective: Defend Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks)

Russian forces attacked Ukrainian positions in Oleksandrivka, west of Kherson city, and may have secured minor advances on April 20.^[20] Russian forces are likely conducting localized attacks to reduce Ukrainian pressure on Kherson city, rather than resuming major offensive operations towards Mykolayiv.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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Note: We have updated our map in northern Kherson Oblast to recode area north of Nova Kakhovka as Russian-controlled territory based on observing new reports of Russian occupation activities in villages in these areas. Russian forces have controlled this area before April 20, but we have only just acquired sufficient evidence and clarity on Russian operations to reflect them accurately in the map of April 20.

Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine: (Russian objective: Withdraw combat power in good order for redeployment to eastern Ukraine)

There was no significant change in this area in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely continue attacking southeast from Izyum, west from Kreminna and Popasna, and north from Donetsk City via Avdiivka.
- Russian troops and aircraft will continue to pound the Azovstal facility, and Russian officials may declare victory in Mariupol even before the facility is fully cleared.
- Russian forces will likely increase the scale of ground offensive operations in the coming days, but it is too soon to tell how fast they will do so or how large those offensives will be. It is also too soon to assess how the Russians will likely weight their efforts in the arc from Izyum to Donetsk City.

[1] <https://gur.gov.ua/content/putin-planuie-provesty-prymusovu-mobilizatsiiu-na-okupovanykh-terytoriiakh-zaporizkoi-ta-khersonskoi-oblastei.html>.

[2] <https://gur.gov.ua/content/na-foni-nevdach-na-fronti-moskva-rozpochala-chystky-kerivnykiv-lnr.html>.

[3] <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1516793740580605962>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516742253926137857>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516742253926137857>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516739932039041024>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516689834580103169>; https://t.me/anna_news/28924; <https://t.me/izvestia/86285>

[4] <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516742253926137857>;

<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516742253926137857>;

<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516739932039041024>

[5] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>; <https://t.me/zvezdanews/77210>.

[6] <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1516482896890056705>;

<https://twitter.com/zcbrooker/status/1516211346609778695/photo/3>

[7] <https://t.me/stranaua/37648>

[8] <https://t.me/stranaua/37559>; <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1516815244160606214>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>

[9] <https://t.me/istorijaoruzija/56852>; https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/1938; <https://t.me/readovkanews/31468>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>.

[10] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>

[11] https://t.me/nm_dnr/7682; https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/1935

[12] <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/situaciya-v-popasniy/31812758.html?nocache=1>;

<https://t.me/stranaua/37606>.

[13] https://t.me/a_shtirlitz/17714?single; https://t.me/a_shtirlitz/17714

[14] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>; <https://t.me/stranaua/37606>;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk4DIUY9RsY>.

[15] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>.

[16] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>.

[17] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>

[18] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>; <https://t.me/stranaua/37545>.

[19] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>

[20] <https://t.me/stranaua/37606>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk4DIUY9RsY>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/298791202433965>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/299092695737149>;

<https://t.me/stranaua/37606>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk4DIUY9RsY>



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