

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 20, 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.

US President Joe Biden visited Kyiv on February 20 ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Biden met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and announced that the US will provide an additional \$500 million in military assistance to Ukraine, including howitzer shells, anti-tank missiles, air surveillance radars, and other aid.¹ US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that the Biden administration notified Moscow of Biden's visit shortly before his departure for Ukraine for "deconfliction purposes."² Biden's visit and the timing of his trip to Europe clearly signal continued Western support for Ukraine following concerted Russian efforts to deter Western military aid and political support.

Ukrainian officials continue to respond to statements made by unspecified US defense officials on the pace and prospects of the war as it approaches the one-year mark. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on February 20 that Ukraine will continue to defend Bakhmut but "not at any cost."³ Zelensky and Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov also emphasized that Ukrainian troops are continuing to prepare for counteroffensives in the near term.⁴ Zelensky and Reznikov's statements are likely direct responses to unspecified US defense officials, who reportedly told the *Washington Post* on February 14 that the United States is concerned about Ukraine's ability to defend Bakhmut while also pursuing counteroffensive operations.⁵ ISW continues to assess that Ukraine's decision to defend Bakhmut is a strategically sound effort to pin Russian forces in a discrete area of the front and attrit them, Zelensky likely tempered his administration's stance on Bakhmut to make a limited rhetorical concession to US officials.⁶ It has long been clear that Ukraine would not continue to defend Bakhmut at the risk of seeing large numbers of Ukrainian troops encircled in the city, so Zelensky's comment is not likely a real change in Kyiv's strategy.

Verkhovna Rada Committee on National Security, Defense, and Intelligence member Fedir Venislavskyy notably stated on February 19 that Russia has "all combat-ready units on the line of contact in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, and partly in Zaporizhia Oblast," reaffirming the assessment that Russia does not have a large uncommitted combat ready reserves that can be deployed and change the course of operations.⁷ These Ukrainian statements are consistent with ISW's assessment that Ukraine has the capacity to regain the initiative in 2023 with sufficient and timely Western backing.⁸

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed the formal integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR/LNR) militias into the Russian Armed Forces on February 19 in response to growing criticism about reported command changes within the proxy units. The Russian MoD denied reports about the alleged dismissal of officers of the integrated DNR and LNR's 1st and 2nd Army Corps, likely in response to widespread milblogger and proxy criticisms about the reported dismissal of DNR Militia Spokesman Eduard Basurin on February 17.⁹ Basurin discussed his dismissal in a publicized meeting with Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on February 19 in which he stated that such command changes will "harm" proxy commanders and servicemen.¹⁰ Basurin noted that servicemen in occupied Donetsk Oblast trust their

commanders and would be demoralized if those commanders were replaced by people they did not know. Basurin stated that it is important to warn about ongoing command changes and questioned who would be defending Russia if the newly integrated proxy units refuse to fight as a result of the Russian professionalization effort.

The decision to reorganize the DNR and LNR militias amid an ongoing offensive likely indicates that the Russian MoD does not fully grasp the scale of the underlying challenges of integrating irregular forces into the professional military, especially during a period of intense combat operations. The DNR and LNR forces are currently fighting in Donbas in support of Russia's goal to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and such untimely restructuring of the command structure may reduce cohesion within the proxy units and between them and Russian forces. Russian forces have suffered from their own shortcomings in unit cohesion and will likely face greater tensions with the proxy militias that were not trained to professional standards. Proxy elements have also repeatedly complained about receiving unequal treatment from the Kremlin, and Russian mobilized servicemen have recently accused the DNR and LNR formations of abuse and discrimination in turn.¹¹ This reorganization may upset and demoralize proxy elements that have enjoyed a great deal of independence as irregular militants for nine years and may risk alienating them amidst the offensive for Donbas. Russia needs DNR and LNR units—which have not been historically effective forces—to maintain positions in western Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as conventional Russian troops pursue an offensive on select frontlines in eastern Ukraine.

The restructuring of proxy militias also suggests that the Russian military command is trying to achieve all desired reforms while the Russian MoD has the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian military command may recognize that Russia does not have the combat capability to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in the short term and is likely trying to rush through some planned reforms before Putin again becomes disillusioned with the Russian MoD's inability to secure meaningful advances. The Russian military command may alternatively be deluded about its ability to rapidly and seamlessly complete professionalization objectives to aid the ongoing offensive and may not perceive the problems inherent in conducting a significant military reform while pursuing difficult offensive operations. The Russian MoD has been trying to simultaneously professionalize different aspects of Russian forces by targeting Wagner's influence, integrating mobilized servicemen into proxy and conventional formations, and introducing personal grooming standards and operational security procedures.¹² These efforts would be logical if Russia had initiated them during peacetime but are a bureaucratic burden that will likely generate further discontent toward the already heavily scrutinized Russian MoD. The Russian military command is embarking on too many drastic changes that will either require time or will cause significant tensions that will hinder their full execution even as it orders its forces to conduct extremely challenging military operations that are likely beyond their capabilities in any event.

The Russian military command has likely cut off Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's independent access to artillery shells and heavy weaponry as part of the effort to professionalize Russian conventional forces. Prigozhin stated on February 20 that the Russian military command had stopped providing artillery shells to Wagner as a result of his "complicated relationships" with unspecified but likely Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials.¹³ Prigozhin claimed that Wagner has "complete shell hunger" as a result of Russian military officials ignoring his demands and introducing new limitations and restrictions on his ammunition procurement. Prigozhin claimed that Wagner servicemen are experiencing twice the number of

casualties (without specifying the comparandum) because they are unable to suppress Ukrainian artillery fire and noted that Wagner had sufficient ammunition during the tenure of former Commander of the Russian Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin. Prigozhin denied rumors of having a personal relationship with Surovikin, but noted that he used to meet up with and call Surovikin when he visited the frontlines. Prigozhin also noted that Wagner had been receiving some weapons from unnamed generals and officers who had violated the military code to help him. The Russian MoD has also reportedly cut off Prigozhin's ability to recruit prisoners and train at select training grounds belonging to the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁴ A milblogger observed that Prigozhin was repeating the experience of former Russian officer Igor Girkin, who led proxy units in Donbas in 2014, claiming that the Russian MoD had also cut off Girkin's access to reinforcements and supplies while blaming him for losing ground in Slovyansk.¹⁵

Prigozhin's appeal may have misrepresented the devastating impact of the lack of artillery ammunition on Wagner to mask his true frustrations with Wagner's inability to have and operate its own artillery systems independent of conventional Russian units.

Prigozhin demanded that the Russian military leadership set aside its principles and save Wagner servicemen by providing shells. It is unlikely that Wagner is operating in the Bakhmut direction completely without artillery support, however. Wagner is likely receiving artillery support from the conventional Russian forces that have been supporting Wagner operations in the area since the Wagner offensive culminated.¹⁶ The Russian military command may have stripped Wagner's privileges to independently use its own artillery systems, which Prigozhin sought to portray as disregard for Wagner servicemen's lives. Prigozhin's rhetoric was partially successful as some prominent milbloggers expressed solidarity with Wagner—even stating that those who boycott Prigozhin are boycotting Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁷ Others complained that paramilitaries should not be allowed to replace conventional forces.¹⁸ Prigozhin's appeal further indicates that Wagner is dependent on the provision of heavy weapons and ammunition by the Russian MoD, and further confirms that Wagner is not the sole force operating around Bakhmut given the ongoing artillery fire in the area.

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov likely publicized a meeting he had with Prigozhin on an unspecified date in order to assuage Prigozhin's possible anger at Kadyrov's likely refusal to join Prigozhin's informational campaign against the Russian MoD.

Kadyrov posted a picture on February 19 showing him meeting with Prigozhin on an unspecified date and applauded the Wagner Group for its success and work in Ukraine.¹⁹ Kadyrov's endorsement of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group followed Kadyrov's equally effusive endorsement of the Russian MoD on February 18, suggesting that Kadyrov is likely trying to maintain his relationships with the MoD and the Kremlin without incurring Prigozhin's criticism.²⁰ Kadyrov did not state that he intends to form a paramilitary company in an unspecified timeframe, as some Western reporting of his comments suggested. Kadyrov rhetorically commented that he might compete with Prigozhin's Wagner Group one day following the completion of his work in the civil service as Chechen Republic head.²¹ Kadyrov has governed the Chechen Republic as its dictator since 2007 and is unlikely to leave his position there any time soon unless he improbably receives a promotion of some sort—certainly not by choice. His observation about "competing" with Wagner was thus likely meant as a compliment to Prigozhin rather than a statement of Kadyrov's own intentions. Kadyrov already effectively has his own paramilitary structure in the form of the Chechen combat units that he raises and over which he appears to retain some command and control.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the US government is concerned that China is considering providing lethal aid to Russia. Blinken stated in an interview with *CBS News* on February 19 that he told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference that Chinese lethal support to Russia would have "serious consequences" for US-Chinese relations.²² The US Treasury and State Department have sanctioned Chinese Changsha Tianyi Space Science and Technology Research Institute Company (Spacety China) for providing satellite imagery of Ukraine to Wagner.²³

The Russian MoD likely responded to a call for the Russian military to systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) by setting possible informational conditions for strikes aimed at forcing emergency shutdowns at these NPPs. The Russian MoD falsely claimed on February 19th that Ukrainian officials are planning false-flag attacks at hazardous radiation facilities in Ukraine to accuse Russian forces of conducting indiscriminate strikes on these facilities in violation of the Convention on Nuclear Safety ahead of the 11th emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly on February 22.²⁴ A prominent Russian news aggregator recently called on the Russian military to systematically target electrical substations external to Ukrainian NPPs in order to force Ukrainian officials to conduct emergency shutdowns at the plants.²⁵ The Russian MoD may be starting an information operation aimed at setting informational conditions for conducting such strikes and the potential radiological incidents that could result from systematically depriving the facilities of energy. The attacks advocated by the Russian news aggregator would not likely generate radiological incidents, but attacking anywhere near nuclear power plants always carries some risk of such incidents. Previous Russian strikes against critical infrastructure facilities in Ukraine do not suggest that Russian forces are systematically targeting electrical infrastructure specifically associated with NPPs at this time, however. The Russian MoD's statement may also be attempting to set informational conditions for a potential radiological incident at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in light of reports that Russia's draining of the Kakhovka Reservoir may be putting the ZNPP's cooling system in peril.²⁶

Key Takeaways

- **US President Joe Biden visited Kyiv on February 20 ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine signaling continued US commitment to supporting Ukraine in its efforts to liberate its territory.**
- **Ukrainian officials continue to respond to statements made by unspecified US defense officials on the pace and prospects of the war as it approaches the one-year mark.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the formal integration of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics' (DNR/LNR) militias into the Russian Armed Forces on February 19 in response to growing criticism about reported command changes within the proxy units.**
- **The decision to reorganize the DNR and LNR militias amidst an ongoing offensive likely indicates that the Russian MoD does not understand the scale of the challenges of integrating irregular forces into a professional military during intensive combat operations.**
- **The restructuring of proxy militias suggests that the Russian military command is trying to achieve all its desired reforms while the Russian MoD has the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin.**

- **The Russian military command has likely cut off Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's independent access to artillery shells and heavy weaponry as part of the effort to professionalize the Russian conventional forces.**
- **Prigozhin may have misrepresented the devastating impact of the lack of artillery ammunition on Wagner to mask his true frustrations with Wagner's inability to have and operate its own artillery systems.**
- **Chechen Republic head Kadyrov likely attempted to assuage Prigozhin's possible anger at Kadyrov's likely refusal to join Prigozhin's informational campaign against the Russian MoD.**
- **US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the US government is concerned about China's possible consideration of sending lethal aid to Russia.**
- **The Russian MoD likely responded to a call for the Russian military to systematically target electrical infrastructure supporting Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) by setting possible informational conditions for strikes aimed at forcing emergency shutdowns at these NPPs.**
- **Russian forces continued ground assaults along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut as well as in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and western Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to militarize the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).**
- **Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces may be struggling to repair air defense systems deployed in Ukraine.**
- **Russian occupation authorities are using an "anti-terrorist" commission to justify seizing and nationalizing assets in occupied Crimea for economic and military benefit.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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)

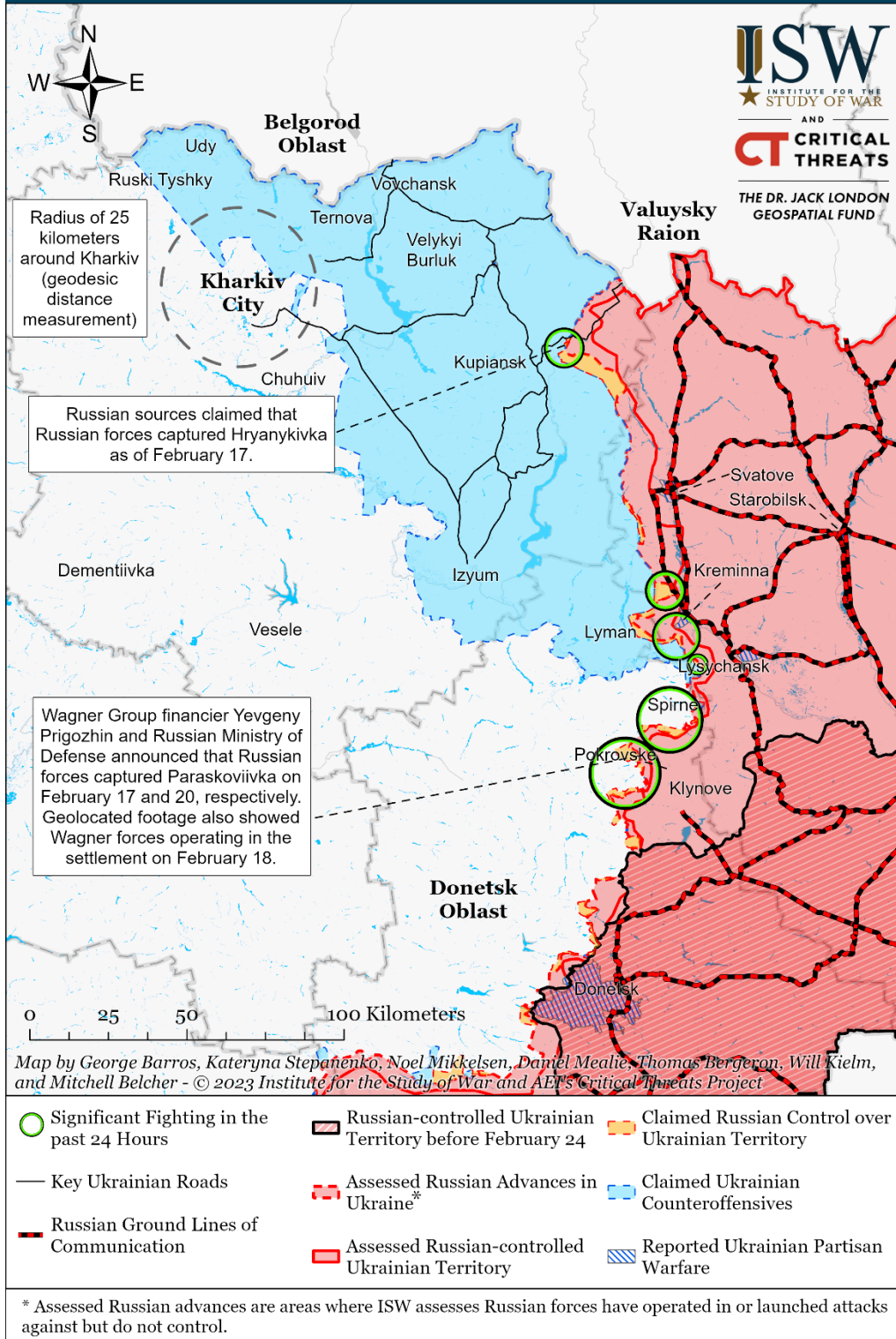
Former Russian officer and prominent milblogger Igor Girkin claimed on February 19 that Russian forces crossed the border into Kharkiv Oblast from Russia (Russian troops already occupy part of Kharkiv from Luhansk Oblast) and occupied one or two unspecified border settlements.²⁷ Girkin claimed that skirmishes between Ukrainian and Russian forces along the border of Sumy Oblast intensified.²⁸ ISW has no independent confirmation that Russian forces have crossed the border into Kharkiv Oblast and seized settlements but has previously assessed that the threat of cross-border raids from Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts into northern and northeastern Ukraine is likely an attempt to force Ukraine to deploy limited elements to these areas to protect against such attacks, thus dispersing Ukrainian troops as Russian forces continue offensive operations elsewhere in the theater.²⁹ The Russian military does not have the combat power necessary to launch a new major assault from Ukraine's northern borders at this time.

Russian forces continued ground assaults in the Kupyansk area northwest of Svatove on February 19 and 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled assaults on Hryanykivka (53km northwest of Svatove) and Masyutivka (51km northwest of Svatove).³⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are conducting successful offensive operations in the Kupyansk direction despite their slow pace and that Ukrainian forces announced civilian evacuations in Kupyansk in anticipation of surrendering the settlement.³¹ Russian milbloggers claimed on February 19 that Russian forces conducted positional battles on the Dvorichne-Hryanykivka line toward the Ukrainian bridgehead across the Oskil River.³²

Russian forces continued ground assaults near Kreminna on February 19 and 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled assaults near Kreminna, Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna) and Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna).³³ Geolocated footage posted on February 19 shows that Russian forces have made marginal advances near Torske, 15km west of

Kreminna.³⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed on February 19 that Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) comprise the main strike force near Kreminna.³⁵ It is unclear if VDV forces are reinforcing or relieving elements of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division (144th MRD) that have been engaged in decisive offensive operations on this axis since early January and may be at or near culmination. Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces on the Svatove-Kreminna line are conducting active defense and slowly advancing but are unable to break through Ukrainian lines.³⁶ A Russian source also claimed that Ukrainian forces sent reinforcements to Torske (14km west of Kreminna) in case elements of the 144th MRD resume an assault.³⁷ A milblogger claimed on February 20 that Russian forces tried to advance toward Bilohorivka and Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna), and attacked near Hryhorivka (10km south of Kreminna, Serebrianske forestry area) and Zarichne (17km west of Kreminna).³⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of February 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

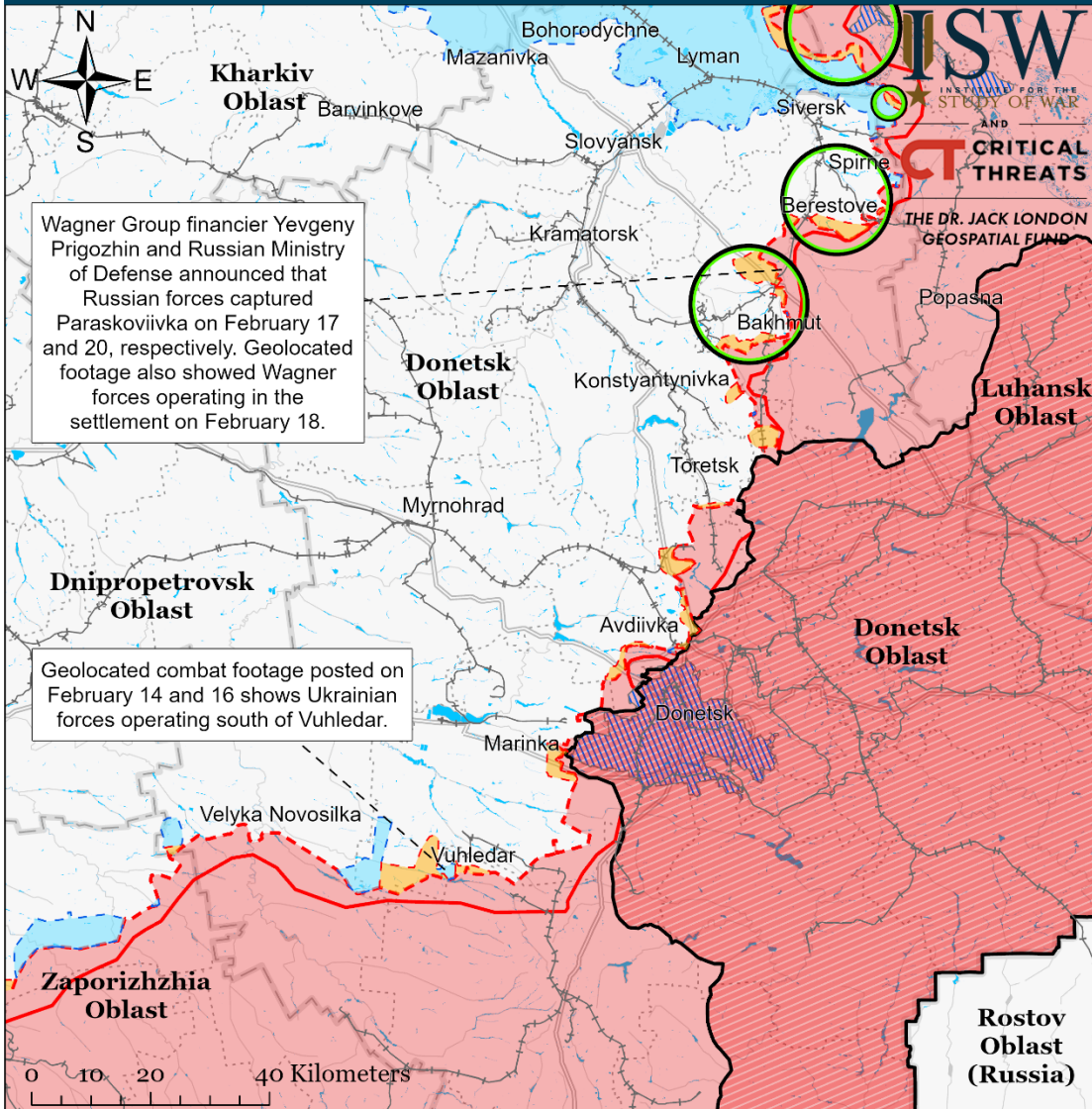
Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and made incremental tactical gains between February 19 and 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks near Bakhmut itself; north of Bakhmut near Vasyukivka (10km north), Dubovo-Vasylivka (8km north) Berkhivka (6km north); northeast of Bakhmut near Vyimka (22km northeast) and Fedorivka (15km northeast); and west of Bakhmut near Ivanviske (5km west) and Chasiv Yar (10km west).³⁹ Geolocated footage posted on February 19 shows Russian forces removing a Ukrainian flag from a building in Paraskoviivka (5km north of Bakhmut), confirming Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s February 17 claim that Wagner captured the settlement.⁴⁰ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a statement on February 20 that "volunteers of assault detachments," paratroopers, and Southern Military District (SMD) units took Paraskoviivka, continuing the Russian MoD’s efforts to undermine Wagner’s role in securing gains around Bakhmut by calling the group "volunteers of assault detachments."⁴¹ Additional geolocated footage posted on February 19 shows marginal Russian advances on the eastern and northeastern outskirts of Bakhmut.⁴² Russian sources claimed that following the capture of Paraskoviivka, Wagner forces are attacking toward Berkhivka and Yahidne (on the northwestern outskirts of Bakhmut) in order to encircle the northern tip of Bakhmut.⁴³ Russian milbloggers additionally reported that Russian troops are advancing along certain streets in eastern and southwestern Bakhmut and trying to regain lost positions on the Chasiv Yar-Ivanivske line near the T0504 Kostyantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway following a Ukrainian counterattack in the area.⁴⁴

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on February 19 and 20. The Ukrainian General Staff did not confirm any ground attacks in this area on either February 19 or 20 but noted that Russian forces continued unspecified offensive actions in the Avdiivka direction.⁴⁵ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City on February 19 and cut a section of the N20 Donetsk City-Kramatorsk highway near Vesele, northeast of Avdiivka.⁴⁶ Russian milbloggers emphasized that the situation in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area is very difficult and has taken on a positional nature due to continued Ukrainian counterattacks and the pervasive exhaustion of troops of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR).⁴⁷ Russian milbloggers continued to discuss purported Russian operations in the western part of Marinka on both February 19 and 20.⁴⁸

Russian forces continued offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast on February 19 and 20. The Ukrainian General Staff did not confirm any ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City in the Vuhledar area on either February 19 or 20 but noted that Russian troops continued unspecified offensive operations in this direction.⁴⁹ Geolocated footage posted on February 19 shows that troops of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade have reached certain settlements on the southern outskirts of Vuhledar, which is consistent with Russian milblogger claims that naval infantry elements are attacking towards the outskirts of Vuhledar from the direction of Mykilske, just southeast of Vuhledar.⁵⁰ Several milbloggers circulated footage on February 20 reportedly of Russian naval infantry elements storming a Ukrainian trench and engaging in small-arms fire at point-blank range near Vuhledar.⁵¹ A Russian milblogger noted that the offensive in this area has "bogged down" despite active actions of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade and 338th Guards Rocket Artillery Brigade (Eastern

Military District).⁵² Several Russian sources emphasized the role of TOS-1A thermobaric artillery systems in supporting Russian operations in this sector.⁵³

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of February 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Russian Ministry of Defense announced that Russian forces captured Paraskoviivka on February 17 and 20, respectively. Geolocated footage also showed Wagner forces operating in the settlement on February 18.

Geolocated combat footage posted on February 14 and 16 shows Ukrainian forces operating south of Vuhledar.

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

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

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

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

Russian sources reportedly conducted a limited ground attack in Zaporizhia Oblast on February 19. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a localized offensive near Novodanylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁴ Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral advisor Petro Andryushchenko stated on February 20 that Russian forces are concentrating forces near Orikhiv and will likely deploy roughly 15 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) worth of personnel to the area by February 24.⁵⁵ Andryushchenko claimed that Russian forces are concentrating these forces in preparation for offensives from the direction of Robotyne (14km south of Orikhiv), Pyatikhatky (25km southwest of Orikhiv), and Novopokrivka (15km southeast of Orikhiv).⁵⁶ ISW has not observed Russian forces recently concentrating forces in the Orikhiv area.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to militarize the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Ukrainian state nuclear energy agency Energoatom reported on February 20 that Russian forces deployed more than 600 mobilized personnel and cadets to the ZNPP and are continuing to build fortifications and military facilities around the ZNPP's dry spent nuclear fuel storage facility.⁵⁷ Energoatom also reported that Russian forces have stationed a machine-gun position on the roof of the fifth power unit at the ZNPP.⁵⁸ Russian forces may be increasing efforts to militarize the ZNPP to increase pressure on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in negotiations concerning the creation of a safety zone around the ZNPP, likely hoping to prompt the IAEA to concede on formally recognizing Russia's control of the plant.

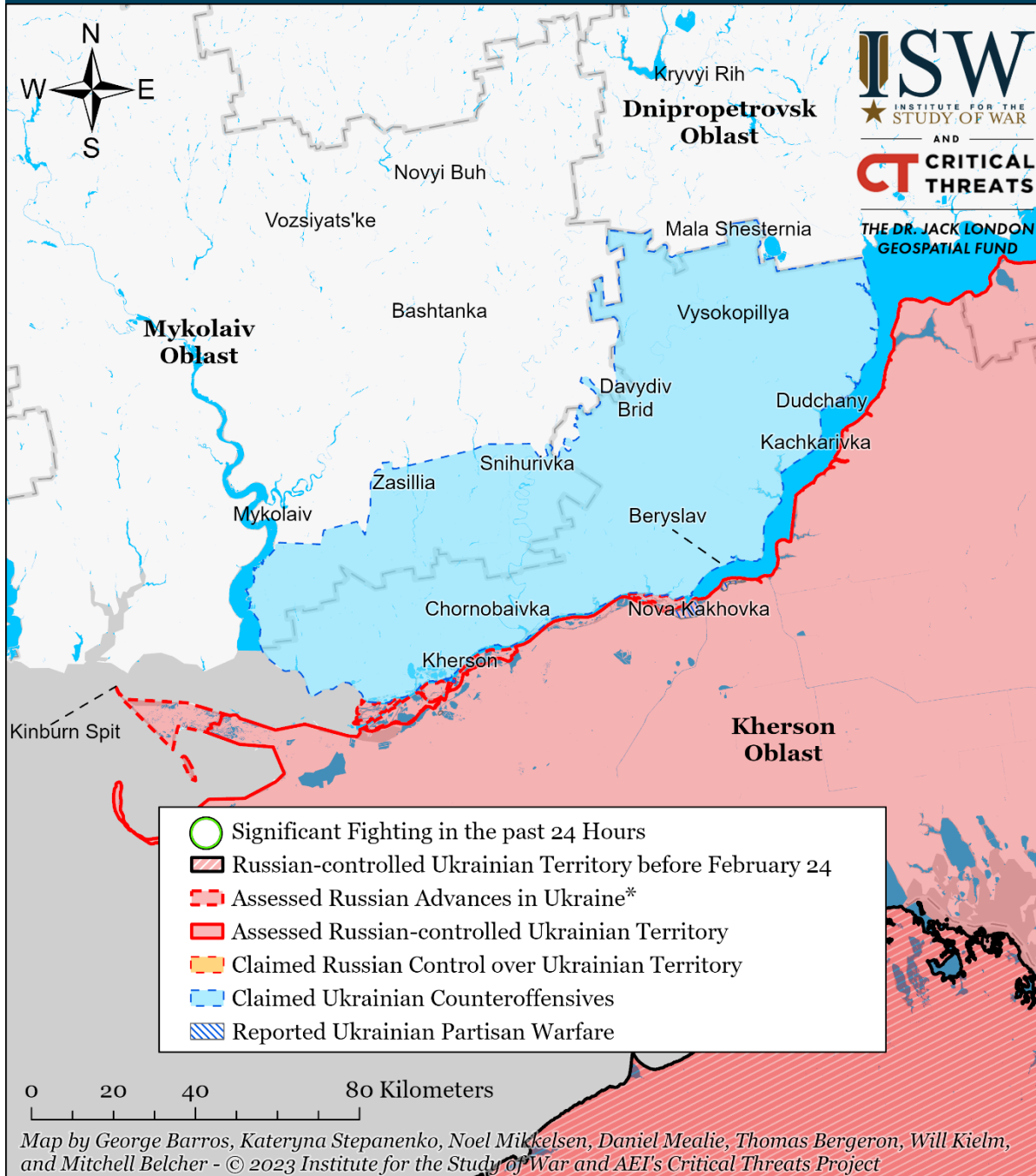
Ukrainian officials reported that Russian reconnaissance groups are decreasing their activity in the Dnipro River delta near Kherson City. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk reported on February 20 that Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups are continuing to unsuccessfully attempt to establish positions in the delta but that the overall pace of their activities is declining.⁵⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces destroyed a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempting to land on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in the direction of Dudchany, Kherson Oblast on February 18.⁶⁰

Russian officials formally accused Ukrainian special services of conducting a terrorist attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge in Crimea on October 8, 2022. Russian Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin stated on February 19 that the committee's investigation into the October 8 explosion on the bridge proves that Ukrainian Special services planned and coordinated a terrorist attack.⁶¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin used the explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge as a pretense to justify the start of Russia's campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, and the Kremlin may use the findings of this investigation as a pretense for future actions in Ukraine.⁶²

Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing to target Russian logistics in southern Ukraine. Humenyuk reported on February 20 that Ukrainian forces are continuing to target Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to inhibit logistical capacity in southern Ukraine.⁶³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 20 that Ukrainian Special Operations Forces elements actively use drones to strike Russian logistics on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River near Kherson City.⁶⁴

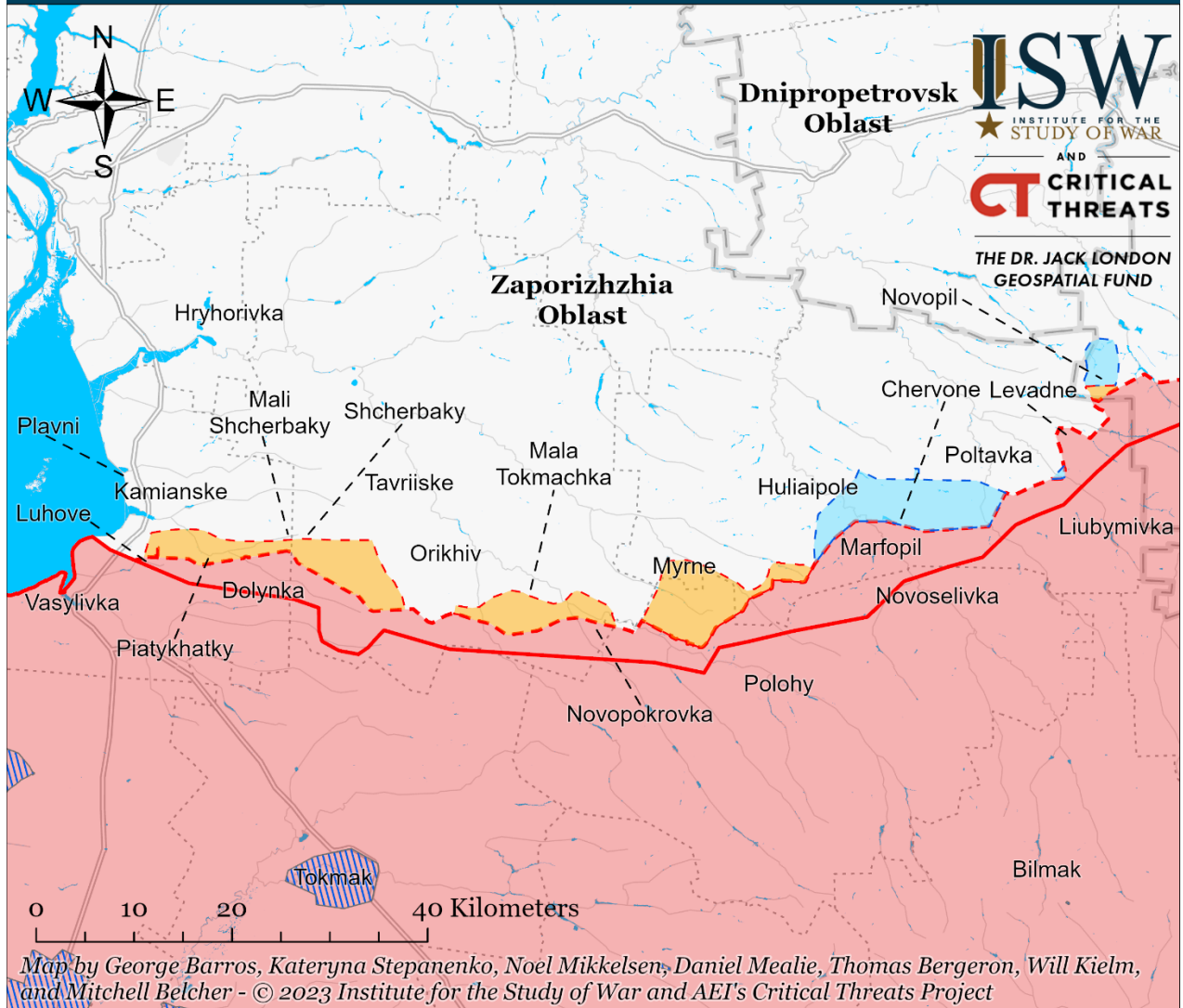
Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, and Kherson oblasts on February 19 and 20.⁶⁵ Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces struck Kherson City, Ochakiv, Mykolaiv Oblast, and Nikopol, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.⁶⁶ Humenyuk reported that Russian forces have increased their shelling of Kherson Oblast as well as in the area of the Kinburn Spit in Mykolaiv Oblast over the past week.⁶⁷ Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported on February 20 that Russian forces used incendiary and phosphorous munitions while shelling settlements on the west (right) bank in Kherson Oblast.⁶⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces shelled Hola Prystan, on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River, on February 19 as part of an ongoing effort to accuse Ukrainian forces of striking civilian targets in occupied areas and engender anti-Ukrainian sentiment amongst residents.⁶⁹










Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of February 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of February 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



-  Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
-  Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
-  Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
-  Key Ukrainian Roads
-  Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine
-  Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
-  Russian Ground Lines of Communication *
-  Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
-  Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

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

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces may be struggling to repair air defense systems deployed in Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 19 that Russian forces are unable to conduct routine maintenance of S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems due to difficulties in delivering components and conducting repairs under combat conditions.⁷⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces withdrew some S-300 systems from deployment points in Ukraine and have transferred them to repair facilities in Russia.⁷¹ The reported transfer of the S-300 systems suggests that Russian forces have used these systems so heavily that maintenance capabilities at lower echelons are inadequate to repair them. The reported Russian withdrawal of these systems from frontline areas may weaken Russian air defense capabilities in Ukraine and could be an indicator that Russian forces are facing wider maintenance issues for air defense systems.

Russian officials claimed that Russian manufacturers are producing more strategic missile systems. Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec head Sergey Chemezov claimed on February 18 that Russia has increased the production of Kinzhal hypersonic missile systems and that Rostec now produces huge volumes of products for the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), in some cases increasing production of certain products by a factor of 50.⁷² Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov previously reported that Russian forces have 84 percent of their stock of Kinzhal missiles remaining and that Russia has produced 47 percent of its pre-war stock of the missiles since the beginning of the invasion.⁷³ The claimed increased Russian production of strategic hypersonic missiles may allow the Russian military to conduct a further series of missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure but will not grant Russian forces the tactical capability to improve their offensive operations in Ukraine this winter.

Russian sources continue to report that Iranian cargo flights are regularly arriving in Moscow, likely delivering Iranian-made weapons systems or components. A Russian milblogger claimed that an Iranian Saha Airlines cargo plane flew from Tehran to Moscow on February 18 and that an Iranian Il-76TD flew from Tehran to Moscow on February 20, its fourth flight to Moscow in the last 10 days.⁷⁴ ISW continues to assess that Russia is relying on the Iranian military for technological support and weapons systems for use in Ukraine.

A reported scandal involving a Russian drone manufacturer's improper facilities prompted calls for mass drone production. A Russian source claimed on February 19 that Lancet drone manufacturer and Kalashnikov Concern subsidiary Zala Aero is involved in a scandal for producing drones in the same building as a public sauna and regularly disregarding safety precautions at a facility in Izhevsk, Udmurt Republic.⁷⁵ Russian forces use Lancet drones in loitering munitions strikes against Ukrainian targets throughout Ukraine, and improper facilities may impact the effectiveness of these systems. Another Russian drone and weapons manufacturer, Lobaev Arms, responded to the situation and called for Russian officials to allow manufacturers to mass produce drones in whatever facilities are available, including within the Kremlin itself.⁷⁶

Ukrainian officials released an audio intercept on February 19 detailing significant desertion among Wagner Group convict recruits and continued poor operational security among Russian personnel in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) released an audio intercept on February 19 in which a Russian soldier states that 200 Wagner Group convict recruits deserted with their

weapons from positions roughly 50km away from Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast.⁷⁷ The Russian soldier also states that 80 Russian personnel died in an unspecified area of Donetsk Oblast when their cell phone use allowed Ukrainian forces to locate them and conduct a strike on their location.⁷⁸

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 authorities are using an "anti-terrorist" commission to justify seizing and nationalizing assets in occupied Crimea for economic and military benefit. Crimea occupation State Council Chair Vladimir Konstantinov announced on February 19 that the Crimean occupation administration has nationalized 700 objects of moveable property and real estate belonging to Ukrainian and Baltic businessmen, whom they have accused of committing unfriendly actions against Russia and maintaining connections with the Ukrainian government.⁷⁹ Konstantinov stated that the Crimean anti-terrorist commission seized land plots, buildings, premises, objects of unfinished construction, warehouses, and other property, amplifying assessments that the goods are worth tens of billions of rubles (at least \$10 million) and that the assets will provide significant support to the Crimean occupation administration and Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.⁸⁰

Russian officials and occupation authorities continue to lean on the education apparatus to consolidate societal control of occupied territories. Head of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Leonid Pasechnik claimed on February 20 that Russian officials will appropriate 5,000 rubles (approximately \$66) per month to Russian teachers in occupied territories, the same amount guaranteed to teachers in Russia.⁸¹ Pasechnik claimed that teachers in occupied territories will soon receive remuneration for their mentorship for January and February, emphasizing that teachers are "second mothers" to school-aged children.⁸² Pasechnik noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared 2023 the "Year of the Teacher and Mentor."⁸³ Kherson Oblast Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo also met with Deputy Chairman of the All-Russian Public and State Organization for Russian Military History Nikolai Osvienko on February 19 to discuss the preservation of the Kherson Oblast's military-historical heritage and the application of patriotic education for children.⁸⁴ Osvienko reportedly created a Russian Military Historical Society branch for occupied Kherson Oblast that will engage with the education for young people.

Russian occupation officials from occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts attended a "We Are Together" meeting with First Deputy Chief of Staff of Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriienko in Rostov-on-Don on February 18. The Donetsk People's Republic Head (DNR) Denis Pushilin, Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik, Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Administration Head Yevgeny Balitsky, and Saldo informally met with volunteers and representatives of the Russian humanitarian movement "People's Movement" (Nadorodnyi Front).⁸⁵ Saldo stated that People's Movement is now heavily involved in providing direct assistance to the Russian forces in Kherson Oblast by bringing ammunition and equipment.⁸⁶ Kireyenko claimed that more than 250,000 volunteers are involved in the "We Are Together" movement throughout Russia, and Pasechnik discussed the development of the volunteer movements.⁸⁷

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.)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and the Belarusian Security Council are considering a law on the creation of a Belarusian People's Militia. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin stated on February 20 that the Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs worked together on the draft law to protect rural settlements and individual district cities.⁸⁸ Khrenin stated that everyone should be able to take up arms to protect their homes and claimed that the People's Militia may grow to 100,000 to 150,000 people.⁸⁹ Khrenin also notably differentiated the People's Militia from Territorial Defense forces and noted that the People's Militia will operate on a more localized basis than traditional Territorial Defense operations.⁹⁰ This draft law is likely an effort by Lukashenko and his administration to install localized and grassroots law enforcement systems and is therefore likely an effort to signal to a domestic audience as opposed to setting conditions for involvement in the war in Ukraine.

Polish authorities will close the last operating border checkpoint with Belarus on February 21. The Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration announced on February 20 that, starting on February 21, it will begin limiting the movement of Belarusian vehicles through the Kukuryki-Kozłowicze crossing in response to Belarusian restrictions on Polish carriers.⁹¹

The Belarusian 19th Separate Mechanized Brigade traveled up to 180km on February 19 as part of a combat readiness check.⁹²

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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