Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 22, 2023 Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan February 22, 9 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin revived his imperialistic narrative that Russia is fighting for Russia's "historic frontiers" on February 22, a narrative that he had similarly voiced in his speech before the re-invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Putin gave a four-minute speech at the rally for the Defenders of the Fatherland Day in Moscow, stating that there is currently "a battle going on for [Russia's] historical frontiers, for [Russian] people." Putin had similarly called territories adjacent to Russia "[Russian] historical land" when announcing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin did not offer other notable remarks on the progress of the war or discuss concrete frontline objectives. The concept of Russia's "historical frontiers" could be used to justify aggression against almost any of Russia's neighbors, as well as Moldova and the Central Asian states that do not share a border with Russia, since all of them contain territory that belonged at one point to either the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire or both.

Putin's speech also followed his February 21 decree revoking his May 2012 edict on Russia's position on Moldovan territorial integrity.³ Putin revoked his 2012 orders to the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) to firmly uphold the principles of the United Nations Charter—which require the development of friendly relations between states on the basis of equality, respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity—and Russia's commitment to actively seek ways to resolve the Transnistria issue on the basis of respect for Moldovan territorial integrity. The revocation of the 2012 decree does not indicate that Putin intends to attack Moldova—an undertaking for which he lacks the military capability—although it does point toward an escalation in his ongoing efforts to undermine the Moldovan state.

The new decree also canceled the provision of "consistent implementation" of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (START) with the United States. Putin stated that he signed the decree "in order to ensure the national interest of the Russian Federation in connection with the profound changes taking place in international relations."

Ukrainian intelligence officials continue to assess that Russia lacks the combat power and resources needed to sustain its new offensive operations in Ukraine. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky told the *AP* that Russian forces intensified their offensive operations in at least four or five directions in Luhansk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts at the beginning of February but have yet to achieve any significant successes despite continuing to exhaust their personnel and resources.⁴ Skibitsky added that Russian forces are concentrating their efforts on capturing Kupyansk, Lyman, Bakhmut, Marinka, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.

GUR Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview with *Forbes* that the Russian offensive is so ineffective as to be almost unnoticeable and noted that Russian forces have been rationing shells and ammunition to sustain assaults on the Bakhmut, Lyman, and Vuhledar directions while conserving shells in other areas.⁵ Budanov's statement coincides with ISW's assessment that Russian forces are prioritizing the Bakhmut and Lyman directions and have yet to launch a significant push to advance in

areas west of Donetsk City.⁶ Budanov added that Russian artillery stocks decreased to 30 percent of the total number of shells. He claimed that Russia has imported a test batch of artillery shells from Iran and is currently attempting to procure another batch of 20,000 shells. Budanov previously estimated that Russian forces fired about 20,000 shells per day in late December 2022, down from 60,000 shells per day during the early stages of the war.⁷ Budanov also observed that Russian tactics around Bakhmut and Vuhledar have largely shifted from artillery and mechanized attacks to infantry assaults due to the lack of shells and armored vehicles. Budanov noted that Russia had committed more than 90 percent of its 316,000 mobilized personnel to the frontlines, which further confirms Western and ISW's assessments that Russian forces do not have significant untapped combat-ready reserves.⁸ Budanov noted that the Kremlin's stated objective of producing 800 tanks per year is unrealistic and stated that Russia can only produce 40 cruise missiles per month, which they use up in a single round of missile strikes. Russia has already lost at least 1,500 tanks and possibly as many as 2,000, as ISW has previously reported.⁹

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of mistreating Wagner forces, igniting intense backlash in the information space and supporting ISW's prior assessments of a growing Wagner-MoD fissure. 10 Prigozhin accused the MoD of lying about supplying all unconventional units with requested artillery ammunition, claiming instead that Wagner forces receive only 20 percent of the artillery ammunition promised to them. 11 Prigozhin claimed that the MoD's statement is "spitting at the Wagner private military company (PMC)" and an attempt to hide the MoD's "crimes against fighters" who achieve battlefield successes near Bakhmut.¹² Prigozhin published a dossier contrasting Wagner forces' artillery ammunition usage with what the MoD distributes to Wagner forces, an image showing Wagner fighters dead supposedly from the lack of artillery support during assaults, and an interview response claiming that the support of certain regional heads, including Crimean Occupation Governor Sergev Aksyonov, has helped raise awareness of Wagner forces' ammunition shortages.¹³ Prigozhin called on the MoD to fulfill its promises rather than "deceiving" the Russian public.14 Many prominent Russian milbloggers jumped to defend Prigozhin, spreading Prigozhin's claims and accusing the MoD of failing to support the supposedly most effective Russian forces in Ukraine. ¹⁵ One milblogger noted that the Russian MoD is now treating Wagner forces in the same way that the MoD treats its conventional forces in Ukraine, a clear step down from Prigozhin's prior posturing as the true victor near Bakhmut.¹⁶ Prigozhin's complaints also confirm that his earlier boasts of Wagner's independence from the Russian MoD were lies.¹⁷ Another Kremlin-affiliated milblogger criticized the rivalry between the Wagner Group and the MoD as counterproductive.18

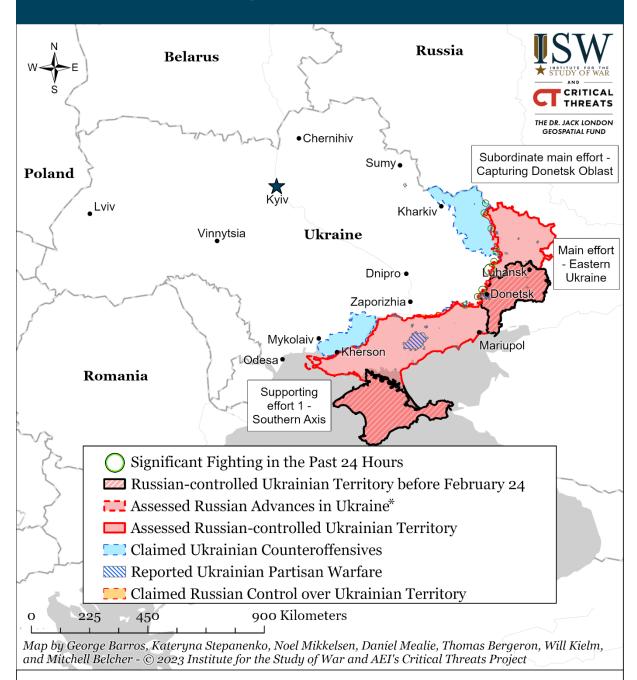
US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that the US government is concerned about the potential strengthening of Russia-China relations. Price stated that the United States is concerned because "these two countries share a vision... in which big countries could bully small countries [and] borders could be redrawn by force." Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Director Wang Yi in Moscow on February 22. Kremlin newswire *TASS* reported that Yi said "no matter how the international situation changes, China remains committed to... maintaining positive trends in the development of its relations with Russia." 22

Key Takeaways

 Russian President Vladimir Putin revived his imperialistic narrative that Russia is fighting for Russia's "historic frontiers" on February 22, a narrative that he had similarly voiced in his speech before the re-invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

- Putin's speech also followed his February 21 decree revoking his May 2012 edict on Russia's position toward Moldovan territorial integrity.
- Ukrainian intelligence officials continue to assess that Russia lacks the combat power and resources necessary to sustain its new offensive operations in Ukraine.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin directly accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of mistreating Wagner forces, igniting intense backlash in the information space and supporting ISW's prior assessments of a growing Wagner-MoD fissure.
- US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that the US government is concerned about the potential strengthening of Russia-China relations.
- Russian forces are likely attempting to increase the tempo of their offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Lyman line.
- Some Russian sources refuted other Russian claims about the intensification of offensive operations in western Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks throughout the Donetsk Oblast front line and secured marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut.
- Russian and occupation authorities continue to publicly indicate that Russian forces are focusing on defensive operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and Crimea.
- US intelligence officials stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin may mobilize significantly more Russian personnel.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 22, 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.

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

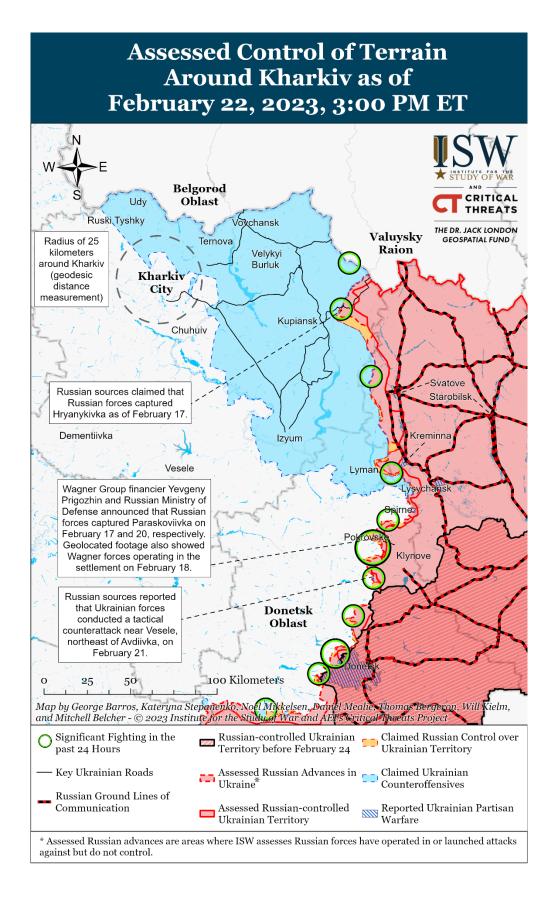
Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

<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 reportedly conducted reconnaissance and sabotage operations on the Ukrainian-Russian international border and northeast of Kupyansk on February 22. A Russian milblogger also claimed that some unnamed areas of the Russia-Kharkiv Oblast border are contested between Russian and Ukrainian forces. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian reconnaissance-in-force in the vicinity of Bolohivka (about 40km northeast of Kupyansk), forcing the sabotage and reconnaissance group to retreat to Russia. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that a Russian Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted to infiltrate the Fyholivka area (approximately 22km northeast of Kupyansk). Geolocated footage showed Russian SPETSNAZ of the 6th Combined Arms Army correcting artillery fire on Ukrainian positions near Fyholivka and Novomlynsk (approximately 20km northeast of Kupyansk).

Russian forces are likely attempting to increase the tempo of their offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Lyman line. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces in the Kupyansk, Siversk, and Lyman directions went on the offensive and advanced up to 5km deep into some unnamed areas. ²⁷ The milblogger added that the terrain, forest, and Ukrainian fortifications are complicating the Russian offensive on the western Luhansk Oblast frontline. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces conducted several unsuccessful offensive operations in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions and that Ukrainian forces repelled assaults on Kuzemivka (17km northwest of Svatove) and Dibrova (about 10km southeast of Lyman). ²⁸ Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that two Russian tank and infantry companies unsuccessfully attempted to break through in the Kreminna direction. ²⁹ Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik also announced that occupation officials turned off mobile internet due to "security issues," and a prominent nationalist source claimed that this announcement indicates that Russian forces have likely started an offensive in the Lyman direction. ³⁰

Some Russian sources refuted other Russian claims about the intensification of the offensive operations in western Luhansk Oblast on February 22. One Russian milblogger noted that elements of the Russian 144th Motorized Rifle Division, 3rd Motorized Rifle Division, and airborne forces are successfully conducting defensive operations in the Kreminna forest and have made some limited advances that cannot be categorized as a major offensive. Another milblogger claimed that Russian forces launched preemptive strikes on Ukrainian forces that thwarted Ukrainian counteroffensive operations originating from Stelmakhivka, Myasozharivka, and Andriivka (all approximately 19km west or northwest of Svatove). What also not observed transfers of new units to the western Luhansk Oblast frontline and specifically has not observed the commitment of elements of the 2nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division that ISW assesses constitute the primary available reserve force of the Western Military District in Luhansk.



<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)

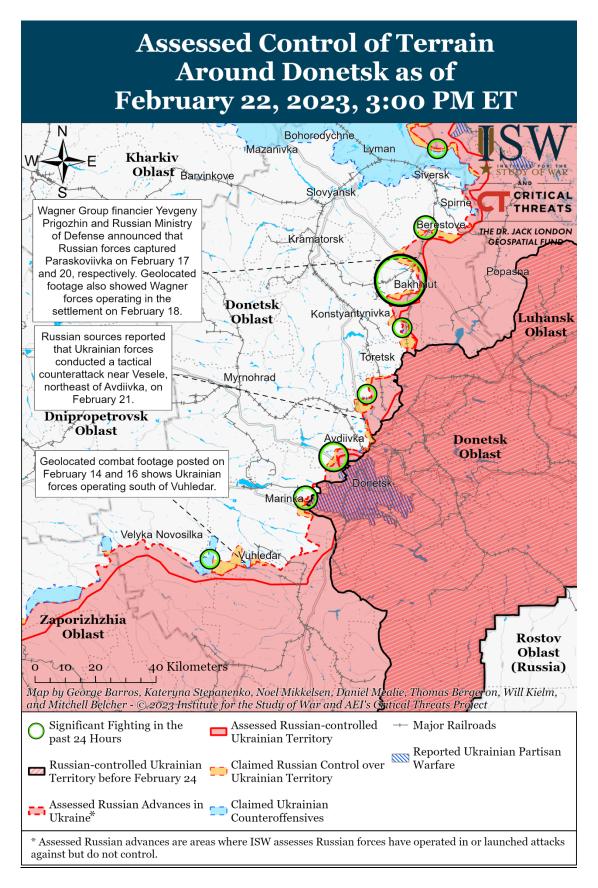
Russian forces continued to make marginal advances near Bakhmut on February 22. Geolocated footage posted on February 22 shows that Russian forces advanced towards the E40 highway south of Zaliznyanske and north of Bakhmut.³³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Bakhmut; northwest of Bakhmut near Dubovo-Vasylivka(6km northwest) and Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest); north of Bakhmut near Yahidne (less than 2km north), Fedorivka (17km north), and Berkhivka (4km north); and south of Bakhmut near Kurdyumivka (11km south).³⁴ Russian milbloggers continued to claim that Russian forces made marginal advances north of Bakhmut. Some milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group forces advanced from the Stupky rail station to the outskirts of Yahidne and entrenched along the E40 highway near Berkhivka.³⁵ Other milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces seized half of Berkhivka and that fighting continues in the centers of Berkhivka and Yahidne.³⁶ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces may capture the rest of Berkhivka soon but did not provide a timeline.³⁷ Other milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces are advancing on Zaliznvanske (10km north of Bakhmut).³⁸ Russian forces' continued focus on making territorial gains north of Bakhmut supports ISW's assessment that Russian forces may have given up on encircling Bakhmut and are instead attempting to enter Bakhmut from the north.39

Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited counterattacks against Wagner positions 3km southwest of Ivanivske (2km southwest of Bakhmut).⁴⁰ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that an unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces formation from Tula, likely an element of the 106th Guards Airborne Division, is operating in the Donetsk direction.⁴¹ Some Russian milbloggers have previously claimed that Wagner Group units have embedded with the Russian 51st Guards Airborne Regiment (106th Guards Airborne Division) and that mobilized personnel from the 51st injured themselves in order to escape fighting alongside Wagner forces.⁴²

Russian forces increased their tempo of operations around Avdiivka but did not secure significant territorial gains on February 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched an unsuccessful offensive against Novobakhmutivka, Vodyane, Nevelske, and Marinka.⁴³ Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces made slight advances north of Vesele (6km north of Avdiivka).⁴⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made slight territorial gains towards the N20 highway west of Novobakhmutivka near Keramik.⁴⁵

Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on February 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched an unsuccessful offensive operation near Preshystiivka.⁴⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that battles continue on the southern outskirts of Vuhledar and between Pavlivka and Mykilske and that Ukrainian forces control the dominant high ground in the area.⁴⁷

Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces launched a large strike campaign against military targets in cities in occupied Donetsk Oblast overnight on February 21 and 22. Milbloggers posted footage purporting to show Ukrainian strikes against targets in Donetsk City, Makiivka, Horlivka, Khartsyzk, Debaltseve, Ilovaisk, and Mariupol—all within range of regular HIMARS rockets and most (apart from Mariupol) within range of rocket artillery.⁴⁸

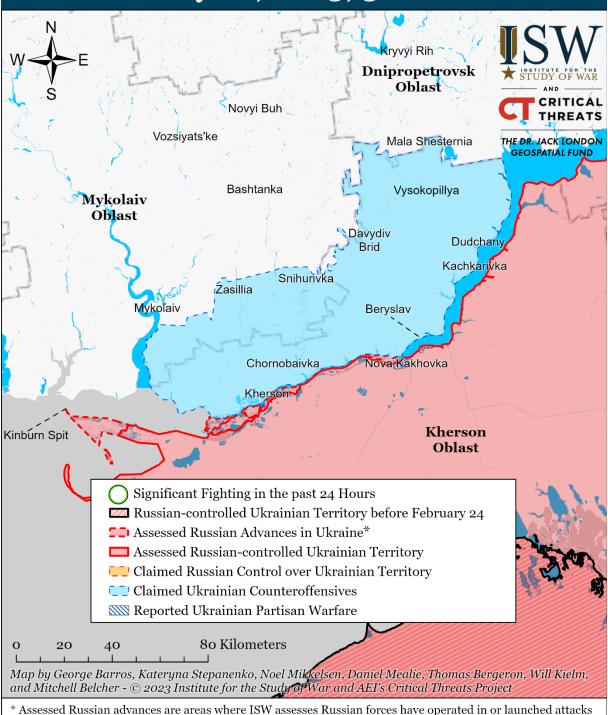


<u>Supporting Effort—Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian and occupation authorities continue to publicly indicate that Russian forces are still focusing on defensive operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast and Crimea. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that unspecified Southern Military District (SMD) tank units in east bank Kherson Oblast struck Ukrainian positions on the west (right) bank.⁴⁹ Russian milbloggers published footage on February 22 purportedly of the Russian 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, SMD) striking Ukrainian positions in Kherson Oblast, likely to demonstrate continued dedication to southern Ukraine amid reports of increasing combat operations in eastern Ukraine.⁵⁰ ISW previously observed the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade operating in Kherson Oblast in October 2022 before the Ukrainian liberation of Kherson City, suggesting that this unit remains committed to the Kherson Oblast frontline.⁵¹ Crimean Occupation Governor Sergey Aksyonov announced that Russian forces will erect defensive fortifications along the Crimean administrative border as a preventative measure.⁵² It is not clear what eventuality Aksyonov imagines these fortifications would prevent.

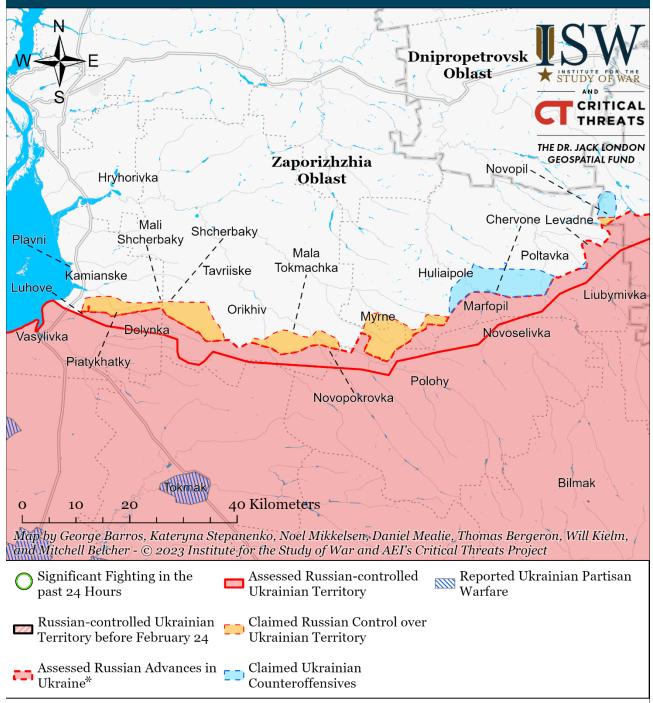
A Russian source claimed that Russian forces conducted a surprise attack near Kamianske (30km south of Zaporizhzhia City) on February 22.⁵³ Russian forces continued routine fire west of Huliapole in Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, and Mykolaiv oblasts.⁵⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of February 22, 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 Zaporizhia as of February 22, 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.

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

US intelligence officials stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin may mobilize significantly more Russian personnel. *The New York Times* reported on February 20, citing US intelligence officials, that Russian President Vladimir Putin may mobilize hundreds of thousands more Russians in addition to the previously mobilized 300,000 personnel. *The New York Times* connected the prospect of mass mobilization with Putin's doubling down on anti-West and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. ISW has previously assessed that Putin has delayed announcing the second mobilization wave out of concern for the stability of his rule and has continued to favor crypto-mobilization practices. Putin has likely ordered Russian state organs to set all necessary conditions for a large-scale mobilization, as ISW has previously reported, but Russia lacks the capacity to train hundreds of thousands of new soldiers or mobilized reservists and will not be able to equip them with artillery or armored vehicles in 2023 barring implausible changes in the Russian defense industry or the willingness of Russian partners such as China to provide lethal aid on a massive scale.

US officials stated that Russian forces are struggling to replace heavy equipment losses due to effective sanctions. The US Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo stated on February 21 that Russia has lost over 50 percent of its tanks and is running out of munitions. Adeyemo stated that US sanctions and export controls have degraded Russian forces' ability to replace over 9,000 pieces of lost military equipment, forced production shutdowns at key defense facilities, and caused shortages of essential components for tanks and aircraft production.⁵⁷

Russians reportedly increased their migration to the United States after the Kremlin announced partial mobilization in September 2022. *CNN* reported that almost 22,000 Russian citizens have attempted to enter the United States through its southern border since Putin's partial mobilization announcement.⁵⁸ The report, which cites US Customs and Border Patrol data, stated that the number of Russian citizens attempting to enter the United States nearly tripled since the start of partial mobilization.⁵⁹

The Kremlin continues to expand social benefit programs for the families of Russian soldiers who participate in the war in Ukraine in accordance with Putin's February 21 address. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin signed a decree on February 21 extending the same social support measures given to families of mobilized personnel to the families of contract and volunteer personnel. Russian State Duma Committee on Labor, Social Policy, and Veterans Affairs Chairperson Yaroslav Nilov announced on February 21 that the State Fund for Assistance to the Families of Fallen Soldiers and Veterans of the "Special Military Operation" will operate in every region of Russia.

<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)

Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights Dmytro Lyubinets accused Russian Ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova on February 22 of possible involvement in international schemes to remove Ukrainian children from other states to Russia. 62 Lyubinets stated that Moskalkova and her

subordinates may have been involved in the forced removal of two Ukrainian children from Austria to Moscow in January 2023. Western Austrian authorities (Tyrol) announced in January the suspension and investigation of a Tyrol official accused of organizing the removal of two Ukrainian children from Austria to their mother in Moscow without coordinating with the responsible Ukrainian authorities.⁶³ Austrian authorities denied state involvement in the removal of these two Ukrainian children.⁶⁴

Russian President Vladimir Putin promoted several Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Ministry of Internal Affairs officials to senior police and military ranks on February 22.⁶⁵ Putin promoted DNR Internal Minister and Kaskad Operational Tactical Combat Formation (OTBF) commander Alexey Dikiy to police colonel general, several DNR Deputy Internal Ministers to police major generals, and DNR Internal Forces Commander Oleg Makarchenko to major general. Former DNR official Igor Girkin characterized Dikiy as inept and criticized Putin for promoting Dikiy.⁶⁶

<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.

Nothing significant to report.

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.

https://meduza.dot.io/news/2023/02/22/putin-vystupil-na-mitinge-v-podderzhku-voyny

² http://en.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67843

³ <u>http://publication</u> dot pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202302210001; <u>https://meduza</u> dot io/feature/2023/02/21/putin-otmenil-svoy-ukaz-2012-goda-o-vneshnepoliticheskom-kurse-rossii

⁴ https://gur dot gov.ua/content/aktyvizatsiia-okupatsiinykh-viisk-rozpochalasia-shche-na-pochatku-liutoho.html

⁵ <u>https://forbes</u> dot ua/war-in-ukraine/rosiya-vzhe-rozpochala-velikiy-nastup-chi-zmozhe-rf-mobilizuvati-shche-500-000-moldativ-koli-zakinchitsya-viyna-velike-intervyu-kirila-budanova-21022023-11881

⁶ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-19-2023

⁷ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-31

⁸ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-15-2023

 $^{^9\} https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-9-2023$

¹⁰ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-31-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-22;

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<sup>19</sup> https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-top-diplomat-expects-new-agreements-with-russia-during-moscow-visit-2023-02-22/
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<sup>26</sup> https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1628437457199833092?s=20; https://t.me/obtf_kaskad/1736
<sup>27</sup> https://t.me/notes veterans/8144; https://t.me/notes veterans/8145; https://t.me/kommunist/16011
<sup>28</sup> https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/videos/942148003445151/;
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