Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 24, 2023

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February 24, 7:00pm 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.

The Kremlin did not comment on the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely because Russia has failed to achieve any of its stated objectives and has not made significant territorial gains since July 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his administration made no statements relating to the anniversary even though Putin has made numerous public appearances over the past three days.¹ Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev made inflammatory claims that Russia will win the war and reiterated that it is vital for Russia to achieve its goals to "push back the borders that threaten [Russia] as far as possible, even if they are the borders of Poland."² ISW has previously assessed that the Kremlin has been using Medvedev to sustain information campaigns targeting Western military support for Ukraine and to deflect attention from Russia's military failures.³ Medvedev's statements highlight the fact that the Kremlin is continuing to pursue its unrealistic maximalist goals even though it has no meaningful successes to offer the Russian people after a year of costly war in Ukraine.

Select Russian milbloggers commented on the Kremlin's silence on the first anniversary of the war. Russian former officer and an avid Kremlin critic Igor Girkin criticized Medvedev's statements as delusional and lamented the fact that no one remembers the severe losses Russian airborne troops suffered during the fight for Hostomel Airfield near Kyiv on February 24, 2022.4 Girkin claimed that he had long been forecasting that Russia had embarked upon a protracted and exhausting war. He noted that it is very difficult to defeat a state that receives external support using Russia's unmotivated forces, absent civil society, and strong brainwashing. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger attempted to downplay Russia's military failures expressing thanks that the war revealed shortcomings but distress at the high price paid in Russian blood. The milblogger also amplified the Kremlin's false narrative that the war was necessary to stop supposed Ukrainian "aggression" in Donbas. The milblogger's statements closely mirror comments made by unnamed Kremlin-affiliated officials to *Financial Times* who noted that Putin will try to frame Russia's catastrophic military failures as a necessary learning experience that Russia will use to prepare for future supposed NATO aggression against Russia that Putin purportedly fears.

A Russian source capitalized on China's release of a 12-point peace plan to inaccurately portray China as supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a document on February 24 titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" that called for Ukraine and Russia to respect each other's sovereignty, cease hostilities, resume peace talks, reduce strategic risks, and cease unilateral sanctions. Advisor to the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) head Rodion Miroshnik falsely asserted that China's peace plan insinuated that Ukraine and the West are the aggressors, supporting Russia's framing of the war. China's release of the vague peace plan is likely in support of an ongoing effort balance between supporting Russia and retaining access to European markets by portraying China as a disinterested third-party mediator. The Chinese peace plan is unlikely to be a serious blueprint for a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine.

US intelligence reportedly assesses that China is seriously considering sending weapons to Russia amidst continued pressure from Western sanctions regimes on Russia's defense industrial base (DIB). *CNN* reported on February 24 that sources familiar with the intelligence stated that Chinese officials have not made a final decision on the provision of lethal aid but are discussing the price and scope of the supply of attack drones and ammunition with Russian officials. ¹⁰ Senior US officials reportedly assess that recent intelligence suggests that China is leaning toward providing the equipment to Russia, although based on a bilateral arms sales agreement and not as security assistance. ¹¹ German outlet *Der Spiegel* reported on February 23 that Russian officials are engaged in negotiations with Chinese drone manufacturer Xi'an Bingo Intelligent Aviation Technology for the mass production and delivery of 100 ZT-180 drones to Russian forces by April. ¹² *Der Spiegel* reported that the ZT-180 drone can carry a 35-50kg warhead, suggesting that these drones may be a dual-use technology that Russian forces are seeking to acquire for reconnaissance purposes and not just as loitering munitions or high-precision weapons systems. ¹³ Russian and Chinese officials have reportedly developed plans for the shipment of the drones to Russia under falsified shipping documents labeling the equipment as replacement parts for civil aviation. ¹⁴

Russian officials are likely seeking support from Chinese defense manufacturers due to restrictions that international sanctions regimes have placed on Russia's defense industry. The United Kingdom (UK) government and the US Department of Treasury both announced new sanctions and export ban measures on February 24 specifically targeting industries, entities, and individuals supporting Russian military capabilities. The UK government stated that its new package of export bans aims to block the export of every item that Russia uses on the battlefield in Ukraine and that its new sanctions package would target senior executives of Russian state-owned nuclear power company Rosatom, executives of Russian defense firms, six entities involved in the repair of Russian military equipment, four Russian banks, and Russian elite figures. The US Department of Treasury stated that Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on 22 individuals and 83 entities, 30 of which are reportedly third-country entities and individuals that help Russia evade existing sanctions measures. Intensified Western sanctions regimes will likely continue to constrain Russia's ability to acquire the technology and materiel to maintain a defense industrial base necessary for supporting its war effort in Ukraine.

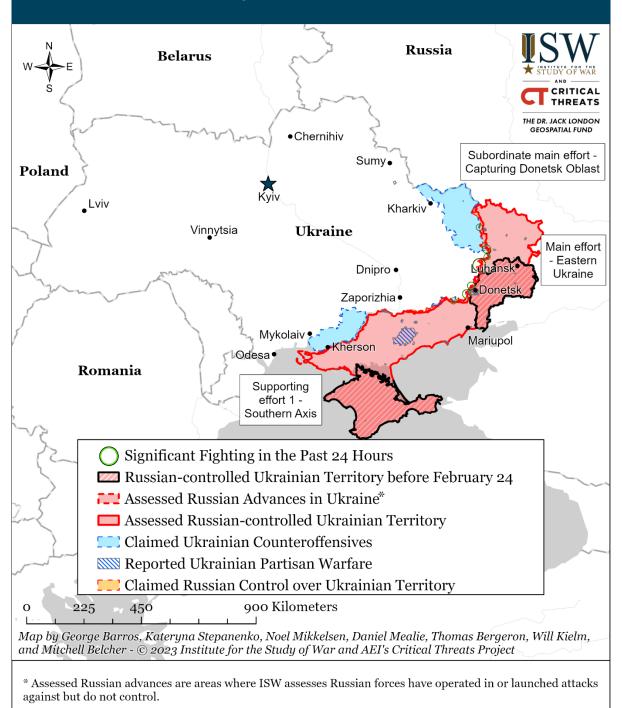
Western governments made a variety of statements on the provision of military aid to Ukraine on February 24. Polish President Andzej Duda reported that Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki delivered the first batch of Leopards to Ukraine as part of the international "tank coalition." Conversely, US Army Minister Christine Wormuth stated that it could take the United States more than a year to deliver M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine due to the production and modernization timeline associated with such tank variants. US National Security Advisory Jake Sullivan stated on February 24 that Russia has already lost its war in Ukraine, but that the provision of F-16 fighter jets, which the Ukrainian government has consistently asked the West for, "are not the key capability" that Ukraine currently needs. Ullivan remarked that the provision of F-16s is not a question of the short-term and instead a question of long-term defensive capabilities. As ISW has previously assessed, the West's material support for Ukraine, particularly the provision of main battle tanks and other critical systems, is essential to enable Ukraine to conduct successful mechanized counteroffensives to liberate Ukrainian people and territory. Continued Western support for Ukraine is crucial to enabling Ukraine to regain the initiative and reengage in successive counteroffensive operations in the near future.

The Kremlin escalated its information conditions-setting for a possible false-flag operation in Russian-occupied Transnistria, Moldova. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) made a second claim on February 23 that Ukrainian forces are intensifying preparations to invade Transnistria following its first such claim earlier in the day.²² The MoD emphasized that the claimed Ukrainian plan poses a significant threat to the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Transnistria. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed on February 24 that Russia will consider any action that threatens Transnistrian security as an attack against Russia.²³ The Kremlin may instead aim to destabilize Moldova, however. Some Russian milbloggers amplified the Kremlin's rhetoric by claiming that the situation along the Ukrainian-Transnistrian border is becoming increasingly tense.²⁴ Moldovan officials continued to deny Russian claims on February 24, characterizing the claims as "aggressive disinformation" or "a psychological operation."²⁵

Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin did not comment on the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, likely because Russia has failed to achieve any of its stated objectives and has not made significant territorial gains since July 2022.
- A Russian source capitalized on China's release of a 12-point peace plan to inaccurately portray China as supporting Russia's war in Ukraine.
- US intelligence reportedly continues to assess that China is seriously considering sending lethal aid to Russia amid continued pressure from Western sanctions regimes on Russia's defense industrial base.
- Western governments made a variety of statements on the provision of military aid to Ukraine on February 24.
- The Kremlin escalated its information condition-setting for a possible false-flag operation in occupied Transnistria, Moldova.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna.
- Russian sources confirmed that Russian forces have split certain Airborne (VDV) force formations across at least two axes of advance.
- Russian forces made marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.
- Ukrainian officials suggested that Russian forces may feel insecure in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.
- Russian authorities continue measures to expand the capacity of Russian peacekeepers.
- Russian sources likely attempted to shift the blame for scandals associated with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commanders to the conventional Russian military.
- Ukrainian partisans likely blew up a railway segment near Poshtove, Crimea.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 24, 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.

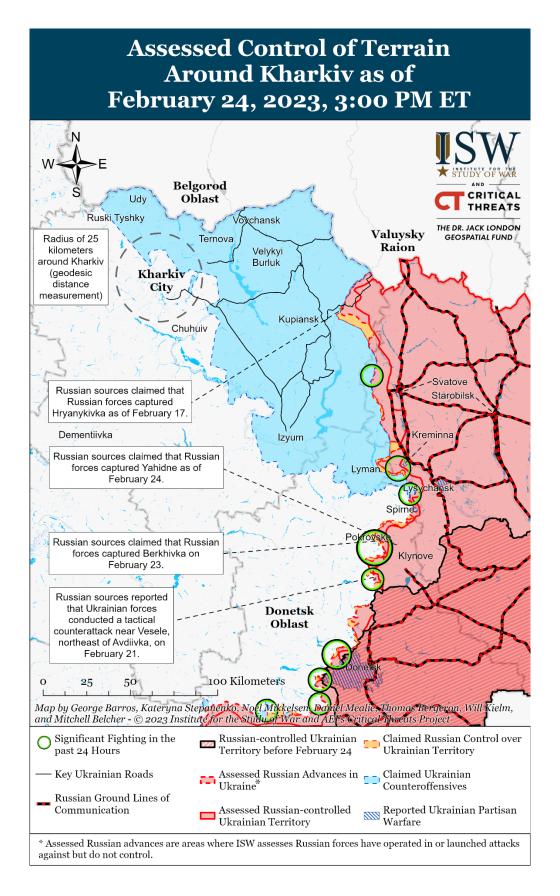
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna on February 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Stelmakhivka (15km northwest of Svatove). Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian ground attack near Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove). The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna), and the Serebrianska forest area (11km south of Kreminna). Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that Russian forces seized an unspecified Ukrainian fortified position near Bilohorivka. One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attacked Bilohorivka and attempted to advance toward Terny (17km northwest of Kreminna) and Makiivka (23km northwest of Kreminna). Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces did not conduct any offensive actions along the Ploshchanka-Makiivka-Zhuravka Balka line (16-23km northwest of Kreminna).

Russian sources confirmed that Russian forces have split certain Airborne (VDV) formations across at least two axes of advance. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on February 23 that unspecified elements of the Russian 76th Airborne Division are operating in unspecified positions on the Svatove-Kreminna line and that VDV units operate along the entire Svatove-Kreminna front.³² The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that unspecified elements of the 76th and 106th Airborne Divisions are operating in the Bakhmut area in Donetsk Oblast, confirming ISW's assessment that the 76th and likely the 106th are not deployed as full division-level formations in either area.³³ Such disaggregation of VDV formations in different sectors of the front contrasts with the deployment of Western Military District motorized rifle divisions as full doctrinal formations and suggests that the Russian military is using its elite forces to plug gaps and as spot reinforcements in key areas.



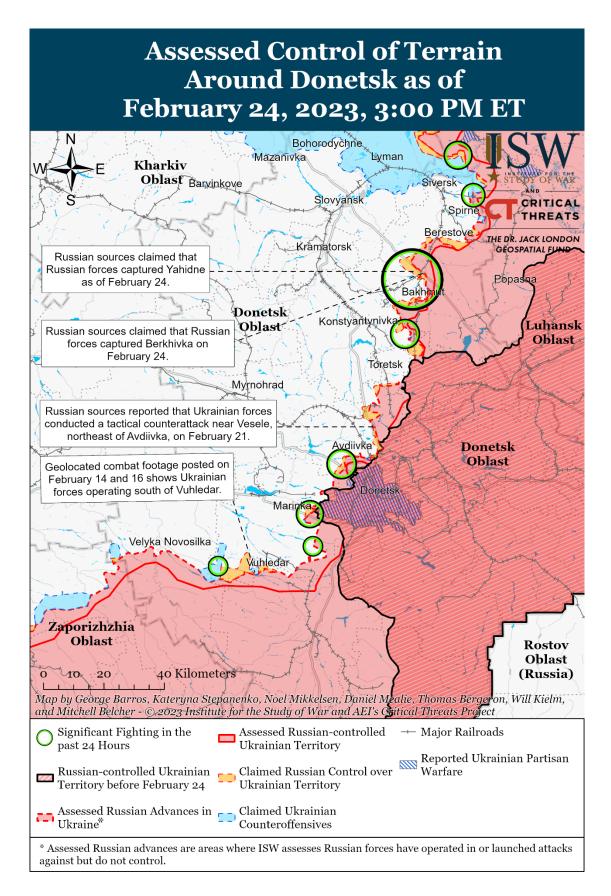
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on February 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Bakhmut; within 30km north of Bakhmut near Verkhnokamianske, Fedorivka, Rozdolivka, Dubovo-Vasylivka, Zaliznianske, and Berkhivka; and within 26km southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske, Chasiv Yar, Dyliivka, and Vasylivka.³⁴ Geolocated footage published on February 23 indicates that Russian forces likely made marginal advances near the E40 highway west of Paraskoviivka (7km north of Bakhmut).35 Geolocated footage published on February 24 indicates that Wagner Group fighters likely advanced into the northern outskirts of Yahidne (2km north of Bakhmut).³⁶ Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters have taken control of most of Yahidne, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation that they have done so.³⁷ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin also claimed that Wagner fighters completely captured Berkhivka (4km north of Bakhmut), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.³⁸ Other Russian sources amplified Prigozhin's claim, although a prominent milblogger stated that claims about the capture of Berkhivka are premature.³⁹ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces control elevated positions north of Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) and attempted to advance towards Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut).⁴⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner Group fighters also conducted an offensive toward Vesele (17km northeast of Bakhmut) from Bilohorivka (21km northeast of Bakhmut).41 Geolocated footage published on February 24 indicates that Russian forces likely secured marginal gains on the northeastern outskirts of Bakhmut.⁴² A Russian milblogger claimed that positional battles are ongoing in Bakhmut and that Wagner fighters advanced in the eastern part and the southwestern outskirts of the city.⁴³ The Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner Group fighters resumed offensives in the direction of the To504 highway and near Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), where there is reportedly fighting on the outskirts of the settlement.44

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on February 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions within 36km southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Vodyane, Nevelske, Marinka, and Novomykhailivka. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Pobieda (32km southwest of Avdiivka) and pushed Ukrainian forces out of strongholds in the settlement. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces lack the personnel needed to make advances around Pobieda. Russian source claimed that Russian forces advanced into Pobieda, although ISW has not seen any visual confirmation of Russian forces in the settlement. Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted an assault towards Avdiivka from Spartak (5km south of Avdiivka) and from Novobakhmutivka (13km northeast of Avdiivka) towards Keramik (15km north of Avdiivka).

Russian forces continued offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast on February 24. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Prechystivka (35km southwest of Donetsk City).⁵⁰ Geolocated footage published on February 23 indicates that Russian forces likely secured marginal gains northeast of Mykilske (27km southwest of Donetsk City).⁵¹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults in the direction of Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) from positions in the dacha area west of Mykilske.⁵² Another Russian milblogger complained that Russian forces are inexplicably unable to destroy high-

rise buildings in Vuhledar that reportedly offer adjusting artillery fire around the settlement. ⁵³	Ukrainian	forces	effective	observation	positions	for



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

Ukrainian officials suggested that Russian forces may feel insecure about their ability to maintain control of the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Adviser Serhiy Khlan stated on February 23 that Russian forces increased their presence in areas close to the Dnipro River and have defined security in the Henichesk area as "conditional."⁵⁴ Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk reported that Russian forces have intensified shelling against areas in west (right) bank Kherson Oblast.⁵⁵ Khlan reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian ammunition depot in Nova Kakhovka on February 24 after Russian forces moved equipment to the area on February 23.⁵⁶

Russian forces continued to conduct routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on February 24.⁵⁷

Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces both conduct reconnaissance-in-force and engage in positional battles without making significant advances in Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of February 24, 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 24, 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)

Russian authorities continue measures to expand the capacity of the Russian peacekeeping force. The Russian government sent a bill to the State Duma on February 23 that expands the mechanisms by which Russian peacekeepers can deploy abroad.⁵⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) previously proposed an amendment on February 7 that allows Russian forces to recruit peacekeepers from conscripts and mobilized personnel without contracts, as ISW has previously reported.⁶⁰ Russian forces may aim to set conditions to secure increased capabilities for their peacekeeping missions abroad or to legitimize the presence of Russian forces in conflict-heavy areas.

Ukrainian sources reported that Russian officials continue covert crypto-mobilization efforts in Russia and in occupied territories. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on February 24 that Russian officials are continuing covert mobilization in Russia, particularly in regions of the Caucasus where Russian officials are reportedly forcibly mobilizing men of conscription age regardless of health or willingness to fight. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian officials are mobilizing a large number of these personnel from penitentiaries with the promise of release if they fight in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on February 24 that Russian officials are actively recruiting Russian occupation officials and police officers into the Russian military and telling them that if they conclude contracts voluntarily before an upcoming mobilization wave in occupied territories, they will be able to serve in safer areas of the front. Russian officials may be more heavily conducting crypto-mobilization efforts in occupied territories and the Caucasus to shield the wider Russian public from these efforts and avoid potential associated domestic discontent.

Russian sources are likely attempting to shift the blame for scandals associated with Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commanders to the conventional Russian military. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) First Deputy Information Minister Danil Bezsonov argued on February 24 that DNR commanders are mistreating disobedient mobilized personnel because Russian military commanders did not solve these issues during the mobilized personnel's training in rear areas.⁶⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that many of these mobilized personnel do not want to fight and that Russian officials deceived them about the nature of their deployments to Ukraine.⁶⁵ These Russian sources likely issued these statements in response to recent scandals in which mobilized personnel reportedly subordinated under DNR formations publicly accused DNR commanders of mistreatment and poor command.⁶⁶ The Russian military's integration of DNR formations into the Russian Armed Forces has also generated widespread complaints from Russian milbloggers and DNR-linked figures that the Russian military is sidelining DNR commanders.⁶⁷ Elements of the ultranationalist pro-war community will likely continue to criticize the Russian MoD for the conduct of this integration effort while shielding the DNR military command from criticism.

Attacks on military recruitment offices in Russia reportedly continued as Russian officials punish previous perpetrators of such attacks. A Russian source claimed on February 23 that an unknown person threw a Molotov cocktail at an enlistment office in Murmansk City.⁶⁸ A Russian source stated on February 23 that a Volgograd City Court sentenced a Russian citizen to over four years in prison for an arson attack on a military recruitment office in Volgograd City in May 2022.⁶⁹

<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 partisans likely blew up a railway segment in occupied Crimea. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on February 24 that Ukrainian partisans damaged a railway station in Bakhchisaray Raion, occupied Crimea. The Resistance Center shared photographs of a cut segment of the railway. Russian sources claimed that unknown actors damaged part of a railroad near Poshtove in Bakhchisaray Raion, approximately 12km northwest of Sevastopol, delaying three civilian transport trains.

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian occupation authorities are attempting to limit the spread of information about Russian military movements in occupied Ukraine. The General Staff reported that mobile operators in Luhansk Oblast cut off all internet access in some areas to prevent residents from spreading information about Russian military actions.⁷² The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that occupation officials imposed a 24-hour curfew in Chaplynka, Kherson Oblast – a frequent target of Ukrainian strikes—from February 23 to 25 possibly to transfer Russian military equipment from Crimea to unspecified defensive lines.⁷³

<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.)

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense reported on February 24 that it is relocating a Belarusian missile unit to an unspecified designated position as part of a combat readiness check.⁷⁴

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.

¹ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-23-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-22-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-21-2023

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