

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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May 17, 7:00 pm ET

Mariupol defenders trapped in the Azovstal Steel Plant likely surrendered after Ukrainian officials negotiated evacuation measures with the Kremlin. Russian forces began evacuating wounded Ukrainian forces to Russian-occupied settlements in Donetsk Oblast on May 16 after the Russian Defense Ministry proposed the agreement earlier in the day. Ukrainian officials said that they will seek to return the Mariupol defenders to Ukraine in a prisoner exchange and continue to undertake appropriate measures to rescue all Ukrainian servicemen from Azovstal.

The Kremlin might have agreed to the conditional surrender of the Azovstal defenders to accelerate Russia's ability to declare Mariupol fully under its control. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian Defense Ministry's Department of Information and Mass Communications is hastily preparing a press tour of foreign journalists through occupied territories of Ukraine between May 18 and May 21.¹ The Kremlin also could have agreed to such a deal to secure a victory in order to deflect criticism on social media of the failed Russian Siverskyi Donets River crossings and the overall slow pace of the invasion.

The Kremlin might refuse to exchange the Mariupol defenders. Some Russian State Duma members are petitioning to pass laws that would prohibit prisoner exchanges for individuals accused of "Nazism."² Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin claimed that the Mariupol defenders must be charged with war crimes and cannot be exchanged for Russian prisoners of war.³ The Kremlin may ignore the Russian State Duma's concerns or use them to sabotage negotiations with Ukraine.

The surrender agreement generated some outrage and confusion on pro-Russian social media, rather than the celebration of the full capitulation of Mariupol that the Kremlin likely expected—possibly undermining Russian information operations. Some Russian Telegram channels ridiculed the Russian Defense Ministry for negotiating with Ukrainian "terrorists" and "Nazis."⁴ Some bloggers criticized the Donetsk People's Republic for organizing the evacuation proceedings and blamed negotiating authorities for creating conditions for Ukrainian martyrdom.⁵ Several Russian bloggers also called for the imprisonment or murder of surrendered Ukrainian servicemen.⁶ Russian audiences are likely dissatisfied with the surrender agreement because they expected Russian forces to destroy Ukrainian defenders at Azovstal. The Kremlin has created large amounts of propaganda that portrayed successful Russian assaults on Azovstal without clearly setting conditions for surrender negotiations. Some Russians may find it difficult to reconcile the triumphant messaging with the abrupt negotiations leading to a negotiated surrender.

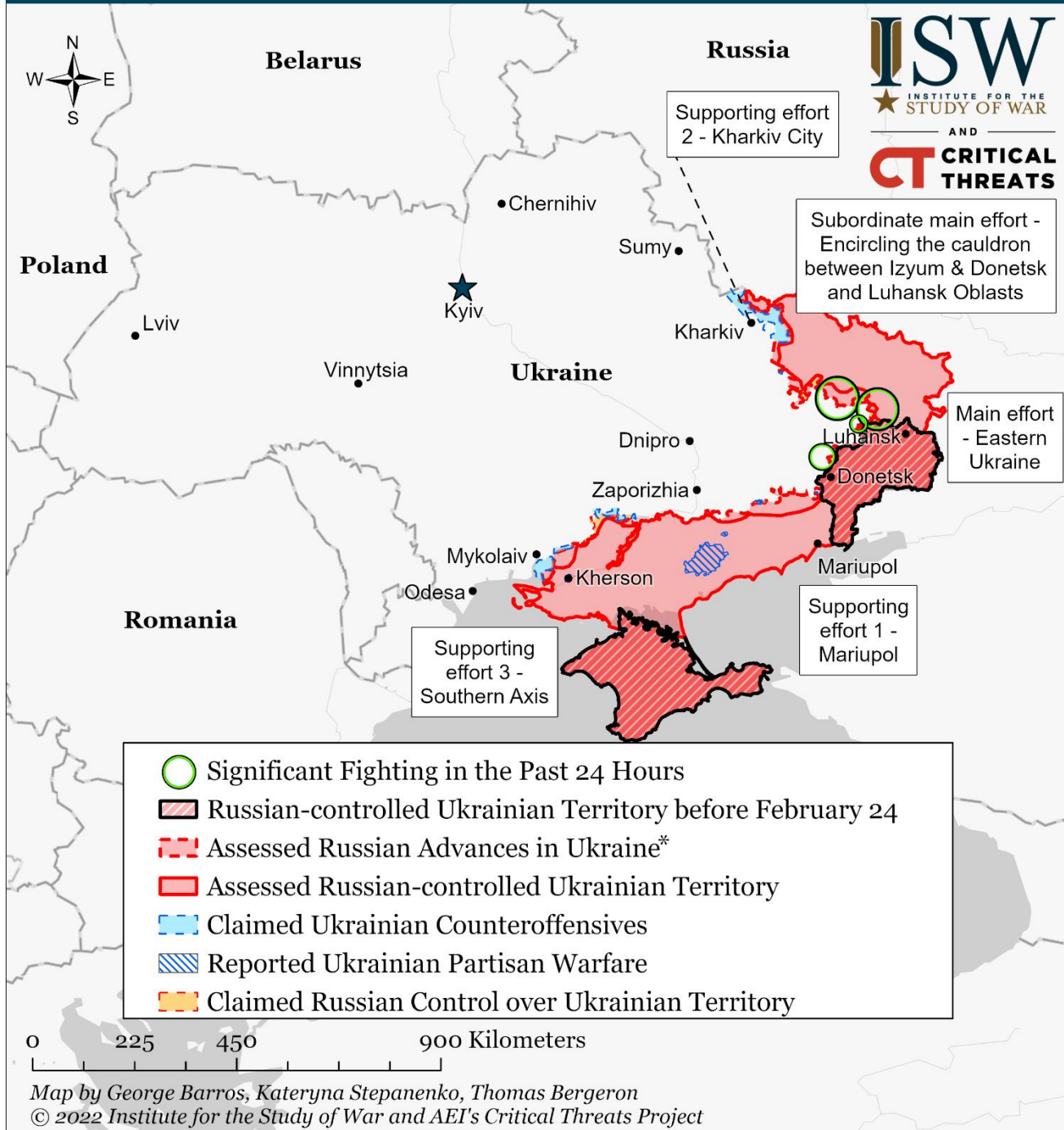
Russian forces have intensified artillery fire on Ukrainian border settlements in Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts over the past few weeks. The Ukrainian Northern Operational Command reported that Russian forces shelled the border between Sumy Oblast and Russia over 70 times on May 17.⁷ Sumy Oblast Administration Head Dmytro Zhyvytskyi said that Russian saboteurs unsuccessfully attempted to break through the Ukrainian border on May 17.⁸

Key Takeaways

- **The Ukrainian military command ordered the remaining defenders of Azovstal to surrender, likely conditionally, in hopes of returning them to Ukraine as part of yet-to-be-negotiated prisoner exchanges.**

- **The announcement of the likely conditional surrender generated outrage in the Russian information space and demands in the Russian Duma for laws prohibiting exchanging the surrendered defenders of Azovstal.**
- **Russian forces continued to make limited advances in Donbas, primarily focused on setting conditions for the Battle of Severodonetsk.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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.

ISW has updated its assessment of the four primary efforts Russian forces are engaged in at this time. We have stopped coverage of supporting effort 4, “Sumy and northeastern Ukraine,” because it is no longer an active effort.

- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and three supporting efforts);
- Subordinate main effort- Encirclement of Ukrainian troops in the cauldron between Izyum and Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts
- Supporting effort 1—Mariupol;
- Supporting effort 2—Kharkiv City;
- Supporting effort 3—Southern axis.

Main effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Encircle Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine and capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to improve their tactical positions south of Izyum to resume offensive operations in that sector. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are replenishing troops and accumulating reserves to renew their drive on Slovyansk.⁹ Russian forces likely did not secure the highway east of Dovhenke—a village approximately 30 km south of Izyum; that highway is necessary to continue the advance toward Slovyansk. Russian aviation attacked Ukrainian positions near Izyum, and Russian ground forces made limited territorial advances in the Lyman district.¹⁰ Ukrainian artillery reportedly destroyed Russian equipment just 15 km north of Izyum on May 17.¹¹

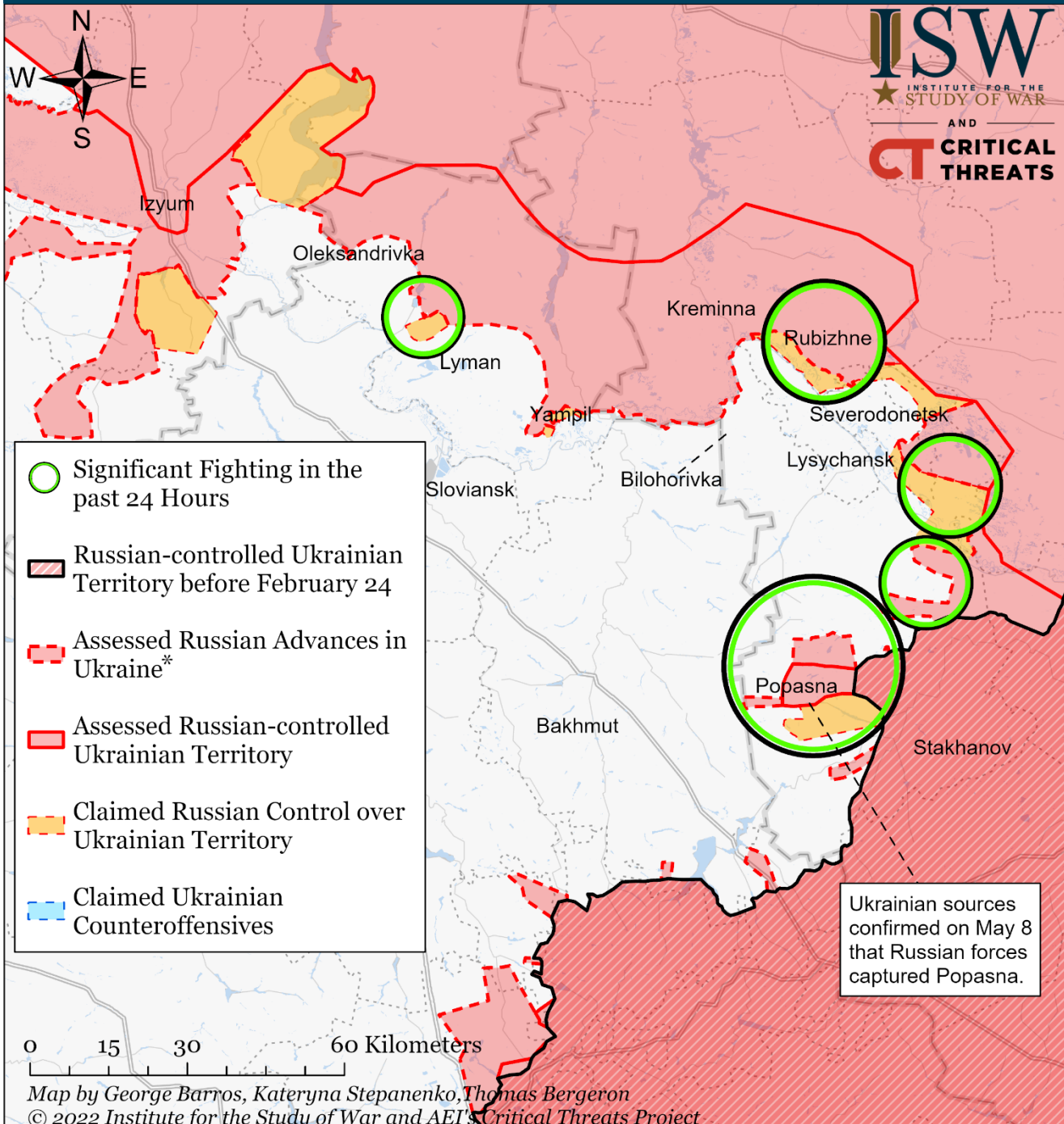
Russian forces continued their efforts to secure highways to Lysychansk from the south and Bahmut from the east with insignificant progress. Russian forces advanced a small distance north of Popasna in an effort to reach a major road connection to Severodonetsk.¹² The Luhansk People’s Republic claimed to have seized Novozvanivka just southwest of Popasna on the way to the Bahmut-Lysychansk highway but have likely not entered the settlement judging from reports of Russian shelling in the area, which suggest that Ukrainian defenders are still there.¹³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful assault on a settlement 6 km southeast of Severodonetsk on May 17.¹⁴

Russian forces may be pushing hard to win the Battle of Severodonetsk in part to forestall emerging criticism of the Russian military campaign in the domestic information space. Russian State Duma Deputy from the Communist Party Viktor Sobolev expressed surprise over the lack of significant victories in Donbas compared to a number of successful operations in 2014.¹⁵ Sobolev said that Russian forces must finally finish up the “special military operation” in Donbas and at least create an effective cauldron (encirclement) in Severodonetsk. Sobolev also criticized the Russian command for initiating a large-scale offensive operation without destroying Ukrainian strike capabilities. Luhansk Oblast Head

Serhiy Haidai claimed that Russian forces are committing most of their combat power to a shallow encirclement to reassure the Russian population of Russian successes in Ukraine.¹⁶ Pro-Russian Telegram channels began celebrating the arrival of a BMPT “Terminator” urban warfare vehicle in Severodonetsk’s vicinity, portraying it as a Russian wonder weapon.¹⁷

Russian forces also conducted a series of unsuccessful ground assaults in western Donetsk Oblast on May 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to seize a segment of the N20 highway to Slovyansk east of Avdiivka.¹⁸ Russian forces also reportedly attempted to advance in settlements east of Avdiivka but did not make any territorial gains.¹⁹ Russian forces attempted to break Ukrainian defenses and reach the N15 highway to Zaporizhia without success.²⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of May 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



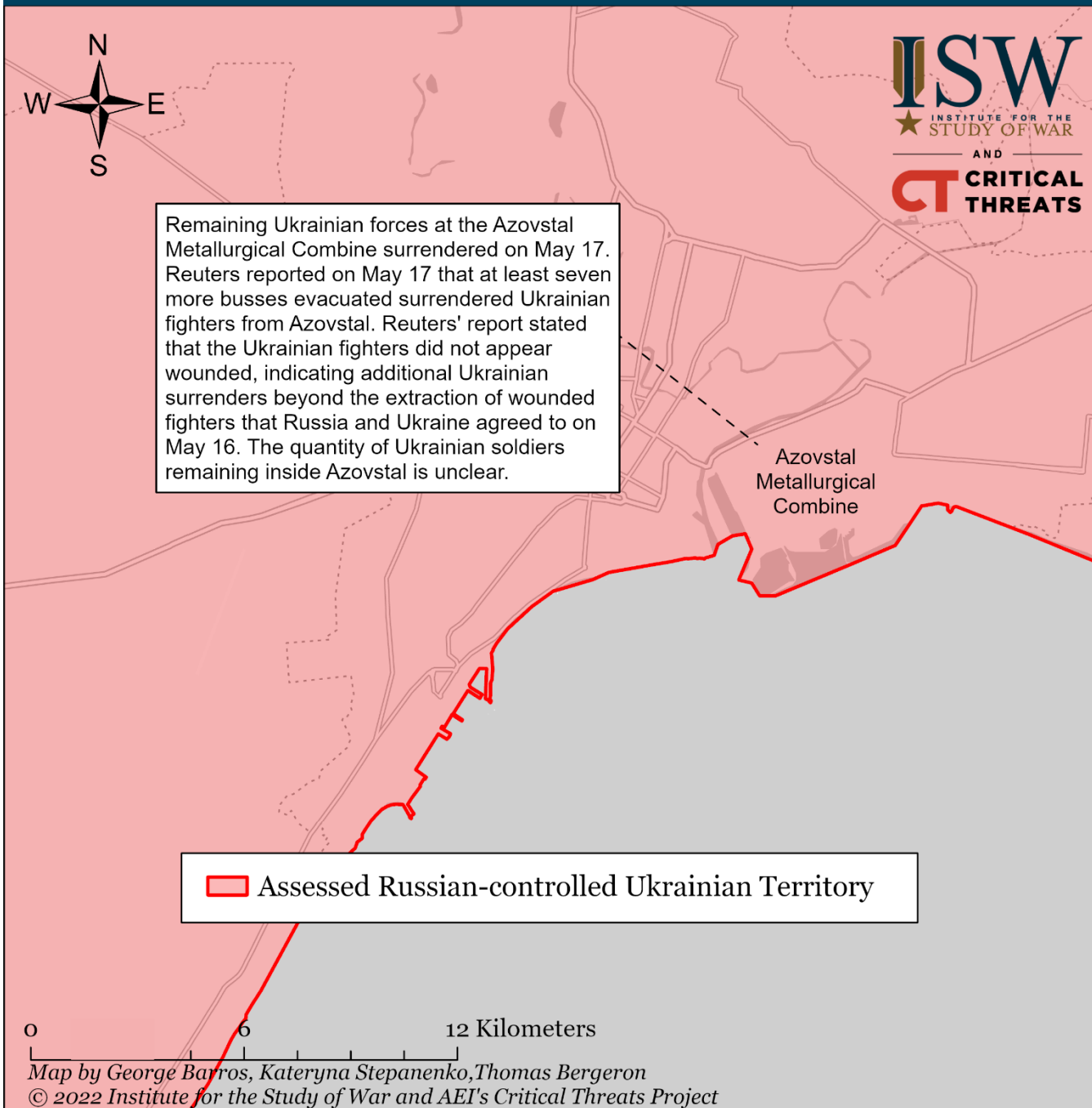
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: We have expanded Russian assessed advances to Rubizhne and Voevodivka based on Ukrainian local administration reports that Russian forces seized the settlements on May 12. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) officials claimed that DNR and Russian forces captured Dobrysheve on May 16.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol (Russian objective: Capture Mariupol and reduce the Ukrainian defenders)

The Ukrainian military command ordered defenders at the Azovstal Steel Plant to surrender to Russian forces.²¹ Russian officials likely accepted the Ukrainian surrender and evacuated over 260 wounded servicemen on May 16. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) announced that Ukrainian officials will attempt to negotiate prisoner exchanges for Mariupol defenders and undertake further unspecified measures to rescue the remaining servicemen.²² The Russian Defense Ministry posted videos of a mass evacuation of the Azovstal on May 17, but ISW cannot confirm if all of Mariupol's defenders left the plant.²³ Reuters reported that at least seven buses with Ukrainian servicemen who did not appear wounded left Mariupol on May 17.²⁴ Russian media also filmed the Donetsk People's Republic forces reportedly demining Azovstal.²⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Mariupol as of May 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



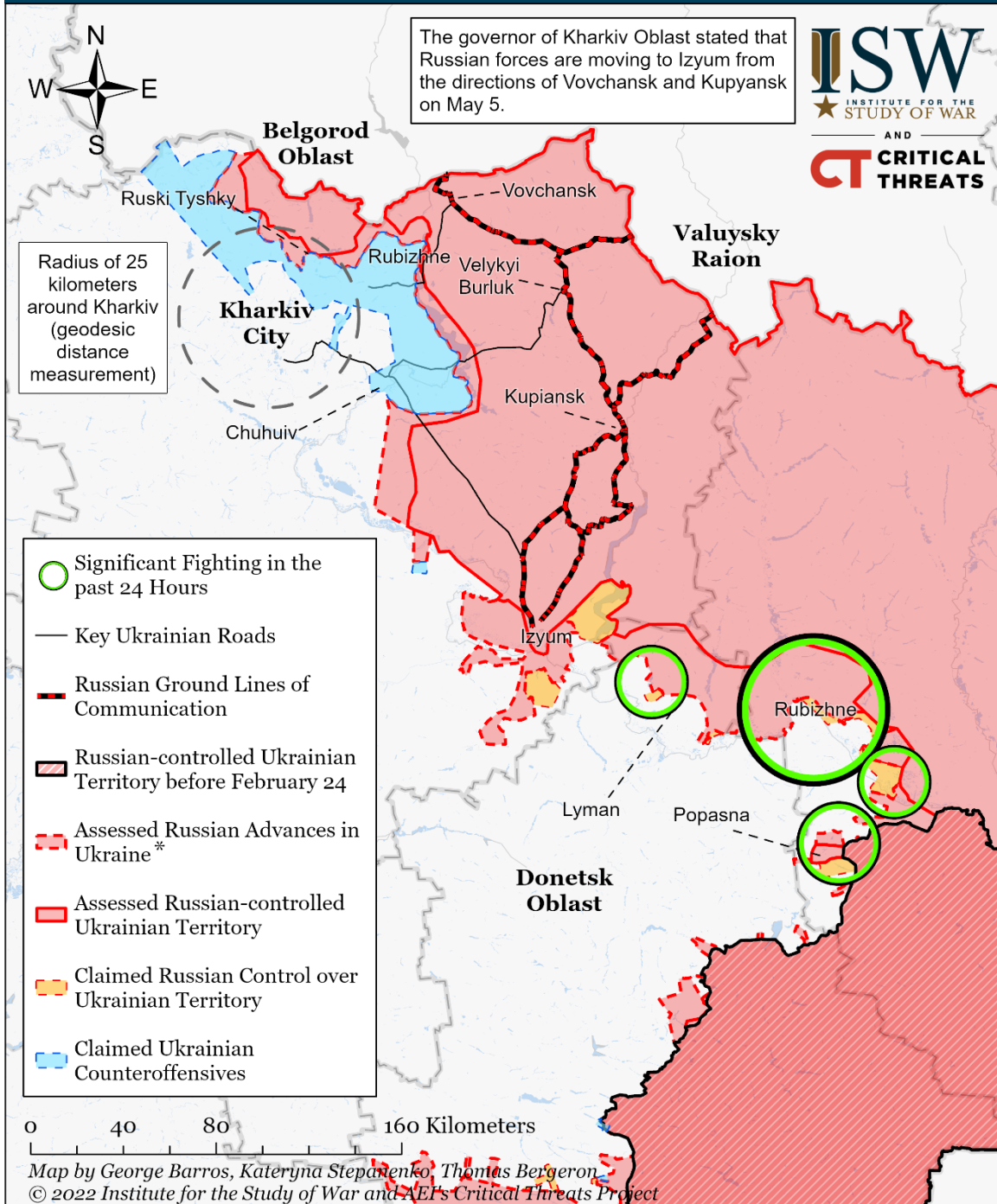
Deputy Ukrainian Defense Minister Hanna Malyar emphasized on May 17 that the Ukrainian authorities have no other way to save Ukrainian troops in Azovstal in other than surrendering them to Russian forces and then exchanging them in a prisoner exchange.

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Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City (Russian objective: Withdraw forces to the north and defend ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum)

Ukrainian forces continued to push the remaining Russian forces northeast of Kharkiv City on May 17. Kharkiv Oblast Administration Head Oleg Synegebov reported that Russian forces are attempting to repel Ukrainian counteroffensives in the direction of Vovchansk, a border settlement approximately 90 km northeast of Kharkiv City.²⁶ Ukrainian forces are continuing to threaten Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum via Vovchansk. Pentagon officials noted that Russia may still hold positions close to Kharkiv City, likely referring to occupied settlements along the Belgorod-Kharkiv highway in the north.²⁷ Ukrainian forces downed a Russian attack helicopter just east of Kharkiv City on May 16.²⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of May 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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We extended Ukrainian counteroffensives to Petrivka and Ternova in Kharkiv Oblast given that the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces shelled these towns on May 13, confirming reports that Ukrainian forces retook them. Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces liberated an unnamed village near the Russian border on May 14. Ukrainian forces claimed they reached an unspecified location on the international border in Kharkiv Oblast on May 15. ISW will change our maps once open sources name these settlements.

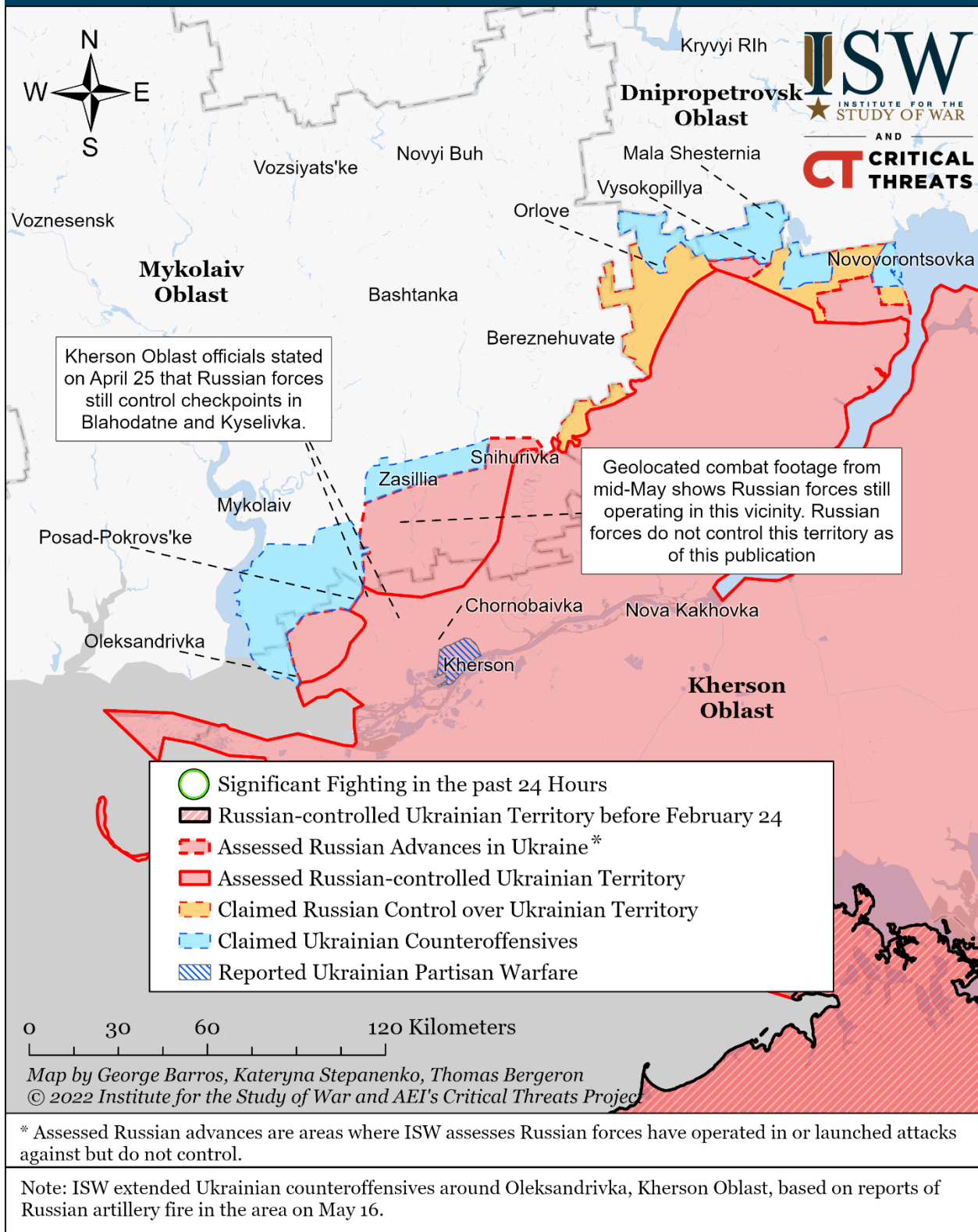
Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis (Objective: Defend Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks)

Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations throughout the southern axis on May 17.²⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued to reinforce defense lines with concrete structures and fired on Ukrainian positions.³⁰ The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Russian forces prevented a large-scale Ukrainian counteroffensive in a settlement approximately 30 km west of the Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts, but ISW cannot independently verify these claims.³¹

Russian forces are continuing to pressure Ukrainian civilians into accepting Russian occupation in southern Ukraine. The Zaporizhia Military Administration reported that Russian forces are preparing for a referendum in Enerhodar.³² The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command said that Russian forces are continuing to set information conditions to promote the creation of a proxy republic or a Russian province in occupied settlements of Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts.³³ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that locals found two Russian soldiers dead in Melitopol, likely due to Ukrainian partisan activity in the area.³⁴

Russian forces continued to launch rocket- and airstrikes on Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts in an effort to disrupt transportation infrastructure in the region. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces launched two cruise missiles at a bridge over the Dniester estuary on May 17.³⁵ The bridge connects Odesa Oblast with the highway to Romania and has reportedly been damaged and out of operation for over two weeks. Russian forces likely seek to destroy the bridge beyond the possibility of repair to disrupt Ukrainian supply lines from Romania. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command also reported that Russian forces struck maritime infrastructure 70 km southwest of Mykolaiv Oblast.³⁶

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely complete their withdrawal from the vicinity of Kharkiv City but attempt to hold a line west of Vovchansk to defend their GLOCs from Belgorod to Izyum. It is unclear if they will succeed.
- The Russians will continue efforts to encircle Severodonetsk and Lysychansk at least from the south, possibly by focusing on cutting off the last highway connecting Severodonetsk-Lysychansk with the rest of Ukraine.



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¹ <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/314082754236485>

² <https://t.me/nakanuneru/8261>

³ <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36418>

⁴ <https://t.me/strelkovii/2563>; <https://t.me/strelkovii/2561>; <https://t.me/nakanuneru/8265>

⁵ <https://t.me/strelkovii/2561>

⁶ https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/5488

⁷ <https://t.me/stranaua/42592>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/DPSUkraine/posts/340151164890427>; <https://t.me/Zhyvytskyi/2172>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318752420437843>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1526209845837418498> <https://t.me/breakingmash/34851>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318752420437843>; https://t.me/nm_dnr/7967 ; <https://dan-news>

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¹¹ https://twitter.com/Blue_Sauron/status/1526531875744915457

¹² https://realist_dot_online/news/karta-boevykh-dejstvij-v-ukraine-po-sostojaniju-na-14-maja; https://voennoedelo_dot_com/posts/id23472-9z3emj9r2plahl9de7rn; <https://t.me/milinfolive/83501>

¹³ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2658?single>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318752420437843>

¹⁵ <https://t.me/nakanuneru/8249>

¹⁶ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2670>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1525749683334922247> <https://t.me/vorposte/21432>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318752420437843>;

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<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1526497335903240193> <https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/13201>

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318752420437843>;

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<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/318566267123125>

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- ²² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=775333650519056;>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG5BxVuAo4Q&ab_channel=%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%96%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC; <https://hromadske dot ua/posts/inshogo-sposobu-poryatunku-vijskovih-z-azovstali-nizh-zdijsnyuyetsya-zaraz-nemaye-minoboroni>
- ²³ [https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36436;](https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36436) [https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36419;](https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36419) [https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36414;](https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36414)
<https://t.me/nakanuneru/8266>
- ²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/surrendered-ukrainian-fighters-leave-azovstal-steel-works-reuters-witness-2022-05-17/>
- ²⁵ <https://t.me/milinfo/83497>
- ²⁶ <https://t.me/stranaua/42609>
- ²⁷ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3033452/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>
- ²⁸ <https://twitter.com/UAWeapons/status/1526240874014855168> ;
https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1526302579092869121 https://t.me/ngu_war_for_peace/2880
- ²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926>
- ³⁰ [https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926;](https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/319091590403926) [https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7856;](https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7856)
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- ³¹ https://t.me/mod_russia/15817 ; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36437>
- ³² https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7860
- ³³ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1147941499098616>
- ³⁴ <https://sprotyv.mod.gov dot ua/2022/05/17/u-melitopoli-stalo-na-dvoh-okupantiv-menshe/>
- ³⁵ [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1147941499098616;](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1147941499098616) https://t.me/Bratchuk_Sergey/12241
- ³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=483479763565238>