

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 20

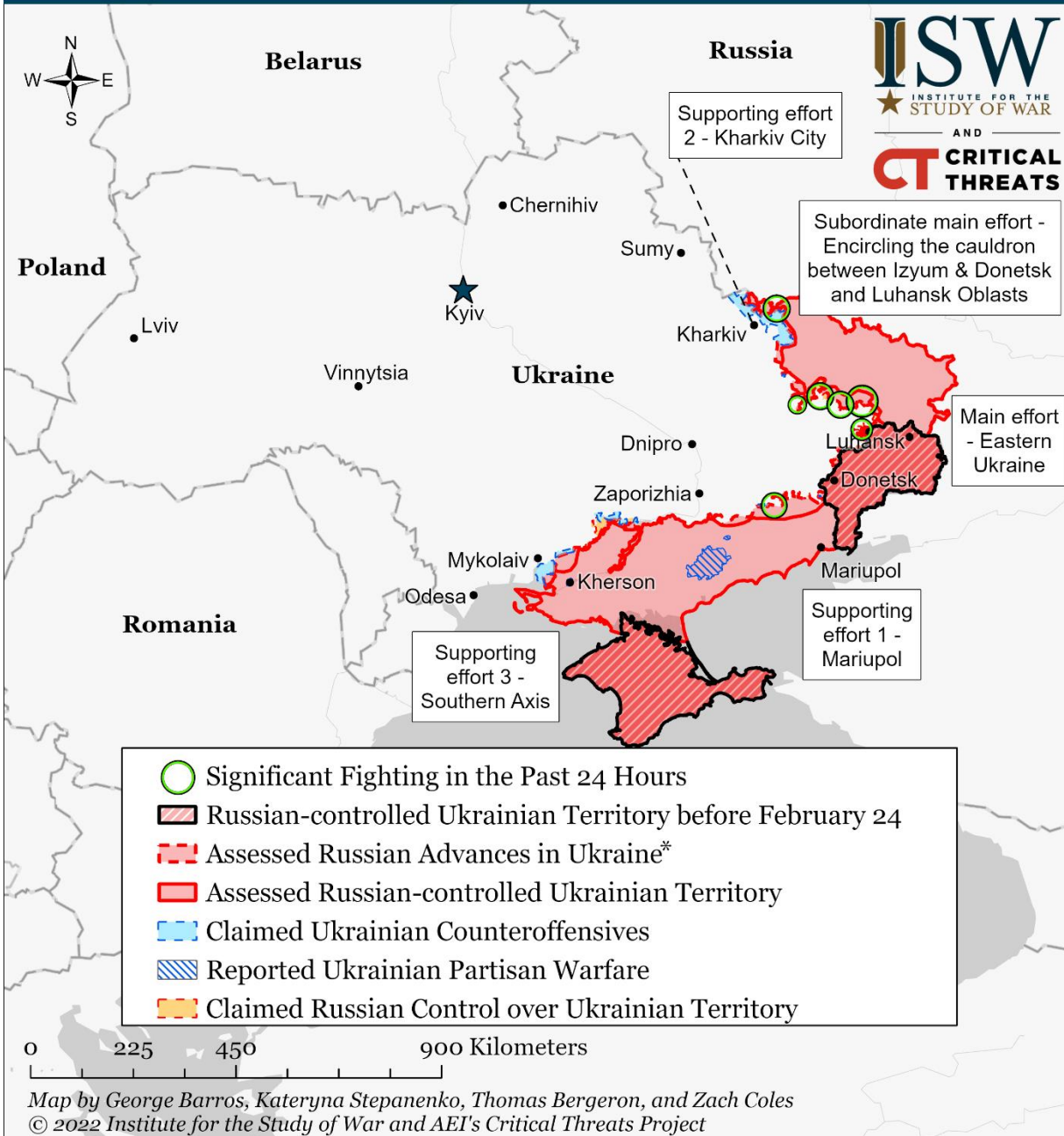
Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros
May 20, 5:30 ET

Russian forces are focusing on digging in and reinforcing defensive positions in Kharkiv and along the Southern Axis in preparation for Ukrainian counteroffensives, while the majority of active offensive operations remain confined to Izyum-Donetsk City arc and especially the Popasna-Severodonetsk area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are creating secondary defensive lines on the Southern Axis, indicating that the Russian grouping in this area may be preparing for a major Ukrainian counter-offensive and a protracted conflict.¹ Russian forces reportedly are holding defensive positions north of Kharkiv City following the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive since May 5 and have conducted limited spoiling attacks either to give Russian forces time to complete their redeployment back to Russia in good order or to allow reinforcements to arrive to defend territory in Kharkiv Oblast. Significant Russian offensive operations are confined to the area of Severodonetsk. Russian troops have made marginal gains to the north, west, and south of the city, especially around Popasna, in order to attempt to take control of Severodonetsk.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces may have made marginal gains to the north, west, and south of Popasna in order to continue their offensive on Severodonetsk from the south.**
- **Russian sources may be overstating the number of Ukrainian defenders who have been evacuated from Azovstal to either maximize the number of Russian prisoners of war who may be exchanged for Ukrainian soldiers or to avoid the embarrassment of admitting they have been locked into a months-long siege against only “hundreds” of Ukrainian soldiers.**
- **Russian troops reportedly regained certain positions taken by the Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces are likely preparing for a major Ukrainian counteroffensive and protracted conflict on the Southern Axis.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

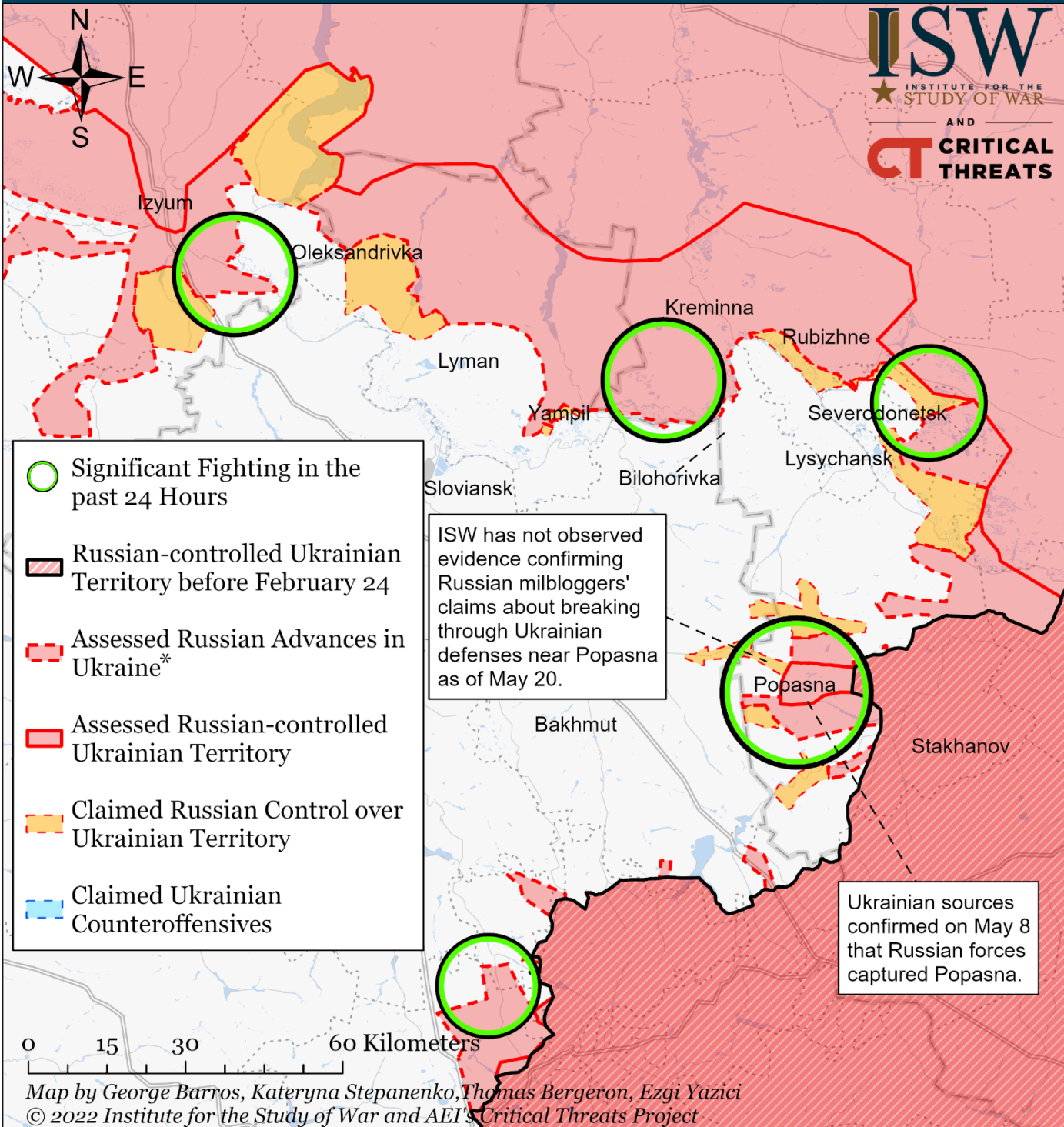
Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Encircle Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine and capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces conducted unspecified offensive operations in the direction of Slovyansk but did not make any confirmed advances on May 20.² The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops are attempting to erect a pontoon bridge over the Severskyi Donets River in the vicinity of Yaremivka, about 25 kilometers southeast of Izyum in the direction of Slovyansk.³ Russian forces additionally conducted artillery strikes on Dovhenke and Dolyna, both southeast of Izyum heading towards Slovyansk.⁴

Russian forces reportedly intensified efforts to break through Ukrainian defenses around Popasna in order to push towards Severodonetsk from the south on May 20. Pro-Russian news sources reported that Russian forces made advances through Ukrainian lines of defense in three directions. Russian Airborne (VDV) forces reportedly took control of Volodymirivka and Lypove, and broke through Ukrainian defenses in Komyshevakha, all north of Popasna.⁵ Troops of the Russian "Wagner" Private Military Company reportedly took control of Trypillya and Vyskrivka to the west of Popasna.⁶ Ukrainian sources noted that offensive operations are on-going in Vyskrivka.⁷ Russian forces additionally reportedly took control of Troitske, south of Popasna.⁸ Such reports are consistent with Ukrainian General Staff statements that the Russian grouping around Popasna is trying to take new frontiers in the area.⁹ NASA’s Fire Information for Resource Management (FIRMS) data, however, does not show a concentration of fires in this area, which may suggest that the Russian sources are exaggerating the scale or significance of the attacks, although the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence in this case.¹⁰ The purported encirclement of the Popasna area may be an effort to break through Ukrainian defenses in order to provide support for the on-going battle for Severodonetsk, where Russian troops are making marginal gains and reportedly took control of Shchedryshcheve and Syrotne, just north of Severodonetsk.¹¹

Russian forces reportedly made marginal gains during ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on May 20. Pro-Russian Telegram channels stated that Russian forces are trying to encircle a Ukrainian grouping around Svyatohirsk and are storming Yarova, both west of Lyman and within 10 kilometers of the border with Kharkiv Oblast.¹² The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are continuing offensive operations around Lyman and will likely continue to push west to meet Russian forces in Southern Kharkiv Oblast.¹³ Russian forces are additionally conducting unsuccessful assault operations around Donetsk City in the vicinity of Avdiivka and Novobakhmutivka.¹⁴

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



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

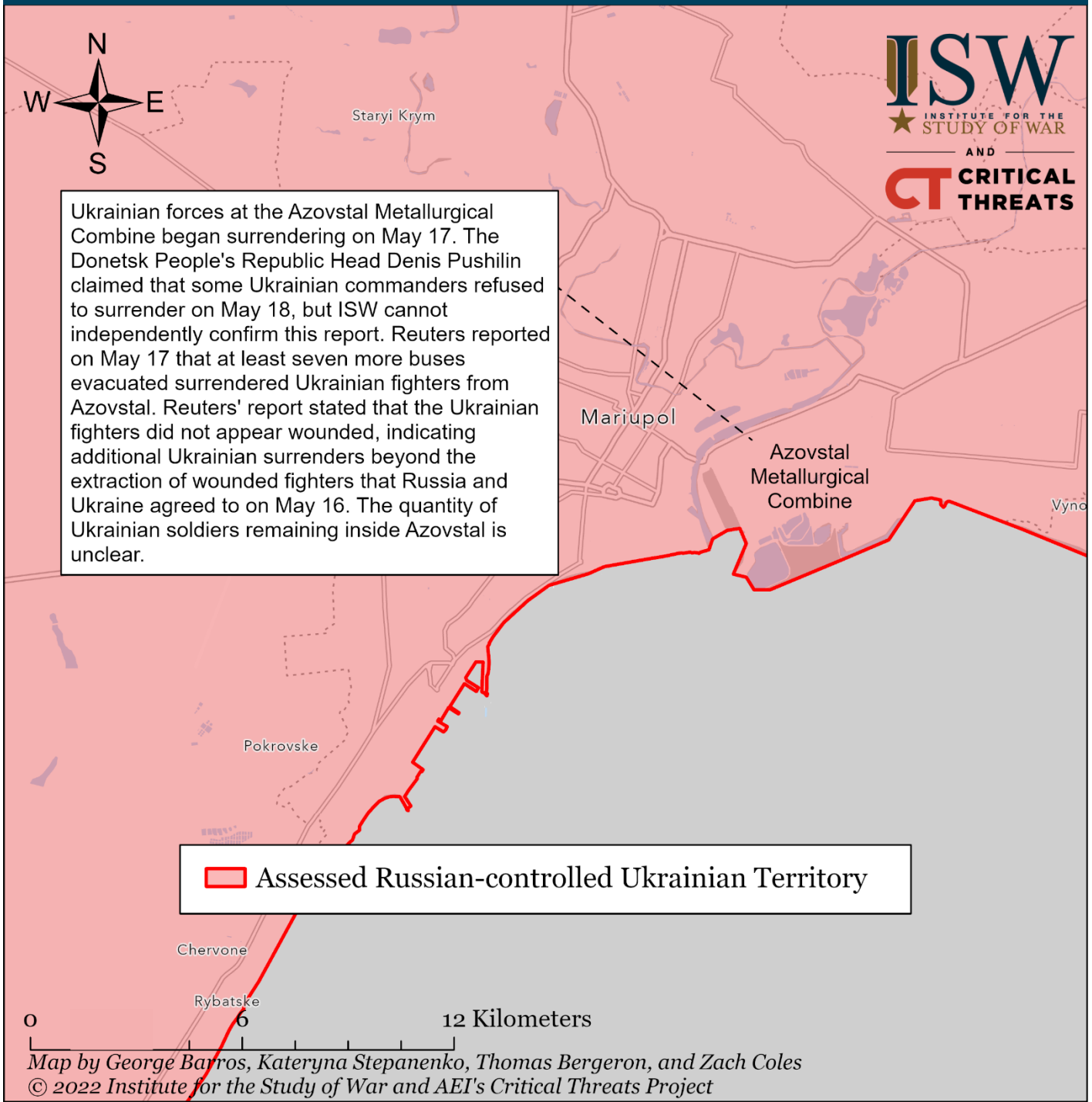
Note: Russian military bloggers and news outlets claimed that Russian forces captured Syrotne, Troitske, Trypillya, Volodymyrivka, Komyshevakhha, Lypove, Vyskryva, and entered Vrubivka on May 20. We will adjust our maps to reflect control of terrain (as opposed to just claims) when we observe evidence of these Russian claims.

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

Russian sources may be overstating the number of Ukrainian defenders who have been evacuated from the Azovstal Steel Plant as of May 20. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated that nearly 2,000 Ukrainian fighters have left Azovstal since evacuations began, whereas the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that it has registered only “hundreds” of Ukrainian prisoners of war.¹⁵ The discrepancy could result merely from delays in ICRC registrations or reporting. Official Russian sources may also be obfuscating the true number of evacuees for various reasons, however. The Russians might claim that they have captured more Ukrainian soldiers than they actually did in order to maximize the number of Russian prisoners that can be exchanged should they agree on a prisoner swap with Ukraine. The Russian leadership may also seek to avoid the embarrassment of admitting that their forces have been locked in a months-long siege by “hundreds” rather than “thousands” of Ukrainian defenders. Commander of the Azov Regiment Denis Prokopenko additionally stated that he has given the command to stop the defense of Mariupol to save the lives of the defenders of Azovstal, so evacuation numbers will likely rise in the coming days.¹⁶

The Ukrainian General Staff reports that Russian forces are continuing filtration measures in Mariupol.¹⁷ Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko additionally made a number of claims that ISW cannot independently verify. He asserted that Russian troops are planning to use filtration camps in Mariupol to forcibly mobilize men into the militia of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR).¹⁸ He claimed that the Russian occupation administration in Mariupol is planning a census for men aged 18 to 50 to further force mobilization into the DNR.¹⁹ He also asserted that four schools in Mariupol are set to open by the end of May under “Russian standards and Russian programs,” with a full implementation of Russian curricula reportedly slated for fall of 2022.²⁰ Andryushchenko’s claims are consistent with overall trends of filtration and occupation processes in Mariupol that ISW has been able to verify through other sources, although these particular claims are unverified at this time.

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



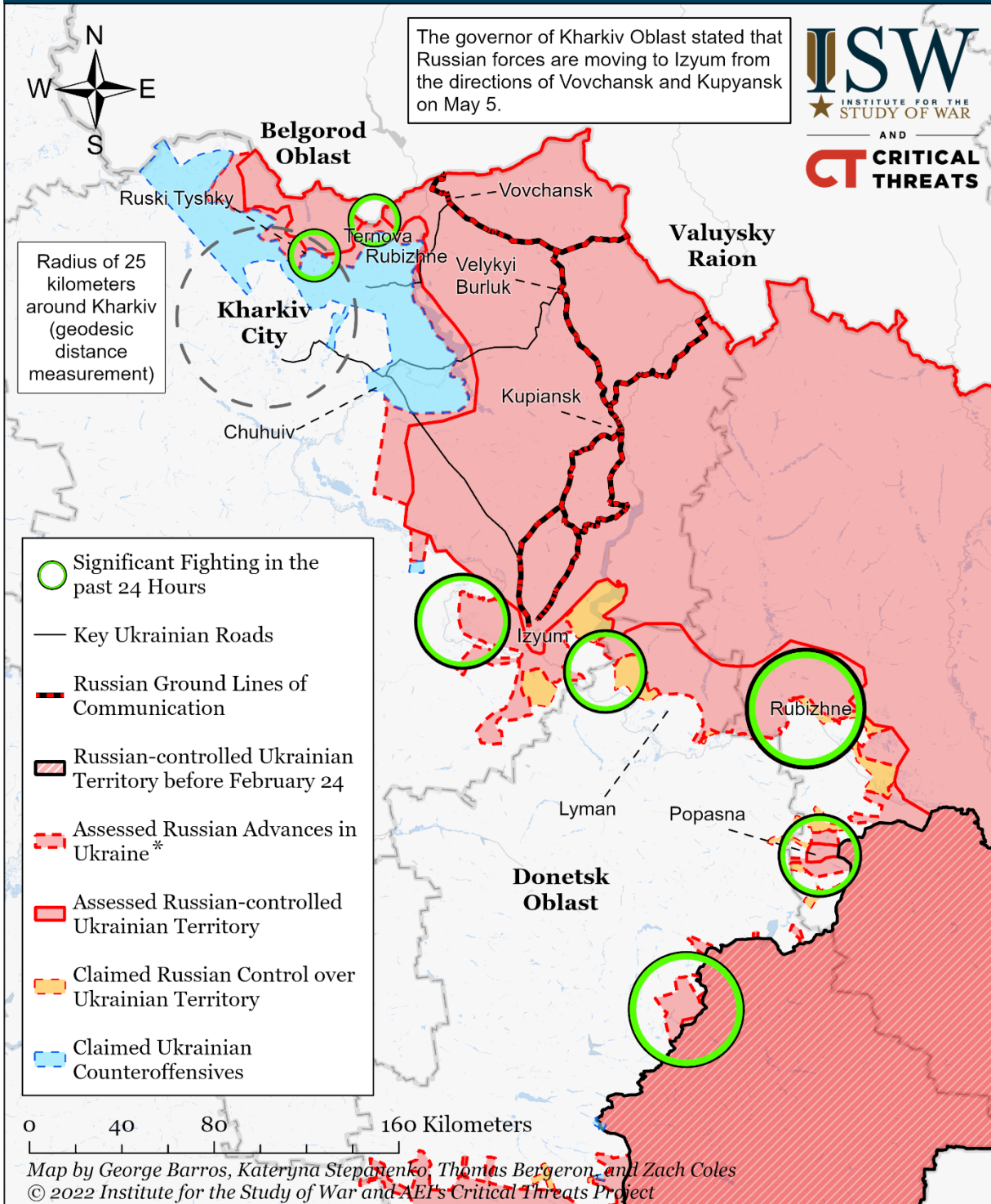
Commander of the Azov Regiment Denis Prokopenko stated that Azov command has given the order to stop the defense of Mariupoly to save the lives of the fighters on May 20. ISW will scale down Russian-controlled territory over Azovstal if independent sources confirm that some Ukrainian forces refused to surrender.

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

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

Russian forces focused on regaining positions taken by Ukrainian forces during the counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City on May 20.²¹ Russian forces are reportedly fighting in Vesele, Tsyrkuny, Zolochiv, and Ternova and may have recaptured Ternova and Rubizhne, although ISW cannot independently confirm these claims at this time.²² Such efforts are likely spoiling attacks meant to disrupt the Ukrainian counteroffensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast with the intention of either buying Russian forces time to withdraw and redeploy to other axes of advance or to reinforce defensive positions to the north of Kharkiv City. Russian forces additionally continued to shell Kharkiv City and its environs, likely to further distract Ukrainian forces from cohering offensive actions towards the Russian border.²³

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



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

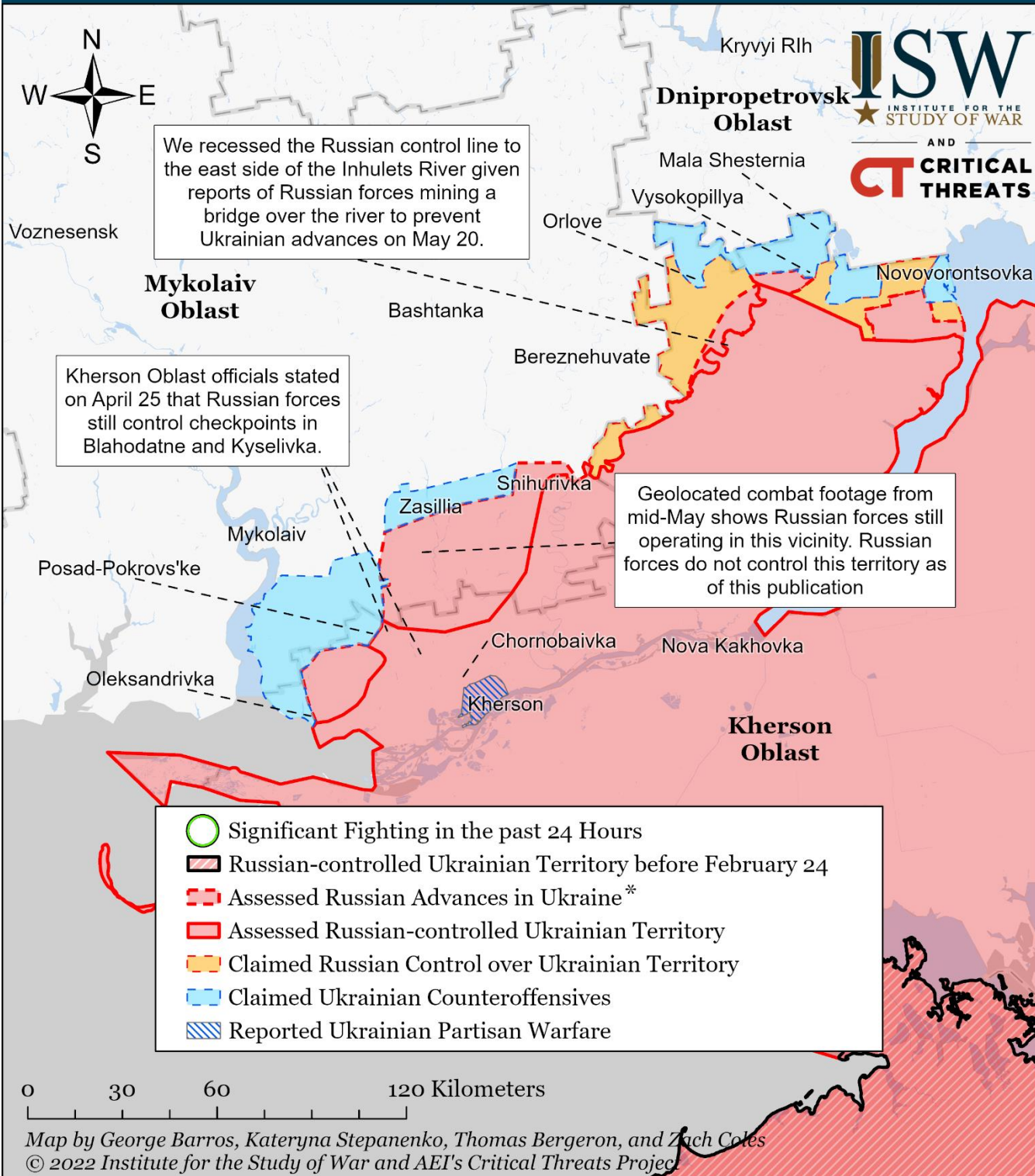
We have not observed open-source evidence to confirm reports that Russian forces captured Ternova and Rubizhne in Kharkiv Oblast on May 20. Pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that Russian forces attacked Tsyrkuny and Zolochiv and launched a counteroffensive in Ternova on May 20. Official Ukrainian government sources stated on May 20 that fighting continued in the area of Ternova and Vesele and that Russian forces shelled Rus'ki Tyshky, but did not specify any territorial control changes. We will update our maps when we collect sufficient evidence to do so.

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

Russian forces focused on strengthening existing defensive lines and creating secondary defensive lines on the Southern Axis but did not make any confirmed advances on May 20.²⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops are bringing engineering equipment to frontlines on the Southern Axis to construct a second line of defense, which likely indicates that Russian forces are preparing to defend against possible Ukrainian counter-offensives and settling in for protracted operations in Southern Ukraine.²⁵ Russian forces conducted rocket, missile, and artillery attacks against Kherson, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa Oblasts.²⁶

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian special services are continuing to destabilize the situation in Transnistria through disseminating disinformation about the mining of social infrastructure and state institutions in Tiraspol, Bender, Dubossary, and Rybnytsia.²⁷

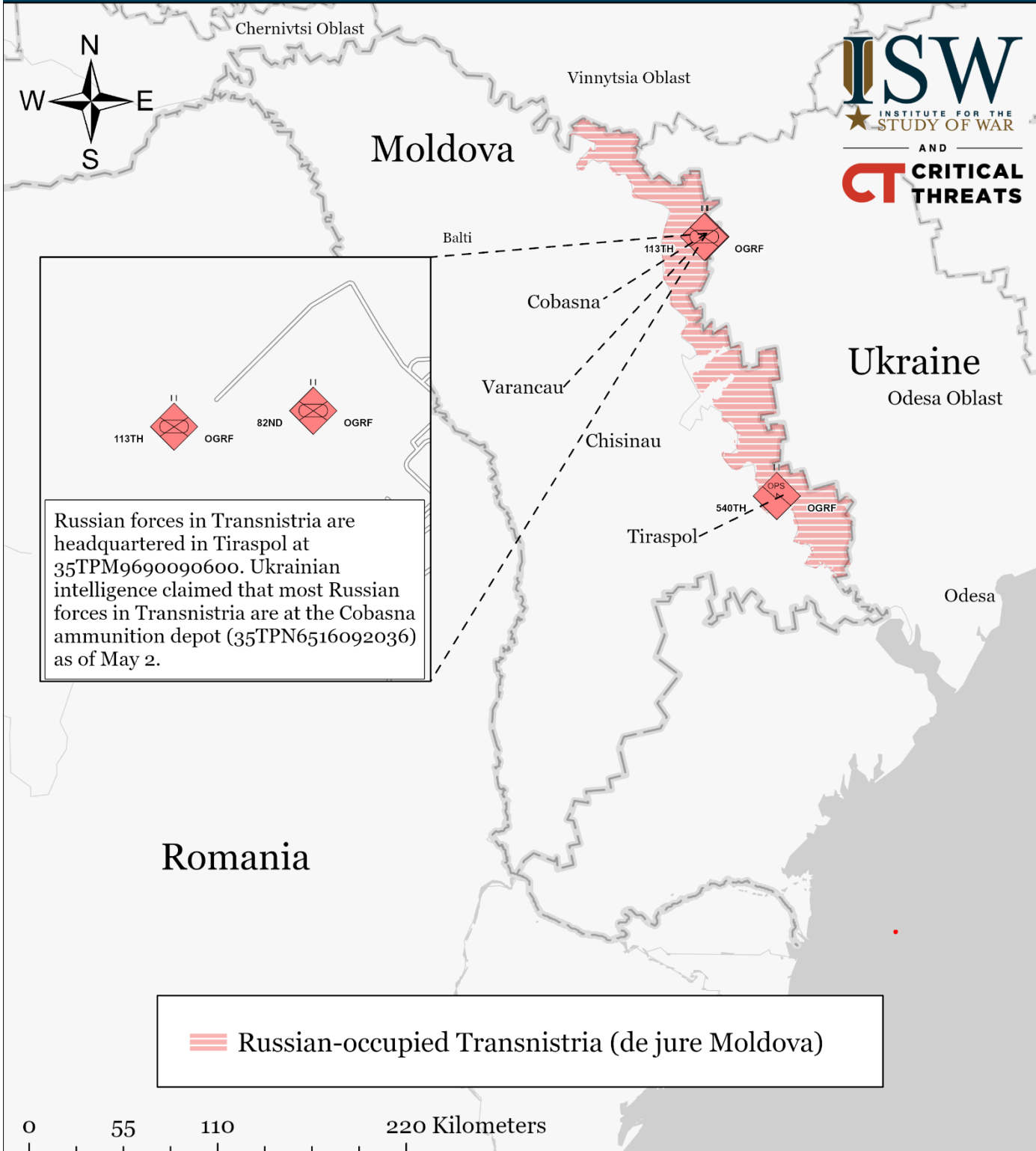
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

Note: ISW extended Ukrainian counteroffensives around Oleksandrivka, Kherson Oblast, based on reports of Russian artillery fire in the area on May 16.

Moldova Situational Map as of May 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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Russian forces in Transnistria are headquartered in Tiraspol at 35TPM9690090600. Ukrainian intelligence claimed that most Russian forces in Transnistria are at the Cobasna ammunition depot (35TPN6516092036) as of May 2.

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Thomas Bergeron, and Zach Coles
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Note: Russia maintains two motorized rifle battalions (subordinate to the Russian Western Military District) and a command battalion in Transnistria in Tiraspol. Ukrainian intelligence claimed these forces are mostly in Cobasna guarding the ammunition depot there as of May 3.

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.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for Ukrainian counteroffensives and settling in for protracted operations in Southern Ukraine.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=696465998289461>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>

² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>

⁵ <https://t.me/swodki/99656>; <https://t.me/swodki/99529>; <https://t.me/swodki/99515>; [https://riafan dot ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah](https://riafan.dot.ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah)

⁶ [https://riafan dot ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah](https://riafan.dot.ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah)

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2732?single>

⁸ [https://riafan dot ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah](https://riafan.dot.ru/23447841-_tsvetok_popasnoi_rossiiskie_sili_prodvigayutsya_na_severnom_i_zapadnom_napravleniyah); <https://t.me/swodki/99656>; <https://t.me/swodki/99529>; <https://t.me/swodki/99515>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>

¹⁰ <https://firms.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/map/#d:24hrs;@0.0,0.0,3z>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2732>;

<https://t.me/swodki/99529>; <https://t.me/swodki/99564>; <https://t.me/swodki/99529>

¹² <https://t.me/swodki/99724>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>;

<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1527577402028736512>; <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/12877>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; <https://t.me/swodki/99562>;

<https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1527318294176247808>

¹⁵ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-icrc-registers-hundreds-prisoners-war-azovstal-plant>; <https://t.me/stranaua/43087>;

https://t.me/mod_russia/15931

¹⁶ <https://t.me/stranaua/43099>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>; <https://t.me/andriyshTime/975>

¹⁸ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/975>

¹⁹ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/976>

²⁰ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/968>; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/7341

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; <https://t.me/synegubov/3218?single>

²² https://twitter.com/ukraine_map/status/1527597309399339011;

https://twitter.com/ukraine_map/status/1527525964560965634; https://twitter.com/MWolf_/status/1527567226781503488;

<https://t.me/swodki/99529>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>;

<https://t.me/synegubov/3218?single>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; <https://t.me/synegubov/3218?single>;
<https://t.me/synegubov/3218?single>; <https://t.me/synegubov/3218?single>; https://t.me/mod_russia/15932

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=696465998289461>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>

²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/320895440223541>; https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/8000;
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<https://t.me/milinfoive/83685>; <https://t.me/milinfoive/83690>; <https://t.me/milinfoive/83695>; <https://t.me/suspilnedeza/13833>

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/321243020188783>

²⁸