Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 21

Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan
October 21, 8:00 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.

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated on October 21 that Russian forces are "quite actively" transferring ammunition, military equipment, and some unspecified units from the Dnipro River's west bank to the east bank via ferries. The Southern Operational Command added that Russian forces deployed 2,000 mobilized men to hold the frontlines and are continuing to shell Ukrainian positions, likely in an effort to cover their withdrawal. Ukrainian military officials reported that the Russian occupation administration is preparing the evacuation of imported Russian specialists, Ukrainian collaborators, and Kherson's banking system. Russian occupation administration in Beryslav and humanitarian facilities in Kherson City also reportedly ceased operations.

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson requires that a Russian detachment left in contact hold the line against Ukrainian attack, covering other Russian forces as they withdraw. Such a detachment must be well-trained, professional, and prepared to die for its compatriots to effectively perform that duty. The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, assessed on October 20 that that Russian military leadership may withdraw "the most combat-capable units" from the left-bank part of the region to the right bank of the Dnipro river and leave mobilized soldiers in contact to cover the withdrawal.⁵ Russian milbloggers seized on Hromov's assessment on October 21 and claimed that Ukrainian officials falsely said that elite units like the VDV and marines are being replaced by untrained mobilized men in Kherson.⁶ If Hromov's assessment is correct, then Russian forces would be setting conditions for a Russian withdrawal to become a rout. Russia's poorly trained, newly mobilized reservists are very unlikely to stand and resist a Ukrainian counterattack if Ukrainian forces chose to attack them and chase the withdrawing forces. The collapse of a mobilized reservist detachment left in contact would likely lead to a Ukrainian rout of Russian forces on the same scale as Ukraine's rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv.

Russian officials have remained cagey about whether or not Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered a withdrawal from Kherson and are likely continuing to prepare the information space for such a collapse, as ISW has previously assessed. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov dodged a direct question from reporters addressing the likely withdrawal and directed reporters to the Ministry of Defense on October 21. One Russian milblogger noted on October 21 that Russian forces "will receive bad news from Kherson Oblast" in the coming week and that "November will be very, very hard." A Russian war correspondent told Russian state-controlled television on October 19 that Ukrainian forces outnumber Russian forces by four to one and that "there will be no good news in the next two months, that's for sure … severe territorial losses are likely in these two months, but defeat in one battle does not mean losing the war."

Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast. Russian forces will almost certainly blame Ukraine for the dam attack, as ISW has previously assessed. 11 Ukraine has no material interest in blowing the dam, which could flood 80 Ukrainian cities and displace hundreds of thousands of people while damaging Ukraine's already-tenuous electricity supply. Russia, however, has every reason to attempt to provide cover to its retreating forces and to widen the Dnipro River, which Ukrainian forces would need to cross to continue their counteroffensive. Any claims that Russian forces would not blow the dam due to concerns for the water supply to Crimea are absurd. Crimea survived without access to the canal flowing from the Dnipro since Russia illegally invaded and annexed it in 2014 through the restoration of access following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Russian officials have demonstrated their ability to indefinitely supply Crimea with water without access to the canal. Russian forces will try to hold eastern Kherson Oblast not for the water, but rather to provide a buffer zone that enables the defense of Crimea and prevents Ukrainian forces from getting into artillery range of the peninsula. Russian decisionmakers may believe that blowing the dam will enable them to retain that buffer zone. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned on October 21 that blowing the dam could cut water supplies to much of southern Ukraine and would pose a serious risk to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which lies upstream of the dam. 12 The ZNPP relies on water from the Kakhovka reservoir to cool its facilities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted high-intensity conventional war in Ukraine, not a negotiated settlement or **off-ramp.** The information conditions that the Kremlin has set to enable the Kherson withdrawal, the preparations to blow the dam, and the preparations for additional mobilization and conscription all demonstrate that Putin is not seeking offramps in the near term. Instead, he is setting conditions for improved Russian combat capability over the winter and well into 2023. Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to "strengthen coordination of federal executive branch organs and the federal subjects' executive branch organs" during the war in Ukraine.¹³ The council's responsibilities include coordinating federal and regional authorities to meet the needs of the Russian military; resolving military supply issues, forming plans to supply the military; defining the volume and direction of the Russian state budget to support the military; and creating working groups on select issues, among other things. 14 Putin's creation of the coordination council is a continuation of Putin's October 19 declaration of martial law readiness standards, which the Kremlin seeks to use to expand Russian government authorities as way of further transiting Russia to a wartime footing. 15 A prominent Russian milblogger stated that the creation of this council is overdue and that its creation in spring 2022 would have prevented Russia's logistics and supply problems from becoming so acute.16 This milblogger stated that Putin's creation of the council was a "step in the right direction" nonetheless.¹⁷ It is a step that Putin need not take if he were seeking to wrap the war up soon or were looking for some sort of off-ramp or pause that he expected to end major combat operations. The creation of this new coordinating body instead sets conditions for a high level of mobilization of the Russian state, economy, and society for continued high-intensity conventional military operations for the foreseeable future. Putin continues to show his willingness to pay a high price in domestic discontent to pursue a military resolution of the war he initiated on his terms, showing through his actions a marked disinterest in any serious concessions or ceasefire negotiations that could lead to sustainable peace.

Key Takeaways

- The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is demonstrably setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted war in Ukraine, not for a negotiated settlement or offramp.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal from Kherson City and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to improve wartime federal coordination.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported fighting northeast of Kharkiv City along the international border, on the Svatove-Kreminna frontline, and west of Lysychansk.
- Ukrainian military officials offered a limited overview of the situation on the frontline.
- Ukraine's Southern Operational Command emphasized that Russian forces are using Ukrainian civilians as human shields when transporting military equipment across the Dnipro River, while Russian sources released footage showing a line of civilians awaiting the ferry from Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast and routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Mykolaiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities are attempting to maintain the façade of sustainable and strong logistics in southern Ukraine while accelerating measures to compensate for the Kerch Strait Bridge attack.
- Fissures between regional Russian officials, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and military commissariats, and the Russian civilian population from which mobilization draws will likely intensify in the coming months.
- Russian authorities are preventing Ukrainians in Russia from leaving Russia with complex residency and permit requirements to cross international borders.
- Russian occupation authorities continued the mass forced removal of civilians from the west bank of the Dnipro River under the guise of civilian "evacuations."

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 21, 2022, 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.

- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

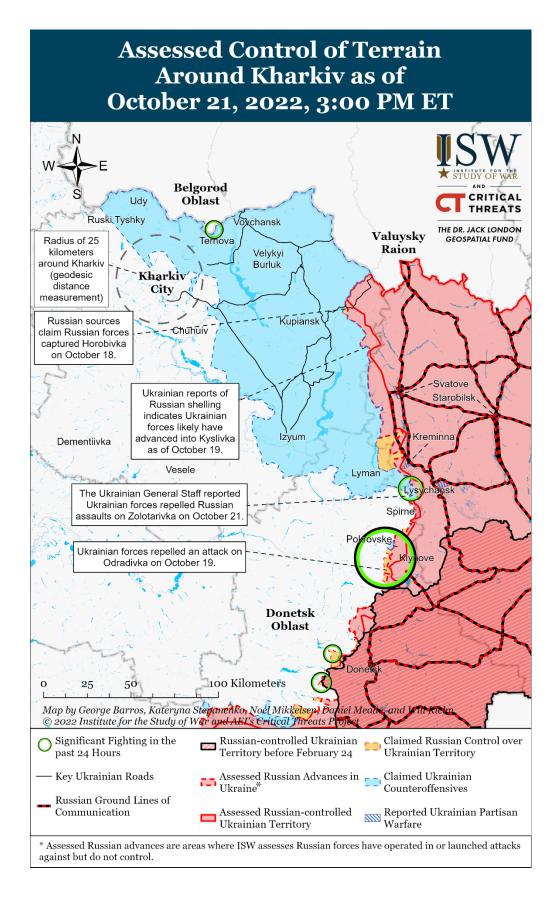
<u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Eastern Ukraine: (Oskil River-Kreminna Line)

Russian forces attempted an unsuccessful assault northeast of Kharkiv City along the international border and continued to shell settlements along the Oskil River on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault on Ternova, approximately 40km northeast of Kharkiv City.¹⁸ Ukrainian officials and Russian sources reported that Russian forces conducted a missile strike on industrial infrastructure in Kyivsky Raion in Kharkiv City.¹⁹ Russian forces continued to shell and launch airstrikes on Kupyansk and settlements in its vicinity.²⁰

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to fight on the Svatove-Kreminna frontline on October 21. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that the territory near Svatove remained the most active frontline as Russian forces continued to try to regain their lost positions around Svatove. Haidai added that Russian forces concentrated most of their military equipment near Svatove and Troitske (about 55km northeast of Svatove). The Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault on Lyman. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to attack in the vicinity of Terny (about 16km northeast of Lyman) and tried to reach the R66 Kreminna-Svatove highway. The Russian Ministry of Defense also claimed that Russian artillery fire prevented Ukrainian forces from crossing the Zherebets River near Novovodyane (about 18km southwest of Svatove) and Torske (approximately 13km east of Lyman).

Russian forces reportedly conducted several unsuccessful assaults west of Lysychansk on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces suppressed Russian attacks on Bilohorivka and Zolotarivka, both just over 10km west of Lysychansk.²⁶ Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces staged an assault in the vicinity of Bilohorivka to regain positions on the southern bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in the area.²⁷



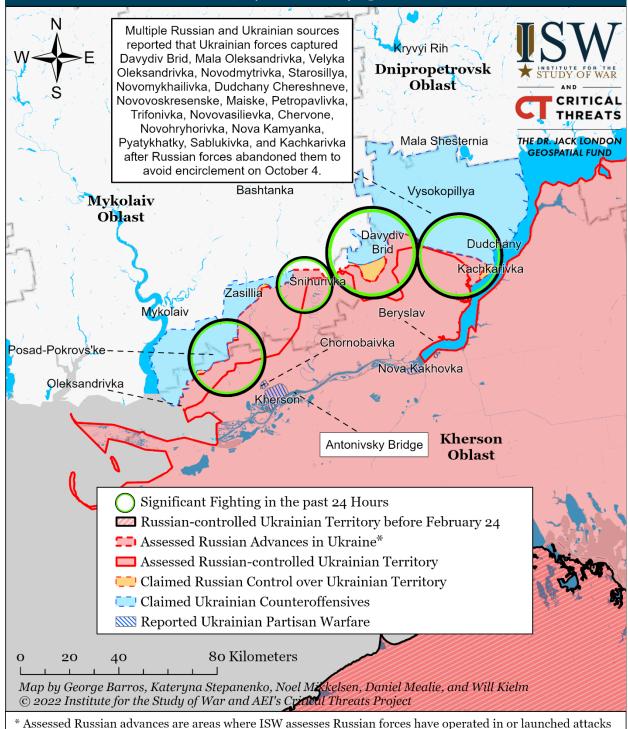
Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)

Russian forces began their withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast—see topline text.

Ukrainian military officials offered a limited overview of the situation on the frontline on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces struck Novovoskresenske, Nova Kamianka, and Mala Seideminukha in northern Kherson Oblast.²⁸ Russian sources in turn claimed that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Nova Kamianka to Ukrainka to reinforce their units, and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian hangar in the settlement.²⁹ Geolocated footage showed the aftermath of Russian artillery strikes supposedly on Ukrainian efforts to advance south of Nova Kamianka, and some Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to advance in the Beryslav direction.³⁰ The Russian MoD also claimed that Russian forces prevented Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Davydiv Brid-Sukhyi Stavok area near the Inhulets River.³¹ Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to shell settlements northwest of Kherson City.³²

Ukraine's Southern Operational Command emphasized that Russian forces are using Ukrainian civilians as human shields when transporting military equipment across the Dnipro River, while Russian sources released footage showing a line of civilians awaiting the ferry from Kherson City.³³ Russian forces may be transporting withdrawing military personnel alongside civilians to limit Ukrainian strikes. The use of human shields is a war crime. Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast by striking the Antonivsky Bridge on October 20. Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of killing four civilians who were reportedly crossing the bridge.³⁴ Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Nataliya Humenyuk confirmed that Ukrainian forces struck the Antonivsky Bridge in the middle of the night and claimed that the presence of civilians on the bridge is not possible due to a Russian-imposed curfew in Kherson Oblast.³⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff also confirmed that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian pontoon crossing under the Antonivsky Bridge on October 19.³⁶ Ukrainian forces otherwise continued to strike Russian positions and ammunition depots in northern and central Kherson Oblast.³⁷

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of October 21, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

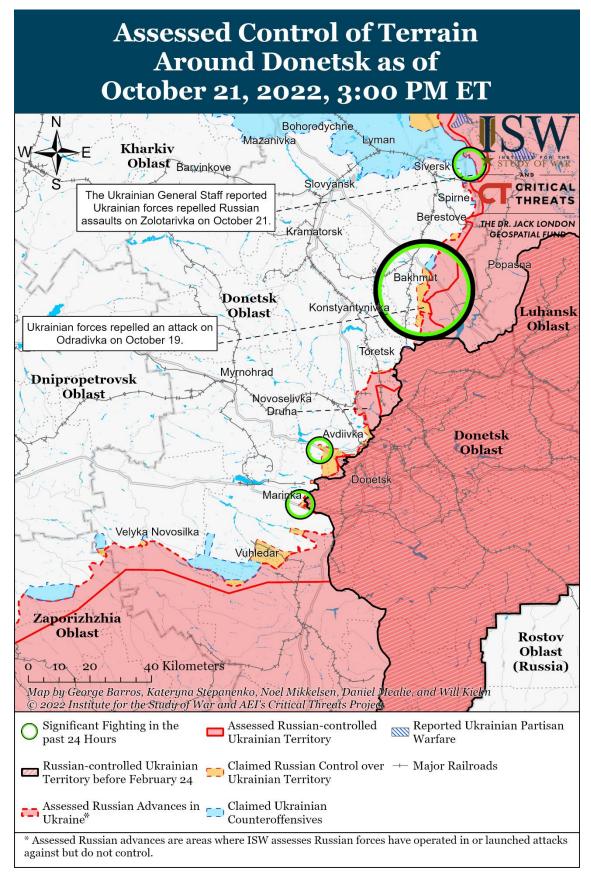


against but do not control.

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Bakhmut, northeast of Bakhmut near Soledar, and south of Bakhmut near Ozaryanivka, Optyne, and Odradivka.³⁸ A Russian source claimed that Wagner Group fighters advanced from positions on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut to the center of Bakhmut and that Wagner Group personnel gained fire control over a railway that Ukrainian forces use to supply the Bakhmut area.³⁹ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces, likely referring to Wagner Group or proxy Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces, seized the last fortified Ukrainian position before reaching Optyne south of Bakhmut.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks east of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske and southwest of Donetsk City near Mariinka and Pobieda.⁴¹ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Marinka and southwest of Avdiivka towards Nevelske.⁴² The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian small-group attempts to attack Russian positions near the Vremivka bulge in western Donetsk Oblast.⁴³



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

Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Mykolaiv Oblast on October 21. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck Zaporizhia City, Mykolaiv City, and Kutsurub Hromada in Mykolaiv Oblast.⁴⁴ Ukrainian Dnipropetrovsk regional authorities reported that Russian forces did not fire on areas in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast overnight or during the day on October 21, which would be consistent with reports of a withdrawal of Russian combat forces from Enerhodar.⁴⁵ Dnipropetrovsk Oblast head Valentyn Reznichenko stated that the night of October 20-21 was the first night without sirens and attacks on the region in three and a half months.⁴⁶ Ukraine's Southern Operational Command acknowledged an anomalous temporary lull in Russian shelling and attacks in southern Ukraine on October 21.⁴⁷ Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces struck Russian military positions in Melitopol, injuring at least 30 and killing at least 30.⁴⁸ Ukrainian Nikopol Head Yevhen Yevtushenko stated that the strike injured 40 "bearded men," likely referring to Chechen forces.⁴⁹

Russian authorities are attempting to maintain the façade of sustainable and strong logistics in southern Ukraine while accelerating measures to compensate for the damage to the Kerch Strait Bridge. Crimean occupation Head Sergey Aksyonov claimed that over 1,000 trucks have traveled to southern Ukraine across alternate land routes and that ferries transported over 720 vehicles across the Kerch Strait on October 19-20, likely to downplay the impact of the Kerch Strait Bridge attack on Russian logistical capabilities.⁵⁰ Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky reported that Russian authorities have begun efforts to restore the Melitopol-Dzhankoy highway that were originally supposed to begin in 2023.⁵¹

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

Fissures between regional Russian officials, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and military commissariats, and the Russian civilian population from which mobilized forces are drawn will likely intensify in the coming months.⁵² A prominent Russian milblogger attacked the notion that Russian authorities outside of the MoD's chain of command have any legal authority over mobilization practices and criticized Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin's October 17 statement that the mobilization in Moscow City ended because the city reached its mobilization quota.⁵³ The milblogger stated that regional heads have some liberty to make mobilization decisions pertaining to the implementation of mobilization but have no legal authority to unilaterally announce the start or end of mobilization periods.⁵⁴ The milblogger stated that partial mobilization is incomplete, that covert mobilization will continue, and that Russian citizens must accept the uncomfortable fact that military mobilization is necessary to win the war in Ukraine.⁵⁵ A Moscow-based lawyer stated that a military enlistment officer beat him up when he presented deferral documents for mobilized men that cited Sobyanin's statement that mobilization ended on October 17.⁵⁶ Moscow officials are likely to continue mobilizing Muscovites despite local officials framing mobilization in Moscow as complete, as ISW previously assessed.⁵⁷

Belarusian officials may be assisting the Kremlin in detaining Russian men fleeing mobilization in Belarus. A Russian Telegram channel reported that Belarusian authorities began preventing Russian

men from leaving Belarus starting on October 20 and that Belarusian authorities have detained 10 Russian men who attempted to board international flights departing Belarus as of October 21.58

Mobilized Russian prisoners continue their poor battlefield performance. A captured Wagner soldier who was recruited from a Ryazan penal colony stated that three-fourths of his unit died in combat near Bakhmut, and that Russian forces shot his comrades who refused to fight, instructed them to commit suicide rather than face capture, did not pay them, and treated them like cannon fodder.⁵⁹ Another mobilized prisoner stated that Russian mobilization officials forced Russian prisoners to mobilize, did not provide Russian prisoners any training, and provided enough food for soldiers to eat only one meal a day.⁶⁰

The Russian military is continuing to struggle to supply Russian forces in Ukraine. A group of mobilized Russian soldiers from Krasnodar Krai operating in an unspecified part of Ukraine released a recorded appeal to Russian authorities on October 21, stating that they have run out of food, water, medicine, and ammunition. Russian-backed Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration official Vladimir Rogov called for donations to buy communications equipment for Russian forces fighting in Zaporizhia on October 21.62

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of occupied and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian authorities are preventing Ukrainians in Russia from leaving Russia by introducing complex residency and permit requirements to cross international borders. Independent Russian outlet *Dozhd* (Rain) reported that Russian officials issued notices to Ukrainians that crossing the border into Belarus by rail is "a violation of the rules for crossing the border of the Russian Federation." The notice stated that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border service will physically remove Ukrainians from trains bound for Belarus, and *Dozhd* reported that Ukrainians received similar notices when traveling by bus. 4 Russian outlet *RBK* quoted a claim by state rail company Russian Railways that these notices are a reminder that only Belarusian-Russian dual citizens, those with residency permits in the arrival country, or those with a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) state certificate of return can cross the Russian border into Belarus.

Russian occupation authorities continue mass forced removals of civilians from the west bank of the Dnipro River under the guise of civilian "evacuations." Kherson Oblast deputy occupation head Kirill Stremousov stated on October 21 that Russian authorities relocated 46 Ukrainian orphans from Kherson City to occupied Crimea as part of "evacuations." The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast are asking Ukrainian "evacuees" for their last place of residence to compile a list of empty houses to use for unspecified purposes, but likely to support Russian military efforts to conduct a controlled withdrawal from Kherson Oblast. A Russian source claimed that Russian authorities "evacuated" over 1,000 civilians from the west bank to the east bank of the Dnipro River just on the morning of October 21.68 ISW has previously reported that such mass, forced deportations likely constitute a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in a manner that may violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western

reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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<sup>1</sup> https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/videos/669691254460230/
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- ²¹ https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/6439; https://t.me/serhiy_hayday/8442
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- ²⁴ https://t.me/epoddubny/13251; https://t.me/epoddubny/13248; https://t.me/epoddubny/13247
- ²⁵ https://t.me/mod russia/21069

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