Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 26 George Barros, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan October 26, 7:30 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.

A Reuters investigation of a document trove found in an abandoned Russian command post in Balakliya, Kharkiv Oblast, supports ISW's longstanding assessments about the poor condition of Russian forces. ISW has long assessed that the conventional Russian military in Ukraine is severely degraded and has largely lost offensive capabilities since the summer of 2022, that Russian strategic commanders have been micromanaging operational commanders' decisions on tactical matters, and that Russian morale is very low. Reuters' investigation found that Russian units near Balakliya were severely understrength, with a combat battalion at 19.6-percent strength and a reserve unit at 23-percent strength.¹ The investigation found that poor morale, bad logistics, and overbearing commanders contributed to Russian forces' poor performance.² The report found that the Russian Western Military District explicitly forbade a subordinate from withdrawing from an untenable position in the small village of Hrakove (which has an area of less than three square kilometers).³ Ukrainian forces defeated Russian forces in Balakiya and routed Russian forces in eastern Kharkiv Oblast around September 8-10.4

Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric indicates that he is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war. Putin stated that Ukraine has "lost sovereignty" in a meeting with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security officials on October 26.5 Putin stated that the United States is using Ukraine as a "battering ram" against Russia, the Russian-Belarusian Union State, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the CIS. Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin amplified this narrative, stating that "Ukraine has lost the ability to exist as a state," "Ukraine is occupied by NATO," and "[Ukraine] has become a colony of the US" on October 26.6 This language is incompatible with negotiations on an equal basis for a ceasefire, let alone a resolution to the conflict that Russia began. It instead strongly suggests that the Kremlin still seeks a military victory in Ukraine and regime change in Kyiv that would affect the permanent reorientation of Ukraine away from the West and into Russia's control. It also indicates that Putin's aims transcend the territory he has claimed to have annexed, let alone the areas his forces actually control.

Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the chaos of the initial Russian withdrawals from the west bank of the Dnipro River. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated on October 26 that it would be "practically impossible" to completely destroy the dam at the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant (HPP) and that even the destruction of the dam locks at the HPP would only cause the water level of the Dnipro River to rise less than 2 meters. Saldo's statement directly contradicts his own prior statements and the warnings made by Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin on October 18 that Ukraine is planning to strike the Kakhovka HPP and cause flood damage along the Dnipro River. Saldo's apparent retraction of his own warnings may suggest that he seeks to quell anxiety accompanying the mass movement of civilians and Russian military and occupation elements across the Dnipro in order to preserve his own ability to rule. Saldo also issued assurances about the provision of basic utilities and financial services that he claimed

will continue even as evacuations to the east bank are ongoing. Saldo's statements indicate that his administration is attempting to mitigate panic in the information space, likely in order to maintain control of the population of Kherson Oblast against the backdrop of ongoing evacuations.

Russian forces conducted an assault on Ternova, Kharkiv Oblast, likely to fix Ukrainian forces there and prevent them from reinforcing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations elsewhere. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 26 that Ukrainian forces repelled an attack on Ternova (40km northeast of Kharkiv city) which is well removed from areas encompassed by the eastern Ukrainian counteroffensive. 10 Russian forces likely do not intend to regain limited territory in border areas of Kharkiv Oblast but instead likely hope to keep Ukrainian forces in the area that otherwise could join counteroffensive operations. Russian forces are likely hoping for a similar outcome in northwestern Ukraine with their deployment of forces to the joint grouping of forces in Belarus and the messaging around it.

Russian officials continued to admit that Russia is deporting children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes. Russian media reported on October 26 that the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, adopted a Ukrainian child who was deported from Mariupol to Russia. Lvova-Belova claimed that Russian officials have brought 31 children from Mariupol to Russia and that her office is working to "rehabilitate" Ukrainian children from active combat zones. As ISW has previously reported, the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Russia is also continuing to use the excuse of recreational trips to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied territory. Member of the Zaporizhia occupation administration Vladimir Rogov reported on October 26 that over 500 children from Enerhodar went on "vacation" in Yevpatoria, Crimea and Anapa, Krasnodar Krai this year alone. Rogov claimed that the children received "new knowledge" as part of the "educational program." Russian-appointed governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev similarly claimed that children from occupied Kherson City and Enerhodar took part in "excursions" in Sevastopol. These reports are consistent with ISW's previous observations that Russian officials have used the veneer of such recreation and rehabilitation programs to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russian-controlled territory and areas of the Russian Federation.

On October 26, Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin denied ISW's report that Prigozhin confronted Putin and other siloviki factions in the Kremlin regarding the progress of the Russian war in Ukraine.¹⁷ Prigozhin explicitly denied ISW's October 25 assessment and falsely insinuated that ISW receives classified intelligence. 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. ISW specifically does not receive information from Prigozhin's deceased mother-in-law, as he (ironically) suggested.

Key Takeaways

• A *Reuters* investigation of Russian documents from Balakliya supports previous ISW assessments about the poor conditions of Russian forces.

- Putin stated that Ukraine has "lost its sovereignty" in an October 26 speech indicating that Russia likely retains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine and remains resistant to negotiations.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the Russian withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces are attempting to fix Ukrainian forces on Ukraine's northern border.
- Russian officials continued to acknowledge that Russian authorities are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin denied a previous ISW assessment that stated he confronted Putin and other *siloviki* factions regarding the progress of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations west of Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to prepare defensive positions on the west and east banks of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in northwest Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military is reportedly attempting to recruit foreigners to support its war effort in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast continued to relocate residents from the west bank of the Dnipro River.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 26, 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.

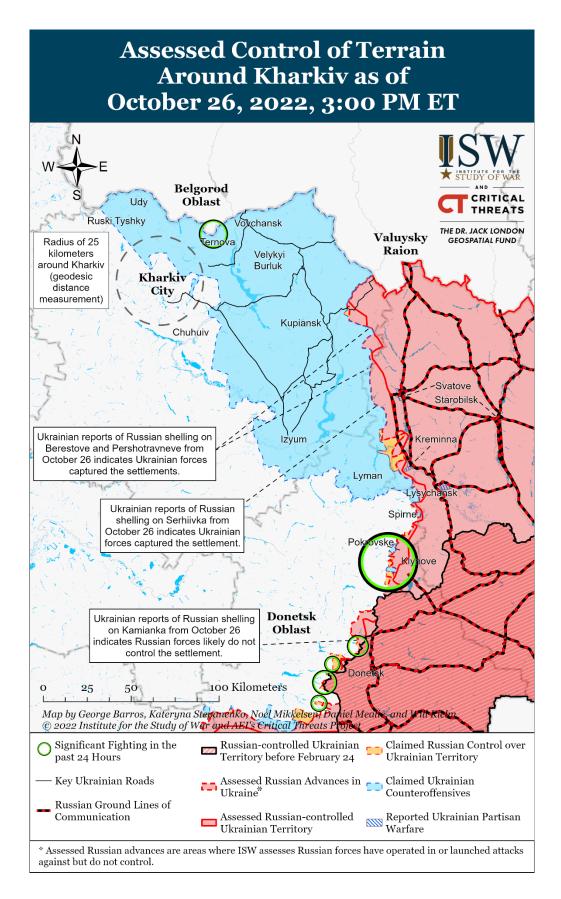
- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force 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 sources claimed that Ukrainian troops conducted counteroffensive operations west of Svatove on October 26. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces launched five consecutive and unsuccessful attacks toward Kuzemivka (13km northwest of Svatove) from Pishchane (23km northwest of Svatove). Several milbloggers claimed that Russian forces repelled multiple attempted Ukrainian attacks toward Svatove. Another prominent milblogger posted a map that indicates that Ukrainian forces have advanced up to Dzherelne, about 16km due west of Svatove.

Russian sources claimed that Russian troops regained lost positions west of the Svatove-Kreminna line on October 26. A Russian milblogger reported that units of the 3rd Motor Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army captured positions in Makiivka (20km northwest of Kreminna) and Novosadove (15km northwest of Kreminna) and pushed Ukrainian troops out of positions south of Makiivka along the eastern bank of the Zherebets River. Another Russian milblogger claimed that fighting northwest of Kreminna has paused due to poor weather and muddy conditions but noted that Russian forces are holding Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna) and that Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna) is a "grey zone." However, footage posted to social media on October 26 shows a Ukrainian soldier raising a flag in Nevske, indicating that Ukrainian troops likely have taken control of the settlement, and Russian sources are trying to obfuscate the gain. Russian sources also claimed that Russian troops repelled attempted Ukrainian attacks towards Bilohorivka, 10km south of Kreminna.

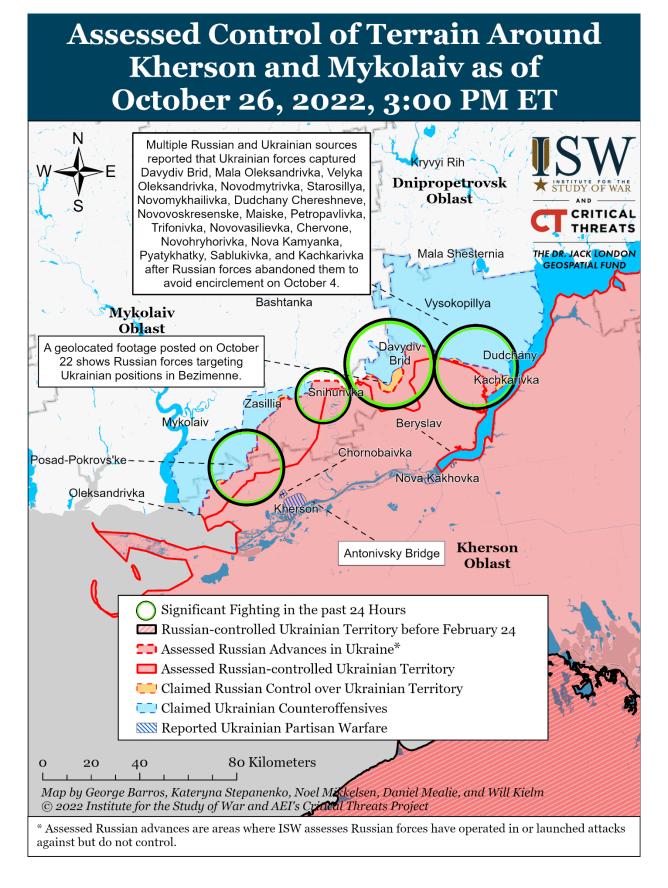


Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)

Russian forces continued to prepare for the defensive on both the west and east banks of the Dnipro River on October 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are continuing to prepare defensive positions on the east bank of the Dnipro River.²⁵ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Russian forces in Nova Kakhovka are preparing defenses in the city for street fighting.²⁶ Russian sources reported that Russian forces are building fortifications in Kherson City and creating strongholds in case of future Ukrainian breakthroughs, with one source calling the fortifications the "Surovikin Line."²⁷ Nova Kakhovka notably lies on the east bank of the Dnipro River, making Russian preparations for fighting in the city contrast with Russian claims that Russian forces intend to hold Kherson City and the west bank of the Dnipro. This may also indicate that Russian forces anticipate battles to take place on the east bank of the Dnipro River in Russian-occupied territory deeper in Kherson Oblast. Geolocated footage from October 26 shows a resident complaining about Russian forces withdrawing to the east bank of the Koshevaya River (5km southwest of Kherson City).²⁸ These continued reports of Russian withdrawals from the area suggest that the Russian military does not expect to hold Kherson City even if it intends to fight for it.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast on October 26. Russian sources claimed that units of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 58th Combined Arms Army repelled a Ukrainian assault toward Ischenka in the vicinity of Davydiv Brid.²⁹ The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces also repelled Ukrainian assaults north of the Beryslav-Nova Kakhovka area near Bruskynske (39km northwest of Beryslav), Piatykhatky (38km north of Beryslav), and Koshara (32km north of Beryslav) in northwestern Kherson Oblast.³⁰ Elements of the Russian 11th Guards Air Assault Brigade are reportedly operating in northeastern Kherson Oblast, likely near or in the Beryslav Raion.³¹

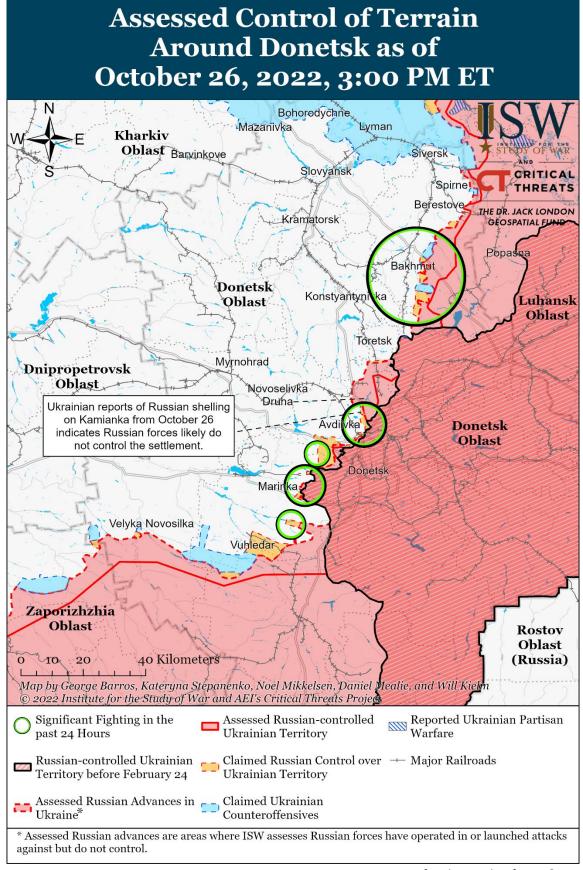
Ukrainian military officials largely maintained operation silence regarding Ukrainian ground maneuvers in Kherson Oblast on October 26. Ukraine's Southern Operational command noted that Ukrainian troops repelled a Russian attempt to break through Ukrainian lines in an unspecified direction on October 25.³² Ukrainian military sources also reiterated that Ukrainian troops are continuing their interdiction campaign to target Russian concentration areas in Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian forces conducted more than 150 fire missions in the Southern Bug direction on October 26 but did not specify any Russian targets that were struck.³³



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 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself, northeast of Bakhmut around Bakhmutske (10km northeast of Bakhmut) and Soledar (12km northeast of Bakhmut), and south of Bakhmut around Ivanhrad (4km south of Bakhmut), Kurdiumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut), and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).³⁴ Russian sources also reported that Russian troops conducted attacks around Soledar and other settlements northeast of Bakhmut.³⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces repelled limited Russian attacks north and west of Donetsk City and in western Donetsk Oblast.³⁶ Russian sources claimed that Russian troops have made limited gains northwest of Donetsk City and have taken control of half of Vodiane (10km northwest of Donetsk City).³⁷ Russian forces otherwise conducted routine artillery strikes around Bakhmut, the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.³⁸



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

Russian forces continued to conduct routine air, missile, and artillery strikes west of Hulyaipole, and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv oblasts on October 26.³⁹ Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck Dnipro and Nikopol in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast and Bereznehuvate in Mykolaiv Oblast.⁴⁰ Dnipropetrovsk Oblast head Valentyn Reznichenko reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down a Shahed-136 drone over Nikopol on October 26.⁴¹ A Russian milbogger posted an image of Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) Spetsnaz supposedly operating in Zaporizhia Oblast on October 26.⁴²

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

The Russian military is reportedly trying to leverage foreigners to support its war in Ukraine. *Foreign Policy* reported on October 25 that Russian actors—reportedly of Russia's Wagner Group—are contacting members of the US-trained Afghan National Army Commando Corps to recruit them to join a Russian "foreign legion" to fight in Ukraine. ⁴³ *Foreign Policy* reported that many of these well-trained former soldiers have been in hiding since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021 and are without stable jobs or personal security, which means that up to 10,000 of these commandos may be vulnerable to Russian offers. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Belarusian military commissariats in Gomel Oblast mobilized Belarusian drivers and mechanics to repair Russian military equipment in Belarus. ⁴⁴ The Kremlin likely seeks to augment its war effort with foreign elements as Russian combat forces continue to face acute personnel shortages.

Local Russian military commissariats continue to contradict Russian regional governors. Military Commissar of Crimea Yevgeny Kutuzov promised that Crimea would complete its partial mobilization by November 1, in time for the start of the fall conscription cycle, as ISW previously forecasted.⁴⁵ Russian occupation Governor of Crimea Sergey Aksenov stated that mobilization activities in Crimea ended on September 25.⁴⁶ Fissures between regional Russian officials, the Russian Ministry of Defense and military commissariats, and the Russian civilian population from which mobilized forces are drawn will likely intensify in the coming months.⁴⁷

Russian sources are complaining that the Russian Ministry of Defense is not maintaining contact with Russian forces and prisoners of war (POWs) in Ukraine. Russian journalist Anastasia Kashevarova wrote a public complaint on October 26 that an entire Russian company of mobilized men of the 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade operating near Svatove are without command.⁴⁸ Thirteen Russian mobilized men in a platoon of the 15th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 2nd Guards Taman Motorized Rifle Division filmed a video in which they stated they hid in an empty house near Svatove after their unit's defeat. The men report they had no connection with their company commander or the rest of command.⁴⁹ A Russian milblogger complained that Russian officials are abandoning Russian POWs in Ukraine and implored Russian authorities to do something to help Russian POWs.⁵⁰

The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UKMOD) seemingly attributed an October 24 attack targeting a Russian rail line in Bryansk Oblast to a Russian anti-war group.⁵¹ Unknown actors destroyed a segment of rail in Novozybykovo, Bryansk Oblast, about 15 km from the Russian-Belarusian border, with an explosive device on October 24.⁵² The UKMOD reported that a Russian anti-war group called

"Stop the Wagons" claimed responsibility for the attack and did not provide any further comment.⁵³ Belarusian opposition elements reportedly have conducted sabotage against Belarusian railways since February.⁵⁴ Russian military mobilization may be promoting similar actions from disaffected Russians.

<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 and occupation administration officials in Kherson Oblast continued to relocate residents from the west bank of the Dnipro River to the east bank on October 26. Kherson occupation administration head Vladimir Saldo claimed on October 26 that Russian and occupation authorities have relocated 70,000 residents from the west bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast in the past week.⁵⁵ Saldo claimed that 40,000 Kherson residents have resettled on the east bank of the Dnipro River and an unspecified number have resettled in other Russian-occupied territories and the Russian Federation itself.⁵⁶ Kherson occupation administration deputy head Kirill Stremousov claimed on October 25 that occupation authorities had relocated 22,000 residents from the west bank.⁵⁷ Stremousov also stated that the Kherson occupation administration's resettlement program was designed to accommodate 60,000 residents.⁵⁸ The discrepancies between Saldo and Stremousov's claimed figures underscore the chaotic nature in which occupation and Russian officials are relocating residents. Saldo may have released a figure that is reflective of the final number of residents that Russian and occupation officials intend to relocate from the west bank of the Dnipro River. Russian and occupation officials will likely increase efforts to relocate residents from the west bank as the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast progresses.

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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¹ https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/

² https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/

³ https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/

⁴ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-10

⁵ http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/69681

⁶ https://t.me/vv volodin/563

⁷ https://t.me/SALDO VGA/191

⁸ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-19

⁹ https://t.me/SALDO_VGA/189; https://t.me/SALDO_VGA/190

¹¹ https://rg dot ru/2022/10/26/gde-ty-mama.html

¹² https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-23

¹³ https://t.me/vrogov/5791

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- ¹⁹ https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/19283; https://t.me/rusich_army/6004; https://t.me/milchronicles/1248; https://t.me/readovkanews/45360
- ²⁰ https://t.me/wargonzo/8903
- ²¹ https://t.me/rybar/40614
- ²² https://t.me/vysokygovorit/9794; https://t.me/wargonzo/8904
- ²³ https://t.me/ukr_sof/333;

https://censor(dot)net/ua/video_news/3376413/biyitsi_sso_vstanovyly_prapor_ukrayiny_v_nevskomu_luganskoyi_obla sti video

²⁴ https://t.me/rybar/40614

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- ²⁶ https://sprotyv.mod.gov(dot)ua/2022/10/26/v-novij-kahovczi-rosiyany-zavaryuyut-kryshky-lyukiv-cherez-ostrah-ukrayinskyh-drg/?fbclid=IwAR0ljAXcs0E8B3YdTuejxvQgEeAQnhy-pfbeRFkagSLul0yjA1azveXQ280;
- ²⁷ https://t.me/boris rozhin/68428; https://t.me/kommunist/12229
- ²⁸ https://twitter.com/2iNtR0VeRt Ed/status/1585271009686454272;

https://twitter.com/neonhandrail/status/1585130686033588224?s=20&t=fqs1SqoFtbH1pl_OlQpY1A

- ²⁹ https://t.me/Stremousov Kirill/618; https://t.me/Stremousov Kirill/625; https://t.me/wargonzo/8905
- 30 https://t.me/mod russia/21199
- 31 https://t.me/milinfolive/92489
- 32 https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/videos/812553639834205/? tn =%2CC
- 33 <u>https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/videos/657823609193644/? tn =%2CO</u>34

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35 https://t.me/wargonzo/8903; https://t.me/wargonzo/8898; https://t.me/wargonzo/8903

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³⁷ https://t.me/rybar/40607; https://t.me/kommunist/12277

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¹⁴ https://t.me/vrogov/5791

¹⁵ https://t.me/razvozhaev/1312

¹⁶ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-14;

¹⁷ https://t.me/Prigozhin hat/1882; https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-25

¹⁸ https://t.me/mod russia/21199; https://t.me/readovkanews/45360

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⁴¹ https://t.me/dnipropetrovskaODA/2248

⁴² https://t.me/grey_zone/15503

⁴³ https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/25/afghanistan-russia-ukraine-military-recruitment-putin-taliban/

⁴⁴ https://sprotyv.mod.gov ua/2022/10/26/v-bilorusi-mobilizuyut-vodiyiv-shho-mayut-obslugovuvaty-armiyu-rf/

⁴⁵ https://t.me/Crimeanwind/13455; https://crimea.ria dot ru/20221024/plan-po-chastichnoy-mobilizatsii-v-krymu-esche-ne-vypolnen-1125062179.html

⁴⁶ https://rg dot ru/2022/09/25/reg-ufo/aksenov-chastichnaia-mobilizaciia-v-krymu-zavershitsia-v-eto-voskresene.html

⁴⁷ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-21

⁴⁸ https://t.me/akashevarova/5761

⁴⁹ https://zona.media/article/2022/10/25/anabasis; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wdTySfihqE

⁵⁰ https://t.me/notes veterans/6243; https://t.me/notes veterans/6241; https://t.me/notes veterans/6240

⁵¹ https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1585134337883869184/photo/1

⁵² https://twitter.com/rybar_en/status/1584888146868961280; https://twitter.com/Internl_Leaks/status/1584705640249069570

⁵³ https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1585134337883869184/photo/1

⁵⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/23/ukraine-belarus-railway-saboteurs-russia/

⁵⁵ https://t.me/SALDO VGA/189

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⁵⁷ https://t.me/Stremousov Kirill/611

⁵⁸ https://t.me/Stremousov Kirill/611