

# **Russia-Ukraine Warning Update:**

## **Russian Military Operations in Southeastern Ukraine Imminent**

**February 21, 2022, 3:30pm**

**By Frederick W. Kagan and Mason Clark  
with George Barros and Kateryna Stepanenko**

Russia recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) and signed treaties of "friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance" with them on February 21, 2022.<sup>1</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his decision in a lengthy speech on the same day. The text of these agreements has not been publicized as of this writing.<sup>2</sup> The Russian Duma will likely vote to authorize the use of Russian military force to occupy the republics, and Russian conventional forces will likely move to do so within the next 24-36 hours. Russian formal recognition of the republics will likely include recognizing all their territorial claims, which extend to the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts still under Ukrainian control.

Putin issued a further ultimatum to Ukraine to cease all fighting against the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Ukraine has not been fighting and has refrained from responding to increasing Russian and separatist aggression, but Russia has repeatedly falsely attributed its proxies' attacks to Ukraine and blamed Ukraine for false flag operations the proxies have conducted against themselves. Putin has therefore created an open-ended justification for future military action against Ukraine. The Kremlin can use the justification of any claimed Ukrainian attack on the newly recognized DNR/LNR to support a range of further military operations up to a full invasion of unoccupied Ukraine in the coming days. He might also claim that Ukrainian resistance to Russian moves to seize the unoccupied portions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts justifies further Russian military action.

Russian armed forces will likely attack Ukrainian forces at the line of contact to secure the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts not currently under DNR/LNR control. An extensive Russian air/missile campaign throughout Ukraine will likely accompany that attack, ostensibly to facilitate it. These attacks may begin on February 22 or may follow in succeeding days.

ISW had [previously described](#) this possible course of action in its January 27, 2022, report, which added the possibility that Russian forces will also push north from Crimea.

The Russian air/missile campaign that could begin ostensibly to support the seizure of unoccupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts following Russian recognition of the proxy republics' independence would likely also set conditions for a full-scale Russian invasion and occupation of all or almost all of Ukraine, including Kyiv.

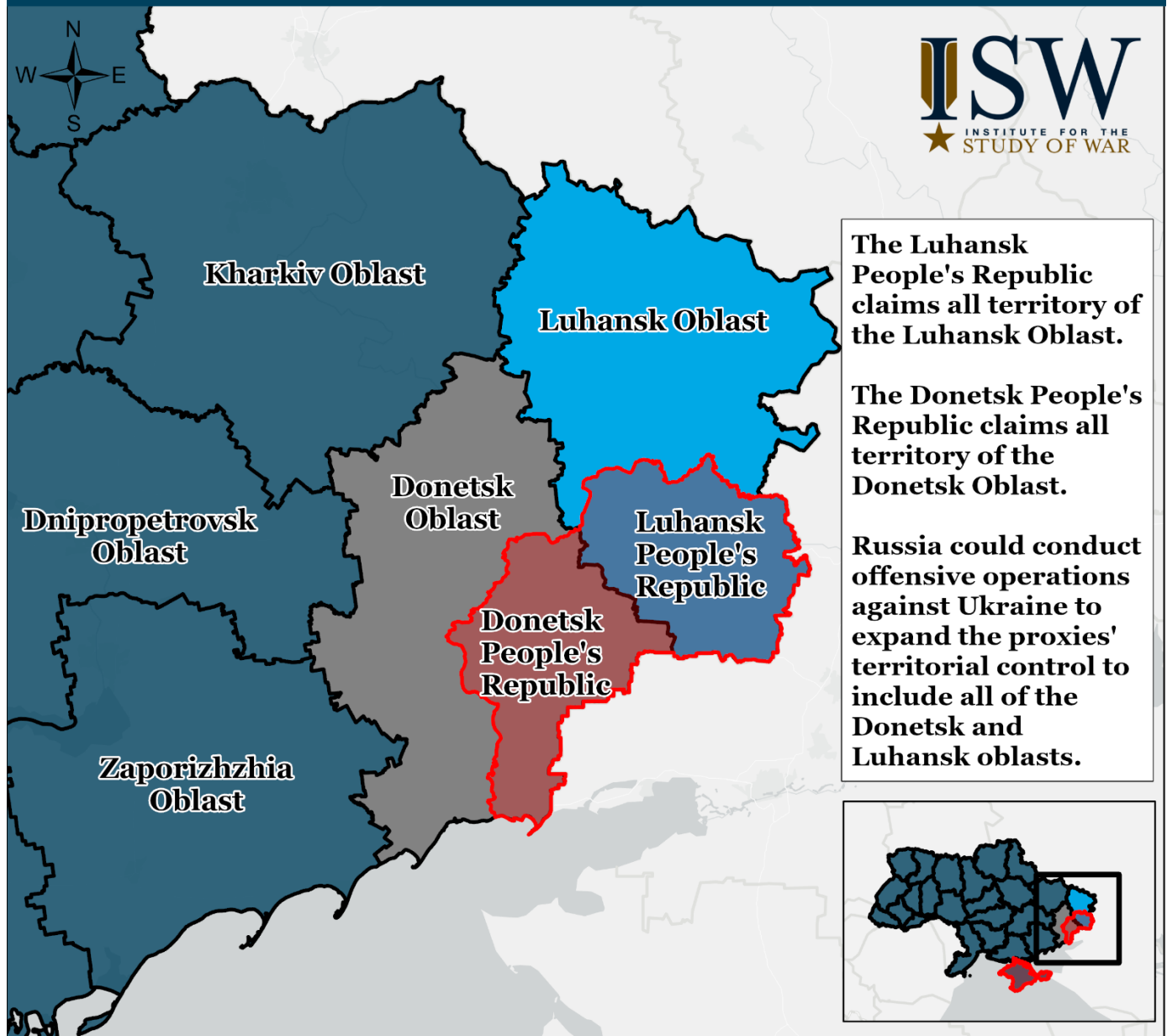
**We assess that Russia will likely take a phased approach rather than beginning with the full-scale invasion immediately, however.** The Russian military is continuing to set conditions for the full-scale attack but has reportedly not yet completed its preparations. The *New York Times* reported on February 20 that US intelligence confirmed the Russian military has prepared to execute an attack plan, and 40-50 percent of units have shifted into "combat formations."<sup>3</sup> *CNN* separately reported the United States still has not seen several "larger actions," such as electronic jamming and cyberattacks, beyond the currently observed tactical indicators to indicate preparations for larger-scale kinetic activity.<sup>4</sup>

Putin's speech of February 21, 2022, laid out an extensive list of grievances against the current Ukrainian government, NATO, and the United States. It rejected the legitimacy of any independent

Ukrainian state and implicitly questioned the legitimacy of any of the post-Soviet states. Putin reiterated his false claims that NATO was planning to deploy offensive weapons into Ukraine that would threaten Russia as well as his complaints that NATO had not acceded to his formal demands regarding NATO expansion, the disposition of NATO military infrastructure, and the deployment of specific weapons systems near Russian territory. This speech could serve as the basis for a justification for an invasion and occupation of all of Ukraine, but Putin has not yet gone that far.

The initiation of a Russian attack in eastern Ukraine would offer Putin many opportunities to expand his narratives to support a full-scale invasion. In the absence of the emergence of a clear narrative justifying the invasion-to-conquer course of action, therefore, we forecast that hostilities will begin in the east and with air and missile attacks throughout Ukraine's depth, likely with some pause before Putin launches further invasions of unoccupied Ukraine.

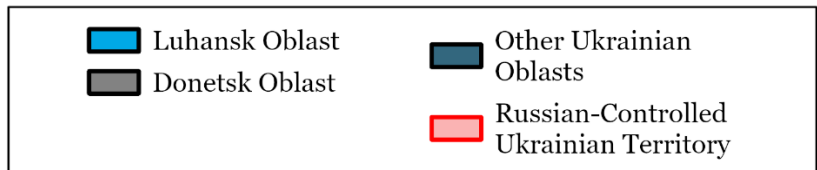
# Russian-Controlled Donbas as of February 21, 2022 4:00 pm EST



The Luhansk People's Republic claims all territory of the Luhansk Oblast.

The Donetsk People's Republic claims all territory of the Donetsk Oblast.

Russia could conduct offensive operations against Ukraine to expand the proxies' territorial control to include all of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.



Putin could also pause after securing all of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and engage in negotiations for a cease-fire under new conditions and terms. However, the recognition of the LNR/DNR will not achieve the maximalist objectives Putin laid out in his speech. Even if he offered or accepted some temporary cease-fire agreement after initial attacks, however, he will continue to demand that Ukraine surrender its sovereignty to Russia. If Kyiv continues to refuse that demand, as it likely will, Putin will likely attack to secure it.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEE\\_vS6aeMQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEE_vS6aeMQ).

<sup>2</sup> <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67829>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/20/world/ukraine-russia-putin-biden#us-intelligence-russia-military>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-21-22/h\\_a8811d359c81931d0fe2d993541fb16a](https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-news-02-21-22/h_a8811d359c81931d0fe2d993541fb16a).