Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 22, 2023

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May 22, 2023, 8:30pm ET

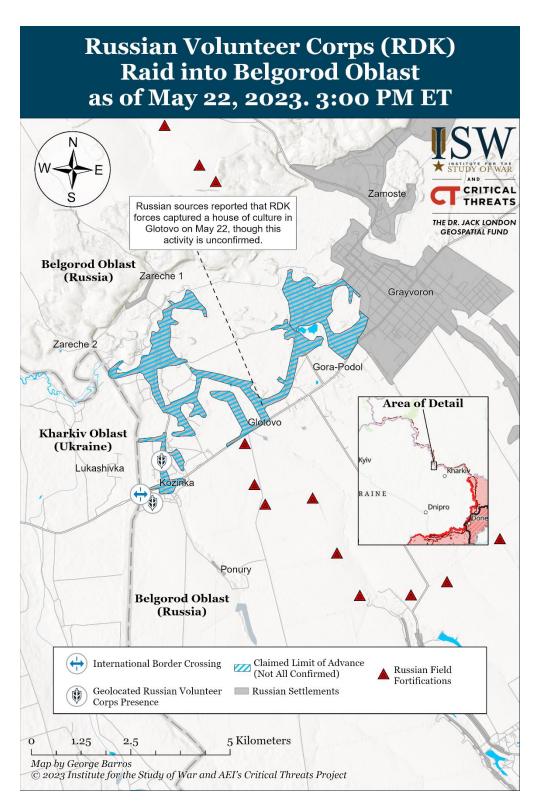
Click here to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click here to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cutoff for this product was 4pm ET on May 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) conducted a raid into Belgorod Oblast on May

22. Russian sources began reporting on the morning of May 22 that a detachment of the RDK and LSR consisting of two tanks, an armored personnel carrier, and nine other armored vehicles crossed the international border and captured Kozinka, a settlement in the Grayvoron region of Belgorod Oblast within 600 meters of the border with Sumy Oblast.[1] Several Russian sources claimed that the grouping then captured the settlements of Glotovo and Gora Podol (3km and 5km from the border, respectively), although some milbloggers disputed claims that the attack completely captured Glotovo or Gora Podol, instead reporting that RDK forces only got to the Glotovo House of Culture.[2] ISW has not yet observed geolocated confirmation that the RDK or LSR reached Glotovo or Gora Podol. Geolocated footage posted on May 22 does confirm that the RDK struck a border post near Kozinka before crossing the border with at least one tank.[3] The RDK also posted footage reportedly showing the body of a Russian border guard in a border station, likely from the border crossing near Kozinka.[4] Russian milbloggers later claimed that Russian troops retook control of all three settlements.[5] Some Russian sources additionally reported that Russian forces repelled pro-Ukrainian sabotage groups near Dronovka, about 22km northwest of Kozinka.[6] The RDK additionally posted footage reportedly outside two settlements near the border area in Bryansk Oblast, but the nature of this incursion is unclear and ISW has not observed additional evidence or discourse surrounding actions in Bryansk Oblast on May 22.[7]



Ukrainian officials noted that they are aware of the attack but denied any direct involvement by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov noted that the RDK and LSR are comprised exclusively of Russian

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citizens and reported that the groups launched an operation in Belgorod Oblast to "liberate these territories...from the so-called Putin regime" and create a "security zone" by the border to protect Ukrainian civilians from further Russian shelling.[8] Advisor to the Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Ukraine is observing and studying the situation but "has no direct relation to it," noting that armed anti-regime Russian partisan movements are inevitable against the backdrop of the war.[9]

The raid prompted a slate of responses from local and federal Russian officials. Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced on May 22 the start of a counterterrorism operation regime in order to "ensure the safety of citizens in Belgorod Oblast." [10] While some social media users posted footage claiming to show an official evacuation from the Grayvoron region, the Belgorod Oblast Ministry of Emergency Situations reported that it never announced an evacuation and suggested that some individuals may be leaving of their own accord. [11] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Federal Security Service (FSB), and Border Service reported to Russian President Vladimir Putin on an "attempt by Ukrainian saboteurs to break into Belgorod Oblast." [12] Peskov also accused Ukraine of staging the incident in order to distract from the situation in Bakhmut. [13] A Russian milblogger additionally claimed that the Russian military leadership decided to deploy the 74th Motorized Rifle Brigade (41st Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) to the Belgorod Oblast border area in order to counter the attack. [14]

The Russian information space responded with a similar degree of panic, factionalism, and incoherency as it tends to display when it experiences significant informational **shocks.** Some milbloggers fixated on the fact that the RDK and LSR are comprised of mostly Russians and labeled them traitors to Russia, baselessly accusing them of working under the GUR.[15] Several milbloggers additionally speculated that the attack was a purposeful information operation intended to distract from the recent Russian capture of Bakhmut and to instill panic in the Russian information space in advance of a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive.[16] Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin remarked that he has long warned that such cross-border raids may be part of a wider Ukrainian counteroffensive strategy.[17] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin took advantage of the incident to accuse the Russian government and its bureaucratic inertia of contributing to the attack and criticized the Russian MoD for being unable to strengthen Russian borders and defend Russia.[18] The first observed line of Russian defensive fortifications notably runs 2km in from of Gora Podol, and the suggestion that RDK forces managed to penetrate the defensive line emphasizes the weakness of such fortifications at least when not fully manned by well-prepared and well-equipped soldiers. While the majority of milbloggers responded with relatively varied concern, anxiety, and anger, the information space did not coalesce around one coherent response, which indicates first and foremost that the attack took Russian commentators by surprise.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces will withdraw from the entire frontline in Ukraine after June 1 in order to reconstitute and train for about two months. Prigozhin claimed on May 21 – one day after he declared victory in Bakhmut City – that Wagner forces will give Russian conventional forces control of Bakhmut on May 25 and completely withdraw from the entire frontline by June 1 to rest and reconstitute over a two-month period.[19] Prigozhin also claimed that any reports of Wagner assault operations during that two-month period are fake unless he says otherwise. ISW previously assessed that Wagner forces are unlikely to continue fighting beyond Bakhmut due to severe depletion and the culmination of their

offensive capabilities.[20] The two-month reconstitution period Prigozhin has announced could have Wagner forces sitting out key parts of the Ukrainian counter-offensive depending on when and how it begins.

Ukrainian officials stated that limited fighting continued in and around Bakhmut on May 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that fighting continues in Bakhmut and that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks near Hryhorivka (8km northwest of Bakhmut) and south of Ivanivske (immediately west of Bakhmut).[21] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reiterated that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in a fortified area in western Bakhmut and that fighting for heights north and south of Bakhmut continues.[22] Geolocated footage published on May 21 shows that Wagner forces advanced towards the To504 entrance to southwestern Bakhmut.[23] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that fighting is ongoing just west of Bakhmut near Khromove as of May 21.[24] Another milblogger claimed on May 22 that Russian forces attempted a limited ground attack south of Bakhmut near Bila Hora.[25] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin, Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and other Russian sources claimed that Russian forces began clearing and demining operations on the western outskirts of Bakhmut.[26]

The Russian informational response to the capture of Bakhmut has thus far focused on competing for responsibility for the victory rather than discussing the resulting military situation. Prominent Russian milbloggers amplified a document allegedly from the Russian MoD that would grant state awards for the capture of Bakhmut to Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel General Alexey Kim, MoD deputies Tatyana Shevtsova and Ruslan Tsalikov, and Ksenia Shoigu, the daughter of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu – notably omitting Wagner Group personnel and its affiliates, such as Prigozhin and Army General Sergey Surovikin.[27] Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that DNR Head Pushilin announced the creation of a specific award commemorating the Battle of Bakhmut but complained that Russia should not hand out the medal to those who did not actually fight in Bakhmut.[28] Prigozhin complained that Russia has not issued state awards to dead Wagner fighters for the Bakhmut effort, and that the MoD had never even awarded Wagner fighters medals commemorating the capture of Palmyra, Syria.[29] Russian milbloggers amplified footage showing a Wagner commander awarding personnel with Wagner's own internal award commemorating Bakhmut, likely attempting to beat the Russian MoD in solidifying its claims in the capture of Bakhmut.[30] A Russian milblogger affiliated with the nationalist, pro-war Angry Patriots Club criticized Prigozhin for claiming sole responsibility for the capture of Bakhmut, claiming that conventional Russian forces defended Bakhmut's flanks and that the 137th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (106th Guards Airborne Division, Western Military District) has supported Wagner forces since the early part of the Bakhmut effort.[31]

The hyperfocus on claiming victory in Bakhmut distracts from the precarious Russian military situation in and around Bakhmut, underscoring the weight of Prigozhin's influence in the information space. The Russian military situation in Bakhmut is particularly vulnerable as the Russian offensive effort in the area has likely culminated, granting Ukrainian forces the opportunity to launch further counterattacks on Bakhmut's already-weakened flanks.[32] Wagner's withdrawal in contact will also likely result in the Russian MoD manning defensive lines with poorly trained and provisioned conventional units similar to those that retreated from their positions while defending against Ukrainian counterattacks earlier in May.[33] The

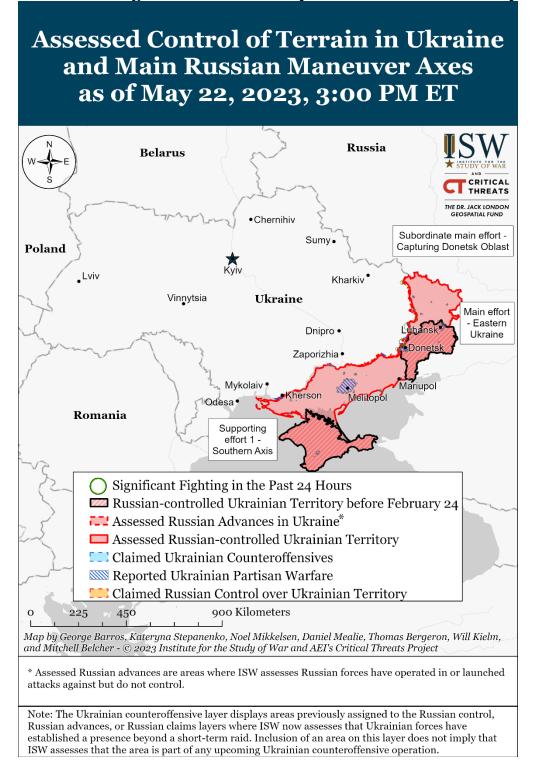
Russian information space is largely ignoring these vulnerabilities, however. Girkin complained that the Russian focus on capturing Bakhmut was a "strategic failure" that resulted in an "unnecessary and Pyrrhic" victory.[34] Girkin criticized Prigozhin, Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov for prolonging the effort to take Bakhmut and distracting from preparations to defend against a coming Ukrainian counteroffensive.[35]

Russian forces launched another large-scale drone and missile strike against Ukrainian infrastructure on the night of May 21-22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 22 that Russian forces launched 21 Shahed drones at Ukraine and 21 missiles at Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia cities and Kharkiv Oblast, including four Kh-101/555 air-launched cruise missiles, five Kh-22 cruise missiles, two Iskander-M ballistic missiles, five S-300 missiles, and four other unspecified missiles.[36] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces shot down all of the Kh-101/555 missiles and Shahed drones. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated that Russian forces may have lost the desire to strike Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts from the northern direction with guided aerial bombs due to the downing of two Russian Mi-8 helicopters, one Su-34 aircraft, and one Su-35 aircraft in Bryansk Oblast on May 13.[37]

Key Takeaways

- Elements of the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russian Legion (LSR) conducted a raid into Belgorod Oblast on May 22.
- Ukrainian officials noted that they are aware of the attack but denied any direct involvement by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The raid prompted a slate of responses from local and federal Russian officials.
- The Russian information space responded with a similar degree of panic, factionalism, and incoherency as it tends to display when it experiences significant informational shocks.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Wagner forces will withdraw from the entire frontline in Ukraine after June 1 in order to reconstitute and train for about two months.
- Ukrainian officials stated that limited fighting continued in and around Bakhmut on May 22.
- The Russian informational response to the capture of Bakhmut has thus far focused on competing for responsibility for the victory rather than discussing the resulting military situation. The hyperfocus on claiming victory in Bakhmut distracts from the precarious Russian military situation in and around Bakhmut, underscoring the weight of Prigozhin's influence in the information space.
- Russian forces launched another large-scale drone and missile strike against Ukrainian infrastructure on the night of May 21-22.
- · Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Kupyansk direction.
- Russian forces made marginal gains in the Avdiivka area and did not conduct any confirmed or claimed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.
- The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant reportedly lost power for the seventh time since the beginning of the war.
- The Russian military is reportedly lowering the length of training for convicts in order to compensate for heavy losses.

• Russian occupation authorities announced that preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia Party has commenced in occupied territories.



We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 the Ukrainian 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.

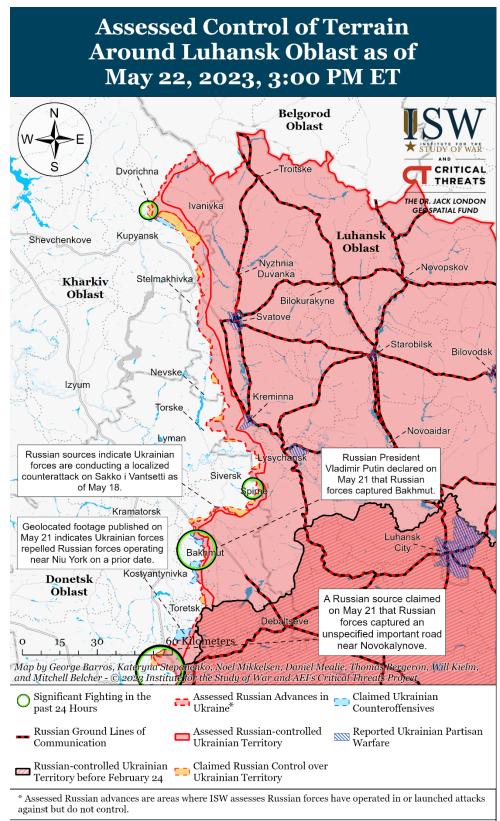
- Russian Main Effort Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas

Russian Main Effort - Eastern Ukraine

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued limited ground attacks in the Kupyansk direction on May 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions towards Masyutivka (13km northeast of Kupyansk).[38] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that units of the Western Group of Forces stopped three Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups about 20km southeast of Kupyansk near Tymivka, Kyslivka, and Ivanivka.[39] A Russian milblogger warned that Ukrainian forces may be preparing to attack positions of the Western Military District (WMD)'s 1st Guards Tank Army and 6th Combined Arms Army on this sector of the front.[40]

Russian forces continued ground attacks and have made incremental advances south of Kreminna as of May 22. Geolocated footage posted on May 22 indicates that Russian troops have advanced near the filtration station on the southeastern outskirts of Bilohorivka (about 13km south of Kreminna).[41] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces also conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Ivano-Darivka (23km south of Kreminna).[42]



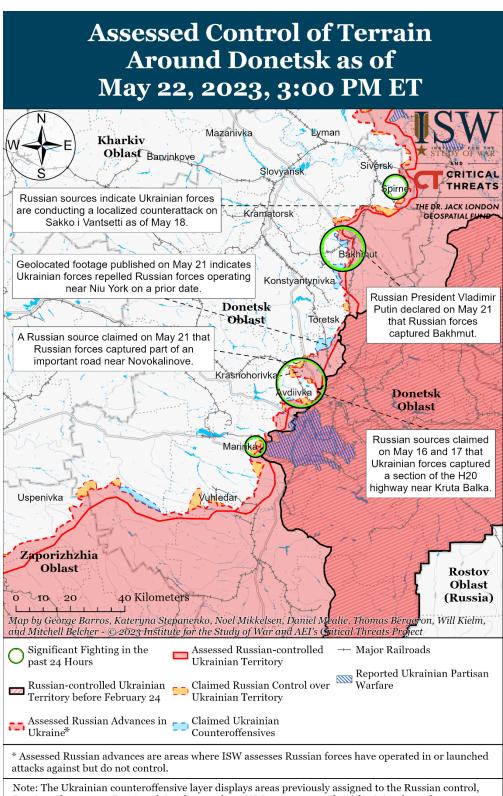
Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

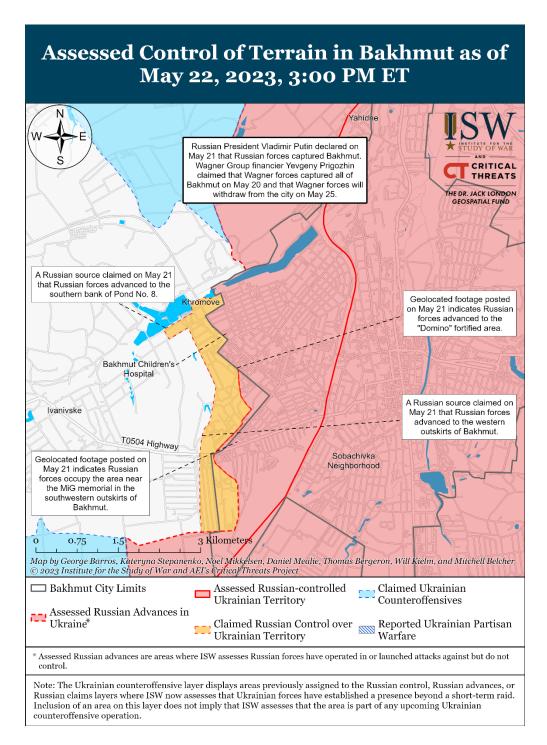
See topline text on Bakhmut.

Russian forces made marginal gains in the Avdiivka area as of May 22. Geolocated footage published on May 21 shows that Russian forces made marginal territorial gains southwest of Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka).[43] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka, Pervomaiske, Novokalynove (7km north of Avdiivka), Vodyane (6km southweset of Avdiivka), and Marinka (18km west of Donetsk City).[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also attacked near Sieverne (7km west of Avdiivka) and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City).[45] Ukrainian Donetsk Oblast Head Pavlo Kyrylenko reported that Russian forces shelled Avdiivka with cluster munitions.[46] One Russian milblogger expressed concern that Ukrainian forces are concentrating armor for an offensive effort from Avdiivka against Donetsk City, but another milblogger claimed that the alleged armor buildup is insufficient for such an effort.[47]

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed or claimed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on May 22.



Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.



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

Russian sources continued to express concern about Ukrainian positions on the Dnipro River islands ahead of an anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration amplified footage on May 22 purportedly showing Russian forces striking Ukrainian positions on unspecified islands in the Dnipro River delta with high-precision projectiles.[48] The Kherson Oblast occupation administration claimed that rumors about Ukrainian forces potentially crossing the

Dnipro River and the coming counteroffensive are only propaganda promoting fear and uncertainty. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces maintain control over the islands in the Dnipro River delta and that Russian forces drive Ukrainian forces off the islands with aerial bombs.[49]

The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) lost power for the seventh time since the beginning of the war. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Rafel Grossi stated on May 22 that the ZNPP was completely disconnected from the national electric grid for several hours, forcing the plant to rely on external diesel generators for power.[50] Grossi reiterated calls for increased efforts to restore backup powerlines and for the IAEA monitoring contingent to receive access to the Zaporizhzhia Thermal Power Plant (ZTPP) switchyard to provide backup power to the ZNPP. Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom reported that Russian shelling cut the only operational power line to the ZNPP.[51] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that Ukrainian forces struck the ZNPP, however.[52] ISW has previously reported on Russian militarization of the ZNPP.[53]



against but do not control.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.



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

The Russian military is reportedly reducing the length of training for convicts in order to compensate for heavy losses. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 22 that the Russian military leadership has reduced the training period for convicts at a training camp in Starobilsk Raion in Russian occupied Luhansk Oblast from four weeks to 10 days.[54] ISW previously assessed that the Russian

forces are diluting their combat effectiveness with poorly trained personnel in an attempt to make up for high casualties.[55]

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

Russian occupation authorities announced that preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia Party has commenced in occupied territories. Russian occupation authorities in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia oblasts announced on May 22 that residents may vote for their preferred candidates online from May 22 to 28, or in-person from May 26-28.[56] Russian occupation authorities in occupied Kherson Oblast did not comment on preliminary voting, though Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that Kherson Oblast occupation authorities are preparing for the autumn regional elections.[57]

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.)

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.

Ukrainian Joint Forces Commander Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev stated on May 22 that there continues to be no evidence that Russian forces have formed ground strike groups in Belarus or Russia though Russian forces maintain a military presence in Belarus.[58] Nayev stated that Russian forces continue to maintain two State Border Protection groups totaling 18,000 personnel in southern Belarus and Kursk, Bryansk, and Belgorod oblasts.[59] Nayev stated that the main contingent of Russian forces that had been in Belarus has moved to Rostov Oblast, Russia and then deployed to Donetsk Oblast after training at Belarusian training grounds.[60] Nayev stated that Russian forces maintain 13 Russian fixed-wing aircraft on Belarusian territory, including eight Su-34s, three Su-30SMs, two Su-24MRs, and 12 Mi-8, Mi-24, and Mi-28N helicopters.[61]

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.

^[1] https://t.me/rybar/47410; https://t.me/readovkanews/59337; https://t.me/rybar/47396; https://t.me/rybar/47395; https://t.me/readovkanews/59340; https://t.me/wargonzo/12687; https://t.me/shot_shot/51738

- [2] https://t.me/rybar/47396; https://t.me/rybar/47395; https://t.me/rusich_army/8969; https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/25643; https://t.me/readovkanews/59337; https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/7723
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- [4] **GRAPHIC** https://twitter.com/Militarylandnet/status/1660591308082118657?s=20
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[16] https://t.me/notes_veterans/9599; https://t.me/sashakots/39849; https://t.me/epoddubny/16031; https://t.me/epoddubny/16030; https://t.me/epoddubny/16032; https://t.me/vysokygovorit/11687

[17] https://t.me/strelkovii/4982

[18] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1019; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1020; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1017; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1018

[19] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1012; https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-20-2023

[20] https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-21-2023

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[22] https://t.me/annamaliar/779

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[24] https://t.me/rybar/47359

[25] https://t.me/wargonzo/12673

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[27] https://t.me/rusbrief/119087; https://t.me/rybar/47383

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[29] https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1019; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1020; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1017; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1018

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