



## Russian Military Movements Unlikely Preparing for Imminent Offensive against Ukraine but Still Concerning

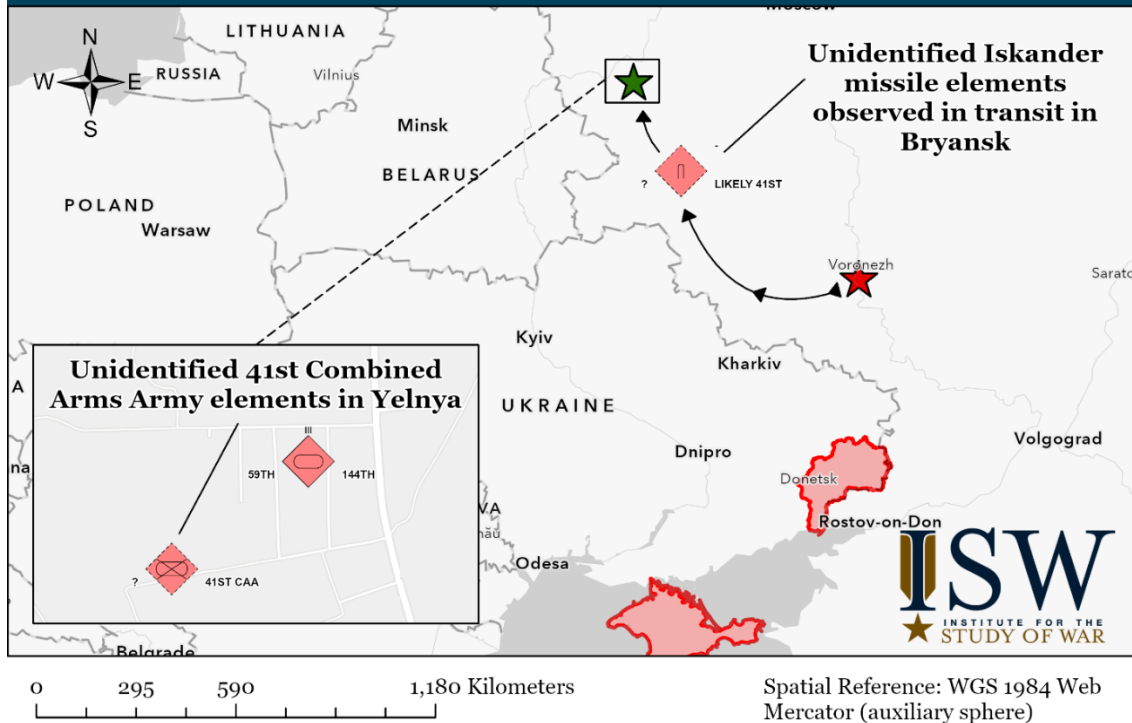
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By Mason Clark and George Barros

**Movements and activities of elements of Russia’s 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) and 1st Guards Tank Army in late October are unlikely to be preparations for an offensive against Ukraine, but do pose longer-term challenges to Russia’s neighbors and NATO.** The *Washington Post* reported on October 30 that a “buildup” of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border concerned US and European officials.<sup>1</sup> The report suggested that the Russian deployments are similar to those carried out on Ukraine’s border in March–April 2021. Open-source reporting does not support the assessment that Russia has moved any additional forces closer to the Ukrainian border or that a Russian offensive against Ukraine is imminent, however. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense stated on November 1 it has not observed any transfers of Russian units, weapons, or equipment to the Ukrainian border.<sup>2</sup>

- **Elements of Russia’s 41st CAA redeployed from temporary positions near Voronezh (northeast of Ukraine) to permanent basing facilities in Yelnya (east of Belarus) in late October.** Open source satellite imagery confirmed that the elements of the 41st CAA had left Voronezh by October 27 and arrived at permanent Russian bases in Yelnya by October 31.<sup>3</sup> Four battalion tactical groups and combat support elements from the 41st CAA, the equivalent of a small division, deployed to Voronezh from their permanent base in Novosibirsk, in the Russian interior, in April 2021.<sup>4</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed at the time that this deployment would support Russia’s Zapad-2021 military exercise, though the 41st CAA did not participate in the main Zapad exercises from September 10–16.<sup>5</sup>
- **An unidentified Iskander ballistic missile battalion, likely part of the 41st CAA’s assets that deployed to Voronezh, was spotted traveling through Bryansk.**<sup>6</sup> Open-source imagery of Russian bases in Bryansk taken on November 1 did not show the Iskander battalion, and its final destination is currently unknown, though it is likely redeploying to Yelnya.
- **Elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army began major training exercises on October 27.** The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on October 27 that about 25 “subdivisions” (подразделение [podrazdelenie], a Russian word indicating units at the battalion echelon or lower) of the 1st Guards Tank Army, based east of Moscow, began exercises to earn the honorary title of “shock” units.<sup>7</sup>

# Redeployment of 41st Combined Arms Army Elements from Voronezh to Yelnya in October 2021



- ★ 144th Motorized Rifle Division permanent base in Yelnya
- ★ Pogonovo Training Ground In Voronezh
- Russian-Occupied Ukrainian Territory

Map by George Barros  
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The 41st CAA elements are likely redeploying from temporary positions in Voronezh to permanent basing facilities in Yelnya, from which they could support several operational directions. These units had been in field camps near Voronezh rather than in hard-stand permanent bases. The Russian military was never likely to leave units or equipment in such facilities through the winter, making the movement of these units unsurprising in itself. Their new position in Yelnya is co-located with permanent basing facilities occupied by the 59th Tank Regiment, therefore likely better suited to house troops and maintain equipment over the winter. The movement of these elements of the 41<sup>st</sup> CAA to the base at Yelnya rather than back to their original home bases in Siberia, however, is noteworthy. It suggests that they will be permanently transferred to the Western Military District (WMD) and remain on the Ukrainian and/or Belarusian border for a time. Yelnya may not be their final destination within the WMD, however.

Reports that elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army deployed to the Ukrainian border are likely inaccurate. Several social media users have claimed without supporting evidence that videos circulating in the past week of Russian armor moving through Kursk depict the 4th Tank Division, part of the 1st Guards Tank Army, deploying to Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The videos likely instead depict the 41st CAA redeploying from Voronezh to Yelnya. The Russian Ministry of Defense’s announcement that elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army are conducting exercises to earn the “shock” title is likely accurate. ISW has not observed any footage of the 1st Guards Tank Army departing its

bases in the Moscow region or transiting any point between Moscow and the Ukrainian border. Exercises to earn the title “shock” have previously occurred in October and November.<sup>9</sup>

**The *Washington Post* article rightly noted important inflections in Moscow’s information operations over the course of 2021 and in recent days and weeks.** These changes in tone and rhetoric could presage military operations against Ukraine, although likely on a much more limited scale and focused in eastern Ukraine rather than in the areas through which the elements of the 41<sup>st</sup> CAA have moved. They are most likely related to Kremlin posturing in advance of the next Normandy Format meeting, however, especially since no open-source evidence of Russian military buildups near eastern Ukraine has emerged.

**The Kremlin exploited two Ukrainian actions in late October to advance a false narrative of a potential Ukrainian offensive against occupied Donbas and claimed it will protect “Russian citizens” (rather than “ethnic Russians”) in Donbas for the first time.**

- **The Kremlin conducted a disinformation campaign to mischaracterize a Ukrainian humanitarian aid delivery to a frontline village in Donetsk on October 26 as a Ukrainian attack.** Elements of a Ukrainian mechanized brigade escorted a humanitarian aid delivery to Staromaryivka village, located in no man’s land in Donetsk, on October 26 and departed on the same day.<sup>10</sup> The Russian-backed Donetsk People’s Republic, Russian Foreign Ministry, and Kremlin-run media conducted a coordinated disinformation campaign accusing Ukrainian forces of attacking and occupying Staromaryivka.<sup>11</sup> The Kremlin has previously used false claims of Ukrainian actions to support kinetic escalations in Donbas. This single disinformation event does not indicate an imminent Russian operation, but further Kremlin information operations claiming Ukraine is conducting offensive operations could support a Russian kinetic escalation against Ukraine in coming months.
- **The Kremlin is additionally exploiting Ukraine’s first use of Turkish TB2 drones in combat to claim a Ukrainian escalation.** Ukrainian forces used a Turkish-supplied TB2 drone to strike a Kremlin-proxy artillery position in Donetsk on October 26 in response to shelling that killed a Ukrainian serviceman.<sup>12</sup> Ukraine first purchased TB2 drones from Turkey in late 2019 and deployed them to frontline units in summer 2020, but has not previously used them in combat.<sup>13</sup> Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated the strike supported longstanding Russian claims that Turkish weapon sales to Ukraine could destabilize Donbas on October 26.<sup>14</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Ukraine of using the novelty of a TB2 strike to obscure its “gross” and “direct” violations of ceasefire agreements on November 1.<sup>15</sup> Ukraine’s use of the TB2 in Donbas is a step-change in its ability to respond to Russian proxy shelling, but the limited deployment of armed drones is unlikely to grant Ukraine new operational capabilities or deter Russian operations. The Kremlin will likely increasingly falsely present Ukraine’s acquisition of TB2 drones and other tactical weapon systems as evidence of Ukrainian preparations to conduct an offensive operation against Donbas.
- **The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that Russia is prepared to protect “Russian citizens” in Donbas for the first time on October 29—a significant inflection in Kremlin rhetoric about its claimed responsibilities in Donbas.** The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) stated on October 29 that Russia “will do everything possible” to protect the rights of Russian citizens in Donbas.<sup>16</sup> This is the first time a Russian ministry has prominently stated readiness to protect “Russian citizens” (as opposed to ethnic Russians) in Donbas.<sup>17</sup> The MFA made this statement as part of the disinformation campaign claiming Ukraine recaptured Staromaryivka. The Kremlin’s campaign to distribute over 600,000 Russian passports to residents in occupied Ukraine over the past several years enabled this disinformation operation.<sup>18</sup> ISW previously forecasted that the Kremlin could leverage its campaign to distribute passports to residents of other states as a pretext for military operations under the justification of protecting “Russian citizens.”<sup>19</sup>

**The Kremlin’s disinformation is likely intended to pressure Ukraine ahead of a Normandy Format meeting in the next six months.** The Kremlin reiterated its intention to hold a Normandy Format (a quadrilateral discussion group including Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany last held in December 2019) meeting on

October 31.<sup>20</sup> Lavrov stated the Kremlin sent France and Germany proposals on the conditions necessary to hold a Normandy Format summit and is waiting for their answer. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and President Vladimir Putin agreed to determine prerequisites for holding a Normandy Format summit on October 11.<sup>21</sup> ISW forecasted in mid-October that Germany, France, and Ukraine likely seek to hold Normandy Format talks with Russia within the next six months.<sup>22</sup> The Kremlin historically intensifies military, diplomatic, information, political, and economic pressure against Ukraine ahead of Normandy Format meetings, including accusing Ukraine of offensive actions. ISW has previously published on the Kremlin's escalations ahead of the December 2019 Normandy Format summit and April 2020 Normandy Format ministerial meeting.<sup>23</sup>

**This recent series of Russian redeployments and rhetorical escalations is unlikely to be preparation for an imminent Russian offensive against Ukraine. It does, however, set conditions for increased pressure on Kyiv and also on Belarus and merits continued close but sober observation.** The frequency of major Russian military exercises and redeployments increased in 2021. Several Russian actions throughout the year have sparked worries of major offensive actions that did not occur. This pattern of increasingly frequent Russian maneuvers and rhetorical escalations will likely continue, and it will be easy for the West to fall into one of two traps—overly alarmist warnings of imminent Russian offensives that are unlikely to occur, or complacency and inattention to Russian actions. The Kremlin likely intends to produce both these effects, allowing it to intimidate Ukraine and NATO and simultaneously establish a new normal of continuous Russian exercises, obscuring dangerous moves. The West should continue to monitor, publicly discuss, and evaluate Russian actions, even if they are not worst-case scenarios.

ISW will continue to monitor and report on Russian actions aimed at Ukraine. ISW does not currently forecast a Russian offensive against Ukraine is imminent, but is watching for the following indicators of preparations for a further escalation.

**Indicators of a potential Russian military operation against Ukraine:**

1. More Russian deployments, mobilizations, or snap exercises at scale (units at the brigade/regiment/multiple battalion tactical groups from maneuver elements of the 1st Tank Army, and the 20th, 8th, and 41st CAAs).
2. Mobilization of artillery elements at the regiment and brigade level.
3. Mobilization of Russia's Airborne Forces (VDV) or Black Sea naval elements.
4. Mobilization of the DNR and LNR militias.
5. Sustained or intensified Kremlin information operations claiming Ukraine is attacking or preparing to attack Donbas.
6. An increase of Russian command and control (C2) elements inside Donbas or in southern or western Russia near the Russian-Ukrainian border.
7. Increased volume of video recordings capturing Russian hardware moving in western Russia towards Ukraine.
8. The Kremlin issues some form of political ultimatum to Kyiv or calls Zelensky in for senior talks.
9. Intensified Kremlin information operations claiming NATO is deploying forces into Ukraine or creating "NATO bases" inside Ukraine

**Counterindicators indicating a Russian military maneuver against Ukraine is less likely:**

1. Russian media relaxes or ends information operations about a Ukrainian offensive
2. Russian units observed in western and southern Russia redeploy east away from Ukraine

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-troop-movements-near-ukraine-border-prompt-concern-in-us-europe/2021/10/30/c122e57c-3983-11ec-9662-399cfa75efee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-troop-movements-near-ukraine-border-prompt-concern-in-us-europe/2021/10/30/c122e57c-3983-11ec-9662-399cfa75efee_story.html).

- <sup>2</sup> [https://www.mil.gov\\_dot\\_ua/news/2021/11/01/fakti-naroshhuvannya-zbrojnih-sil-rf-na-ukrainskomu-napryamku-e-elementom-informacijno-psihologichnih-dij-czentr-operativnogo-informuvannya/](https://www.mil.gov_dot_ua/news/2021/11/01/fakti-naroshhuvannya-zbrojnih-sil-rf-na-ukrainskomu-napryamku-e-elementom-informacijno-psihologichnih-dij-czentr-operativnogo-informuvannya/).
- <sup>3</sup> <https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/>;  
[https://twitter.com/The\\_Lookout\\_N/status/1455231057758982150?s=20](https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1455231057758982150?s=20).
- <sup>4</sup> <https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/>;  
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-russian-deployments-near-ukraine-likely-intended-pressure-zelensky-not>.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia%E2%80%99s-zapad-2021-exercise>; [https://function.mil\\_dot\\_ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12358821@egNews](https://function.mil_dot_ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12358821@egNews); <https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/>.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1454052512932245504?s=20>.
- <sup>7</sup> [https://structure.mil\\_dot\\_ru/structure/okruga/west/news/more.htm?id=12390789@egNews](https://structure.mil_dot_ru/structure/okruga/west/news/more.htm?id=12390789@egNews); The Soviet military historically employed “shock” units to spearhead offensives. Shock armies received high proportions of artillery, engineers, and other assets intended to break defensive positions, but lacked mobility and sustainability. The Russian military revived the “shock” designation in 2017 as an honorific reward for units that demonstrate high readiness and capabilities, without any changes in the equipment and doctrinal purpose of units designated “shock.” Elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army are carrying out unspecified tests to earn the shock designation. For more information on the past and present use of the “shock” designation, see: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-bringing-back-its-world-war-ii-shock-armies-20870>.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/Archer83Able/status/1453752459210407951?s=20>;  
<https://twitter.com/Archer83Able/status/1453853398495899657?s=20>.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://rochan-consulting.com/russian-land-forces-movements-in-october/>.
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/93OMBr/posts/1703030636560386>; [https://novosti.dn\\_dot\\_ua/news/316996-selo-staromarevka-ne-zahvatyvali-ukrainskaya-storona-zaprosila-tishinu-dlya-dostavki-uglya](https://novosti.dn_dot_ua/news/316996-selo-staromarevka-ne-zahvatyvali-ukrainskaya-storona-zaprosila-tishinu-dlya-dostavki-uglya);  
<https://www.facebook.com/364683177357638/posts/1226957351130212/?d=n%3B>;  
<https://www.facebook.com/93OMBr/posts/1703030636560386>; [https://ria\\_dot\\_ru/20211026/staromarevka-1756363335.html](https://ria_dot_ru/20211026/staromarevka-1756363335.html);  
<https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-30%20SMM%20Daily%20Report.pdf?itok=16279>; [https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-29%20Daily%20Report\\_ENG.pdf?itok=25745](https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-29%20Daily%20Report_ENG.pdf?itok=25745); [https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-28%20Daily%20Report\\_ENG.pdf?itok=51748](https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-28%20Daily%20Report_ENG.pdf?itok=51748);  
[https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-27%20Daily%20Report\\_ENG.pdf?itok=59674](https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-27%20Daily%20Report_ENG.pdf?itok=59674); [https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-26%20Daily%20Report\\_ENG.pdf?itok=77572](https://www.osce.org/files/2021-10-26%20Daily%20Report_ENG.pdf?itok=77572).
- <sup>11</sup> [https://www.gazeta\\_dot\\_ru/politics/news/2021/10/26/n\\_16754167.shtml](https://www.gazeta_dot_ru/politics/news/2021/10/26/n_16754167.shtml); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aQ1KTztXS8>;  
[https://news\\_dot\\_ru/world/glava-dnr-rasskazal-o-situacii-v-sele-staromarevka-zahvachennom-vsu/](https://news_dot_ru/world/glava-dnr-rasskazal-o-situacii-v-sele-staromarevka-zahvachennom-vsu/); [https://aif\\_dot\\_ru/politics/world/ukrainskie\\_voennye\\_zanyali\\_selo\\_staromarevka\\_v\\_donbasse\\_-\\_smi](https://aif_dot_ru/politics/world/ukrainskie_voennye_zanyali_selo_staromarevka_v_donbasse_-_smi); [https://www.mid\\_dot\\_ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4920669](https://www.mid_dot_ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4920669); [https://www.mid\\_dot\\_ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4919845#11](https://www.mid_dot_ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4919845#11); [https://thegoaspotlight\\_dot\\_com/2021/10/26/media-ukrainian-military-took-control-of-staromarevka-village-in-donbass/](https://thegoaspotlight_dot_com/2021/10/26/media-ukrainian-military-took-control-of-staromarevka-village-in-donbass/);  
<https://www.facebook.com/364683177357638/posts/1226957351130212/?d=n>; [https://www.pravda\\_dot\\_com.ua/rus/news/2021/10/26/7311750/](https://www.pravda_dot_com.ua/rus/news/2021/10/26/7311750/); [https://www.ostro\\_dot\\_org/general/society/news/621390/](https://www.ostro_dot_org/general/society/news/621390/); [https://focus\\_dot\\_ua/voennye-novosti/496319-smi-soobshchili-ob-osvobozhdenii-vsu-sela-staromarevka-shtab-oos-nazval-eto-feykom-foto-video](https://focus_dot_ua/voennye-novosti/496319-smi-soobshchili-ob-osvobozhdenii-vsu-sela-staromarevka-shtab-oos-nazval-eto-feykom-foto-video).
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=467614907881638>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/04/09/ukraine-might-field-a-drone-strike-force-and-it-could-knock-out-russian-tanks/?sh=30ddaf3b6ca1>.
- <sup>14</sup> [https://www.kommersant\\_dot\\_ru/doc/5051611](https://www.kommersant_dot_ru/doc/5051611).
- <sup>15</sup> [https://www.mid\\_dot\\_ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4921162](https://www.mid_dot_ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4921162).
- <sup>16</sup> [https://www.mid\\_dot\\_ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4920669](https://www.mid_dot_ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4920669).
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57087885>; [https://lenta\\_dot\\_ru/news/2021/03/07/deputat/](https://lenta_dot_ru/news/2021/03/07/deputat/); [https://www.interfax\\_dot\\_ru/russia/760395](https://www.interfax_dot_ru/russia/760395).
- <sup>18</sup> [https://www.vedomosti\\_dot\\_ru/society/news/2021/09/29/888934-v-etom-godu-rossiiskoe-grazhdanstvo-poluchili-500-000-inostrantsev](https://www.vedomosti_dot_ru/society/news/2021/09/29/888934-v-etom-godu-rossiiskoe-grazhdanstvo-poluchili-500-000-inostrantsev)
- <sup>19</sup> A former representative of the Luhansk People’s Republic militia accused Ukraine of preparing for either a full-scale military operation or an escalation on the front line and accused Russia of not protecting Donbas on October 31. The Kremlin media apparatus has not adopted this narrative as of this writing. The Kremlin can fabricate information conditions to attack Ukraine if the Kremlin decides to. [https://www.mk\\_dot\\_ru/politics/2021/10/31/veteran-lnr-o-zadache-korpusov-v-sluchae-voyny-proderzhatsya-tri-dnya.html](https://www.mk_dot_ru/politics/2021/10/31/veteran-lnr-o-zadache-korpusov-v-sluchae-voyny-proderzhatsya-tri-dnya.html); <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-september-1-%E2%80%93-september-21-2021>.
- <sup>20</sup> [https://tass\\_dot\\_ru/politika/12813285](https://tass_dot_ru/politika/12813285); [https://tass\\_dot\\_ru/politika/12816739](https://tass_dot_ru/politika/12816739); [https://tass\\_dot\\_ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12817881](https://tass_dot_ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12817881).

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-october-6-19-2021>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-october-6-19-2021>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.iswresearch.org/2019/12/the-perils-of-talks-on-russias-war-in.html>; <https://www.iswresearch.org/2020/01/europe-cedes-opportunity-in-russia.html>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-kremlin-misdirection-continues-amid-covid-and-peace-processes>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-kremlins-fake-de-escalation-donbas>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-putin-accelerates-ukraine-campaign-amid-converging-crises>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/viral-disinformation-kremlin%e2%80%99s-coronavirus-information-operation-ukraine>.