Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 7, 2023 Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Nicole Wolkov, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark April 7, 5:30pm 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.

Russian milbloggers responded with speculative anxiety to reportedly leaked (and possibly altered) classified US military documents about the war in Ukraine, indicating continued fear over the prospect of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Russian information space. The New York Times reported on April 6 that a slate of five-week-old, classified US military documents are circulating on various social media platforms, reportedly depicting operational reports and assessments of the capabilities of the Ukrainian military.[1] Bellingcat analyst Aric Toler noted that the documents circulated online as early as March 4, and it remains unclear why these documents reached mainstream Western media over a month later.[2] Clearly doctored versions of the documents which reduce reported Russian losses and inflate Ukrainian casualty numbers are additionally circulating on Russian Telegram channels.

Regardless of the veracity of the reportedly leaked documents, which ISW will not speculate on, the response of Russian milbloggers to the *New York Times* story highlights the fear of prospective Ukrainian counteroffensives pervading the Russian pro-war information space. While several prominent Russian milbloggers immediately rejected the validity of the documents and suggested that they are fakes, they fixated on the possibility that the released documents are disinformation intended to confuse and mislead Russian military command.[3] One milblogger stated that the document leak could be part of a larger Ukrainian campaign to mislead Russian forces before a counteroffensive.[4] Another Russian milblogger noted that there is historical precedent for militaries disseminating false planning information prior to starting surprise offensives.[5] The milblogger urged their audience to be cautious in discussing where Ukrainian counteroffensives may take place due to document leak.[6] *The New York Times* story has therefore exposed a significant point of neuralgia in the Russian information space, and responses to the documents suggest that Russian milbloggers may be increasingly reconsidering the validity of their own assessments and speculations regarding any potential Ukrainian counteroffensives and their ability to forecast Ukrainian operations.

The Kremlin continues to indicate that it is not interested in legitimate negotiations and places the onus for any negotiations on the West. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated at a press conference in Ankara, Turkey on April 7 that Russia does not refuse to negotiate but that negotiations can only be based on Russia's claimed "legitimate" interests and concerns.[7] Lavrov claimed the West has arrogantly ignored Russia's interests "with disdain."[8] The Kremlin retains Putin's original maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine and maintains that Russia's "legitimate" interests include international recognition of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, regime change in Kyiv under Russia's calls for "denazification," and the "demilitarization" of Ukraine.[9] Concerns about losing more occupied territory in Ukraine during an expected upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive may be prompting the Kremlin to intensify an ongoing information

operation intended to pressure the West to offer preemptive concessions and coerce Ukraine into negotiations on conditions more favorable to Russia.[10]

A Ukrainian official reported that Russian aviation units are changing tactics, possibly due to aviation losses and depleted stocks of high-precision weapons. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuri Ihnat reported on April 7 that Russian aviation units are reducing their operations in the immediate vicinity of Ukrainian positions and are increasingly relying on more remote aviation strikes with guided aerial bombs.[11] Ihnat stated that Russian Su-35 aircraft can use these munitions from more than 50km away from the line of contact and that Ukrainian forces are unable to drive Russian aviation units away from Ukraine's borders at this range.[12] These modified aerial bombs are likely less precise than other munitions that Russian aviation units have previously used in Ukraine. Russian forces may be changing aviation tactics to mitigate the risk of further aviation losses by operating out of the range of most Ukrainian anti-aircraft and air defense systems, at the cost of the ability to conduct close air support.

Former Russian proxy commander and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin revealed on April 7 that a volunteer battalion that he previously actively promoted is essentially a sham. Girkin posted an angry rant to Telegram on April 7 claiming that the "Nevsky" volunteer battalion that he advertised throughout 2022 has deployed as a "brigade" consisting of three battalions and 1,186 total personnel.[13] A single Russian battalion typically consists of around 800-900 personnel, so Girkin's remark suggests that "Nevsky's" leadership sought to erroneously portray the volunteer battalion as a larger formation by designating it as a brigade. Girkin noted that "Nevsky" deployed to the frontline near Avdiivka with the forces of a "reinforced company" without promised equipment or training and quickly found itself conducting costly assaults.[14] Girkin accused "Nevsky's" commander of being more interested in "political and commercial machinations" and suggested that "Nevsky" was created for the sole purpose of generating profit.[15] Girkin's tirade against a formation that he once ardently supported suggests that even volunteer formations held in high regard face corruption and training issues that are endemic to the Russian force generation apparatus.

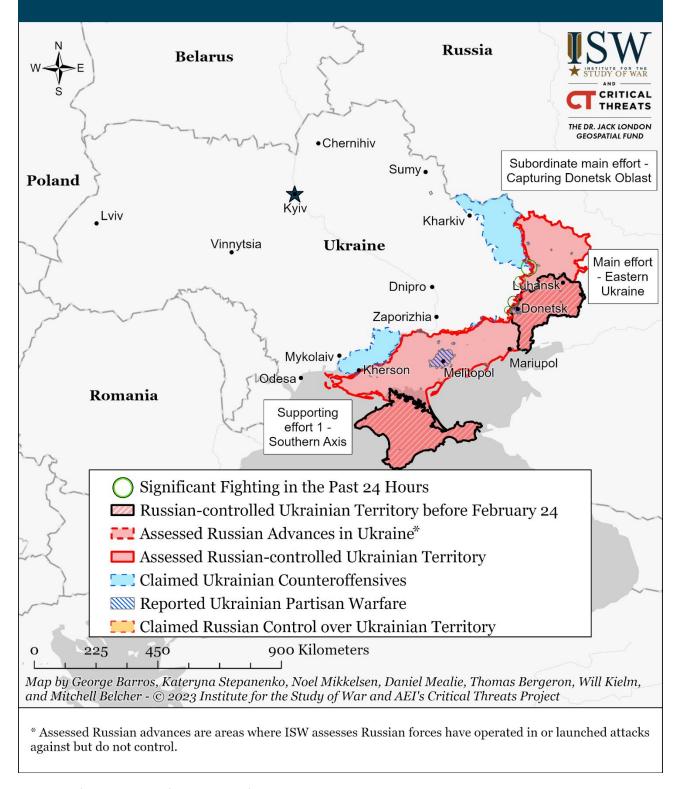
High-ranking Russian officials including ministers and department heads can reportedly only leave Russia with permission from Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. Independent Russian news outlet *The Bell* reported on April 7 that Mishustin restricted international travel by his subordinates to official business and with his permission.[16] *The Bell* reported that employees of the presidential administration are not subject to the same travel restrictions. ISW previously reported that Russian security services are reportedly confiscating the passports of Russian officials, ex-officials, and state company executives to prevent flight from Russia.[17]

Key Takeaways

- Russian milbloggers responded with speculative anxiety to reportedly leaked (and possibly altered) classified US military documents about the war in Ukraine, indicating continued fear over the prospect of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Russian information space.
- The Kremlin continues to indicate that it is not interested in legitimate negotiations while placing the onus for negotiations on the West.
- A Ukrainian official reported that Russian aviation units are changing tactics, possibly as a result of aviation losses and depleted stocks of high-precision weapons.

- High-ranking Russian officials reportedly can only leave Russia with permission from Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.
- Former Russian officer and prominent critical milblogger Igor Girkin revealed on April 7 that a volunteer battalion that he previously promoted is essentially a sham.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut and continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline.
- Russian forces continue to build defenses in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts.
- Russian officials continue measures to support Russia's ongoing spring conscription cycle amid continued crypto-mobilization efforts.
- Russian occupation officials are accelerating passportization efforts in occupied Ukraine.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 7, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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)

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 7, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



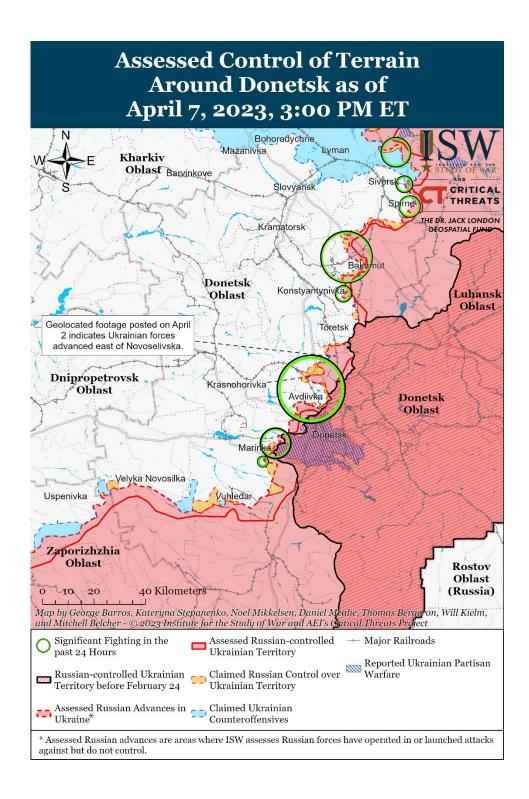
^{*} Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

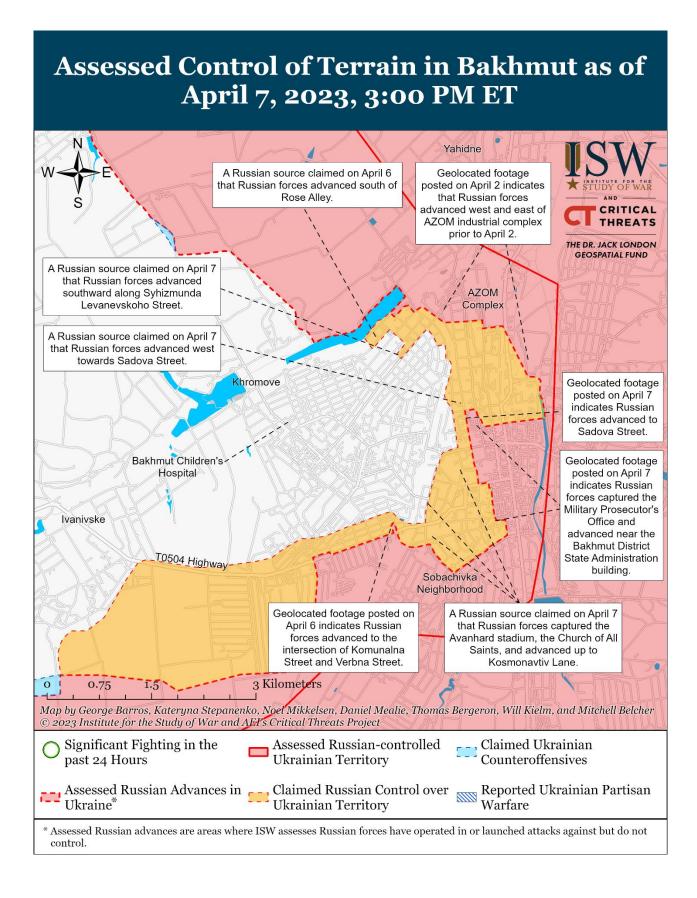
Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line on April 7.

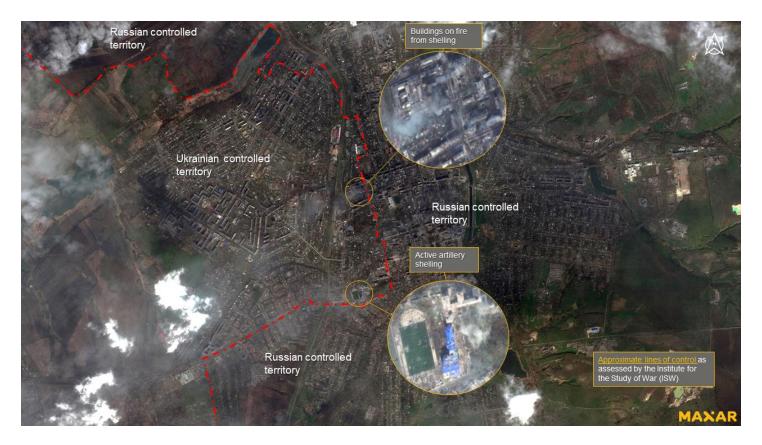
The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Kreminna, the Serebrianska forest area (10km south of Kreminna), Verkhnokamianske (18km south of Kreminna), and Spirne (25km south of Kreminna).[18] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Torske, Terny, Nevske, and Makiivka (all within 14 to 21km west or northwest of Kreminna).[19] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces started using TOS-1A thermobaric artillery near Kreminna on April 6.[20] An interview with Ukrainian soldiers published on April 7 reported that Wagner Group fighters are the primary Russian force operating near Siversk (18km southwest of Kreminna).[21]

<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)

Russian forces continued advancing in and around Bakhmut as of April 7. Geolocated footage posted by a prominent Russian military correspondent near the train station in central Bakhmut suggests that Russian forces have further advanced in Bakhmut's city center.[22] Additional geolocated footage posted on April 7 showing Wagner Group forces standing outside of the Bakhmut Military Prosecutor's Office in central Bakhmut indicates that Wagner has likely captured the building.[23] Geolocated footage posted April 6 shows that Russian forces have advanced to about 3km south of the To504 Kostyantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway southwest of Bakhmut.[24] Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces captured several structures in central Bakhmut, including the Metallurg Stadium, Hotel Bakhmut, and the Church of All Saints, and reported that Ukrainian troops continue to withdraw to the western outskirts of the city. [25] One milblogger claimed that Wagner managed to break through Ukrainian defenses in northern, southern, and central Bakhmut but did not specify exactly where these breakthroughs occurred. [26] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) noted on April 7 that conventional Russian forces, including airborne (VDV) elements are reinforcing the Bakhmut area and using artillery more effectively, which the UK MoD suggests could indicate that Wagner and Russia MoD leadership may be working together more harmoniously. [27] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka (6km northwest) and Orikhovo-Vasylivka (12km northwest) and southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km southwest) and Bila Hora (15km southwest).[28]







Battle of Bakhmut. Imaged on April 7, 2023.

Satellite image ©2023 Maxar Technologies.

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline on April 7 and appear to be concentrating offensive operations in the Marinka area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the Avdiivka area near Novokalynove (12km northwest of Avdiivka) and Severne (5km west of Avdiivka); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Pervomaiske; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka and Pobieda. [29] The Ukrainian General Staff additionally noted that the fiercest battles are ongoing near Marinka, where Ukrainian forces repelled 29 Russian ground attacks of the 80 total ground attacks reported across the theater on April 7. [30] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked towards Keramik, 13km northwest of Avdiivka. [31] Russian sources continued to highlight ongoing offensive operations by several elements of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline. [32]

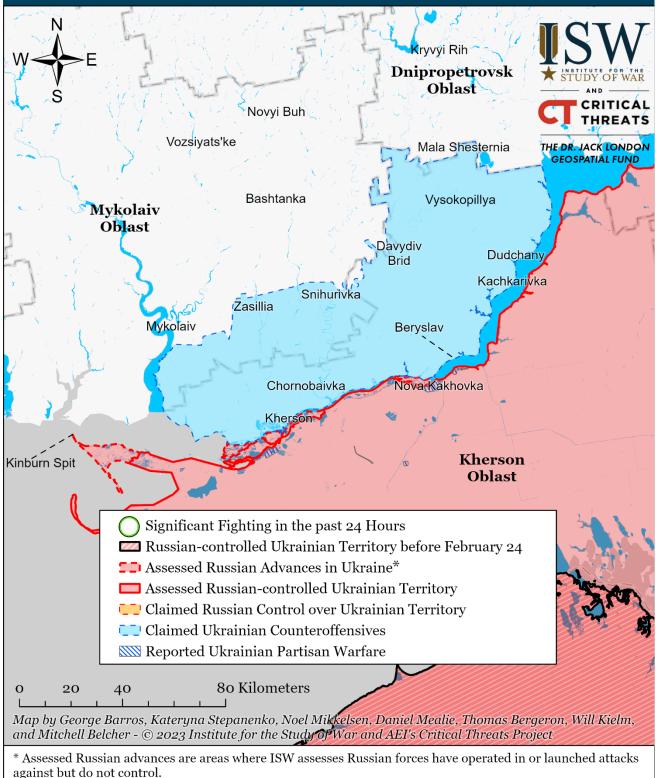
Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on April 7. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations in this direction.[33] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that units of the Eastern Group of Forces (Eastern Military District) prevented an attempted Ukrainian advance in an unspecified location of western Donetsk Oblast.[34] A Russian milblogger noted that elements of the Russian Ministry of

Internal Affairs (MVD), DNR units, the "Kaskad" formation, Russian motorized infantry, and mobilized personnel are making unspecified advances near Vuhledar, 30km southwest of Donetsk City.[35]

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



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 7, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces continue to build defenses in occupied Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continue to construct defensive lines and fortifications in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.[36] Geolocated footage published on April 7 purportedly shows Russian forces mining an unspecified location on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.[37]

Russian forces continue efforts to consolidate control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Ukrainian nuclear energy operator Energoatom reported that Russian forces kidnapped four ZNPP employees who signed contracts with the Russian organization in charge of the ZNPP's occupation, and that their whereabouts and condition are unknown.[38] Energoatom claimed that the Russian forces could have kidnapped the workers if they attempted to walk back their cooperation with Russian authorities in anticipation of a Ukrainian counteroffensive. ISW previously reported on Russian forces kidnapping ZNPP employees in order to strengthen Russian control over ZNPP operations.[39]

Russian forces made a limited advance south of Zaporizhzhia City. Geolocated footage from April 4 shows a Ukrainian drone striking a Russian vehicle, indicating a limited Russian advance south of Kamianske (30km south of Zaporizhzhia City), although it is likely that this is recently geolocated footage of an older advance. [40]

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in Zaporizhia, Kherson, and Mykolayiv oblasts on April 7.[41] The Ukrainian Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration reported that Russian forces increased the intensity of shelling along the line of contact on April 7.[42]

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

Russian officials continue measures to support Russia's ongoing spring conscription cycle amid continued crypto-mobilization efforts. The Russian State Duma reportedly continued to consider a bill that will allow summonses to be sent by mail instead of handed to conscripts personally on April 6.[43] Russian sources claimed that Russian officials in Kurgan Oblast plan to conscript 1,000 personnel, and that Russian occupation officials in Simferopol, Crimea plan to conscript 500 personnel for service primarily in the Black Sea Fleet and the Southern Military District. [44] Russian sources claimed that Russian officials in Moscow and Kaliningrad oblasts are conducting mass advertising and outreach campaigns for contract service.[45] Russian outlet Rotunda claimed on April 6 that St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov created an operational headquarters for organizing the recruitment of contract servicemen. [46] Independent Russian outlet Sirena claimed on April 6 that Russian officials require employees at the Sakharovo Center for migrants in Moscow Oblast to offer migrants contract service with the Russian military, and that employees at the facility attempt to make migrants sign contracts on the spot. [47] ISW has previously assessed that Russian crypto-mobilization efforts and the ongoing conscription cycle will likely compete with each other for resources and add further pressure on Russia's already taxed training capacity.[48]

Open-source reports on Russian casualties in Ukraine continue to indicate that volunteers and paramilitary personnel are suffering heavy casualties. The BBC and Russian opposition news

outlet *Mediazona* reported on April 7 that they confirmed in the past two weeks the identities of 1,665 Russian servicemen who died in Ukraine. [49] *Mediazona* and the *BBC* stated that the figure is only those casualties they have confirmed from open-sources instead of the current total on the front. [50] The most significant part of the recent increase in the *Mediazona* and *BBC* casualty count is comprised of Wagner Group convict recruits and fatalities in the Bakhmut area. [51] Independent Russian investigative outlet *Vazhnye Istorii* (iStories) reported on April 6 that it calculated that at least 8,000 volunteers and mercenaries have died in the war in Ukraine based off of the increase in pension payments associated with the death of primary household income earners for non-contract personnel. [52] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not published data on pensions for the relatives of deceased or injured contract servicemen in 2022, likely purposefully obscuring the true extent of Russian losses in Ukraine. [53]

Russian budgetary revenues and expenditures for the first quarter of 2023 indicate mounting financial burdens on the Russian government. The Russian Finance Ministry released preliminary data on the Russian Federal Budget from January to March of 2023 on April 7, showing that Russian revenues decreased by 21 percent and expenditures increased by 34 percent compared to the first quarter of 2022.[54] The Finance Ministry claimed that the differences in first quarter budgetary revenues and expenditures between 2022 and 2023 is a result of a 45 percent reduction in oil and gas revenues between those two time periods, ignoring the impact of the war in Ukraine. [55] The Russian Ministry of Finance classified a third of its budget expenditures, likely in an effort to conceal the true extent of the cost of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [56]

Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to promote parallel military structures in Russian oblasts which border Ukraine. Prigozhin stated on April 6 that the Wagner Group continues to support efforts to train people's militias in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts and that these formations are effectively patrolling border areas. [57] Prigozhin asserted that Ukrainian forces are more prone to raiding neighboring Bryansk Oblast due to the effectiveness of Wagner-affiliated Kursk and Belgorod people's militias, and called on Russian officials to take urgent measures to protect Russian border areas. [58] Prigozhin stated that the Wagner Group is willing to provide protection for Russian border areas if the public requests it.[59] ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin involved himself heavily in paramilitary structures and border fortifications in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts to strengthen his independent power base. [60] Prigozhin may be promoting Wagner's involvement in paramilitary structures in Russian border oblasts and proposing that Wagner assume a border security role in search of new avenues for personnel and resources. ISW assesses that the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) may be purposefully expending Wagner forces in Ukraine to derail Prigozhin's political ambitions. [61] Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian occupation authorities are intensifying efforts to forcibly issue Russian passports to residents of occupied territories after Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed dissatisfaction with the pace of these efforts in late March. Putin previously emphasized the importance of expedited issuance of Russian passports in occupied areas during a collegium of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs on March 20, and is likely pressuring occupation authorities to intensify passportization efforts to meet an unspecified quota. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 7 that Russian occupation authorities are pressuring Ukrainians in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts who do not have Russian passports by restricting their movements, subjecting them to constant searches, and employing intimidation tactics.[62] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on April 7 that Russian forces are increasingly resorting to violence against Ukrainian civilians who refuse to obtain Russian passports. 14 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project 2023

The Resistance Center also stated that local occupation administrations have developed "mobile" groups for dispersing passports that forcibly enter locals' homes to agitate and coerce residents to accept Russian passports and that Russian forces are placing employees of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in torture chambers to coerce them into accepting Russian passports. [63] Ukrainian advisor to the Kherson Oblast Administration Serhii Khlan noted that Russian occupation officials are checking domiciles in occupied Kherson Oblast and questioning residents if they do not hold Russian passports. [64] Russian occupation authorities will likely continue to escalate such passportization efforts to consolidate bureaucratic control of occupied areas and create the guise of wide-spread local support for Russian citizenship and lend occupation administrations a veneer of legitimacy.

<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.

Belarusian maneuver elements continued conducting exercises in Belarus. Elements of the Minsk-based Belarusian 120th Mechanized Brigade conducted a pontoon river crossing over an unspecified segment of the Berezina River on April 7.[65] Belarus reportedly deployed about 20 pieces of unspecified heavy equipment to the Gudogay Railway Station near the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border on April 6.[66]

The Belarusian military continues calling up Belarusian forces for combat readiness checks. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced that Belarus' Air Force and Air Defense Forces are conducting combat readiness checks for an unspecified airfield defense and maintenance battalion on April 7.[67]

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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