#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 23, 2023 Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan May 23, 2023, 8:00pm 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.

Click <u>here</u> 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 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian authorities ended the "counterterrorism" operation in Belgorod Oblast and claimed to have defeated the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) in the region on May 23. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Western Military District (WMD) Border Guards units defeated the raid and expelled all "saboteurs" from Belgorod Oblast.¹ Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov announced that the "counterterrorism" operation had ended but called on civilians who evacuated to wait before returning to the border settlements.² Russian authorities later announced on May 23 that authorities evacuated 100 civilians from nine border settlements in Belgorod Oblast on May 22 after Gladkov originally denied conducting formal evacuations.³ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not hold an emergency meeting of the Russian Security Council to discuss the Belgorod raid but will instead discuss the situation during the Security Council's planned May 26 meeting, likely in an effort to project confidence about Russian handling of the situation.⁴

Russian forces likely pushed the RDK and LSR forces at least to the Kozinka border settlement and possibly out of Russian territory as of May 23. Kozinka is located approximately 76km southeast of Sumy City. Russian sources amplified footage of Russian forces firing on RDK and LSR vehicle positions near the Kozinka border checkpoint overnight and claimed that Russian forces recaptured Kozinka and its border checkpoint in the morning. Geolocated footage from Russian state media shows damaged and destroyed vehicles at the checkpoint. Some Russian sources claimed that RDK and LSR forces entrenched themselves in the Kozinka church but that preliminary reports suggest Russian forces may have ousted the Ukrainian forces by the evening. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces began clearing operations in Kozinka and Glotovo (immediately east of Kozinka) on May 23. Geolocated footage posted on May 23 shows the aftermath of shelling Gora Podol (about 6km northwest of Kozinka) and Russian infantry conducting patrols between Grayvoron (about 7km northwest of Kozinka) and Gora Podol, suggesting that RDK and LSR personnel no longer hold or never held positions in the settlement. It is unclear whether the RDK and LSR captured any villages on May 23 nowever. The LSR claimed that LSR and RDK personnel continued to operate in Belgorod Oblast on May 23, however.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted raids across the Kharkiv-Belgorod border on May 23, but ISW has observed no confirmation that these raids occurred. Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian and Ukraine-affiliated formations –

including Azov Regiment, Kraken Regiment, Territorial Defense, and regular Ukrainian forces – and RDK personnel attempted additional raids near Gorkovsky, Bogun-Gorodok, and Tsapovka, and managed to cross the border south of Shchetinovka.<sup>11</sup> Other Russian sources denied claims that sabotage groups crossed the Kharkiv-Belgorod border.<sup>12</sup>Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian forces accumulated reserves less than 10 kilometers from the Kharkiv-Belgorod border and expressed fear about the threat of further raids.<sup>13</sup> One milblogger claimed that the Azov Regiment, Kraken Regiment, Territorial Defense, and regular Ukrainian forces all took part in a raid in Bryansk Oblast on May 22, but ISW has still not observed confirmation of this claimed raid.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian information space largely hyperfixated on speculated goals for the raids and on the conduct of the Russian response. Some Russian milbloggers amplified claims that a drone struck the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Belgorod City and speculated that Ukrainian forces aimed to attack the FSB and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) in the raid. <sup>15</sup> Russian sources also amplified a photograph of Colonel General Alexander Lapin posing with a captured vehicle and claimed that Lapin led the counterterrorism operation alongside elements of the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (20th Guards Combined Arms Army, Western Military District). <sup>16</sup> Many Russian sources praised Lapin for organizing Russian forces to conduct coherent counterterrorism operations after the Russian Border Service failed to repel the raids. 17 Some sources criticized the decision to give Lapin command and noted Lapin's prior military failures such as the disastrous Siverskyi Donets river crossing near Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast in May 2022.18 Lapin has notably returned to commanding Russian operations in eastern Ukraine after suffering intense criticism for commanding the operations to take Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, and Lapin has not received much praise in the information space since the campaign to undermine him led to Lapin's dismissal in November 2022.<sup>19</sup> The openness of Russian milbloggers to praise Lapin for commanding the defense against an extremely small and limited border incursion suggests that at least some milblogger factions are amenable to Russian President Vladimir Putin's tendency to rotate old and disgraced commanders.<sup>20</sup> The Russian reaction to the raid in the information space and in the reported military activities appears to be a highly disproportionate response to a very small and localized undertaking. Russian forces should not have required significant reinforcements—or the involvement of a colonel general—to repulse a raid conducted by reportedly 13 armored vehicles.21

Ukrainian officials stated that the pace of fighting in the Bakhmut direction has decreased amid continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks on May 23. The Ukrainian General Staff did not report fighting in Bakhmut City in its 1800 situational report for the first time since December 2022, suggesting that Wagner Group forces may have made further advances within the city. The General Staff also reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Khromove (immediately west of Bakhmut).<sup>22</sup> Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that combat operations have decreased in and around Bakhmut and reiterated that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in a fortified area near the MiG-17 monument in western Bakhmut.<sup>23</sup> A milblogger amplified video footage purportedly showing Wagner forces near the MiG-17 monument and claimed that there are no Ukrainian forces in the area, however.<sup>24</sup> Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that Ukrainian forces advanced 200 to 400 meters along the flanks of Bakhmut and still control a number of buildings and fortifications in southwestern Bakhmut.<sup>25</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Yahidne (1km northwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Hryhorivka (8km northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (immediately west of Bakhmut).26 Another milblogger denied reports that Ukrainian forces made gains during counterattacks northwest and southwest of Bakhmut and assessed that a Russian offensive from Bakhmut toward Ivanivske or Bohdanivka remains unlikely.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- \* Russian authorities ended the "counterterrorism" operation in Belgorod Oblast and claimed to have defeated the all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (LSR) in the region on May 23.
- Russian forces likely pushed the RDK and LSR forces at least to the Kozinka border settlement and possibly out of Russian territory as of May 23.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted raids across the Kharkiv-Belgorod border on May 23, but ISW has observed no confirmation that these raids occurred.
- Ukrainian officials stated that the pace of fighting in the Bakhmut direction has decreased amid continued limited Ukrainian counterattacks on Bakhmut's flanks on May 23.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- Pardoned Wagner Group convicts continue to commit crimes in Russia after finishing their military contracts with Wagner.
- Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials announced the start of preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia party.

### Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



<sup>\*</sup> Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

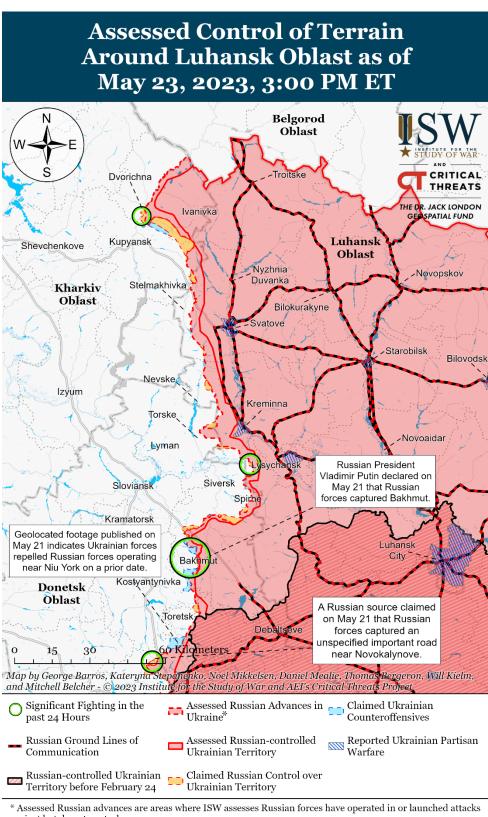
We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military 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 conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on May 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Masyutivka (13km northeast of Kupyansk) and Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna). Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces gained new positions near Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim. Video footage published on May 23 purportedly shows unspecified airborne units operating in the forests near Kreminna.



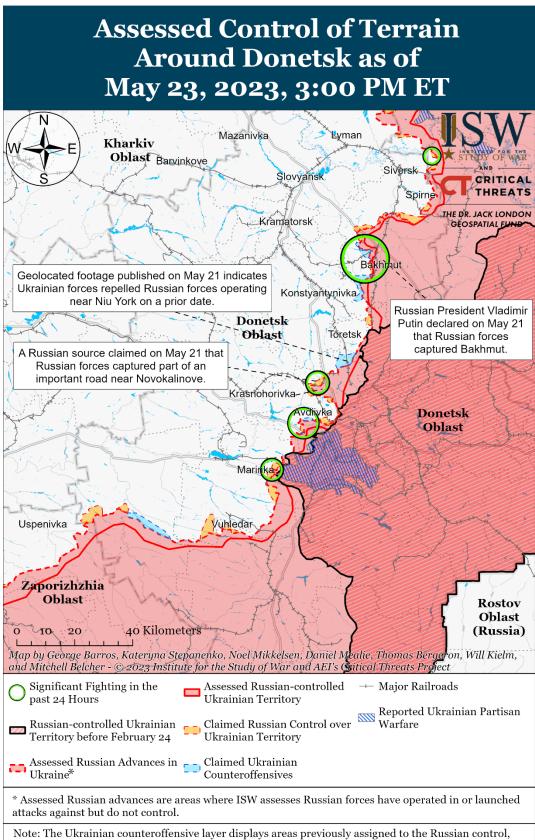
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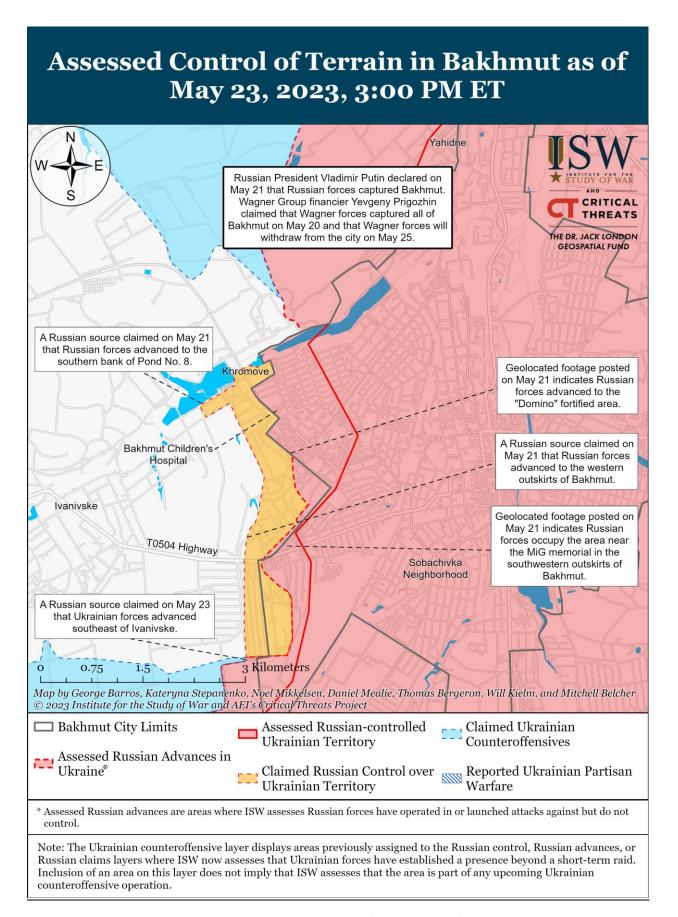
### <u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

See topline text for Bakhmut update.

Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on May 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Avdiivka, 13km north of Avdiivka near Novokalynove, and within 14km west of Avdiivka near Sieverne, Vodyane, and Pervomaiske.<sup>31</sup> Ukrainian forces also reportedly repelled numerous assaults on Marinka (about 24km southwest of Donetsk City).<sup>32</sup> Ukrainian Defense Forces Tavriisk Direction Spokesperson Valeriy Shereshen stated that Russian forces are concentrating their efforts on attacking Avdiivka and Marinka, and reported that there were 19 combat clashes in the two areas.<sup>33</sup> A Russian source claimed that Russian forces conducted assault operations near Pervomaiske, on the southwestern approached to Avdiivka, in Marinka, and in the Krasnohorivka direction (approximately 20km west of Donetsk City).<sup>34</sup> Geolocated footage published on May 23 showed elements of the 287th Separate Rifle Battalion of the 1st Army Corps operating south of Avdiivka.<sup>35</sup>

Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations southwest of Donetsk City on May 23.36





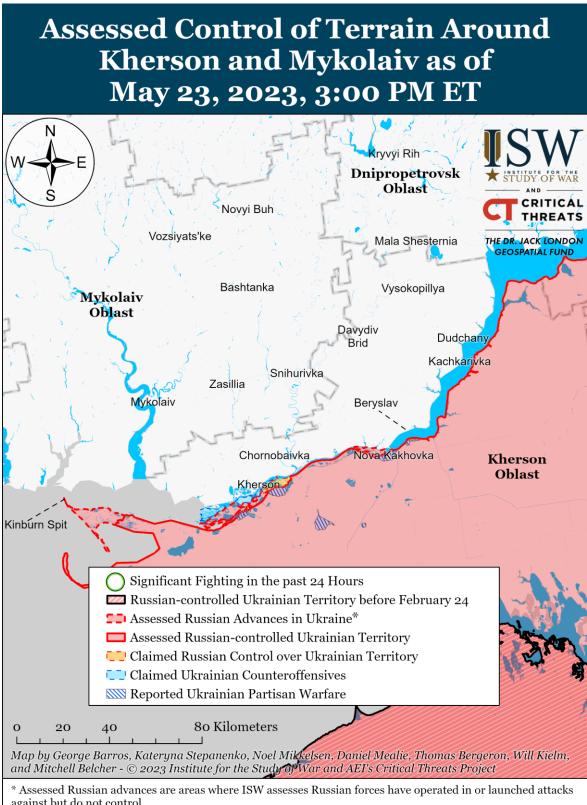
## <u>Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine ahead of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive. Ukrainian Defense Forces Tavriisk Direction Spokesperson Valeriy Shershen reported on May 23 that Russian forces are conducting defensive operations in the Novopavlivka and Orikhiv directions in Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>37</sup> Shershen also stated that Russian forces are actively mining the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River and installing barricades against boats and watercraft.<sup>38</sup> Geolocated footage showed that Russian forces constructed new fortifications in Crimea along the roads that lead into the peninsula.<sup>39</sup>

Russian forces continue to target Ukrainian positions in southern Ukraine. Geolocated footage published on May 23 shows artillery elements of the 177th Naval Infantry Regiment of the Caspian Sea Flotilla operating near Dorozhnyanka in Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>40</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) published footage purportedly showing unspecified airborne units striking Ukrainian armored vehicles on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>41</sup>



<sup>\*</sup> Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.



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

Pardoned Wagner Group convicts are continuing to commit crimes in Russia after finishing their military contracts with Wagner. Russian police detained a 42-year-old convict for raping two underage girls in Berdsk, Novosibirsk Oblast. The convict served in the Wagner private military company (PMC) until returning to Russia after his contract ended on May 19.<sup>42</sup>

The Russian State Duma adopted amendments to the law concerning the entry to and exit from Russia on May 23.<sup>43</sup> The amendments would allow Russian authorities to confiscate travel passports from mobilized personnel, personnel of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and individuals with access to state secrets. Russian officials can also confiscate travel passports from individuals who are called up for military or alternative service, persons who are facing charges or imprisonment, or bankrupt citizens. Individuals conscripted for military or alternative service must submit their travel documents to the Ministry of Internal Affairs or Multifunctional Center within five days of being declared fit for military service.<sup>44</sup> Conscripts will only be able to receive their travel documents after finishing military or alternative service.

Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russia is forming private military companies (PMCs) in occupied Crimea to defend against planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Andriy Chernyak stated that Crimean occupation officials such as Sergey Aksyonov are funding Crimean PMCs to protect themselves against Ukrainian counteroffensives. Chernyak stated that "Aksyonovites" - or people in Crimean PMCs - receive monthly salaries of 200,000 to 250,000 rubles (about \$2,500 to \$3,120) and train in Perevalne (southeast of Simferopol) or in occupied Kherson Oblast. Chernyak noted that Crimean PMCs recruit from mobilized personnel and created a dual contract with PMCs and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) so as to not compete with Prigozhin's recruitment efforts.

Russian milbloggers complained on May 23 about the Russian MoD failing to arm the Belgorod Oblast militia in response to all-Russian pro-Ukrainian Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) and Freedom of Russia Legion's (LSR) raid into Belgorod Oblast on May 22.46

# <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)

Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials announced the start of preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia party on May 22 and 23. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov announced that preliminary voting for the ruling United Russia party in Zaporizhia Oblast began on May 22 and will run until May 28, with in-person voting scheduled to start on May 24.<sup>47</sup> The occupation administrations of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kherson oblasts announced similar parameters for preliminary voting, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>48</sup>

Kherson Oblast occupation authorities continue efforts to integrate occupied educational institutes with Russia, likely aiding the forced relocation of Ukrainian children to Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration announced on May 23 that it established an agreement with Crimean occupation authorities to ease the admissions process to Crimean universities for Kherson Oblast students as well as resolving unspecified issues regarding Kherson Oblast children residing at Crimean

educational institutions.<sup>49</sup> The Kherson Oblast occupation administration also announced the distribution of a new Russian journalism textbook in occupied Kherson Oblast higher educational institutions.<sup>50</sup>

<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 President Alexander Lukashenko stated on May 23 that he was had adenovirus and that concern over his health is unnecessary. Lukashenko claimed that rumors about his death were nothing more than idle speculation circulating on social media.<sup>51</sup> Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Dmitry Krutoy told Kremlin newswire *TASS* on May 23 that Lukashenko would not be attending the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 14 to 17.<sup>52</sup>

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on May 23 that the Belarusian Main Operational Department is holding meetings on May 23 and 24 aiming to increase professional training of officers in accordance with the plan to increase Belarusian forces' readiness.<sup>53</sup> The Belarusian MoD stated that the 103rd Vitebsk Separate Guards Airborne Brigade and Kazakh forces air assault units participated in combat skills competitions on the Losvido Training Ground as part of ongoing combat readiness checks.<sup>54</sup> Belarusian forces also conducted exercises at the Gozhsky and Domanovo training grounds.<sup>55</sup>

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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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://t.me/mod russia/26773

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://t.me/vvgladkov/2266; https://t.me/vvgladkov/2269;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> <a href="https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22-2023">https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22-2023</a>; <a href="https://t.me/readovkanews/59395">https://t.me/readovkanews/59395</a>; <a href="https://t.me/readowkanews/59395">https://t.me/readowkanews/59395</a>; <a href="https://t

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://tass dot ru/politika/17822461; https://t.me/readovkanews/59397

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> https://t.me/rybar/47470; https://t.me/severrealii/16939; https://t.me/rybar/47463; https://t.me/rybar/47441; https://t.me/rybar/47425; https://t.me/notes veterans/9629; https://t.me/rybar/47449; https://t.me/rybar/47425;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> https://twitter.com/aldin\_aba/status/1661048261958942730; https://twitter.com/IntelCrab/status/1661070731067682816; https://t.me/zvezdanews/119242

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<sup>20</sup> https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-30-2023
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