The Kremlin acknowledged its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first time Moscow has openly recognized a defeat since the start of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Kremlin officials and state media propagandists are extensively discussing the reasons for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast. A marked change from their previous pattern of reporting on exaggerated or fabricated Russian successes with limited detail. The Kremlin never admitted that Russia was defeated around Kyiv or, later, at Snake Island, framing the retreat from Kyiv as a decision to prioritize the “liberation” of Donbas and the withdrawal from Snake Island as a “gesture of goodwill.” The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) originally offered a similar explanation for the Russian failure in Kharkiv, claiming that Russian forces were withdrawing troops from Kharkiv Oblast to regroup, but this false narrative faced quick and loud criticism online. The Kremlin’s acknowledgment of the defeat is part of an effort to mitigate and deflect criticism for such a devastating failure away from Russian President Vladimir Putin and onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the uniformed military command.

Kremlin sources are now working to clear Putin of any responsibility for the defeat, instead blaming the loss of almost all of occupied Kharkiv Oblast on underinformed military advisors within Putin’s circle. One member of the Kremlin’s Council for Interethnic Relations, Bogdan Bezpalko, even stated that military officials who had failed to see the concentration of Ukrainian troops and equipment and disregarded Telegram channels that warned of the imminent Ukrainian counter-offensive in Kharkiv Oblast should have their heads “lying on Putin’s desk.” ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin delayed Putin’s meeting with Russian defense officials immediately after the withdrawal of troops from around Kharkiv, increasing the appearance of a rift between the Kremlin and the Russian MoD. The Kremlin’s admission of defeat in Kharkiv shows that Putin is willing and able to recognize and even accept a Russian defeat at least in some circumstances and focus on deflecting blame from himself.

Several members of the Russian State Duma expressed concern about the dire situation on the frontlines in Ukraine during the Duma’s first plenary meeting of its autumn session on September 13. Leader of the Russian Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov stated that Russia needs to announce full mobilization because the Russian “special military operation” is a war. Zyuganov said that one can end a “special military operation” at any time, but that a war can end only in victory or defeat, and “we have no right to lose” this war. Leader of the “Fair Russia—For Truth” Party Sergey Mironov called for social “mobilization,” in which regular Russians would pay attention more to the war in Ukraine, rather than for full military mobilization. Leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party Leonid Slutsky also noted that Russia will continue to fight in the geopolitical “scrum” with the West. All three MPs had publicly advocated for Putin to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) before the February invasion and were instrumental in setting information conditions for the invasion itself. The MPs also discussed a December date for the next hearing on a bill that will simplify the delivery of the semiannual conscription notices. The bill, which is likely to pass, will allow Russian military recruitment centers...
The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts. Zyuganov’s, Mironov’s, and Slutsky’s statements could be aimed at raising concern and patriotism among Russians to encourage them to get more involved in the war. The bill could further facilitate the ongoing crypto mobilization campaign, which aims to promote recruitment into contract service via deception, coercion, or promised financial rewards. Recruitment centers throughout Russia have been delivering unofficial summonses that look like conscription notices via mail and phone calls, but many men are aware that Russian law requires military recruitment centers to issue conscription notices in person. Russian men who have responded to the unofficial summonses have recounted recruiters attempting to persuade or pressure them into signing a military contract. The bill legalizing mailed conscription notices will facilitate this dishonest practice. Both the bill and MPs’ statements may evoke fear of general mobilization among men, which could incentivize some to sign military contracts and receive financial bonuses for volunteering, as opposed to being conscripted and forced to serve without such compensation.

Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly. Large-scale conscription would very likely overwhelm the Russian MoD’s ability to induct, train, and equip new soldiers, particularly since the Russian training base appears to be strained in preparing the limited numbers of volunteer battalions currently being fielded. Russia would likely first have to expand its training base significantly, a time-consuming process, and then find and prepare for combat sufficient equipment to kit out large numbers of new units before it could even begin to handle a large influx of new conscripts. Widely-reported Russian materiel shortages suggest deep failures in the Russian military industry that would make generating the necessary equipment, ammunition, and supplies for a large conscript army very difficult. ISW has not identified any indicators that preparations for such activities have been ordered or are underway.

The Kremlin has adopted narratives that echo longstanding milblogger demands and complaints, suggesting that Putin seeks to appease and win back the critical milblogger community rather than censor it. Russian milbloggers have long complained about the Russian MoD and the military high command, and now the Kremlin state media is openly expressing dissatisfaction with the progress of the war and the lack of situational awareness of events on the ground. Milbloggers are advertising Telegram channels covering frontline developments 24/7 and urging readers to subscribe if they “believe” in Putin. Kremlin-controlled and Kremlin-influenced media are now openly calling for an intensive missile campaign against Ukrainian civilian critical infrastructure and transit routes, an idea with broad support among many milbloggers. These new calls are a stark departure from the Kremlin’s previous line claiming that Russian forces did not target civilian infrastructure, and this new narrative is earning the Kremlin public support among milbloggers. Slutsky’s statement at the Duma meeting pointing to the disinterest of most Russian civilians in the war echoes frequent milblogger complaints about the harmful side effects of conducting a limited war.

Russia’s defeat in Kharkiv Oblast is causing panic among Russians in occupied Ukrainian territories, servicemen, and milbloggers. The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) reported that Russian authorities in Crimea urged their families to flee to Russia, while employees of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) are selling their homes on the peninsula and are urgently evacuating their families due to Ukrainian counter-offensives. The Ukrainian General Staff reported
that forcibly mobilized proxy units are suffering low morale and psychological problems.\textsuperscript{17} Russian milbloggers are increasingly worrying about Ukrainian counter-offensives in different areas along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblasts frontline, and preemptively identifying vulnerable Russian positions.\textsuperscript{18}

**Russia’s military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia’s leverage in the former Soviet Union.** Armenia accused Azerbaijan of violating a Russian-brokered ceasefire and attacking Armenian forces along the Azerbaijan-Armenian border on September 13.\textsuperscript{19} Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a call with Russian President Vladimir Putin and convened a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states later in the day but did not invoke the CSTO’s collective security agreement, according to government readouts of both meetings.\textsuperscript{20} The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not comment on whether the Kremlin would fulfill its CSTO obligations to Armenia if Azerbaijan continued to press its attack.\textsuperscript{21} Russia’s hedging approach may damage Russia’s relationship with Armenia and with other CSTO member states, particularly if Russia cannot provide military or peacekeeping support.

The CSTO is a Russia-created and Russia-dominated intergovernmental military alliance that the Kremlin claims is about collective security, but typically uses to justify or further its hybrid war aims. The degraded Russian military likely does not have sufficient forces to enforce a ceasefire or to deploy additional peacekeepers to the area after six months of devastating war in Ukraine. ISW reported on March 13 that Russia pulled 800 personnel from Russia’s base in Armenia and elements of its Nagorno-Karabakh “peacekeeping deployment” to replenish early losses in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{22} ISW has observed no redeployments to Nagorno-Karabakh or Russia’s base in Armenia since then.

**Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin has recognized its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first defeat Russia has acknowledged in this war. The Kremlin is deflecting blame from Russian President Vladimir Putin and attributing it instead to his military advisors.
- The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts by intensifying patriotic rhetoric and discussions about fuller mobilization while revisiting a Russian State Duma bill allowing the military to send call-ups for the regular semiannual conscription by mail. Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly in any case.
- The successful Ukrainian counter-offensive around Kharkiv Oblast is prompting Russian servicemen, occupation authorities, and milbloggers to panic.
- Russia’s military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia’s leverage in the former Soviet Union as Russia appears unwilling to enforce a violated ceasefire it brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan or to allow Armenia to invoke provisions of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization in its defense.
- Ukrainian troops likely continued ground attacks along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line in northern Donetsk Oblast and may be conducting limited ground attacks across the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counter-offensive.
- Russian troops made incremental gains south of Bakhmut and continued ground attacks throughout Donetsk Oblast.
• Ukrainian forces provided the first visual evidence of Russian forces using an Iranian-made drone in Ukraine on September 13.
Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 13, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, and Daniel Mealie
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* 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 those 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 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.

- Ukrainian Counter-offensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Ukrainian Counter-offensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Eastern Ukraine: (Vovchansk-Kupyansk-Izyum-Lyman Line)

Ukrainian forces continued to consolidate gains in eastern Kharkiv Oblast on September 13 and are likely conducting ground attacks in northern Donetsk Oblast. Ukrainian forces likely hope to take advantage of recent gains in Sviatohirsk (just south of the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border 20km northwest of Slovyansk) to move east on Russian positions in Lyman, where Russian sources claim Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and BARS Special Combat Reserve forces are repelling Ukrainian attacks. Russian sources also stated that Ukrainian forces are fighting around Bilohorivka (30km east of Lyman) in an attempt to pressure Russian defenses in western Luhansk Oblast and in the Lysychansk-Severodonetsk area.

Ukrainian forces may be threatening Russian positions along the Oskil River, which Russian mibloggers have identified as the new frontline. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian troops forded the Oskil River at Borova (about 30km northeast of Izyum and near the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border), indicating that Ukrainian forces are continuing localized ground assaults to threaten Russian positions behind the Oskil River. Russian troops are unlikely to be strong enough to prevent further Ukrainian advances along the entire Oskil River because they do not appear to be receiving reinforcements, and Ukrainian troops will likely be able to exploit this weakness to resume the counter-offensive across the Oskil if they choose.
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of September 13, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

The Russian Defense Ministry's daily briefing map of September 11 confirmed the withdrawal of Russian forces operating around Kharkiv City and on the western bank of the Osikl River on September 11.

Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)

Institute for the Study of War & AEI’s Critical Threats Project 2022
Ukrainian forces continued counter-offensive operations in Kherson Oblast on September 13. Ukrainian and Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks in three main areas along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline; northern Kherson Oblast just south of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border; western Kherson Oblast along the Inhulets River; and northwest of Kherson City. A Russian source reported that Ukrainian troops are consolidating positions in Olhyne (5km south of the Dnipropetrovsk-Kherson Oblast border) and preparing for attacks along the Arkhanhelske line toward Novopetrivka (5km south of Olhyne).²⁷

Russian sources additionally discussed Ukrainian ground maneuvers in western Kherson Oblast near the Inhulets River, with multiple sources claiming that Ukrainian troops launched attacks on Davydov Brid.²⁸ A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian troops are regrouping near Sukhyi Stavok (10km southwest of Davydov Brid) in order to attack toward Bruskynske, which lies along the T2207 highway that is supporting Russian positions in Davydov Brid.²⁹ Ukrainian military officials also reported that Russian troops attempted to attack toward Bezimenne, just south of Sukhyi Stavok, indicating that fighting is occurring within the Sukhyi Stavok pocket.³⁰

Ukrainian and Russian sources both discussed fighting northwest of Kherson City in the Ternovi Pody area. Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that Russian troops attempted to attack along the Ternovi Pody-Lyubomirivka line, about 30km northwest of Kherson City.³¹ Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting is ongoing near Ternovi Pody as Ukrainian troops attempt to move south toward Chornobaivka and the Kherson City area.³² Advisor to the Ukrainian President’s Office, Oleksii Arestovych, claimed that Ukrainian troops took control of Oleksandrivka, 33km northwest of Kherson City.³³

Ukrainian forces are additionally continuing an operational-level interdiction campaign to target Russian military, logistical, and transportation assets in southern Ukraine to support ground maneuvers along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline. The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian aviation conducted 11 strikes against concentrations of Russian manpower and equipment throughout the day on September 13.³⁴ Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian troops continued fire missions against Russian military and logistics assets throughout Kherson Oblast.³⁵ Social media footage from within Kherson City indicates that Ukrainian troops struck the suburbs of Kherson City on September 13 as part of the wider interdiction campaign.³⁶

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) did not comment on Ukrainian actions in Kherson Oblast at all on September 13, despite an apparent uptick in Russian milblogger coverage of the offensive compared to the last few days.³⁷
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 13, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mcekelsen, and Daniel Mealie
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* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: Ukrainian officials announced on August 29 that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. An unnamed military official of an unspecified country told CNN on August 29 that Ukrainian forces liberated Pravdyne, Nova Dmytrivka, and Tomyna Balka (northwest of Kherson City) and Arkhanhelske (along the Inhulets River). ISW will reorient the maps when more open sources confirm the liberation of these settlements. ISW extended Ukrainian counteroffensive to Sukhyi Stavok based on several claims from Russian milbloggers that Ukrainian forces liberated the settlement on August 29. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back to Sukhyi Stavok from Kostromka and Bezimenne on September 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched air strikes on Bezimenne and Kostromka on September 4, which may indicate a Ukrainian advance in the area.
Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

**Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk Oblast** (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on September 13 and made marginal gains around Bakhmut. Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters took control of Mykhailivka Druha, a small settlement along the T0513 highway 10km southwest of Bakhmut.\(^3\) Russian news outlet *Izvestia* claimed that Russian troops reached the suburbs of Bakhmut and occupied positions in the industrial zone on Bakhmut’s eastern outskirts.\(^9\) Russian troops also continued localized ground attacks north and northwest of the Donetsk City area and conducted routine shelling along the Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontlines.\(^40\)

Russian sources are increasingly voicing concern that Ukrainian troops are pulling forces southwest of Donetsk City and near the eastern Zaporizhia Oblast frontline. A member of Zaporizhia’s occupation administration, Vladimir Rogov, claimed that the accumulation of Ukrainian forces in the Zaporizhia direction is “colossal” and unprecedented.\(^4\) Russian milbloggers further claimed that Ukrainian troops are amassing near Vuhledar (45km southwest of Donetsk City), where they stated fighting is ongoing.\(^42\) ISW cannot independently confirm if Ukrainian forces are indeed in this area, but the Russian milblogger discourse about the area southwest of Donetsk City indicates a pervasive sense of nervousness over perceived Russian vulnerabilities in Donbas and southern Ukraine.
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 13, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours

Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory

Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24

Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

Major Railroads

Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*

Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

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

Note: ISW recessed assessed Russian advances to a poultry farm in eastern Verkhonokamyanske, Donetsk Oblast, and recessed Russian claimed control around Siversk based on geolocated footage published on September 5 that shows Russian forces targeting Ukrainian positions at the poultry farm.
**Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground assaults in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 13 and continued routine shelling along the line of contact in Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk Oblasts. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian troops are preparing to attack from Orichiv in the direction of Tokmak, indicating continued concern in the Russian information space regarding attempted Ukrainian advances all along the southern axis.

**Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)**

Ukrainian forces provided the first visual evidence of Russian forces using an Iranian-made drone in Ukraine on September 13. Ukrainian forces either shot down or recovered fragments of an Iranian-made Russian drone in Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast. A Ukrainian servicemember shared Twitter imagery of a drone fragment labeled “M412 Geran-2,” which may be the Russian name for Iran’s Shahed-136 kamikaze drone. The Shahed-136 is a single-use drone that can actively search for targets after launch, rather than following a pre-programmed path to its target.

**Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of occupied areas; set conditions for potential annexation into the Russian Federation or some other future political arrangement of Moscow’s choosing)**

The Kremlin had demonstrably intended to annex occupied Kharkiv Oblast prior to its liberation by Ukrainian forces in early September. The Ukrainian head of Derhachi Hromada, Vyacheslav Zaporenko, reported on September 13 that Russian forces had connected the village of Kozacha Lopan, Kharkiv Oblast to the Russian energy grid during the occupation. Kozacha Lopan lies 10km from the Russian border and was one of the first towns Russian forces seized in late February. Connecting occupied Ukrainian territory to the Russian energy grid is an evident step toward complete economic and administrative integration of occupied and annexed Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation. Ukraine’s counter-offensive in Kharkiv and southern Ukraine has likely forced the indefinite delay of Russian annexation plans.

Ukrainian partisans continued their attacks on Russian occupation officials on September 12. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on September 12 targeting the Russian-appointed rector of Kherson State University, Tetyana Tomilina, at her apartment. The attack reportedly killed a Chechen bodyguard and led to Tomilina’s hospitalization. The Ukrainian Resistance Center emphasized that Tomilina “organized the illegal collection of personal data of students of the occupation pseudo-university” and was “responsible for the Russification of the region and propaganda.” Partisans also reportedly attacked a Russian patrol in Mariupol with explosives as the patrol tried to erase an “ї” symbol that was painted on a building. The attack injured three Russian occupation personnel. Ї, a letter found in the Ukrainian but not Russian alphabet, has become a Ukrainian resistance symbol since the invasion began.

**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.