Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Mason Clark, Kat Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan
September 21, 9:30 pm 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of "partial mobilization" on September 21 reflected many problems Russia faces in its faltering invasion of Ukraine that Moscow is unlikely to be able to resolve in the coming months.¹ Putin's order to mobilize part of Russia's "trained" reserve, that is, individuals who have completed their mandatory conscript service, will not generate significant usable Russian combat power for months. It may suffice to sustain the current levels of Russian military manpower in 2023 by offsetting Russian casualties, although even that is not yet clear. It will occur in deliberate phases, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said in an interview on September 21, likely precluding any sudden influx of Russian forces that could dramatically shift the tide of the war.² Russia's partial mobilization will thus not deprive Ukraine of the opportunity to liberate more of its occupied territory into and through the winter.

Putin and Shoigu emphatically said that only reservists who have completed their initial military service will be mobilized, making clear that Russia will not be expanding conscription. Shoigu also declared that students will not be affected and told them to go about their studies without concern.³ These comments were clearly intended to allay fears among the Russian population that "partial mobilization" was code for general conscription.

It is not clear how much of the Russian reserve has already been deployed to fight in Ukraine. Western intelligence officials reportedly said in November 2021 that Russia had called up "tens of thousands of reservists" as part of its pre-war mobilization.⁴ Ukrainian military officials reported in June 2022 that Russian forces had committed 80,000 members of the mobilized reserve to fight in Ukraine.⁵ The Russian military likely called up the most combat-ready reserves in that pre-war mobilization effort, which suggests that the current partial mobilization will begin by drawing on less combat-ready personnel from the outset.

Russian reserves are poorly trained to begin with and receive no refresher training once their conscription period is completed. Russian mandatory military service is only one year, which gives conscripts little time to learn how to be soldiers, to begin with. The absence of refresher training after that initial period accelerates the degradation of learned soldier skills over time. Shoigu referred to the intent of calling up reservists with "combat experience," but very few Russian reservists other than those now serving in Ukraine have any combat experience.⁶

Reports conflict regarding how much training reservists called up in the partial mobilization will receive. Shoigu described a deliberate training process that would familiarize or re-familiarize mobilized reservists with crew, team, detachment, and then platoon-level operations before deploying them to fight. That process should take weeks, if not months, to bring reservists from civilian life to war readiness. Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security head Viktor Bondarev reportedly said that mobilized reservists would train for over a month before being deployed. A military commissariat in Kursk Oblast, on the other hand, reportedly announced that reservists under 30 would deploy immediately with no additional training. 8

Putin emphatically did *not* say that the Russian nuclear umbrella would cover annexed areas of Ukraine nor did he tie mobilization to the annexation. He addressed partial mobilization, annexation referenda in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, and the possibility of nuclear war in his speech—but as separate topics rather than a coherent whole. The fact that he mentioned all three topics in a single speech was clearly meant to suggest a linkage, but he went out of his way to avoid making any such linkage explicit.

Putin framed his comments about the possibility of Russian nuclear weapons use in the context of supposed Western threats to use nuclear weapons against Russia. He claimed that Western officials were talking about "the possibility and permissibility of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia." He continued, "I wish to remind those who allow themselves such statements about Russia that our country also has various means of attack..." His comment on this topic concludes by noting that Russia would use all means at its disposal in response to a threat to "the territorial integrity of our country, for the defense of Russia and our people." That comment could be interpreted as applying in advance to the soon-to-be annexed areas of occupied Ukraine, but its placement in the speech and context do not by any means make such an interpretation obvious. Nor is Putin's language in making this comment different from formal Kremlin policy or from previous statements by Russian officials. Putin's speech should not be read as an explicit threat that Russia would use nuclear weapons against Ukraine if Ukraine continues counter-offensives against occupied territories after annexation.

Putin did not connect annexation with the partial mobilization either, defending the need for partial mobilization by referring to the length of the lines along which Russian forces are now fighting and Western assistance to Ukraine. He noted that the front lines now stretch for more than a thousand kilometers to explain why more Russian forces are needed. He and Shoigu also heavily emphasized the false narrative that Russia is fighting not Ukraine but NATO and the West. This narrative is not new. It is not even markedly different from the initial false justifications Putin offered before ordering the invasion in February. The formal Kremlin position has long been that NATO was pushing Ukraine to war with Russia, that NATO was preparing to give Ukraine nuclear weapons, and that NATO forces were taking up or preparing to take up positions in Ukraine. Putin's and Shoigu's repetitions of that line do not reflect an escalation in their rhetoric.

Russia's partial mobilization will not transform the war this year and may or may not have a significant impact on Russia's ability to continue operations at their current level next year. Ukraine and the West should neither dismiss it nor exaggerate it.

Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin's announced "partial mobilization" will not materially affect the course of the war in the coming months.
- Putin did *not* explicitly threaten to use nuclear weapons if Ukraine continues counter-offensive operations to liberate occupied areas after Russian annexation.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued offensive operations around Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces conducted strikes north and east of Kherson City as part of an operational-level interdiction campaign against Russian logistics, military, and transportation assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 21: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border around Vysokopillya.

- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing crypto-mobilization efforts regardless of Russian President Vladimir Putin's declaration of partial mobilization.
- Russian-appointed occupation administrators are likely increasing law enforcement and filtration measures in occupied areas of Ukraine in preparation for Russia's sham annexation referenda.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 21, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



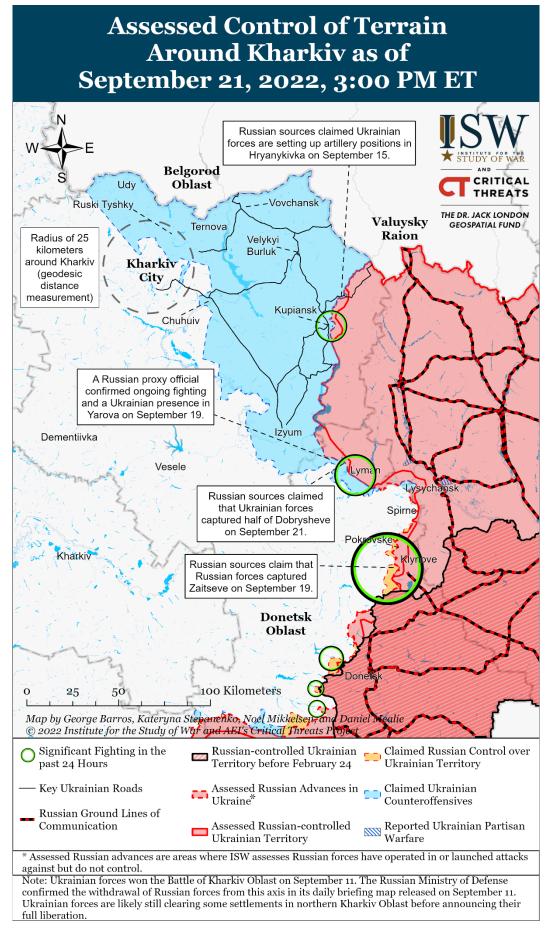
We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military 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 Counteroffensives—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

<u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

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

Ukrainian forces likely continued counteroffensive operations toward Lyman on September 21. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to break through Russian defenses around Yampil (just southeast of Lyman) and in Lyman itself. Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian and Ukrainian troops are actively fighting in Drobysheve (just northwest of Lyman). While ISW cannot independently verify these claims, they are consistent with previous visual evidence of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian troops repelled an attempted Russian attack near Kupyansk, eastern Kharkiv Oblast, along the Oskil River. This report indicates that Russian troops are likely engaged in limited attempts to threaten newly recaptured Ukrainian positions along the right bank of the Oskil River.



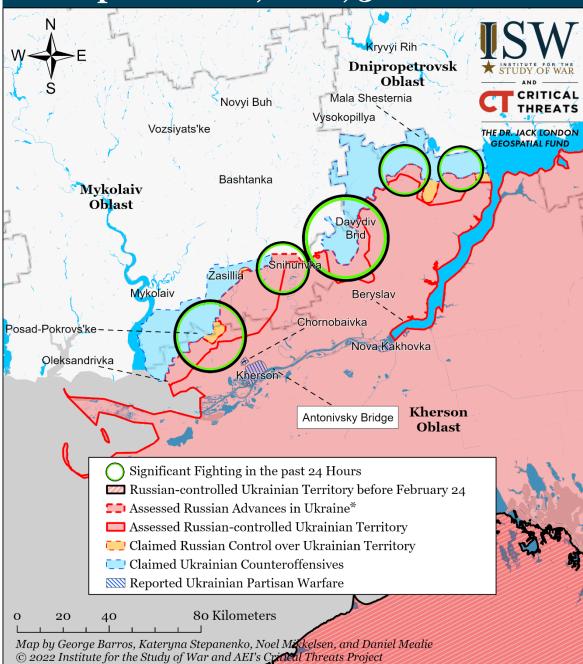
Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)

Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground attacks in Kherson Oblast on September 21 and reiterated that Ukrainian forces are conducting an operational-level interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command and the Ukrainian General Staff both noted that Ukrainian strikes targeted Russian equipment, logistics, transportation, and command and control assets in southern Ukraine throughout the day.¹²

Social media footage provided visual evidence of the continuing Ukrainian interdiction campaign against Russian positions north and east of Kherson City on September 20 and 21. Geolocated footage showed the aftermath of Ukrainian strikes on Kherson City that reportedly hit a factory, a semiconductor plant, a Russian base, and a ferry crossing near the Antonivsky Bridge.¹³ Ukraine's Southern Operation Command noted that Ukrainian troops hit Russian equipment and manpower concentrations and a command post of the 7th Guards Air Assault Division just north of Kherson City in Chornobaivka.¹⁴ Social media footage from September 20 also showed that Ukrainian forces struck Russian positions in Nova Kakhovka, about 60km east of Kherson City, corroborating Ukrainian claims of Ukrainian strikes on Russian positions in Nova Kakhovka.¹⁵ Ukraine's Southern Operational Command additionally stated that Ukrainian troops hit Russian command posts in Beryslav Raion (65km east of Kherson City).¹⁶

Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 21: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border around Vysokopillya. The Russian Defense Ministry and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are continuing to strike Ukrainian military equipment in Pravdyne (around 30km northwest of Kherson City). The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Russian forces shelled Pravdyne. Geolocated footage showed Ukrainian forces striking Russian military equipment in Davydiv Brid. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that Ukrainian forces destroyed Russian drones when they were conducting aerial reconnaissance over Kostyrka (southeast of Vysokopillya) and Novodmytrivka on the eastern bank of the Inhulets River along the T2207 highway. An uptick in Russian aerial reconnaissance in these areas may indicate that Russian forces have shifted forces away from this sector of the front.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 21, 2022, 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.

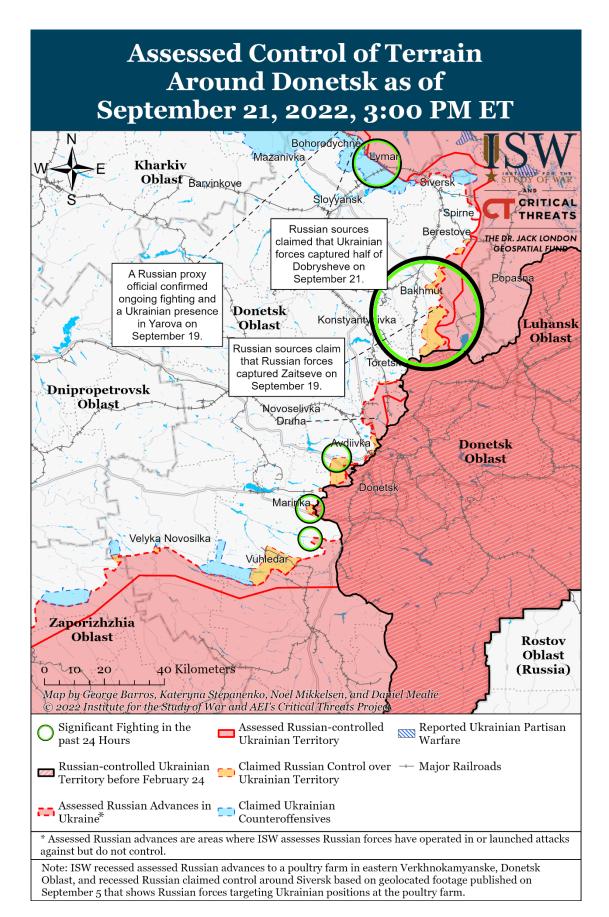
Note: Ukrainian officials announced on August 29 that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. An unnamed military official of an unspecified country told CNN on August 29 that Ukrainian forces liberated Pravdyne, Nova Dmytrivka, and Tomyna Balka (northwest of Kherson City) and Arkhanhelske (along the Inhulets River). ISW will readjust the maps when more open sources confirm the liberation of these settlements. ISW extended Ukrainian counteroffensives 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

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

Russian forces continued ground attacks on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut and against Avdiivka and continued routine fire along the frontline in Donetsk Oblast on September 21.²¹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks against Vesele, just northeast of Soledar; Zaitseve and Kurdyumivka, south of Bakhmut; and Bakhmutske, northeast of Bakhmut.²² Geolocated footage confirmed Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut, reportedly on the grounds of the Champagne Wine Factory.²³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces shelled but did not inflict any damage against the Slovyansk Thermal Power Plant, likely as part of Russia's continuing campaign to degrade Ukrainian critical infrastructure.²⁴ Russian forces conducted airstrikes against infrastructure facilities in Bakhmut, indicating that Ukrainian forces still hold fortified positions in the city.²⁵

Russian forces conducted routine shelling in western Donetsk Oblast and eastern Zaporizhia Oblast, and additional Russian forces deployed to the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline. Ukraine's General Staff reported continued shelling along the frontline in the area.²⁶ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a failed ground attack near Pavlivka, just north of Vuhledar.²⁷ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces are conducting artillery strikes on an unspecified road towards Vodyane, likely either the To524 or To509 highway or the Slavne-Vodyane road.²⁸ The Russian source also claimed that Ukrainian forces are deploying large quantities of equipment in the Vuhledar direction, though ISW cannot independently confirm this report.²⁹ A Ukrainian source stated that elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division are deployed on the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline and that several armored personnel carriers of the 35th and 74th Motorized Rifle Brigades traveled through Rozivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, likely to positions along the front line.³⁰



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

Russian forces did not conduct any ground assaults in western Zaporizhia Oblast and continued routine fire against Ukrainian frontline positions and rear areas in Mykolaiv Oblast on September 21.³¹ Official Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck unspecified infrastructure facilities in Zaporizhzhia City, Zaporizhia Oblast; Synelnykove Raion, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast; and Shevchenkove and Ochakiv, Mykolaiv Oblast.³² The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 21 that Ukrainian strikes inflicted severe casualties on Russian forces in Zaporizhia Oblast on September 19, including killing 50 personnel and destroying 15 units of military equipment and an ammunition depot in the Melitopol and Polohy administrative districts as well as in the area of Kamianka.³³

Russian and Ukrainian sources traded accusations of striking the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on September 21, damaging one of the power units. Ukrainian state nuclear agency Energoatom stated that Russian shelling damaged the communication equipment and a transformer for reactor number 6.34 Energoatom reported that the damaged transformer cut power to the reactor, forcing two emergency diesel generators to kick in to provide power to the reactor's cooling pumps. ZNPP employees reportedly enabled an alternate power supply and shut down the emergency generators within an hour of the attack. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that a Ukrainian large-caliber projectile damaged a water pipe of reactor number 5's safety system and shelling damaged a power line to reactor number 6.35 An image circulated by social media users on September 21 shows a burst water pipe at the ZNPP near the reactor buildings.36 Russian forces continued routine fire against Ukrainian positions on the opposite side of the Kakhovka Reservoir from Enerhodar.37

Russian and Ukrainian sources reported explosions in the Black Sea near Sevastopol, Crimea on September 21.³⁸ The Russian-appointed occupation governor of Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhayev stated that Russian authorities discovered an unmanned water surface vehicle on Soldatskyi Beach and detonated the vehicle, causing the explosion.³⁹

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

Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing crypto-mobilization efforts regardless of Russian President Vladimir Putin's declaration of partial mobilization on September 21. Novosibirsk Oblast Governor Andrey Travnikov announced that the oblast will form one or two more volunteer battalions if necessary for the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff added that the "self-mobilization" campaign is ongoing simultaneously with partial mobilization, noting that Cossacks are recruiting candidates to serve in Rosgvardia.⁴¹ The Ukrainian General Staff added that the Kuban Cossack Army is forming additional volunteer units and training them at the Cossack bases in Krasnodar Krai. The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Russian forces are misleading men into entering military service by offering them "construction" jobs in Ukraine. Russian federal subjects will likely continue advertising volunteer service and promising large bonus payments to incentivize more men to volunteer for contract service rather than waiting to be mobilized.

Russian forces are also continuing to replenish personnel with prisoner recruits and forcibly mobilized men from proxy areas. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are still detaining men of conscription age in occupied Luhansk and Donetsk Oblast.⁴² The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Russian forces established a training camp in occupied Torez (about 62km due east of Donetsk City) for Russian prisoners.⁴³ The GUR added that Russian forces also began to recruit prisoners serving time in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) into the DNR 100th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade and "Somali" Battalion as well as the Russian 9th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment. The GUR noted that recruiters select prisoners based on their physical characteristics

and previous military experience, regardless of the severity of their crimes. The DNR leadership also reportedly revoked previously issued exemptions from mobilization and is continuing to mobilize industrial workers for combat service.

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (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)

Russian-appointed occupation administrators are likely increasing law enforcement and filtration measures in occupied areas of Ukraine to maintain control of Ukrainian populations and preempt partisan attacks ahead of Russia's sham annexation referenda, currently scheduled for September 23-27.44 The Ukrainian head of Kherson Oblast, Yaroslav Yanushevich, stated on September 21 that Russian forces are escalating filtration measures and inspections of private property throughout occupied Kherson Oblast.45 Russian-backed authorities have also increased restrictions on movement out of occupied territories, likely to prevent large portions of the population in occupied territory from fleeing to Ukrainian-held territory ahead of Russia's illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory and Russian "partial mobilization." Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko claimed that the Russian-backed commandant's office in Mariupol will stop issuing passes to civilians who wish to leave occupied parts of Donetsk Oblast on October 1.46 Andryushchenko also noted that Russian forces at the checkpoint in Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, are introducing special passes and increased restrictions for those who want to leave occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.47

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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² https://ria dot ru/20220921/shoygu-1818321328.html

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⁴ https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-21/u-s-intel-shows-russian-plans-for-potential-ukraine-invasion?leadSource=uverify%20wall; https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2021/12/03/us-intel-says-russia-is-preparing-175000-troops-for-ukraine-offensive/?sh=318e35ca4582

⁵ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-16

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¹⁹ https://twitter.com/Blue Sauron/status/1572336144922349568

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²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzF27BqoHNg;

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¹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=823247075356247

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²⁸ https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/17900; https://t.me/RtrDonetsk/9560

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