

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 14, 2023
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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.

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The Kremlin is likely attempting to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China ahead of Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu's visit to Moscow from April 16 to 18. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on April 14 that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu will meet with Li to discuss bilateral defense cooperation as well as issues of regional and global security.¹ Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang stated on April 14 that China will not sell weapons to Russia and will regulate the export of items to Russia that have dual civilian and military uses.² Qin's comments represent a continuation of China's efforts to rhetorically downplay its support for Russia and demonstrate that there are limits to the "no limits" partnership that Russia and China declared before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³ ISW assessed that Putin was unable to secure the no-limits bilateral partnership with China that he likely hoped for when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Moscow from March 20 to 22.⁴

The Kremlin is likely hoping to make itself more attractive to China by launching Russian Pacific Fleet exercises to project Russia's naval power in the Pacific. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on April 14 that the Russian military raised the Pacific Fleet of the Eastern Military District (EMD) to the highest level of combat readiness for combat readiness checks.⁵ Russian Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, also stated that elements of the Pacific Fleet will conduct combat exercises.⁶ The Russian Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks are likely meant to signal to China that Russia supports Chinese security objectives in the Pacific and that Russia remains an equal military partner that can operate as a Pacific power despite the degradation of Russian military power in Ukraine.

The Kremlin also likely intends to use the Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks to attempt to deter further Japanese support for Ukraine ahead of the G7 meeting from May 19 to 21. Shoigu stated on April 14 that Russian forces declared that combat readiness checks are intended to work out methods to prevent enemy forces from deploying in the southern part of the Sea of Okhotsk and to repel a landing on the southern Kuril and Sakhalin islands, both signals to Japan (which claims part of the archipelago that the Soviet Union seized at the end of World War II).⁷ Russia's Eastern Military District (EMD) recently deployed a battery of Bastion coastal defense missile systems to Paramushir Island in the northern portion of the Russian-occupied Japanese Kuril Islands, which ISW assessed was likely a warning to Japan about further supporting Ukraine.⁸ Russia likely intends to use military posturing in the north Pacific to raise fears about military escalation with Japan in an increased effort to prevent Japan from further supporting Ukraine when it hosts the G7 meeting in Hiroshima. Russia has employed similar information operations and demonstrative actions against the West aimed at preventing further Western security assistance to Ukraine by stoking concerns about escalation, although these efforts have never presaged any real escalation.⁹

The Russian military is in no position to threaten Japan at this time. ISW previously reported that elements of the 40th and 155th Naval Infantry Brigades of the Pacific Fleet suffered heavy losses near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast in early 2023 and in late 2022, with the 155th being reconstituted as many as eight times in the past year.¹⁰ The Pacific Fleet likely lacks the available combat power in the Pacific region to posture in a way that would be truly threatening to Japan or suitable for Russia power projection attempts that would be able to convince China that it is an equal military power.

It is noteworthy that Prigozhin – one of most extreme thought leaders among Russia’s pro-war faction – considers that Russia can incur a defeat in Ukraine and that such a defeat in the short run would actually benefit Russia.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is setting information conditions to exploit a Russian military failure if the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive is successful. Prigozhin published an essay on April 14 in which he argues that Ukraine’s coming counteroffensive is more likely to succeed than fail.¹¹ Prigozhin warned that a selfish Russian “deep state” (which he defines as “a community of near-state elites that operate independently of the political leadership of the state and have close ties and their own agenda”) is currently in crisis due to the Russian military’s failures to secure a victory quickly.¹² Prigozhin accused members of this deep state embedded in the Russian bureaucracy of deliberately sabotaging Russian success in the war because they seek to resume their privileged lives of comfort.¹³ Prigozhin stated that these Russian deep state “internal enemies” will push the Kremlin to “make serious concessions” tantamount to “betraying Russian interests,” including even possibly returning occupied Ukrainian territory to Ukraine over the course of a few years.¹⁴

Prigozhin explicitly rejected the notion of any negotiations to end the war and urged Russians to continue fighting, even if it results in Russia’s temporary defeat. Prigozhin stated that Russia must ignore the Russian deep state’s temptations to cut Russian losses and settle.¹⁵ Prigozhin stated the Russian military cannot stop fighting now despite current Russian territorial gains because the Ukrainian state has transformed, and unoccupied Ukraine is now politically opposed the Kremlin. Prigozhin stated that Russia must continue to fight relentlessly in Ukraine regardless of how adverse conditions become. He stated that any scenario in which Russia faces defeat will result in a groundswell of “radical national feelings” in Russia that will serve as the catalyst for a reinvigorated Russian patriotism and enable the Russian nation to undergo the baptism by fire necessary to emerge victorious and defeat Ukraine.¹⁶ Prigozhin’s essay is thematically and logistical consistent with his previous stated effort to transform Wagner Group into a hardline ideological elite parallel military organization to advance Russian interests.¹⁷

The Russian nationalist discourse about the acceptability of Russia suffering defeat in Ukraine deviates from some Western assertions of the need to preserve Russia from humiliation and allow Russia to “save face.” Prigozhin’s argument that the Kremlin must resist the temptation to settle and instead remain committed to winning in Ukraine is not compatible with the idea that the Kremlin must be given a way to save face lest it conduct a massive, possibly nuclear, escalation.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Prigozhin – one of most extreme thought leaders among Russia’s pro-war faction – considers that Russia can incur a defeat in Ukraine and that such a defeat in the short run would actually benefit Russia. Prigozhin’s comments, together with those of other radical pro-war voices, highlight the priority that the pro-war community places on galvanizing Russian society and energizing it for a long fight against the West. That agenda is not advanced by courting thermonuclear destruction.

Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin denied speculations that he is facing charges in St. Petersburg for the discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces – a denial that likely further indicates his protection by unknown *siloviki* patrons. A Russian news aggregator claimed on April 14 that a Novosibirsk resident asked the St. Petersburg Investigative Committee to investigate Girkin’s social media content for discreditation of Russian forces – a crime punishable by a fine of up to five million rubles (\$65,530), up to five years of correctional or forced labor, or up to seven years in prison.¹⁹ Girkin denied receiving a criminal charge notice, claiming that he will not alter his behavior and is not intimidated by authorities.²⁰ Girkin denied receiving any charges from the Russian Ministry of Interior (MVD) and hypothesized that the MVD could “theoretically” investigate him for discreditation.²¹ Girkin added that if someone has the “political will” then he could be framed for humanitarian aid fraud. Girkin noted that everyone will soon find out if the “authorities are ready to stop [him].”²² Girkin’s response is consistent with his ruthless criticisms of the Kremlin and may indicate that he likely continues to benefit from some protection from within the Russian force structures – the *siloviki*. Girkin has every reason to believe that he would be convicted without such protection, as his vitriolic assaults on the Russian military’s performance in Ukraine almost self-evidently violate the discreditation law.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may be attempting to apply pressure on Girkin's patronage networks by responding to accusations against Girkin. Prigozhin stated that Girkin would not be recruited into Wagner as Wagner is no longer recruiting prisoners – likely implying that Girkin would remain in prison for his behavior.²³ While it is unclear if Prigozhin or Wagner-affiliated figures are involved in sparking an investigation against Girkin, it is notable that the complaint was filed in St. Petersburg - a city where Prigozhin has connections and a city where Prigozhin is attempting to push his political aspirations.²⁴ Girkin is reportedly based out of Moscow, which makes the St. Petersburg venue of the complaint more unusual.²⁵ Prigozhin and Girkin have a history of personal attacks and feuds, and Prigozhin may want to expose or strain Girkin's patronage networks, which are allowing him to be unscathed despite ongoing censorship measures in Russia. ISW also previously assessed that Prigozhin and Girkin are likely competing for influence and patronage within the pro-war faction, and a public investigation into Girkin might burden Girkin's patrons as they attempt to deflect or quash these accusations.²⁶

Russian elite forces are diluting their combat effectiveness with poorly trained mobilized personnel and volunteers due to high casualties sustained in Ukraine. *The Washington Post* reported that leaked classified US intelligence documents revealed that Russia's 22nd Separate Guards Special Purpose (SPETSNAZ) Brigade (Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff) and two other unspecified SPETSNAZ brigades suffered an estimated 90-95% attrition rate in Ukraine.²⁷ *The Washington Post* also reported that the 346th SPETSNAZ Brigade lost almost its entire complement, with only 125 servicemen remaining active out of 900 initially deployed.²⁸ These high casualty rates suggest that Russia's most elite forces - Airborne and SPETSNAZ forces - are likely no longer elite. Russian forces have recently deployed elements of airborne brigades and SPETSNAZ formations to frontline areas in Ukraine that operate as volunteer battalions or that are almost entirely comprised of mobilized personnel.²⁹ It is highly unlikely that mobilized personnel or volunteers received training on how to conduct aerial landing operations and special forces operations, which would suggest that these Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) and SPETSNAZ elements do not differ markedly from other combat ineffective Russian formations staffed by mobilized personnel or volunteers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely host his annual June press conference in early June 2023. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced on April 14 that the Kremlin expects to hold the "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," a live forum at which Putin addresses questions from the Russian public, on an unspecified date likely in June 2023.³⁰ Putin cancelled his "Direct Line" in 2022 due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as in 2020 due to COVID-19.³¹ Putin notably cancelled his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly in December 2022 and regurgitated boilerplate rhetoric at his annual New Year's speech, indicating that Putin was uncertain of his ability to shape the Russian information space amidst criticism of the Russian military's performance in the war.³² This year's event will likely be highly filtered to support Putin's current rhetorical lines and avoid exposing any challenges to the Kremlin or to Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine.

The Russian State Duma is intensifying its efforts to censor Russian cultural figures who fled Russia and criticize the war, likely aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship. Russian State Duma Vice Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy announced on April 14 that the State Duma has created a working group to find a "fair solution" to prevent these cultural figures as well as designated foreign agents from receiving income from creative endeavors in Russia.³³ Tolstoy claimed that some deputies are making "radical proposals...because it's not worth making money in a country that you hate." Prior Duma proposals included withholding state funding, royalty payments, advertising revenue and copyrights, and confiscating the property of Russians who fled.³⁴ State Duma Vice Speaker Irina Yarovaya chairs the committee, and other members include Tolstoy and the chairs of the State Duma committees for Security and Anti-Corruption, State Building and Legislation, Information Policy, Information Technology and Communications, and Culture.³⁵ Measures that punish Russians abroad or foreign agents for criticizing the war in Ukraine also demonstrate to domestic audiences the range of punishments they may also suffer for airing their own criticisms.

Key Takeaways

- **The Kremlin is likely attempting to portray Russia as an equal defense partner with China ahead of Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu's visit to Moscow from April 16 to 18.**

- **The Kremlin is likely hoping to make itself more attractive to China by launching Russian Pacific Fleet exercises to project Russia's naval power in the Pacific.**
- **The Kremlin also likely intends to use the Pacific Fleet's combat readiness checks to attempt to deter further Japanese support for Ukraine ahead of the G7 meeting from May 19 to 21.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is setting information conditions to exploit a Russian military failure if the planned Ukrainian counteroffensive is successful.**
- **Former Russian officer and ardent nationalist Igor Girkin denied speculations that he is facing charges in St. Petersburg for the discreditation of the Russian Armed Forces – a denial that likely further indicates his protection by unknown *siloviki* patrons.**
- **Russian elite forces are diluting their combat effectiveness with poorly trained mobilized personnel and volunteers due to high casualties sustained in Ukraine.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely host his annual June press conference in early June 2023.**
- **The Russian State Duma is intensifying its efforts to censor of Russian cultural figures who fled Russia and criticize the war, likely aimed at encouraging domestic self-censorship.**
- **Russian forces continued limited offensive operations in the Kreminna area as Ukrainian forces targeted rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued to advance in Bakhmut and conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.**
- **Russian forces continue to endanger the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) amidst continued Russian efforts to establish control over the ZNPP.**
- **The Kremlin reportedly continues to use private military companies (PMCs) and nationalist networks to support its force generation campaigns.**
- **Russian security personnel continue to arrest Ukrainian citizens under allegations that they associate with claimed illegal formations.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 14, 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.

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

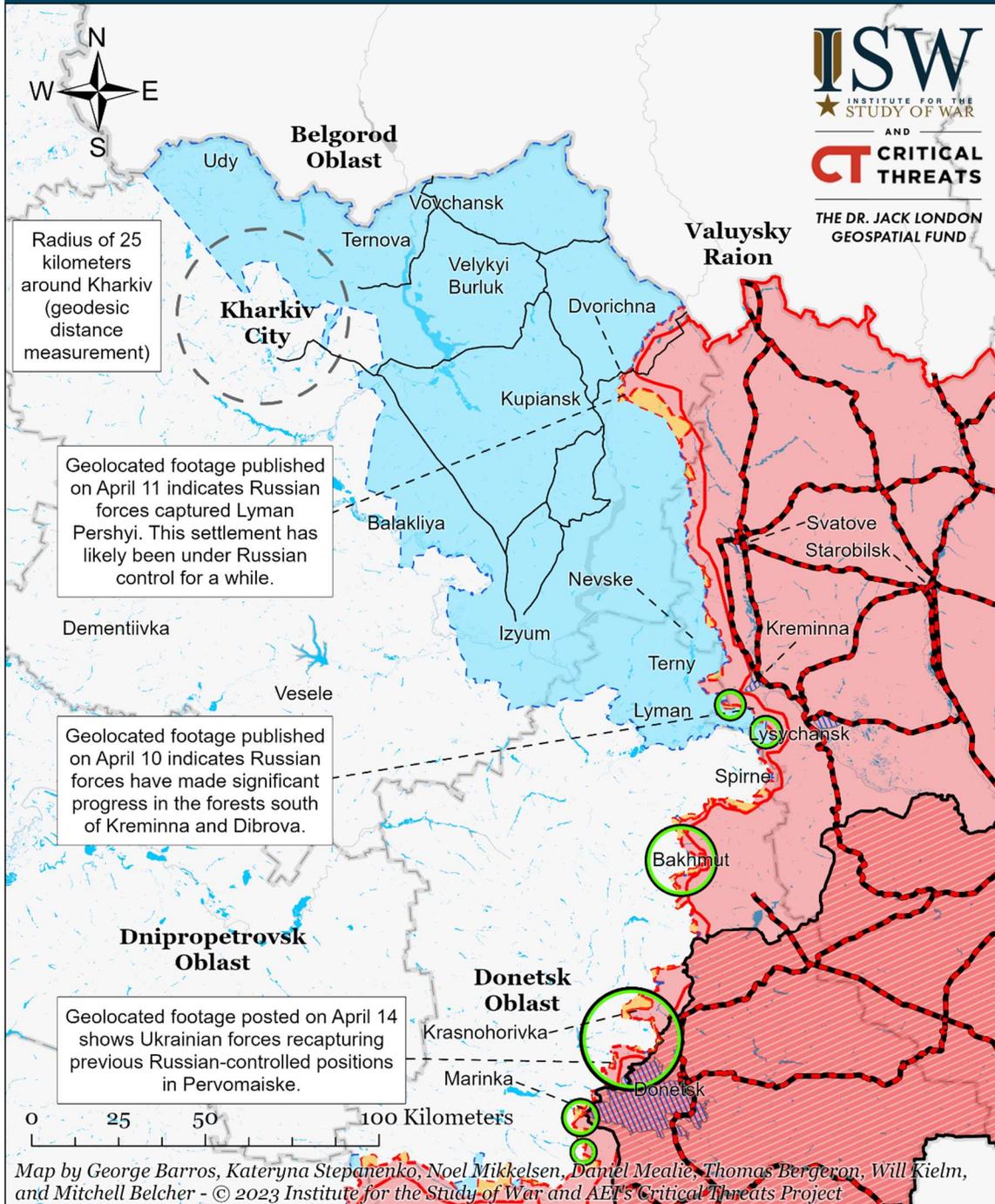
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued limited offensive operations in the Kreminna area on April 14. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations south of Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna) and near Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).³⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully tried to advance towards Torske (16km west of Kreminna) and Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), and that heavy fighting is ongoing near Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna).³⁷

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces are continuing to target rear areas in Luhansk Oblast. Former Advisor to Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Rodion Miroshnik claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Rubizhne (6km east of Kreminna) and Troitske (53km northeast of Kupyansk) with 14 HIMARS rockets on the evening of April 13.³⁸ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are striking Russian military assets in rear areas in preparation for counteroffensive operations in the area and speculated that Ukrainian forces will increase sabotage activities in rear areas in Luhansk Oblast.³⁹

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued reconnaissance activity along the Kupyansk-Svatove line on April 14. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled five Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Vilshana (13km northeast of Kupyansk), Tymkivka (18km east of Kupyansk), and Krokmalne (20km northwest of Svatove).⁴⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of April 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Key Ukrainian Roads
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- ▭ Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- ▭ Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- ▭ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▭ Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- ▭ Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- ▭ Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

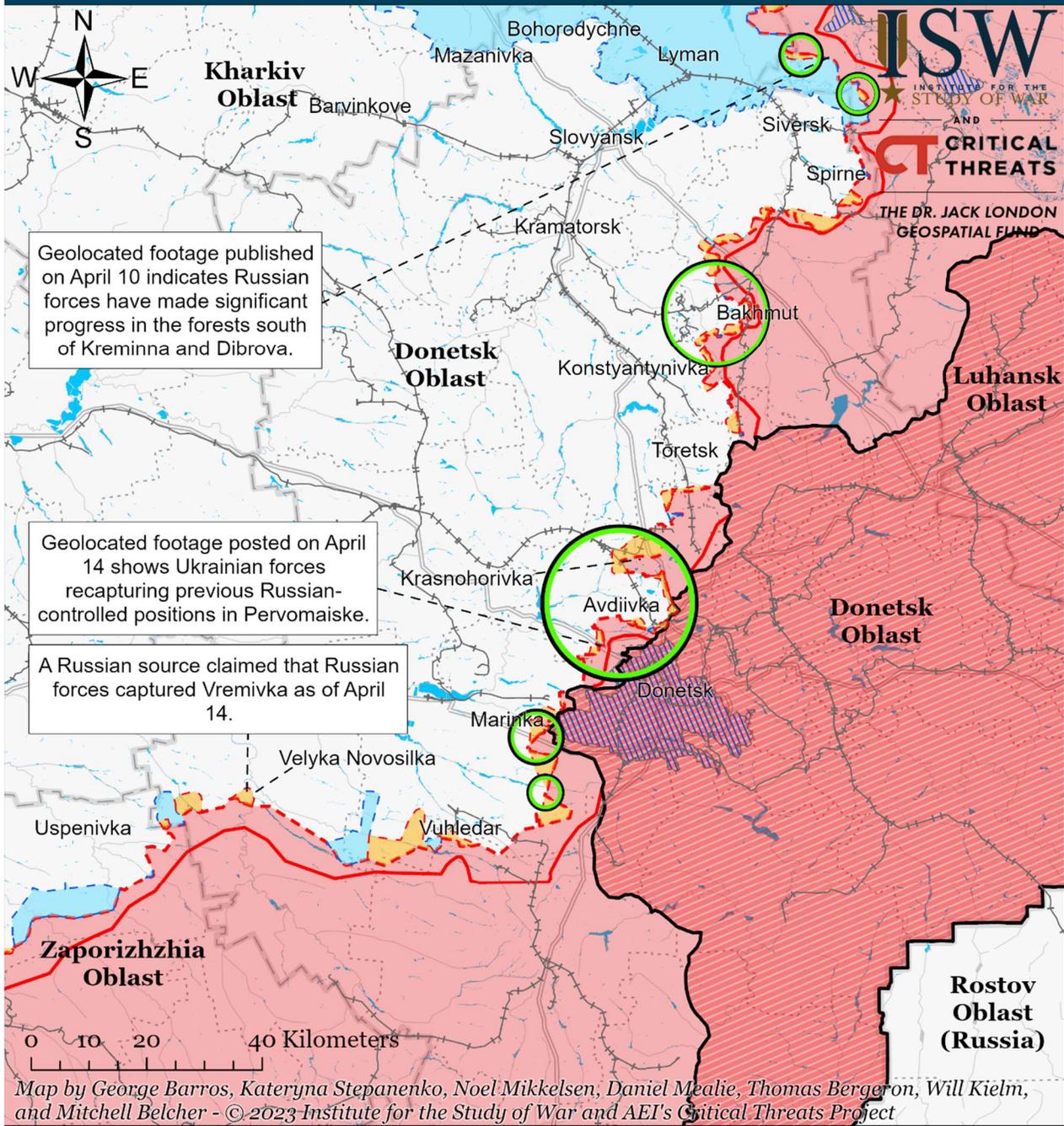
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian Objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued to advance in Bakhmut on April 14. Geolocated footage showed that Wagner Group forces made marginal gains in northwestern Bakhmut and advanced in southwestern Bakhmut.⁴¹ Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner forces cleared Rose Alley park in northwestern Bakhmut and advanced in several areas in central Bakhmut, including across an unspecified section of rail track on April 13.⁴² A Russian milblogger claimed on April 14 that Russian forces attacked Predtechnyne and Wagner Group forces continued assaults in Bakhmut, near Khromove (2km west of Bakhmut), and near Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut).⁴³ A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces do not control the T0504 Bakhmut-Ivanivske-Chasiv Yar highway despite prior milblogger claims to the contrary.⁴⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks in Bakhmut, northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka, and southwest of Bakhmut near Predtechnyne.⁴⁵ A Republic of Tatarstan outlet reported that the 2nd Battalion of the "Veterany" Separate Air Assault Brigade is operating on one of the Bakhmut flanks.⁴⁶

Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on April 14. Geolocated footage published on April 14 shows that Russian forces have advanced to the eastern outskirts of Nevelske (8km west of Donetsk City).⁴⁷ Russian milbloggers claimed on April 13 that Russian forces advanced near Novokalynove (10km north of Avdiivka), Opytne (3km southwest of Avdiivka), and Kruta Balka (3km northeast of Avdiivka).⁴⁸ A milblogger claimed on April 14 that Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Novomykhailivka, Pobieda, Sieverne, and Marinka.⁴⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks near Novokalynove, Sieverne (5km west of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).⁵⁰

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed or claimed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on April 14.⁵¹ A Russian milblogger claimed that the Russian 40th Naval Infantry Brigade is still operating near Vuhledar as of April 14.⁵²

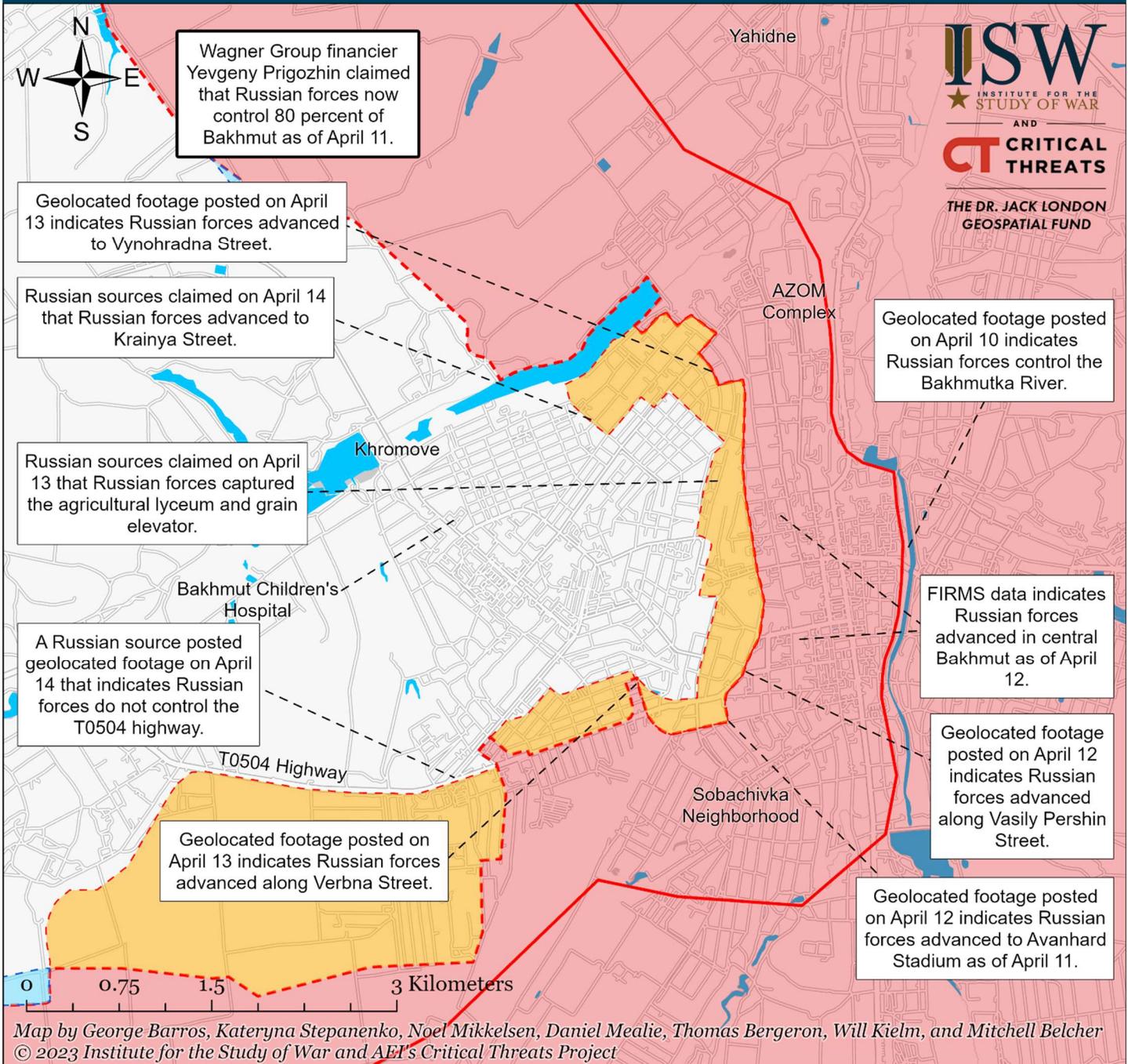
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of April 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

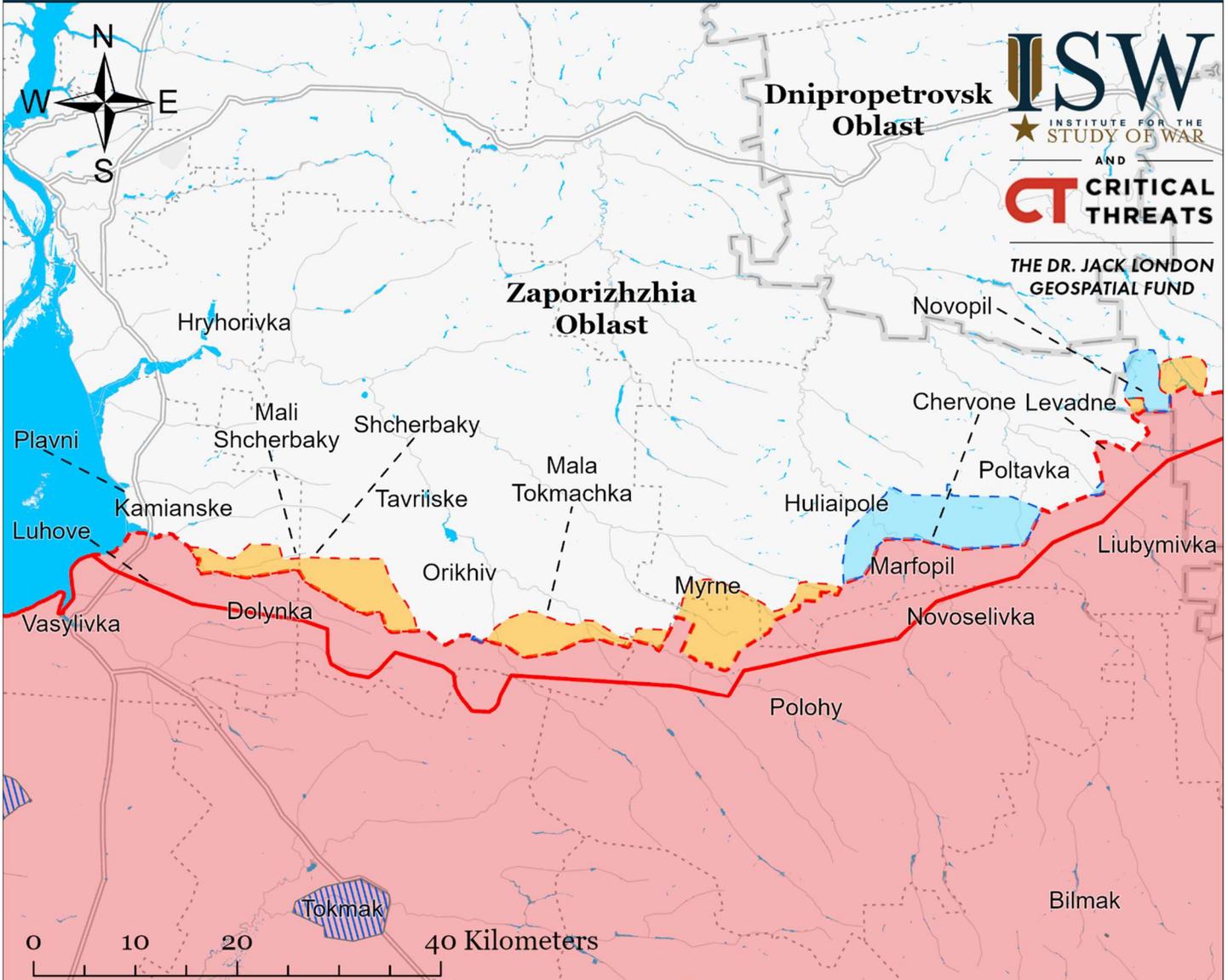
Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of April 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of April 14, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

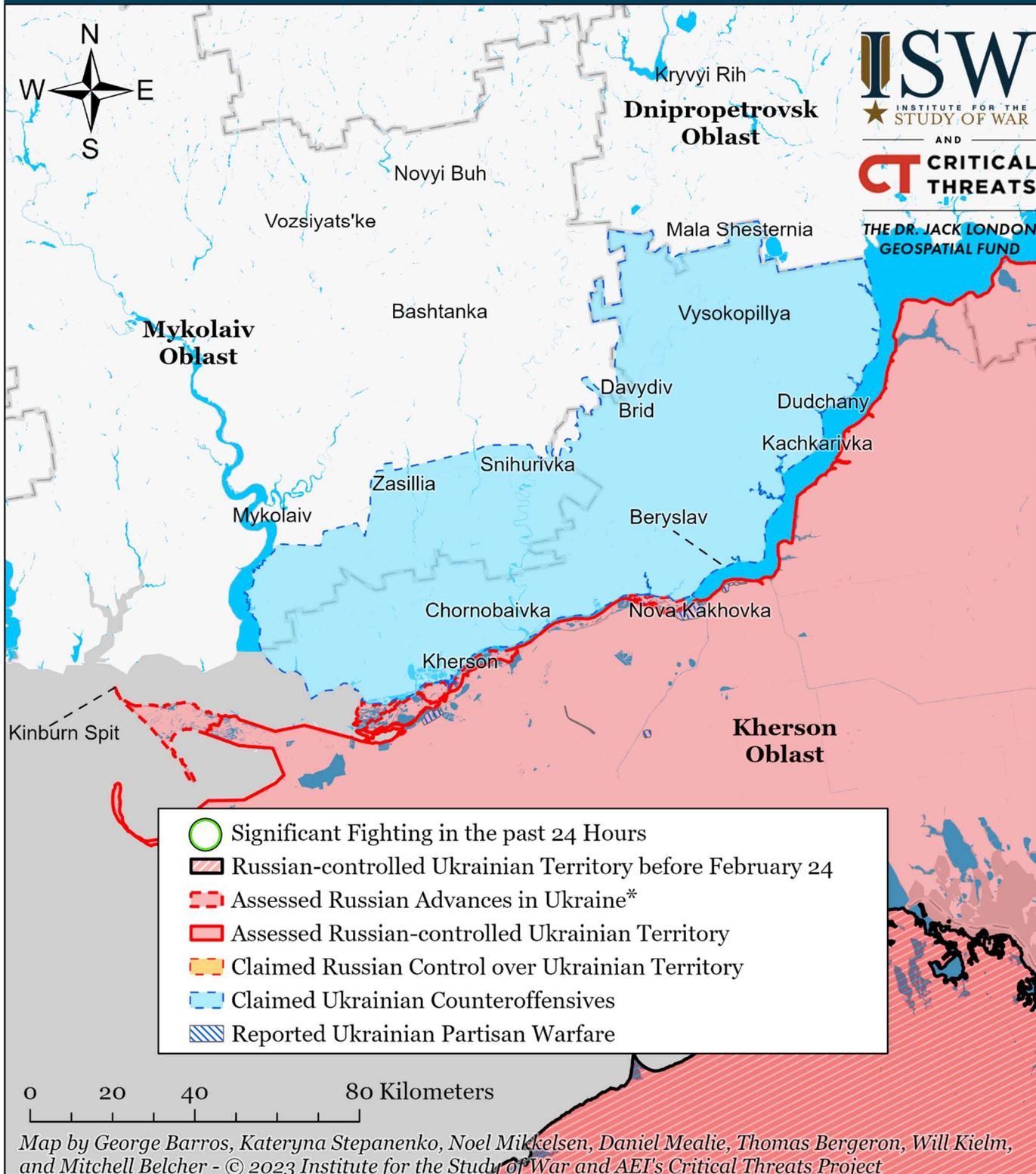


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- 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
- 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.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 14, 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 Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces continue to endanger the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) amidst continued Russian efforts to establish control over the ZNPP as of April 14. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Rafael Grossi stated on April 14 that the ZNPP's dependency on a single power line continues to pose a major risk and that IAEA representatives regularly report shelling near the ZNPP.⁵³ Grossi reported that two landmines detonated near the perimeter of the ZNPP on April 8 and 12.⁵⁴ Grossi reported that Russian officials are preparing to transfer one of the ZNPP's two remaining reactors currently in hot shutdown mode to a cold shutdown mode and that the Kakhovka Reservoir is currently two meters above the minimum required for cooling at the ZNPP.⁵⁵ Grossi reported that one third of the ZNPP's original staff have left and that the remainder having either signed contracts with Russian state energy company Rosenergoatom or retained their employment with Ukrainian State energy company Enerhoatom.⁵⁶ A Russian source reported on April 14 that the "SahaBootur" Russian Airborne (VDV) Battalion comprised mainly of mobilized personnel from Yakutsk, Republic of Sakha deployed to the Enerhodar area.⁵⁷

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian rear areas in Zaporizhia Oblast. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Melitopol with an unspecified munitions on April 14 and that Russian air defenses in Melitopol intercepted a Ukrainian drone on April 13.⁵⁸

Russian forces reportedly continue to maintain a military presence on the Kinburn Spit in Mykolaiv Oblast as of April 13. Russian state outlet *Pravda* reported on April 13 that the "Terek" Cossack volunteer battalion is operating on the Kinburn Spit.⁵⁹

Russian forces continued routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson Oblast on April 14.⁶⁰

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

A Russian volunteer who previously served in the "Troy" special forces detachment revealed to Russian independent outlet *Novaya Gazeta Europe* that the Kremlin continues to use private military companies (PMCs) and nationalist networks to support its force generation campaigns.⁶¹ The volunteer recounted that he originally signed a contract with an unnamed Russian PMC during the start of mobilization in September 2022 after reading a recruitment ad on Telegram, and noted that he had wanted to serve in the war but was disinterested in signing a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). *Novaya Gazeta* observed that the volunteer likely enlisted into the Redut PMC based on his month-long training at the Trigulay Training Ground in Tambov Oblast, which the Redut PMC uses to train volunteers. This training ground, however, belongs to the 16th Special Purpose (SPETSNAZ) Brigade of the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff. The volunteer noted being completely blindsided when he was directed to operate within the "Troy" detachment, implying that volunteer service within a PMC was more appealing because volunteers had more control over their deployments than volunteers who had signed contracts directly with the Russian MoD. *Novaya Gazeta* previously reported that Redut has ties with the Russian MoD and is responsible for the recruitment of the "Veterany" battalion and the "Don" Cossack Brigade.⁶² The "Troy" battalion formed in mid-2014 in Donetsk Oblast where it operated as a special forces reconnaissance company and frequently got into altercations with the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) units that deemed the battalion to be full of "fake paratroopers." The volunteer revealed that the "Troy" battalion operated in the Svatove area of operations since December 2022 with only half of the unit having prior military experience. The volunteer noted that he heard that the Russian MoD disbanded the "Troy" battalion to incorporate volunteer units into the conventional forces. The volunteer noted that the Russian military command was protecting the volunteer units unlike their negligent treatment of the mobilized personnel.

Novaya Gazeta's interview with the Russian volunteer uncovers several key observations about the Russian volunteer recruitment movement. The interview reinforces the ISW's assessment that the Russian MoD is not effective in directly attracting recruits due to its reputation, making Russian PMCs more appealing to recruits.⁶³ The Russian MoD is likely using MoD-affiliated PMCs to mislead recruits into signing military contracts,

effectively transferring PMC personnel into Russian military under the recent efforts to professionalize the military. The interview indicates that Russian elite units such as airborne (VDV) or SPETSNAZ forces are likely reinforced by volunteers and mobilized personnel and are no longer fully or even mainly composed of professionals or specialists, calling into question their status as “elite” units. A Russian milblogger also observed that Russia needs to change its recruitment system because it does not account for recruits’ expertise.⁶⁴ Russia may even be creating or misrepresenting SPETSNAZ or VDV volunteer units to attract recruits regardless of their inexperience with special forces or VDV operations to brand such recruitment as enlistment into prestigious elite units.

Russian officials are continuing to expand their volunteer recruitment campaigns across Russia and in occupied Ukraine. Advisor to the Republic of Bashkortostan Head Artur Yumaguzhin reportedly formed the “Salavat Yulaev” Operational Battalion.⁶⁵ Mariupol Mayor Advisor Petro Andryushenko amplified reports of Mariupol residents receiving advertisements to sign military contracts with the Russian Armed Forces.⁶⁶ Russian Crimea Occupation Head Sergey Aksyonov met with representatives of the Russian Volunteer Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation, and Navy of Russia (DOSAAF) and pledged to allocate 15 million rubles (about \$182,325) to expand the program.⁶⁷ ISW previously reported that DOSAAF has ties to Wagner Group’s recruitment efforts.⁶⁸ A Republic of Tatarstan outlet reported that 15 fighters of the BARS-13 “Russkiy Legion” unit (Russian Combat Army Reserve) deployed to Ukraine on April 14.⁶⁹ The owner of the Lobayev Arms precision grade rifle ammunition manufacturer, Vladimir Lobayev claimed that local officials such as Krasnodar Krai Duma official Tozlyan Armenak are continuing to purchase weapons for an unnamed Cossack BARS unit.⁷⁰

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 security personnel continue to arrest Ukrainian citizens on allegations that they associate with a Crimean Tatar volunteer battalion. Russian sources claimed on April 14 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested two alleged members of the Noman Chelebidzhikhan Volunteer Battalion in Sevastopol, Crimea.⁷¹ The Noman Chelebidzhikhan Volunteer Battalion is an armed resistance formation established in 2016 to oppose Russia’s annexation of Crimea and is banned in Russia. Crimean news outlet *Crimean Realities* reported on April 14 that Russian security forces have detained dozens of Ukrainian citizens throughout the past year on accusations that they participated in the Crimean Tatar volunteer battalion.⁷²

Russian Federation Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova claimed on April 14 that delays in returning Ukrainian children from Russia to Ukraine were due to changes in frontline hostilities.⁷³ Lvova-Belova claimed on April 14 that all Ukrainian children who had not previously returned from “vacations” in Krasnodar Krai have now returned to their families.⁷⁴ Lvova-Belova continued to claim that parents from occupied territories voluntarily sent their children to southern Russia at the end of summer 2022 and that both Russian and Ukrainian volunteer organizations are assisting to reunite Ukrainian children with their parents.⁷⁵ ISW continues to assess that Russian officials use vacation and rehabilitation schemes to deport Ukrainian children to occupied Crimea and Russia.

Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare for preliminary elections in occupied territories. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky announced on April 14 that he applied to participate in preliminary voting in the All-Russian United Russia Party, which will take place from May 22-28.⁷⁶ Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov claimed on April 13 that occupation officials will launch local elections to select members of the legislative assembly and that those individuals will propose their candidates for governor of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷⁷

A Russian source claimed on April 14 that occupation law enforcement in Mariupol arrested two individuals suspected of conducting an attack on Mariupol occupation police chief Mikhail Moskvin on March 27.⁷⁸

Significant activity in Belarus (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 continue conducting exercises in Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on April 14 that unspecified elements of Belarus' Western Operational Command (about 6,000 personnel) are preparing to undergo combat readiness checks and a brigade tactical exercise after receiving equipment drawn from storage.⁷⁹

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.

¹ https://t.me/mod_russia/25633

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/china-weapons-ukraine-war-russia-1.6810898>

³ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar040623> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar040523>

⁴ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032023> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar032123>

⁵ https://t.me/mod_russia/25631

⁶ <https://telegra dot ph/Vystuplenie-nachalnika-Generalnogo-shtaba-VS-RF-generalarmii-VVGerasimova-04-14>

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