### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 21, 2023

Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Karolina Hird, and Mason Clark October 21, 2023, 4:45pm ET

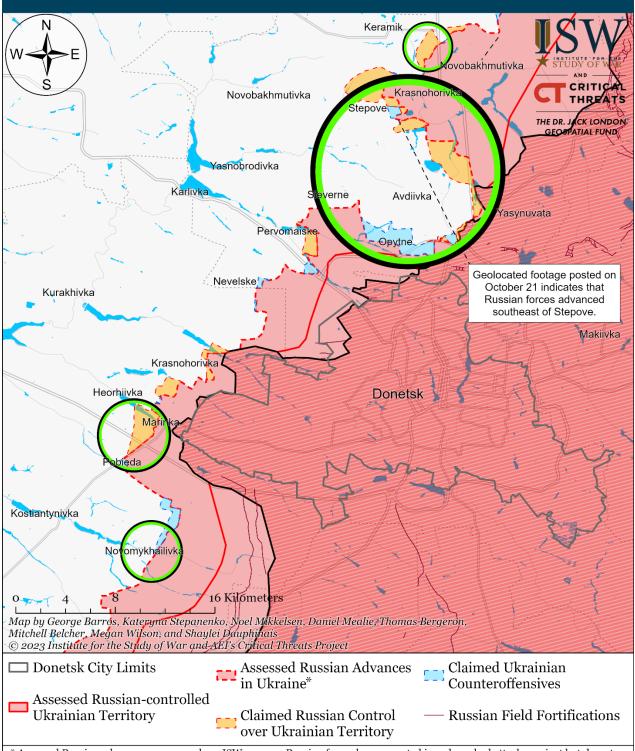
Click here to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click here to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:30pm ET on October 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the October 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces have likely repelled another intensified Russian offensive effort towards Avdiivka in the past several days and inflicted further heavy personnel and equipment losses on Russian troops in the area. Ukrainian and Russian sources indicated that Russian forces mounted another offensive push on Aydiiyka between October 19 and 20, and geolocated footage posted on October 21 confirms that Russian forces did make marginal gains northwest of Avdiivka in the waste heap area.[1] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are gradually advancing north of Avdiivka near the waste heap towards Berdychi (5km northwest of Avdiivka).[2] A Ukrainian military observer noted that Russian forces are attacking towards Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka), towards Novokalynove (7km north of Avdiivka), and towards the waste heap from the Krasnohorivka-Vesele area.[3] However, Ukrainian military officials noted that Russian forces have somewhat decreased the pace of offensive operations near Avdiivka on October 21, and reiterated earlier Ukrainian reporting that Russian forces lost 50 tanks, 100 armored vehicles, and 900 personnel during attacks on Avdiivka on October 19,[4] Estonian Defense Forces Intelligence Center Head Ants Kiviselg notably identified the Avdiivka push as a potential avenue for a new Russian offensive alongside offensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border.[5] The fact that Russian forces continue to recommit waves of personnel and equipment to offensive efforts in the Avdiivka area suggests that Russian command will continue to prioritize this axis, despite high losses and the general low quality of Russian forces on the offensive. [6] A Ukrainian military official noted that Russia's regular infantry and tactics writ large are "consistently bad" and that Russian forces are relying instead on unmanned aerial systems (such as Lancet drones), artillery, and aviation. [7] It appears that Russian forces are continuing to use ineffective and costly tactics in offensive efforts near Aydiiyka leading to high personnel and vehicle losses, and that they have continuously done so in several waves of attacks over the past week suggests that the Russian military command is prioritizing this axis, despite continued and growing losses.

# Assessed Control of Terrain near Donetsk City as of October 21, 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.

Note: A Russian source claimed on October 19 that Russian forces advanced one kilometer in depth in the Stepove and Berdychi directions. A Russian source claimed on October 18 that Russian forces advanced approximately two kilometers in the areas around Avdiivka.

Russian forces are struggling to interdict Ukrainian efforts to supply and reinforce newly captured positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast. BBC Russia Service reported on October 21 that Ukrainian personnel involved in ground operations on the east bank stated that they are fighting to take full control of Krynky (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).[8] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in Krynky, but disagreed about the extent of these positions.[9] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced up to almost two kilometers south of Kyrnky, [10] Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces control all of Krynky, although a different milblogger directly refuted this claim and claimed that Russian forces pushed a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group out of positions on the southern outskirts of the settlement.[11] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are firing on Ukrainian positions near the Antonivsky roadway bridge north of Oleshky (7km south of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River) and the Antonivsky railway bridge north of Poyma (10km southeast of Kherson City and 4km from the Dnipro River).[12] One milblogger claimed that there were combat engagements near Krynky and Pishchaniyka (12km southeast of Kherson City and 3km from the Dnipro River), although most Russian sources claimed that Russian forces are primarily using aviation and artillery units to try to dislodge Ukrainian forces from positions on the east bank, [13] Select Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are evacuating wounded personnel and transferring new forces and light equipment across the Dnipro River to support positions on the east bank.[14] Ukrainian forces have maintained a presence on the east bank since starting larger-thanusual ground operations on the night of October 17-18, suggesting that Ukrainian forces have been able to adequately supply and reinforce the groups conducting these operations despite increased Russian aviation activity along the Dnipro River, [15]

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and Bakhmut direction.[16] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Novofedorivka (21km southeast of Orikhiv) and are 6 kilometers away from the settlement.[17] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults along the Robotyne-Kopani and Robotyne-Novoprokopivka lines.[18]

Russian forces may be diversifying the mix of missiles, guided bombs, and drones used in strikes on Ukrainian rear areas, likely in an attempt to find gaps in Ukrainian air defenses ahead of further strikes over the winter. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces launched unknown air-to-surface missiles at Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Odesa oblasts; Kh-59 missiles at Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts; and Iskander-K cruise missiles and Shahed drones at Kryvyi Rih on the night of October 20–21.[19] The Southern Operational Command noted that three of the unknown missiles detonated mid-air, a Kh-59 struck a residential area in Kryvyi Rih, and the Iskanders and Shaheds hit industrial facilities in Kryvyi Rih.[20] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian tactical aviation simultaneously launched 30 modified KAB guided bombs against frontline areas in Kherson Oblast.[21] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces have never used this combination of weapons in similar strike series before and stated that Russian forces are shifting their main operations to the air.[22] Humenyuk's statement echoes Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat's October 8 warning that Russian forces are increasing their drone strike campaign ahead of winter.[23]

Disgraced Moscow City Duma Deputy Yevgeny Stupin formally requested on October 20 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) investigate Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for "divulging state secrets." Stupin shared a copy of his official request on his Telegram channel on October 21 and accused Sobyanin of publicizing the location of an air defense production plant in the Rudnevo industrial zone in Nekrasovka, Moscow Oblast during the plant's opening on October 17, making the facility an easier target for Ukrainian drone strikes.[24] ISW has repeatedly observed Russian sources blame Sobyanin and his administration for the inability of Moscow's air defenses to stop Ukrainian drone strikes.[25] Russian state news outlet *Kommersant* reported on September 28 that Stupin left Russia several months after the Russian Ministry of Justice declared Stupin a foreign agent in June 2023.[26] Stupin notably supported protesters who called for Sobyanin's resignation in April 2023 and protested the cutting down of a forest in Kosinsky Park, the logging of which the Russian opposition outlet *SOTA* reported supported the air defense production plant's construction effort.[27]

Kremlin newswire *TASS* reported on October 20 that Russian authorities confirmed Colonel General Viktor Afzalov in his previous acting role as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Aerospace (VKS) Forces.[28] Kremlin newswire *RIA Novosti* reported on August 23 that Putin formally dismissed Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin as commander of the Russian VKS and replaced him with Afzalov.[29]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Ukrainian forces have likely repelled another intensified Russian offensive effort towards Avdiivka in the past several days and inflicted further heavy personnel and equipment losses on Russian troops in the area.
- Russian forces are struggling to interdict Ukrainian efforts to supply and reinforce newly captured positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21.
- Russian forces may be diversifying the mix of missiles, guided bombs, and drones used in strikes on Ukrainian rear areas, likely in an attempt to find gaps in Ukrainian air defenses ahead of further strikes over the winter.
- Disgraced Moscow City Duma Deputy Yevgeny Stupin formally requested on October 20 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) investigate Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin for "divulging state secrets."
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in various sectors of the front.
- The Russian federal government is reportedly taking steps to rectify some discrepancies in the treatment of personnel in irregular and regular formations.



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 Ukranian 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 Information Operations and Narratives

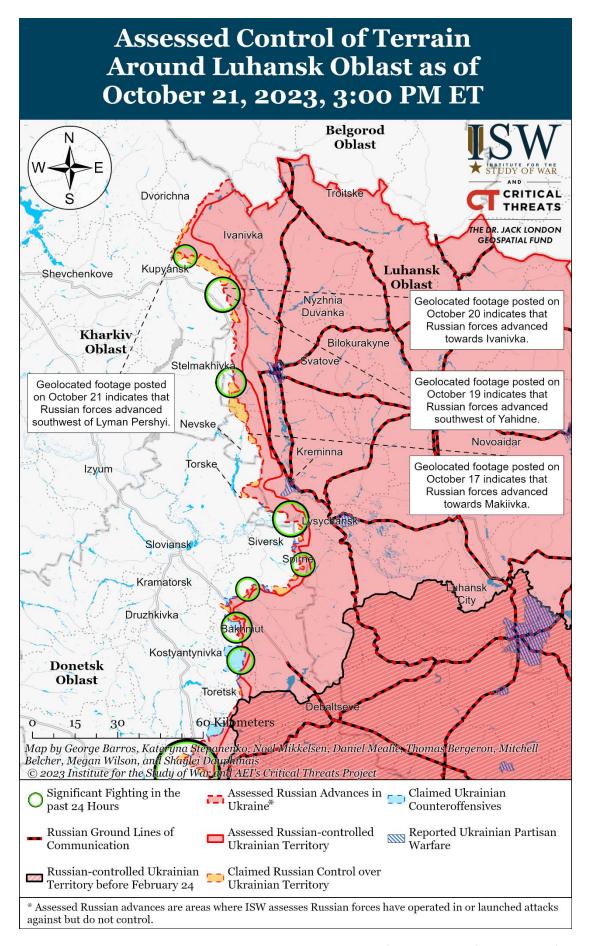
### <u>Russian Main Effort - Eastern Ukraine</u>

## <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 continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on October 21 and made recent confirmed advances in the Kupyansk area. Geolocated footage published on October 21 indicates that Russian forces advanced southwest of Lyman Pershyi (11km northeast of Kupyansk) in the direction of Kalynove (8km northeast of Kupyansk).[30] Additional geolocated footage published on October 17 and 20 indicates that Russian forces also recently advanced north of Ivanivka (21km southeast of Kupyansk).[31] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled more than 20 Russian assaults near Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) and Ivanivka; more than five Russian assaults near Nadiya (15km southwest of Svatove); and 10 Russian assaults near Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna), in the Serebryanske forest area (11km south of Kreminna), and near Spirne (24km south of Kreminna).[32] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces prevented Russian forces from advancing near Nevske (20km northwest of Kreminna).[33]

Russian forces reportedly continue to target Ukrainian crossings along the Oskil River near Kupyansk as of October 21. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces stuck two bridges across the Oskil River, allegedly disrupting the transfer of Ukrainian personnel and equipment to the east bank of the river.[34] Russian aviation heavily targeted bridges across the Oskil River near Kupyansk in mid-to-late September 2023.[35] The Russian command likely intends to interdict Ukrainian supply efforts across the river to augment localized Russian offensive operations in the area.

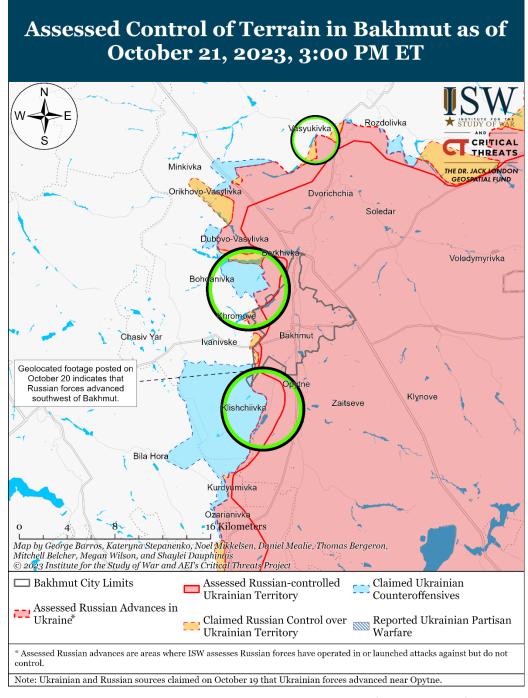
Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful counterattacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on October 21. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that elements of the Russian Western Grouping of Forces repelled five Ukrainian attacks near Synkivka and Serhiivka (13km west of Svatove) and that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces repelled ten Ukrainian assaults in the Lyman direction.[36] A Ukrainian military observer stated on October 21 that Ukrainian forces recently advanced two kilometers towards Orlyanka (22km east of Kupyansk), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this reported Ukrainian advance.[37]



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

Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut on October 21 but did not make any claimed or confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Vasyukivka (11km north of Bakhmut), Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut) Khromove (1km west of Bakhmut), and Klishchiivka (5km southwest of Bakhmut).[38] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage reportedly showing signalmen of the 98th Airborne (VDV) Division operating near Bakhmut.[39] Ukrainian military observer Konstantyn Mashovets reported that Russian forces are concentrating their main efforts near Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut) and Zelenopillya (12km southwest of Bakhmut) and trying to equip a defense line along the To5013 road on the Opytne-Zaitseve-Odradivka-Mykolaivka Druha line.[40]

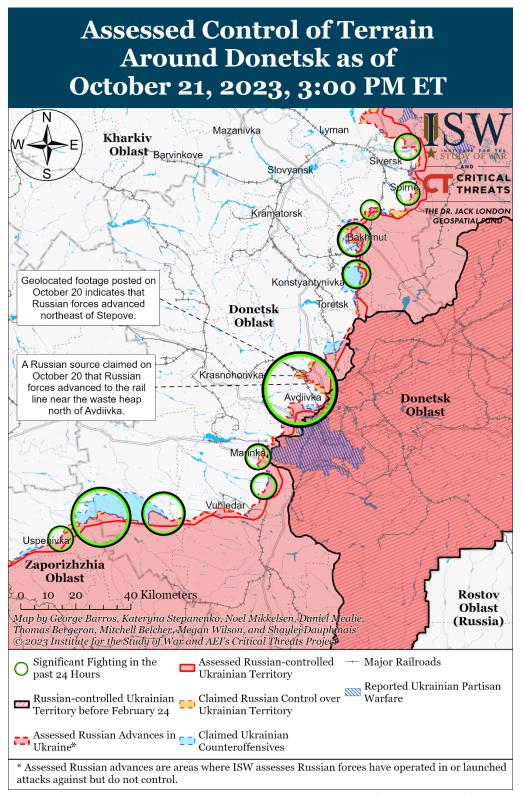
Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut on October 21 but did not make any claimed or confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian troops continued offensive actions south of Bakhmut.[41]



See topline text for updates on the Avdiivka area.

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City on October 21 but did not make any claimed or confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted twenty unsuccessful attacks near Krasnohorivka, Marinka, and Pobieda (all on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City), and near Novomykhailivka (25km southwest of Donetsk City).[42] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continued attacks near Marinka.[43]

Ukrainian forces did not conduct any claimed or confirmed ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City on October 21.

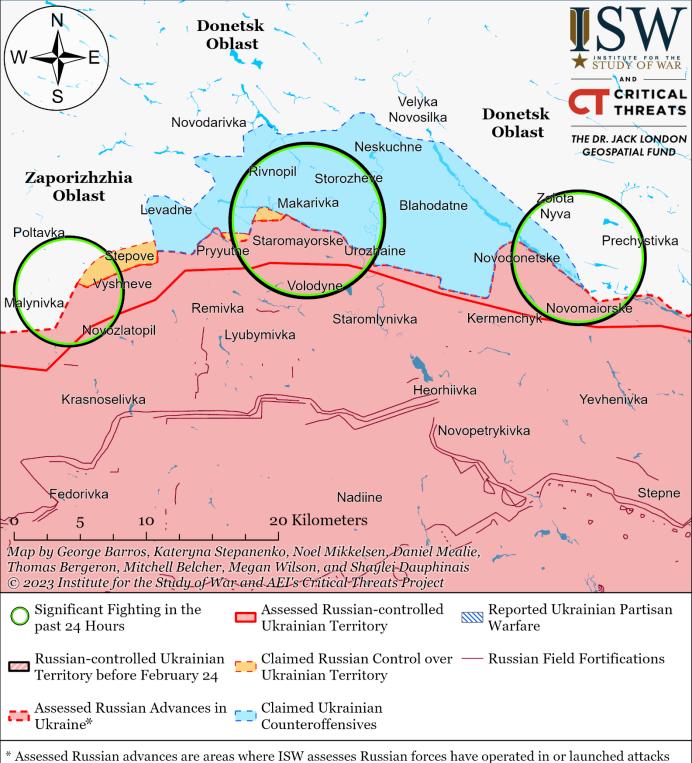


### <u>Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporzhia Oblast border area on October 21. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the direction of Pryyutne (14km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[44] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near heights between Pryyutne and Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).[45]

Russian forces conducted ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on October 21 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Prechystivka (17km southeast of Velyka Novosilka), Zolota Nyva (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka), Staromayorske, Rivnopil (10km southwest of Velyka Novosilka), Pryyutne, and Poltavka (28km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[46] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are slowly advancing north of Pryyutne, and another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced several hundred meters north of Pryyutne.[47] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults near Staromayorske and Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) on October 20.[48]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of October 21, 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.

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[49] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that Ukrainian forces pushed Russian forces from Robotyne's western outskirts (10km south of Orikhiv).[50] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Novofedorivka (21km southeast of Orikhiv) and are 6 kilometers away from the settlement.[51] Mashovets also stated that elements of the Russian 247th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) retreated several hundred meters towards Novofedorivka.[52] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled three Ukrainian attacks near Verbove (10km east of Robotyne).[53] Another prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted mechanized assaults along the Robotyne-Novoprokopivka line (up to 2km south of Robotyne) with up to 10 tanks and armored combat vehicles.[54]

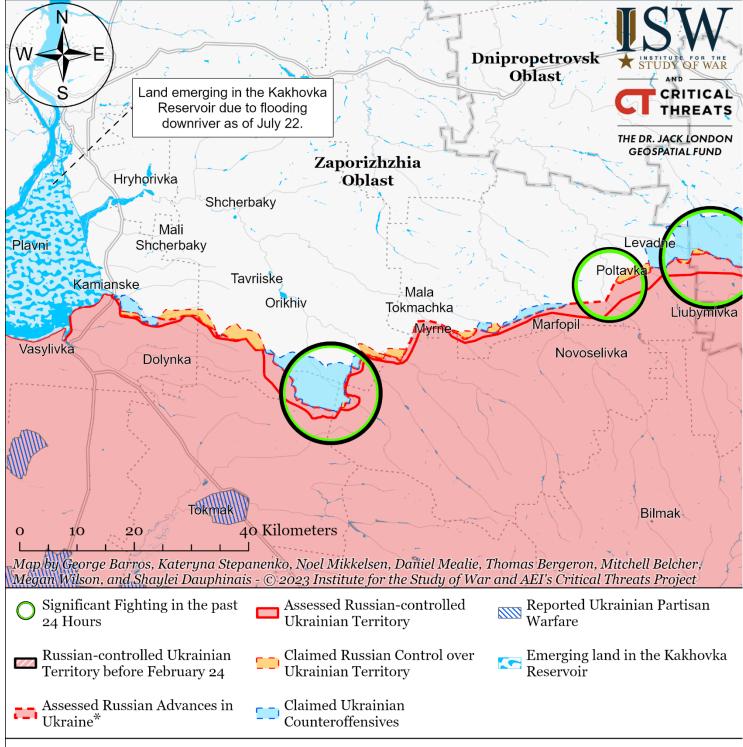
Russian forces conducted ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast on October 21 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Robotyne.[55] Mashovets stated on October 21 that Russian forces counterattacked west of Verbove and advanced 200 meters in a nearby forest area.[56] Mashovets added that elements of the Russian 108th VDV Regiment (7th VDV Division) attacked near Novopokrovka (16km southeast of Orikhiv) towards Mala Tokmachka (9km southeast of Orikhiv). Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting continues along the Robotyne-Kopani line (up to 5km northwest of Robotyne).[57] Mashovets suggested that the Russian 104th VDV Regiment (76th VDV Division) may be too degraded to prevent Ukrainian advances towards Novoprokopivka.[58]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of October 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



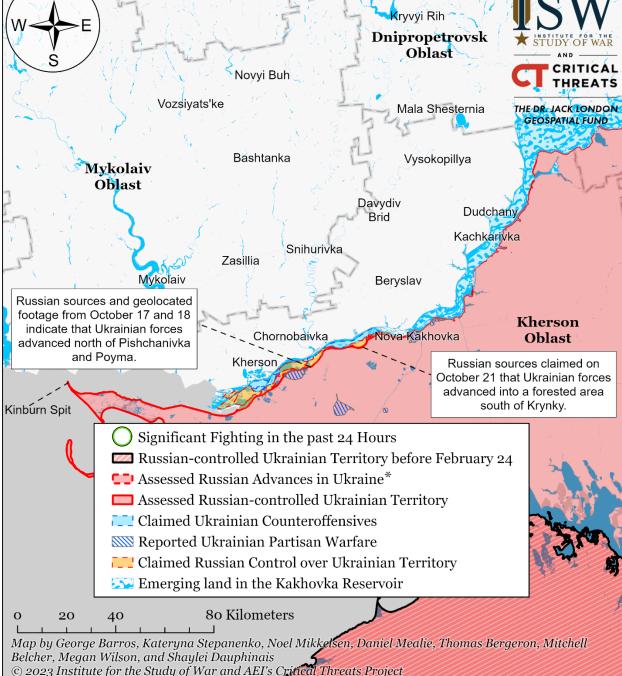
out do not control.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of October 21, 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.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of October 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET Rryvyi Rih Dnipropetrovsk Oblast



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

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

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

The Russian federal government is reportedly taking steps to rectify discrepancies in the treatment of personnel in irregular and regular formations. The Russian Vostok Battalion (currently operating in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area) claimed on October 21 that the Russian Presidential Administration and the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) regional branch of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) worked to clear a backlog of 2,000 requests to award DNR fighters that the DNR MVD had accumulated prior to Russia's illegal annexation of the territory.[59] The Vostok Battalion thanked Russian propagandist and *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan for helping bring the issue to the attention of the Russian government. Russia has notably struggled to integrate existing irregular formations into regular formations and provide the irregular formations with benefits provided by Russian law.[60]

Rosgvardia continues to subsume materiel that previously belonged to the Wagner Group. A Russian milblogger posted imagery and claimed on October 20 that Rosgvardia's 116th Operational Brigade has received a Russian T-80BV tank that Wagner reportedly used in the June 2023 rebellion.[61]

<u>Activities in Russian-occupied areas</u> (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian occupation authorities continue to integrate occupied areas into Russian political infrastructure. Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed on October 21 that over 36,000 residents of occupied Luhansk Oblast have joined the Luhansk Oblast branch of the United Russia Party since its creation a year ago.[62] Pasechnik claimed that the United Russia Party is currently implementing 21 projects and has hosted over 30,000 events aimed at integrating occupied Luhansk Oblast into the Russian legal, social, and political structures.[63]

### **Russian Information Operations and Narratives**

A lawmaker who is a prominent member of the Russian veterans' community claimed on October 20 that Russians who do not support Russian President Vladimir Putin should be "isolated" or "at least somehow destroyed."[64] Russian State Duma Deputy and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev claimed that at least 80 percent of Russians trust Putin, which Gurulev claimed indicates Russian unity, and called those who do not trust or support Putin "rot."[65] Prominent Russian left-wing activist Sergei Uldatsov criticized Gurulev for calling for mass reprisals against those who disagree with Putin and stated that he will appeal to the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to investigate Gurulev for extremism.[66]

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Nothing significant to report.

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/BUAR1100mbr/139; https://x.com/klinger66/status/1715708408706257156?s=20; https://twitter.com/Girkin/Status/1715628259872797007

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- [5] https://rus.err dot ee/1609140164/jestonskaja-voennaja-razvedka-rossija-i-ukraina-prodolzhat-popytki-prorvat-oboronu-drug-druga
- [6] https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-20-2023
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- [8] https://t.me/bbcrussian/54685
- [9]  $https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/4156; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/101558; https://t.me/romanov_92/41955; https://t.me/osetin20/7247; https://t.me/osetin20/7248; https://t.me/rybar/53478; https://t.me/rybar/53455; https://t.me/dva_majors/27752; https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/51458$
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- [15] https://isw.pub/UkrWar101923; https://isw.pub/UkrWar102023; https://isw.pub/UkrWar101823
- [16] https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidozWQezWiHZj4Ax5XQrcKtXjWwC1PTrMXvkJcu9okP9dR6 D3Cr9t3vS4dr8Qr6CCgcl
- [17] https://t.me/wargonzo/15928
- [18] https://t.me/dva\_majors/27758; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/55299; https://t.me/boris\_rozhin/101585; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/55336
- [19] https://t.me/SJTF\_Odes/1722;
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- [20] https://t.me/SJTF\_Odes/1722;
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[23] https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-8-2023

[24] https://t.me/evstupin/4048; https://t.me/sotaproject/68211

[25] https://isw.pub/UkrWaro91223; https://isw.pub/UkrWaro80223; https://isw.pub/UkrWaro80123;

[26] https://www.kommersant.dot.ru/doc/6239230

[27] https://t.me/sotaproject/68084; https://t.me/sotaproject/56382

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[29] https://isw.pub/UkrWaro82323

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