Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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

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

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30 pm ET on August 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 1 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31 and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front. The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions and achieved unspecified success in the direction of Novodanylivka-Novoprokopivka (5km to 13km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhia Oblast.¹ Malyar also stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the Bakhmut direction.² Ukrainian Chief of the Main Directorate of Missile Forces and Artillery and Unmanned Systems of the General Staff Brigadier General Serhiy Baranov stated that Ukrainian forces have reached parity in counterbattery capabilities with Russian forces.³ Baranov stated that NATO-provided artillery systems with ranges of 30km to 40km allow Ukrainian forces to destroy Russian artillery systems and force Russian forces to move their artillery further from the frontline.⁴ Ukrainian officials previously made statements in late July indicating that Ukraine's interdiction campaign is successfully degrading Russian counterbattery capabilities.⁵ Russian sources have repeatedly expressed concerns since mid-July over the lack of Russian counterbattery artillery capabilities, particularly in southern Ukraine.⁶

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted Ukraine's domestic production of long-range missiles on August 31, likely as part of a coordinated Ukrainian campaign promoting increased Ukrainian strike capabilities against Russian deep rear areas. Zelensky stated that a Ukrainian-produced long-range weapon successfully hit a target 700 kilometers away, but did not provide further details about the strike or the weapon. Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov previously stated on August 26 that a new but unspecified Ukrainian-made missile struck a Russian S-400 air defense system in Crimea on August 23, and Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated on August 24 that Ukrainian forces have the ability to strike any part of occupied Crimea.

Russian authorities arrested a notable fringe ultranationalist Russian milblogger on accusations of discrediting the Russian military, likely as part of centralized efforts to silence some critical milblogger voices without prompting a general backlash. Russian authorities arrested Andrei Kurshin, who reportedly runs the Telegram channel "Moscow Calling," on August 31 but did not specify what content Kurshin posted that prompted the charges. The "Moscow Calling" channel routinely criticizes Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and notably commonly attacks many aspects of

Russia's military conduct of the war in Ukraine while supporting the ultranationalist goals underpinning the war itself. The wider Russian ultranationalist information space welcomed Kurshin's arrest and noted that he routinely discredited the Russian military by mocking Russian military deaths and writing "vile" thoughts about the Russian war effort.¹⁰ "Moscow Calling" also regularly supports imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin, likely generating further Kremlin opposition towards Kurshin.¹¹ Elements of the wider Russian ultranationalist community revealed Kurshin's previously anonymous identity in April after he joked about the assassination of Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky), and at the time milbloggers called on Russian authorities to punish Kurshin for fostering anti-government attitudes online.¹² Kurshin and Girkin's arrests suggest that the Kremlin may be arresting prominent ultranationalist voices that the wider community largely reviles to avoid backlash as the Kremlin intensifies its effort to increase its long-term control over the Russian information space. ¹³ Kurshin's arrest does not necessarily portend wider repression of more mainstream Russian milbloggers. Milblogger reactions, including those who have been outright critical of the Russian military leadership, additionally suggest that the milblogger community has been and is willing to establish unofficial guidelines for what is permissible criticism of the war and the Russian leadership. The Kremlin likely benefits from and encourages this self-policing, to a certain degree, among milbloggers - tolerating some criticism while cultivating key milbloggers and seeking to silence particularly critical voices.

Russian military authorities allegedly ordered the detention of three Russian milbloggers who have recently criticized the Russian MoD – a move that sparked a backlash in only a small corner of the Russian information space. Russian milbloggers claimed that the commander of the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) and possibly a high-level Russian military official ordered Russian Military Counterintelligence to detain the three Russian milbloggers who have recently been critical of the Russian MoD's handling of issues within the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. Reactions to the detention orders were largely isolated to the small community that has been perpetuating discussions about the 205th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade since August 25, indicating that the Russian MoD is likely choosing targets whose punishment will not have significant repercussions in the Russian information space and this discussion is unlikely to last in the wider milblogger space. 15

Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin and his associates conducted likely futile political maneuvers intended to coalesce into a coherent and meaningful political opposition group. Girkin announced on August 31 that he intends to run for president in the 2024 Russian presidential elections, but primarily used the announcement to reiterate his longstanding critiques of Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁶ Girkin's theoretical "campaign" will have little to no impact and should not be construed as a direct political threat to the Kremlin. Girkin criticized Putin for being an ineffective military leader, failing to remove inept senior officials, and for prioritizing rich billionaires and longtime friends over the needs of Russia - all of which are longstanding rhetorical points from Girkin.¹⁷ Girkin's announcement is not a serious presidential bid (and the Kremlin will not allow it to be one) but rather an attempt to bring attention to Girkin's imprisonment, his longtime criticisms of Putin, and his attempts to form a political movement. Kirill Fedorov, member of the Girkin-run Angry Patriots Club, stated that Girkin's presidential announcement is a surprise and that the Angry Patriots Club had previously decided against Girkin or other members participating in the coming electoral cycle after Girkin's arrest, and did not discuss the possibility of Girkin running for president during a recent meeting.18 The Russian Movement in Support of Strelkov (Igor Girkin) announced on August 30 that it formed the "Russian Strelkov Movement" and unanimously elected Girkin as its head, one of many recent political announcements likely aimed at preventing the movement from fracturing without Girkin's leadership and voice to hold the movement together. 19 Girkin's August 31 announcement prompted limited reactions in the Russian ultranationalist information space that largely centered around confusion, sarcastic support, and criticism of the alleged presidential bid due to Girkin's and Russia's current political situations.20 Prior announcements about the formation of political movements from Girkin's associates have not resulted in any significant reaction, and the Angry Patriots Club is likely desperate to maintain relevance and cohesion with Girkin imprisoned.²¹

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31 and reportedly advanced in both sectors of the front.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted Ukraine's domestic production of long-range missiles on August 31, likely as part of a coordinated Ukrainian campaign promoting increased Ukrainian strike capabilities against Russian deep rear areas.
- Russian authorities arrested a notable fringe ultranationalist Russian milblogger on accusations of discrediting the Russian military, likely as part of centralized efforts to silence some critical milblogger voices without prompting a general backlash.
- Russian military authorities allegedly ordered the detention of three Russian milbloggers who have recently criticized the Russian MoD a move that sparked a backlash in only a small corner of the Russian information space.
- Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist Igor Girkin and his associates conducted likely futile political maneuvers intended to coalesce into a coherent and meaningful political opposition group.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line and unsuccessfully counterattacked in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russify Ukrainian youth.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas

Russian Main Effort - Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on August 31 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Novoyehorivka (16km southwest of Svatove) and Bilohorivka (13km south of Kreminna).²² A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces with air and artillery support conducted offensive operations near Novoyehorivka and Bilohorivka, but did not specify an outcome.²³ Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Ilya Yevlash stated that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked Ukrainian positions near the Serebryanske forest area (10km southwest of Kreminna).²⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are intensifying offensive operations near Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk) and in the direction of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and Kyslivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk).²⁵ A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russian forces advanced near Synkivka and Petropavlivka, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.²⁶

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on August 31 but did not advance. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults in the Kupyansk direction and near Serhiivka (12km southwest of Svatove), Novoyehorivka, Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna), Yampolivka (17km west of Kreminna), and the Serebryanske forest area.²⁷

<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)

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut on August 31 and reportedly advanced. The Ukrainian General Staff and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continue to conduct offensive operations south of Bakhmut and that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the Bakhmut direction.²⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Mayorske (17km south of Bakhmut).²⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked in Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and are counterattacking on the Klishchiivka-Kurdyumivka line (up to 13km southwest of Bakhmut).³⁰ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attack Russian positions near Klishchiivka daily.³¹

Russian forces conducted offensive operations and reportedly advanced on August 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Klishchiivka and Kurdyumivka.³² Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are continuing to improve their positions near Klishchiivka and captured several heights near the settlement.³³ A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces back several kilometers and regained lost positions near Klishchiivka, but ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of this claim.³⁴ A Russian advance of this scale would likely generate wide coverage from Russian milbloggers, which ISW has not observed. Russian sources recently claimed similarly exaggerated Russian advances without visual evidence along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line to portray Ukrainian counteroffensives as a failure, and some Russian sources may be trying to replicate similar claims in the Bakhmut direction.³⁵ Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Klishchiivka, Kurdyumivka, Ozaryanivka (14km south of Bakhmut), and Bohdanivka.³⁶

The Russian MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Avdiivka on August 31.³⁷

Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances on August 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Marinka (directly west of Donetsk City) and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City). A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Marinka. The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces attacked near Novomykhailivka, but did not specify an outcome.

<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 continued offensive operations along the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts on August 31 but did not advance. Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Oleg Chekhov claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian assault near Pryyutne (15km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).⁴¹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) and Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).⁴²

Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on August 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Staromayorske.⁴³

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and reportedly advanced on August 31. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and achieved unspecified success in the direction of Novodanylivka-Novoprokopivka (5km to 13km south of Orikhiv).⁴⁴ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that Russian forces repelled five Ukrainian assaults near Verbove (18km southwest of Orikhiv).45 Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces, including elements of the 7th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division, repelled two Ukrainian assault groups that attempted to break through Russian defenses to the northwestern outskirts of Verbove.⁴⁶ Several Russian sources described these Ukrainian assaults as reconnaissance-in-force operations.⁴⁷ Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces have advanced closer to the western outskirts of Verbove but still have not penetrated the series of prepared Russian defensive positions immediately west of the settlement.⁴⁸ Other milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced in an unspecified forest area near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) but maintained that Russian forces still hold positions in the southern part of the settlement.⁴⁹ Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces bypassed Robotyne and attacked in the direction of Novoprokopivka.⁵⁰ Russian milbloggers claimed that "rested units" and VDV elements have reinforced Russian defenses in the area, likely referring to the recent arrival of elements of the 76th VDV Division from the Kreminna area in Luhansk Oblast.⁵¹ A Russian milblogger claimed that the current composition of the Russian multi-echeloned defensive layer does not allow Russian forces to conduct counterattacks against the flanks of Ukrainian advances as quickly as they could when defending further northwest of their current positions.⁵²

Russian forces conducted limited unsuccessful counterattacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast on August 31. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Verbove.⁵³

Russian milbloggers claimed on August 31 that Russian forces continue attempts to establish positions on islands in the Dnipro River delta while Ukrainian forces continue limited activity in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are attempting to capture a foothold on Nestryha island southwest of Kherson City and may have succeeded in doing so.⁵⁴ The milblogger claimed that Russian forces maintain control over Bilohrudyi and Mali Bilohrudyi islands (up to 7km southwest of Kherson City).⁵⁵ Russian

milbloggers also claimed that small Ukrainian groups continue to operate on the left bank near the Antonivsky bridge and are continuing efforts to gain a foothold northeast of Pidstepne (17km east of Kherson City).⁵⁶

The Russian MoD claimed that Russian air defenses intercepted a Ukrainian missile targeting Russian rear positions in occupied Crimea on the evening of August 30.57 Russian milbloggers claimed instead that Russian forces intercepted a Ukrainian drone near Feodosia (98km from Simferopol).58 Geolocated footage published on August 30 shows an explosion near a substation in the vicinity of Feodosia.59

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

The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) is attempting to mitigate severe personnel shortages. Russian MVD Spokesperson Irina Volk promoted an August 4 decree that raises maximum age limits and other requirements on August 31 likely to encourage recruitment.⁶⁰ The decree increases the maximum age limit for those seeking to enter the MVD from 35-40 years to 50-55 years depending on the position, abolishes a requirement to obtain a personal guarantee to enter service, abolishes probationary periods for new employees with prior military or special service, and allows those declared medically unfit for service to continue to serve in a modified capacity.⁶¹ The Russian MVD has previously reported on efforts to recruit more personnel amid additional reporting that employees are leaving the MVD due to corruption, poor payment, and acting as gendarmerie (military forces functioning as civilian law enforcement) likely in occupied Ukraine.⁶²

The Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) is reportedly forming a new formation to operate in Ukraine. A Russian milblogger posted a recruitment advertisement on August 31 calling for volunteers for a new unit "as part of the 116th ODON," which will reportedly have heavy military equipment and operate in Ukraine. ⁶³ While the post is unclear, it likely refers to a new element intended to deploy to Ukraine subordinated to the existing "Dzherzhinsky" ODON (Separate Operational Division), which traditionally acts as the key Rosgvardia internal security force in Moscow and protects important state facilities in wartime. The ODON does not have the numerical designation "116th," and this number most likely refers to a new battalion to be attached to this unit. However, the advertisement lists the military unit number (войсковая часть) of the recruiting unit as 3641, likely that of Rosgvardia's 21st Separate Operational Brigade. The exact structure and composition of the intended unit is unclear. The post advertises a lump-sum payment of 195,000 rubles (\$2,039), monthly salaries of 40-50,000 rubles (\$418-522), and payments of 200,000 rubles (\$2,091) for deployment.

Wagner Group-affiliated sources continue efforts to keep Wagner prominent in the information space and portray Wagner as maintaining its ability to conduct international operations. A Wagner-affiliated milblogger posted footage on August 31 claiming to show Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in Africa in late August 2023 before his death on August 23.65 Prigozhin ironically dismissed speculation about Wagner operations in the video and reassured that everything would be fine.66

<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 forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russify Ukrainian youth. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration amplified a claim on August 31 that 18 Ukrainian children from occupied Kherson Oblast left for Novgorod Oblast, Russia under a children's summer camp scheme. Russian Presidential Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova reported that Russian authorities are

opening youth centers in occupied Donbas as part of the "Teenagers of Russia" program, likely to support efforts to promote Russian identity and values among Ukrainian youth.⁶⁸

Ukrainian partisans reportedly conducted an arson campaign in occupied Mariupol. Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on August 31 that Mariupol partisans destroyed four Russian military vehicles as part of a successful arson campaign against Russian military assets.⁶⁹

<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)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko dismissed Western concerns about Wagner's presence in Belarus during a Belarusian Security Council meeting on August 31. Lukashenko claimed that Poland and the Baltic states accused Belarus of "mythical aggressive intentions" that have never and could never exist.⁷⁰ Lukashenko attempted to justify the Wagner Group's presence in Belarus by erroneously drawing parallels with foreign servicemen in Poland and the Baltic states.⁷¹

Belarusian forces will reportedly train in Russia over the next month. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on August 31 that Union State instructors will train servicemen from the Belarusian 120th Separate Guards Mechanized Brigade at a combat training center in Russia over the next month.⁷²

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus as part of ongoing Kremlin efforts to increase their control over Belarus and other Russian actions in Belarus.

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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- 12 https://isw.pub/UkrWar040223
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45 https://t.me/mod_russia/29976; https://t.me/mod_russia/29981
46 https://t.me/rybar/51368;
47 https://t.me/rybar/51368; https://t.me/russkiv_opolchenec/37848
48 https://t.me/rybar/51368; https://t.me/wargonzo/14728
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51 https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/2742;https://t.me/dva majors/24654;
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70 https://president dot gov.by/be/events/zasedanie-soveta-bezopasnosti-1693481381#block-after-
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72 https://t.me/modmilby/31251
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