

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 17, 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.

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 maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Russia from March 20 to 22 likely to discuss sanctions evasion schemes and Chinese interest in mediating a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin stated that Putin and Xi plan to sign unspecified bilateral documents and discuss topical issues in Russia's and China's comprehensive partnership.¹ Chinese companies have reportedly sold rifles, drone parts, and equipment to Russian entities that could be used for military purposes, and Western intelligence agencies have stated that Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment to Russia.² Xi likely plans to discuss sanctions evasion schemes with Putin and Russian officials to support the sale and provision of Chinese equipment to Russia. ISW previously assessed that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Xi signed a package of 16 agreements on March 1 that may facilitate Russian sanctions evasion by channeling Chinese products through Belarus.³ Xi also likely aims to promote Chinese efforts aiming to position China as an impartial third-party mediator for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. China released a broad 12-point peace plan for the war in Ukraine on February 24, although it remains unclear what more definitive Chinese proposals for a negotiated settlement to the war would encompass. Xi may seek to parlay his success in mediating the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia into a larger effort to mediate in this war.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that Belarusian industry is supplying Russia with electronic components, potentially supporting previous ISW assessments that Belarus may assist Russia in evading Western sanctions. Lukashenko stated on March 17 that Belarus and Russia signed an agreement on establishing a joint Belarusian-Russian center for the development and production of photomasks (an intermediate good used in the production of integrated circuits), that the two states have developed a list of critically important electronic components, and that Belarusian industry has already begun shipping unspecified microelectronics to Russian enterprises.⁴ ISW previously assessed that Belarus might facilitate sanction evasion for Russia and that China might clandestinely transfer goods and/or equipment to Russia via Belarus.⁵ The US State Department sanctioned several additional Belarusian defense entities and tightened existing export controls to Belarus as of February 24, 2023, but these sanctions may not be comprehensive enough to prevent Belarus from sending Russia electronic components used in weapon systems and other dual use technologies.⁶ Lukashenko made this announcement at the Belarusian Planar Joint Stock Company technological enterprise, which the US does not appear to have sanctioned.⁷

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's rhetoric about Belgrade's refusal to sanction Russia is softening. Vucic refused to promise that Serbia will *not* sanction Russia, acknowledged that Belgrade's decision not to join European sanctions against Russia has brought Serbia "tough [economic] circumstances," and stated that he will evaluate "when we are in a deadlock and when our policy has to change" on March 17.⁸ Serbian Economy Minister Rade Basta called on the Serbian government to impose sanctions on Russia and stated that Serbia is paying a "high price" for not doing so on March 14.⁹ *Politico* previously reported that Vucic is seemingly reconsidering Serbia's close ties with Russia, spurred in part by ongoing Wagner Group recruitment and subversion efforts in Serbia and demonstrating the international economic and informational costs imposed on Putin by his invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰

The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on March 17 for alleged war crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.¹¹

Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that it did not submit a press request to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin concerning a rumored plot by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev against him. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* suggested that someone responsible for fabricating the request is actively engaged in fomenting conflict between different *siloviki* structures, which may support ISW's March 16 assessment that Prigozhin likely promoted the alleged plot to support informational campaigns against the Russian military establishment.¹² ISW initially assessed on March 16 that Prigozhin might have fabricated the alleged plot to support these informational campaigns, but ISW failed to observe that a Russian milblogger had posted rumors about the alleged plot on March 13.¹³ Prigozhin's press service was involved in a fabrication of some kind given the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* denial, but Prigozhin does not appear to have fabricated the rumor itself. Prigozhin's press service may have received a fabricated press request or may have fabricated the press request itself. Prigozhin chose to give prominence to the rumored plot whoever fabricated the press request. ISW continues to assess that Prigozhin promoted the rumored plot to identify Patrushev and the Russian Security Council as enemies of the Wagner Group, set conditions to blame Patrushev for Wagner's failures in Ukraine, and support ongoing informational campaigns against the traditional Russian military establishment.¹⁴

Key Takeaways

- **Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Russia from March 20 to 22 likely to discuss sanctions evasion schemes and Chinese interest in mediating a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine.**
- **Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that Belarusian industry is supplying Russia electronic components, potentially supporting previous ISW assessments that Belarus may assist Russia to evade Western sanctions.**
- **Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's rhetoric about Belgrade's refusal to sanction Russia is softening.**
- **The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights**

Maria Lvova-Belova on March 17 for alleged war crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

- **Russian outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that it did not submit a press request to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin concerning a rumored plot by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev against him.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks across the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian forces along the front line in southern Ukraine.**
- **The Kremlin continues to call up reservists throughout Russia.**
- **Russian authorities reportedly detained three Ukrainian partisans in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.**

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.

- 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 continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Hryanykivka (17km northeast of Svatove), Kreminna, Kuzmyne (3km southwest of Kreminna), Verkhokamianske (7km east of Siversk), and Spirne (11km southeast of Spirne).¹⁵ A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces drove Ukrainian forces near Hryanykivka across the Oskil River to the western (right) bank.¹⁶ Former Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) People’s Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that positional battles continue northwest of Kreminna near the Zhuravka gully and south of Kreminna near the Serebrianska forest area.¹⁷ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful assaults near Makiivka (22km northwest of Kreminna), Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna), Yampolivka (17km west of Kreminna), and Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna).¹⁸

Another Russian source claimed that Russian forces gained territory along this line and near Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna), however.¹⁹

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground attack near Chervonopopivka on an unspecified recent date and are accumulating forces for a future counteroffensive push.²⁰

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 offensive operations in and around Bakhmut on March 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut, within 11km northwest of Bakhmut near Orikhovo-Vasylivka and Hryhorivka, and within 6km southwest of Bakhmut near Ivanivske and Klishchiiivka.²¹ Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters attacked Ukrainian positions near Khromove (2km west of Bakhmut) and Bohdanivka (6km west of Bakhmut).²² Geolocated footage published on March 17 indicates that Russian forces secured marginal gains in northern Bakhmut.²³ Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin claimed that Russian forces advanced deeper into the AZOM complex in northern Bakhmut, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation that Russian forces are operating on the territory of the complex.²⁴ Ukrainian State Border Guards reported that Ukrainian forces engaged in combat with Wagner fighters in an industrial zone in Bakhmut but did not specify whether it was the AZOM complex.²⁵ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continued assaults in the southern parts of Bakhmut and that Wagner fighters reached the T0504 highway on Bakhmut’s southwestern outskirts and severed a Ukrainian supply line.²⁶ ISW has not observed visual confirmation that Wagner Group forces have interdicted the T0504 highway on the southern outskirts of Bakhmut as of this publication. Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut would still be able to access sections of the T0504 highway through country roads between Khromove and Ivanivske, even if the current Russian claims are true.

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City on March 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian offensive operations near Avdiivka, Kamianka (5km northeast of Avdiivka), and within 27km southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Marinka.²⁷ Russian milbloggers continued to claim that Russian forces have captured Krasnohorivka (8km north of Avdiivka), although ISW has still not observed visual confirmation of these claims.²⁸ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces started an offensive from Krasnohorivka in the direction of Stepove (8km northwest of Avdiivka) and are attempting to capture a section of a local railroad that leads into Avdiivka.²⁹ A prominent Russian milblogger assessed on March 16 that Russian forces are unlikely to advance quickly north of Avdiivka following the claimed capture of Krasnohorivka and that it is premature to talk about the possibility of Russian forces encircling Ukrainian forces in Avdiivka.³⁰ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults on the northern outskirts of Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka) and attempted to advance towards Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka).³¹

A Russian official claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks in an unspecified area of western Donetsk Oblast on March 17. Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces spokesperson Alexander Gordeev claimed that elements of unspecified Russian naval infantry brigades of the Pacific Fleet repelled elements of three Ukrainian brigades that attempted to counterattack and conduct reconnaissance-in-force operations in an unspecified area of western Donetsk Oblast.³² The 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades of the Pacific Fleet are currently operating in the

Vuhledar area, but ISW has not observed other Russian claims about Ukrainian counterattacks around Vuhledar in recent days.

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

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian forces along the front line in southern Ukraine. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Polohy and Orikhiv on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line.³³ Some Russian milbloggers claimed that the Ukrainian attacks were successful because Russian mines failed to halt Ukrainian vehicles.³⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group that attempted to cross the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.³⁵

Russian forces continue to struggle with logistics across the Kerch Strait Bridge despite claiming to have fully repaired the bridge's road spans. Russian news outlet Vesti Crimea posted footage of a large traffic jam on the bridge on March 17 and claimed that waiting time to pass through the checkpoint to Russia is over an hour.³⁶

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Vadym Skibitsky stated on March 17 that Russian forces created a defense grouping in occupied Crimea in preparation for a defensive operation.³⁷

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

The Kremlin continues conducting reservist call ups throughout Russia. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev held a meeting in a St. Petersburg military recruitment center on March 16 regarding contract service recruitment.³⁸ Penza Oblast military recruitment officer Andrey Surkov announced that the oblast is distributing summonses to call up men with previous military experience for annual 30-day training. Surkov claimed that men without prior military experience will not be called up for such training and noted that as of March 16 the military recruitment center had already achieved its target of 140 people for this call-up.³⁹ Mari El Republic also announced a call up of reservists for military training on March 16, citing an unpublished presidential decree from February 22.⁴⁰ Under Russian law the Russian President must approve any decree calling reservists for training and Putin had not publicly issued any such decree as of this publication.⁴¹ Russian opposition outlets also reported on instances of military recruitment centers wrongfully delivering summonses to deceased men.⁴²

Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on March 16 that over 40 Russian regions began distributing summonses to "clarify military registration documents."⁴³ The head of the "Agora" international human rights group, Pavel Chikov, stated that while these summonses do not indicate that the Kremlin is covertly conducting a second mobilization wave at this time, Russia may be planning an involuntary reservist call up in April.⁴⁴ Chikov noted that he observed indicators for an involuntary call up in appeals he is receiving from men of conscription age. Chikov reported that some students and men who had applied for alternative service are receiving subpoenas to appear in front of the conscription committee in May or June instead of during the designated spring conscription period beginning on April 1. Chikov noted that it is unclear why Russian military recruitment centers began distributing summonses in March to appear at the military recruitment centers and hypothesized that Russian officials may be planning

mobilization and conscription events or may be setting conditions to recruit contract servicemen. Chikov stated that Russia did not previously call up men to clarify their military registration information before the war. The Kremlin may be attempting to make full use of its training capacities by mobilizing some reservists alongside the spring conscripts, but this effort remains unlikely to generate effective combat forces for many months.

Kremlin officials and veterans' organizations are continuing to advocate for greater social benefits for servicemen and their families, likely in an effort to incentivize and promote volunteer recruitment. Secretary of the General Council of the United Russia Party Andrey Turchak announced that the Russian State Duma will soon adopt bills on providing legal assistance to veterans, removing administrative fees for veterans when filing for documents, reducing the period necessary to declare a serviceman legally dead to claim benefits, and granting veterans benefits to servicemen who fought in Donbas since 2014.⁴⁵ Turchak added that the presidential committee on addressing problems with the "special military operation" is considering new provisions on forgiving debts for parents of servicemen and allocating additional payments to conscripts training on the border with Ukraine. The Union of Belgorod Veterans also sent letters to all municipal assemblies in Belgorod Oblast proposing to issue additional benefits to war veterans such as abolishing land tax and allowing free travel on municipal and suburban public transportation.⁴⁶

The *BBC* and Russian independent outlet *Mediazona* confirmed the identities of at least 1,000 convicts who have died in Ukraine since January 2023. The investigation noted that 400 of the confirmed deaths occurred in the first two weeks of March 2023 largely around Bakhmut.⁴⁷ The *BBC* and *Mediazona* confirmed the names of 2,092 convicts killed in action since the war began.⁴⁸ US officials previously estimated that Wagner Group had suffered over 30,000 casualties over the course of the war, most of whom were likely convicts.⁴⁹

Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian forces reportedly detained three Ukrainian partisans in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast on March 17. Russian military spokesman Roman Kodryan claimed on March 17 that Russian forces seized two weapons caches and arrested three Ukrainian partisans accused of planning to conduct a "terrorist" attack in an unspecified location in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁰

Russian officials continue sending Ukrainian children to camps in Russia as part of Russia's larger assessed ethnic cleansing campaign against Ukraine. Zaporizhia Oblast Occupation Head Yevheny Balitsky claimed on March 17 that a group of 35 schoolchildren from the Kamianka-Dniprovska Raion, Zaporizhia Oblast, are taking part in a "Day After Tomorrow" camp in Moscow Oblast.⁵¹ Balitsky claimed that Zaporizhia Oblast occupation authorities and Russian Commissioner for Human Rights Maria Lvova-Belova had previously transported 155 children to Russia to participate in the "Day After Tomorrow" camp.⁵² ISW has previously reported that the "Day After Tomorrow" organization announced that it will begin conducting "rehabilitation" tours in Crimea with children who need special psychiatric assistance.⁵³ ISW continues to assess that Russian officials and occupation authorities are using the guise of psychiatric services and medical rehabilitation to bring children deeper into Russian-controlled territory within Ukraine or deport them to Russia.⁵⁴

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. Unspecified elements of the Grodno-based Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade deployed to an unspecified area for exercises on March 17.⁵⁵ Multiple Belarusian artillery units from at least four brigades participated in an unusually large joint exercise at the Osipovichsky Training Ground in Mogilev, Belarus, on March 17.⁵⁶ Artillery elements of the 19th Mechanized Brigade, 120th Mechanized Brigade, 231st Artillery Brigade, and 51st Artillery Brigade participated in this exercise.⁵⁷ The head of Belarus' Missile Troops and Artillery Forces, Colonel Ruslan Chekhov, presided over this exercise.⁵⁸ The Belarusian military typically does not conduct such large exercises frequently.

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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- ³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-1-2023>
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- <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/02/27/2023-03927/implementation-of-additional-sanctions-against-russia-and-belarus-under-the-export-administration>
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- ¹² <https://www.ng dot ru/news/762223.html>
- ¹³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-16-2023> ; <https://t.me/generalsvr/1464>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-16-2023>
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- ¹⁶ <https://t.me/rybar/44755>
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- ²⁰ https://t.me/russkiy_opolchenec/36084; <https://t.me/readovkanews/54874>; <https://t.me/rybar/44755>;
- <https://t.me/m0sc0wcalling/21347>; <https://t.me/epoddubny/15189>
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- <https://twitter.com/small10space/status/1636745133948321793>
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- ²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/DPSUkraine/posts/pfbid028t3zPvh4xR2RT3A7BeV8QpLDWkaEuaGjtt68QCtM1P1mt5q3CvRzFDHN2Uw4nLAI>
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⁴² https://t.me/horizontal_russia/18247; https://t.me/horizontal_russia/10715;
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