

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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May 15, 6:30 pm ET

Russian forces have likely abandoned the objective of completing a large-scale encirclement of Ukrainian units from Donetsk City to Izyum in favor of completing the seizure of Luhansk Oblast. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai said that the Russian military command likely understands that it will not be able to seize Donetsk Oblast but believes that it has the capacity to reach the administrative borders of Luhansk Oblast.¹ His observations are generally consistent with our analysis. The Russian military command will likely prioritize the Battle of Severodonetsk going forward, with some efforts dedicated to disrupting Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in eastern Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces are continuing a coordinated effort to seize Severodonetsk from the north and the south, which would result in a shallower encirclement of Ukrainian troops than originally expected. The failed Russian attempts to cross the Siverskyi Donets River near Kreminna may shift Russian encirclement operations further east, closer to Severodonetsk via Rubizhne, rather than conducting a wider encirclement along multiple axes. Russian forces have also likely been scaling down advances to Slovyansk from Izyum, possibly due to the slow pace of the offensive operation there.

Russian forces have likely run out of combat-ready reservists, forcing the Russian military command to amalgamate soldiers from many different elements, including private military companies and proxy militias, into ostensibly regular army units and naval infantry. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that approximately 2,500 Russian reservists are training in Belgorod, Voronezh, and Rostov oblasts to reinforce Russian offensive operations in Ukraine. That number of reservists is unlikely to generate enough force to replenish Russian units that have reportedly lost up to 20 percent of staffing in some areas—to say nothing of the battalion tactical group that was largely destroyed recently while attempting to cross the Siverskyi Donets River.² The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate stated that Russian forces are conducting covert mobilization and creating new units with newly mobilized personnel who likely have insufficient training to be effective and little motivation to fight.³ Russian forces also deployed new conscripts from occupied settlements in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to maintain an offensive around Kharkiv City, likely due to the lack of Russian reserves.⁴

Russian private military companies are reportedly forming combined units with airborne elements due to significant losses in manpower.⁵ Denaturing elite airborne units with mercenaries is shocking, and would be the clearest indication yet that Russia has exhausted its available combat-ready manpower reserves. The Russian 810th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade is reportedly receiving personnel from other Black Sea Fleet units, including navy ship crewmembers.⁶ Newly formed or regrouped units are unlikely to be effective in combat.

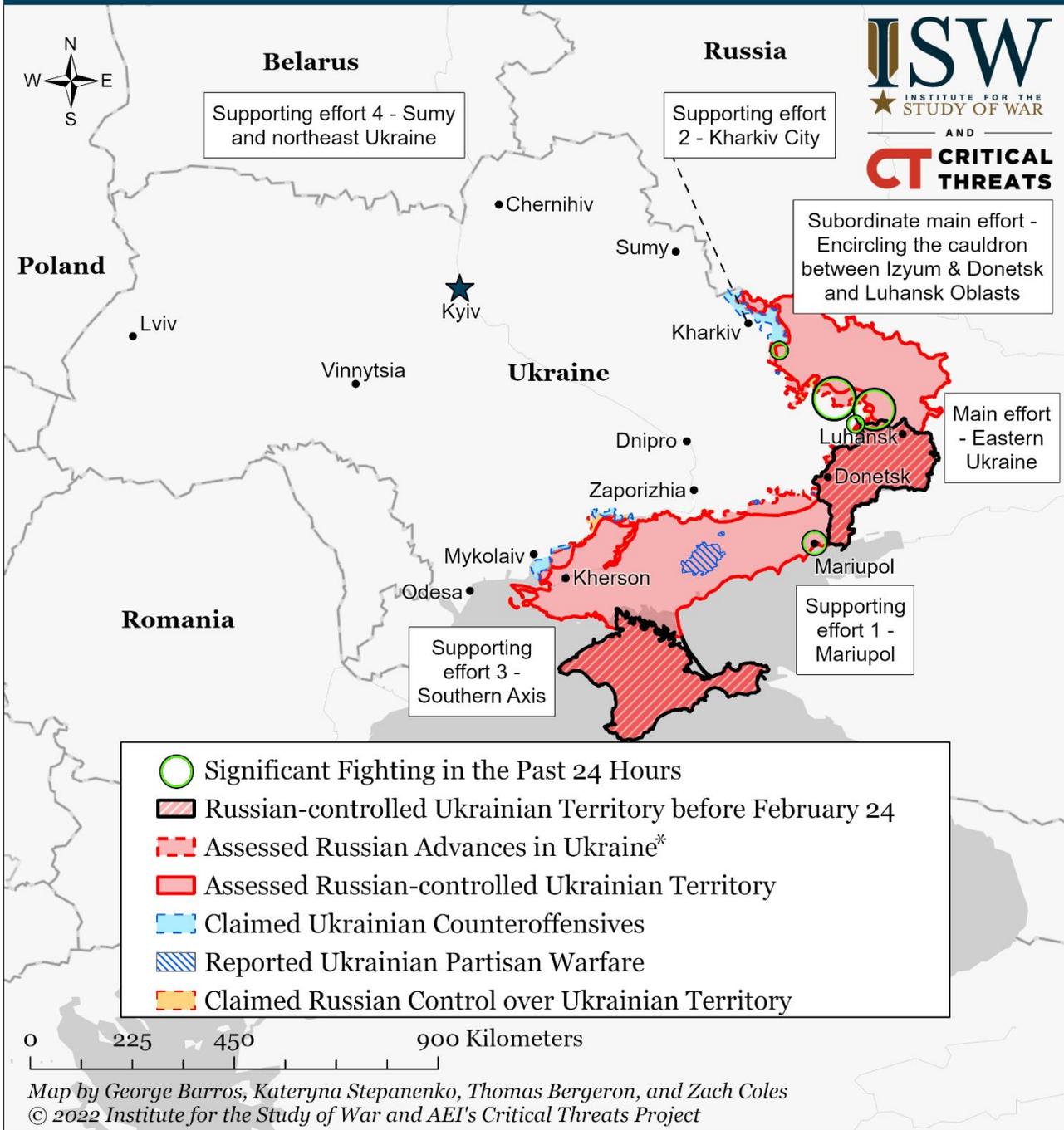
Russian forces are likely fortifying occupied settlements in southern Ukraine, indicating that the Russians are seeking to establish permanent control in the region. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces began digging trenches and building concrete revetments in unspecified areas of Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblast, near Melitopol, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces will likely prioritize winning the Battle of Severodonetsk over reaching the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast.**

- **Russian forces did not advance in the Slovyansk direction due to unsuccessful offensive operations in the Izyum area. Ukrainian aviation continues to operate north and east of Izyum.**
- **Russian forces continued to launch artillery, air, and naval assaults on the Azovstal Steel Plant, but Mariupol defenders maintained their positions.**
- **Russian forces are fortifying occupied settlements along the southern axis, indicative of Russian objectives for permanent control of the area.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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.

ISW has updated its assessment of the four primary efforts Russian forces are engaged in at this time. We have stopped coverage of supporting effort 4, "Sumy and northeastern Ukraine," because it is no longer an active effort.

- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and three supporting efforts);
- Subordinate main effort—Encirclement of Ukrainian troops in the cauldron between Izyum and Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts
- Supporting effort 1—Mariupol;
- Supporting effort 2—Kharkiv City;
- Supporting effort 3—Southern axis.

Main effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Encircle Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine and capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

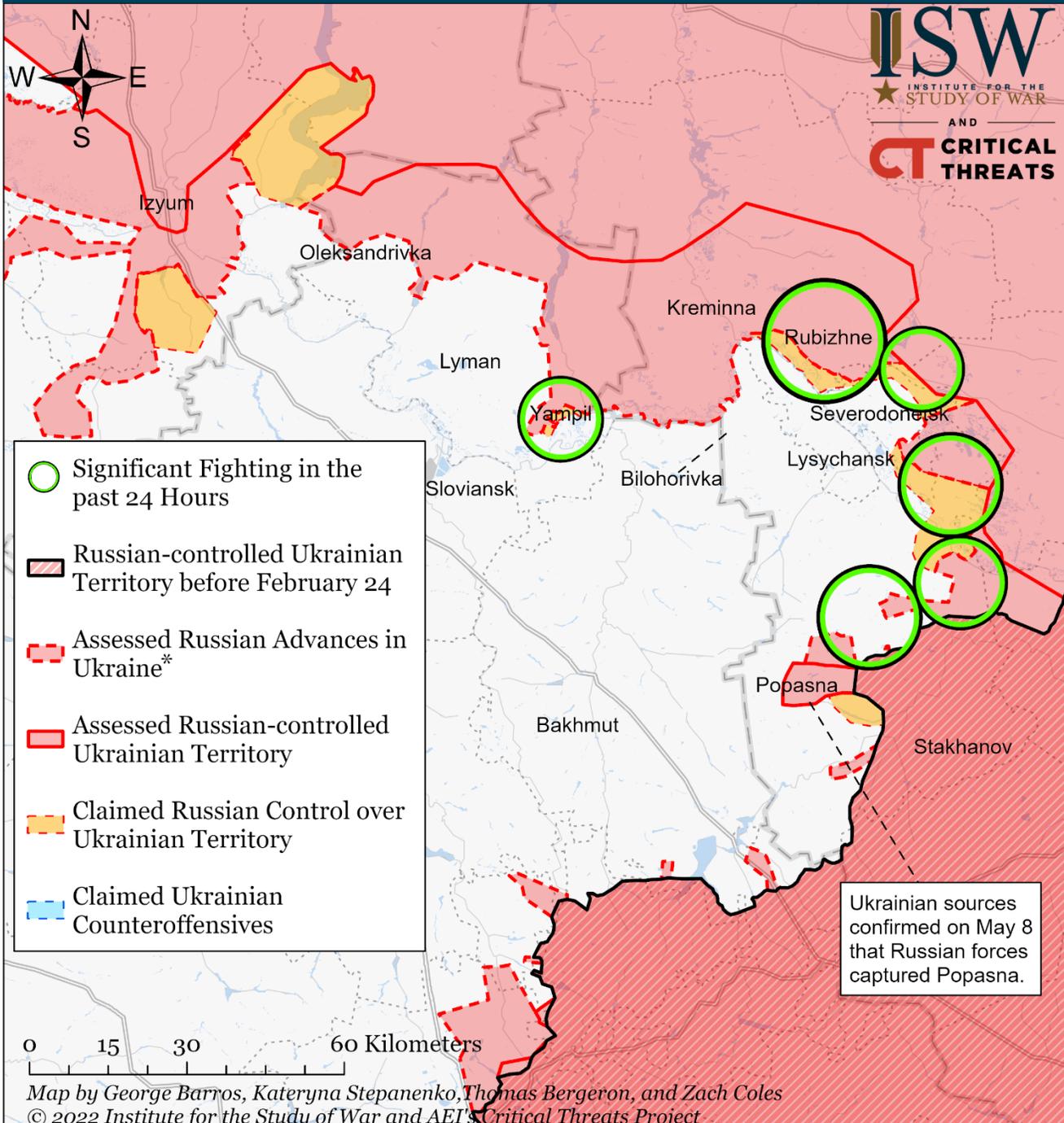
Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults in the direction of Slovyansk on May 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched an offensive on Dovhenke and Bogorodychne, approximately 18 and 25 km south of Izyum, respectively.⁸ Pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that Russian forces entered Dovhenke on May 14, but we assess that they were likely unable to secure the settlement due to heavy fighting.⁹

Ukrainian aviation continues to operate over Russian-controlled settlements near Izyum. Ukrainian artillery struck Russian armor and positions approximately 65 km north of Izyum with support from Ukrainian drones.¹⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces suffered losses and retreated from an occupied settlement east of Izyum, likely due to a Ukrainian airstrike.¹¹ Social media also observed Ukrainian fixed-wing aircraft striking the Russian salient in the Izyum area.¹²

Russian forces made minor territorial advances toward Severodonetsk and are likely committing to a shallower encirclement of Ukrainian troops in Luhansk Oblast in place of the more ambitious encirclements that might have given them control over all or most of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Russian forces engaged in battles in settlements approximately 4 km northeast and 5 km southwest of Severodonetsk on May 15.¹³ Haidai said that the Russian command likely scaled back its objective of reaching the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders to focus on Luhansk Oblast. Haidai said that the Russians are committing additional forces to their northern and southern drives toward Severodonetsk in Luhansk Oblast.¹⁴ He added that the Russian command also continued its efforts to seize the Lysychansk-Bahmut highway to surround Ukrainian units in Rubizhne, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk, all in Luhansk Oblast.¹⁵ Commentary on pro-Russian Telegram channels and observed ground offensives northeast of Popasna suggest that Russian forces will try to advance to Lysychansk via the T1303 highway.¹⁶ Failed Russian attempts to cross Siverskyi Donets River from Kreminna likely further undermined Russian large-scale encirclement efforts.¹⁷

Russian forces continue their efforts to reach Zaporizhia City and Slovyansk from Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful assault southwest of Donetsk City, likely to secure the N15 highway to Zaporizhia City.¹⁸ Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful attack on Avdiivka from the west.¹⁹ Pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that units of the Donetsk People’s Republic advanced in the eastern Avdiivka area.²⁰ Pro-Russian Telegram channels characterized Russian efforts in western Donetsk Oblast as “methodological and unhurried encirclement” of Ukrainian units in Donbas that will reunite with Russian forces in Izyum.²¹ Russian forces are unlikely to succeed in such large-scale encirclement operations due to the evidently limited availability of effective Russian combat power, stiff Ukrainian resistance, and Russian prioritization of the Severodonetsk offensive operation. Ukrainian forces destroyed the dam at the Mironovskyi reservoir, 5 km north of Svitlodarsk, on May 14 to cause flooding that will likely slow down Russian advances to the north.²²

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

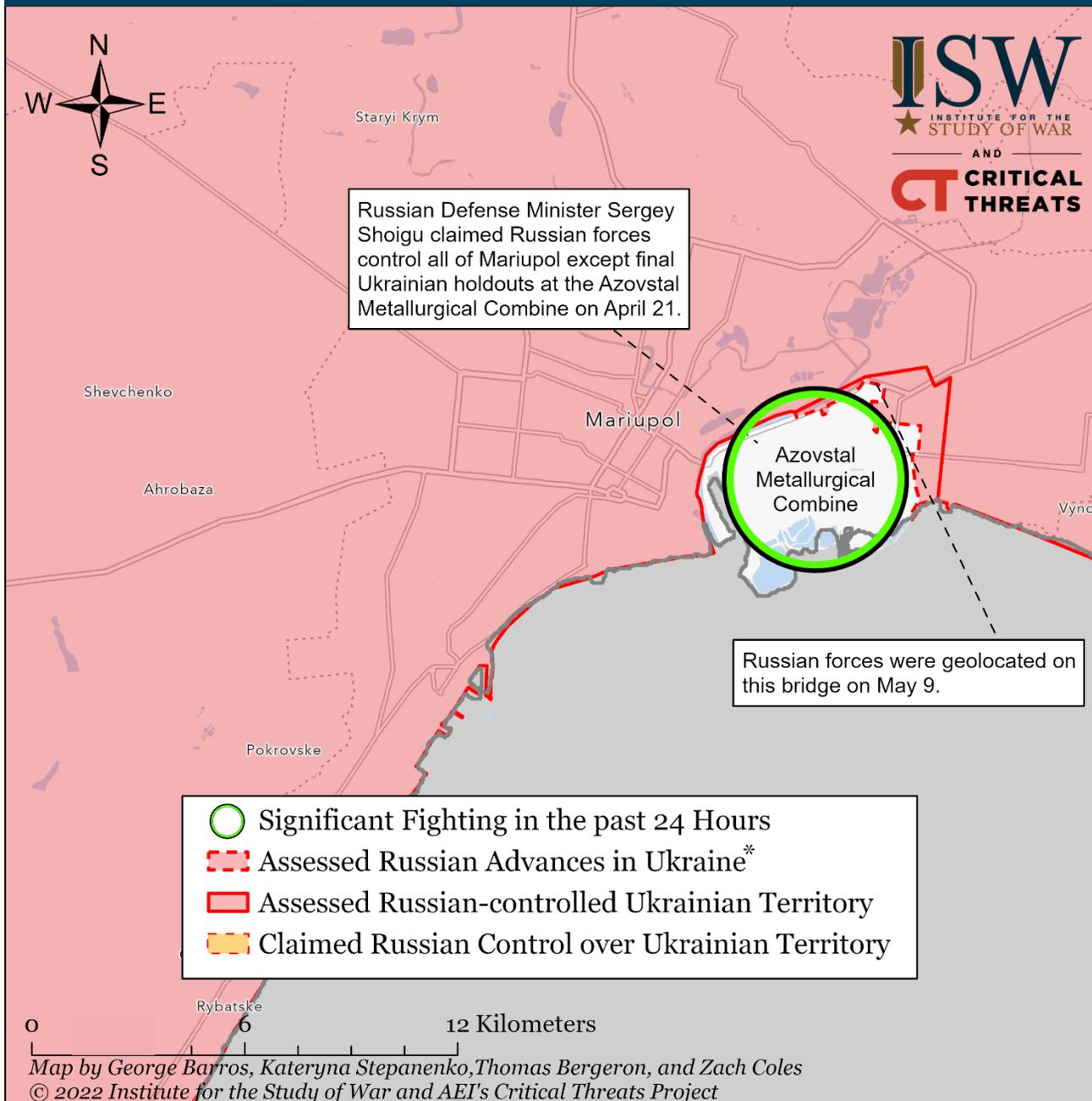
Note: We have expanded Russian assessed advances to Rubizhne and Voevodivka based on Ukrainian local administration reports that Russian forces seized the settlements on May 12.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol (Russian objective: Capture Mariupol and reduce the Ukrainian defenders)

Russian forces conducted artillery, air, and naval strikes on the remaining Ukrainian defenders in the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 15.²³ Ukrainian officials said that Russian forces fired incendiary munitions with thermite layers at Azovstal on May 14.²⁴ Families of the Mariupol defenders said that Ukrainian servicemen barely leave shelter at Azovstal and then only to procure food and water.²⁵

Mariupol Mayor Advisor Petro Andryushenko reported that a column of over 500 vehicles evacuated from Mariupol to Zaporizhia City on May 15.²⁶ Andryushenko added that Russian forces did not fix access to water or electricity for Mariupol residents and focused on strengthening occupation authority in the city.²⁷

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Mariupol as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



The Kremlin declared victory in Mariupol on April 21 after capturing the city besides Ukrainian holdouts in the encircled Azovstal Metallurgical Combine. Russian forces reportedly conducted an assault on the remaining Ukrainian defenders at Azovstal on May 4. ISW recoded Russian claimed control over the northwestern outskirts of Azovstal to Russian assessed advance based on geolocated videos of Russian forces operating in the area on May 9.

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Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City (Russian objective: Withdraw forces to the north and defend ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum)

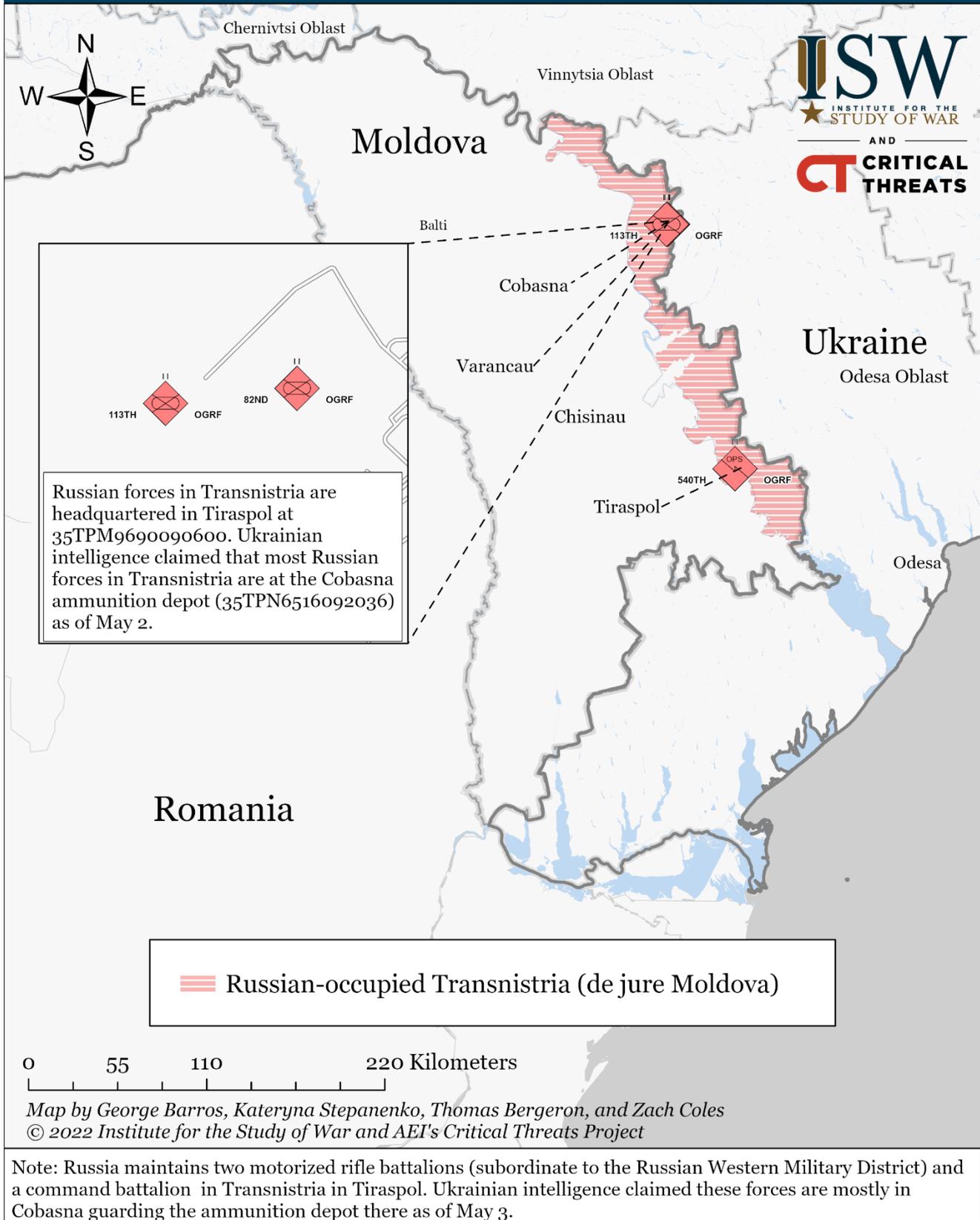
The Ukrainian counteroffensive continued to push Russian forces from northeastern Kharkiv City toward the Russian state border on May 15.²⁸ Kharkiv Oblast Administration Head Oleg Synegebov reported that Russian forces fired on Ukrainian positions northeast of Kharkiv, likely in an attempt to defend Russian ground lines of communications in Vovchansk, approximately 60 km from Kharkiv City.²⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff noted that the Russian command had committed newly mobilized units from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts to the Kharkiv City axis—further evidence of the inadequacy of Russia’s available reserves.³⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Ukrainian forces recaptured Rubizhne (Kharkiv), Pytomnyk, and Bairak on May 10. We extended Ukrainian counteroffensives to Petrivka and Ternova in Kharkiv Oblast given that the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces shelled these towns on May 13, confirming reports that Ukrainian forces retook them. Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces liberated an unnamed village near the Russian border on May 14. ISW will change our maps once open sources name the settlement.

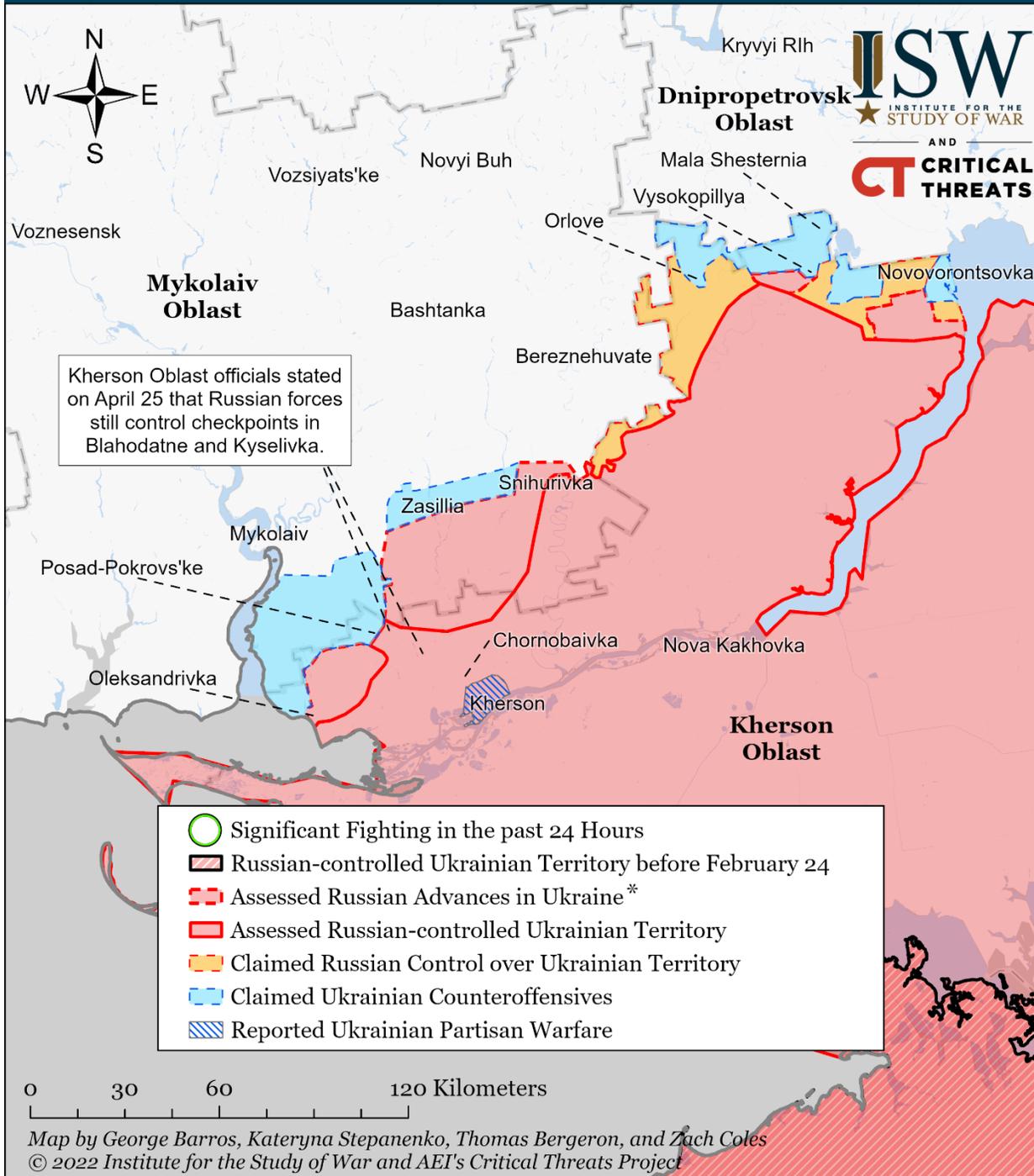
Moldova Situational Map as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis (Objective: Defend Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks)

Russian forces continued to fortify their positions in southern Ukraine and did not conduct active offensive operations on May 15. The Zaporizhia Military Administration reported that Russian forces dug trenches in southern Melitopol along the Molochna River and in villages 30 km south of the city.³¹ ISW previously reported that Russian forces reportedly also created trenches 35 km east of the Kherson Oblast border.³² The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces are also creating reinforced concrete structures in Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts.³³ Russian trenches and concrete shelters are indicators that Russian forces seek to establish and defend permanent control over the occupied areas. Russian forces are also attempting to restart operations at an auto parts plant in Zaporizhia Oblast in an effort to start military production in the region.³⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

Note: ISW scaled back the Ukrainian counteroffensive around Oleksandrivka, Kherson Oblast, based on a geolocated video of a Ukrainian drone attack on a Russian tank on May 11.

Immediate Items to Watch

- Russian forces will likely complete their withdrawal from the vicinity of Kharkiv City but will likely attempt to hold a line west of Vovchansk to defend their GLOCs from Belgorod to Izyum. It is unclear if they will succeed.
- The Russians will continue efforts to encircle Severodonetsk and Lysychansk at least from the south, possibly by focusing on cutting off the last highway connecting Severodonetsk and Lysychansk with the rest of Ukraine.
- A Ukrainian counteroffensive around Izyum will likely begin soon.
- The Battle of Mariupol will, apparently and surprisingly, continue.



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¹ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2613>

² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/311906081120819>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>;

<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-13>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317306580582427>

⁷ https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7789; [https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-](https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-14)

[assessment-may-14](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3258185934416443); <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3258185934416443>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

⁹ https://t.me/rosich_rus/9631

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1525830536912158723>;

https://twitter.com/Blue_Sauron/status/1525796784399859712;

<https://twitter.com/doppelot/status/1525828271945957384>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

¹² <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1525788514142638080>

¹³ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2613>

¹⁴ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2601>

¹⁵ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2613>

¹⁶ <https://t.me/epoddubny/10644>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>;

<https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2599>

¹⁷ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2613>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>

²⁰ https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/5473

²¹ <https://t.me/swodki/96099>; https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/5473

²² <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1525840827838242816>; https://t.me/romanov_92/14612

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- ²³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317306580582427>; <https://t.me/andriyshTime/891>;
<https://t.me/mariupolnow/10392>
- ²⁴ <https://t.me/stranaua/42255>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6roO7zkk4&ab_channel=Zinger;
<https://t.me/faceofwar/19522>; https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1525718180819263490;
https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1525849952148152321
- ²⁵ <https://t.me/stranaua/42226>
- ²⁶ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/885>
- ²⁷ <https://t.me/mariupolnow/10344>; <https://t.me/andriyshTime/897>; <https://t.me/andriyshTime/896>;
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- ²⁸ <https://t.me/stranaua/42191>
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<https://t.me/synergubov/3183>
- ³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/317686480544437>;
<https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-13>
- ³¹ https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7789
- ³² <https://understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-14>
- ³³ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3258185934416443>
- ³⁴ https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/7789