

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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May 23, 6:00 pm ET

Russian nationalist figures are increasingly criticizing the failures of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine and are calling for further mobilization that the Kremlin likely remains unwilling and unable to pursue in the short term. The All-Russian Officers Assembly, an independent pro-Russian veterans’ association that seeks to reform Russian military strategy, called for Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin to declare war on Ukraine and introduce partial mobilization in Russia on May 19.¹ The Assembly said that Russia’s “special military operation” failed to achieve its goals in three months, especially after the failed Siverskyi Donets River crossings. ISW previously assessed that the destruction of nearly an entire Russian battalion tactical group (BTG) during a failed river crossing on May 11 shocked Russian military observers and prompted them to question Russian competence.² The Assembly’s appeal called on Putin to recognize that Russian forces are no longer only “denazifying” Ukraine but are fighting a war for Russia’s historic territories and existence in the world order. The officers demanded that the Kremlin mobilize all regions bordering NATO countries (including Ukraine), form territorial defense squads, extend standard military service terms from one year to two, and form new supreme wartime administrations over Russia, the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR), and newly occupied Ukrainian settlements. The officers also demanded the death penalty for deserters.

The Assembly’s letter may be a leading indicator of elements of the Russian government and society setting informational conditions to declare partial mobilization. However, the Kremlin has so far declined to take this step likely due to concerns over domestic backlash and flaws in Russia’s mobilization systems.³ The All-Russian Officers Assembly called on Putin to recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR three weeks prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, setting conditions for the Russian “special military operation.”⁴ Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced on May 20 that Russia will form 12 new Western Military District units (of unspecified echelon) before the end of the year in response to NATO expansion.⁵ Russian forces may intend to man these units with newly mobilized personnel, as it is unclear how else the Kremlin could generate the manpower for new units. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are withdrawing old T-62 tanks from storage to form new BTGs.⁶ Russia is likely continuing to exhaust its remaining combat-ready reserves to maintain the momentum of the Battle of Severodonetsk, rather than prioritizing preparations for new reinforcements. ISW previously assessed that Russian mobilization is unlikely to generate combat-ready force due to hasty training.⁷

More Russians supportive of the Kremlin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine are beginning to criticize the Kremlin openly. Russian milbloggers claimed that the Kremlin will not honor the Officers Assembly appeal, indicating an intensifying negative perception of the Russian leadership among Russians supportive of the war in Ukraine.⁸ Kaliningrad Oblast Governor Anton Alikhanov publicly stated that the Russian war in Ukraine has disrupted transport routes and construction schedules in the region, a rare admission of the economic cost of the war from a Russian government official.⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian military personnel are increasingly complaining about the ineffectiveness of offensive operations against Ukrainian troops.¹⁰

Unidentified assailants continued attacks against military recruitment offices in Russia on May 23, indicating growing discontent with conscription.¹¹ A Russian Telegram channel reported that an unknown attacker threw a Molotov cocktail at the military recruitment office in the Udmurtia region, which follows a May 19 incident wherein a Russian conscript shot at a recruitment office in Zheleznogorsk-Ilimsky (Irkutsk Oblast) with a pneumatic device.¹² The Ukrainian General

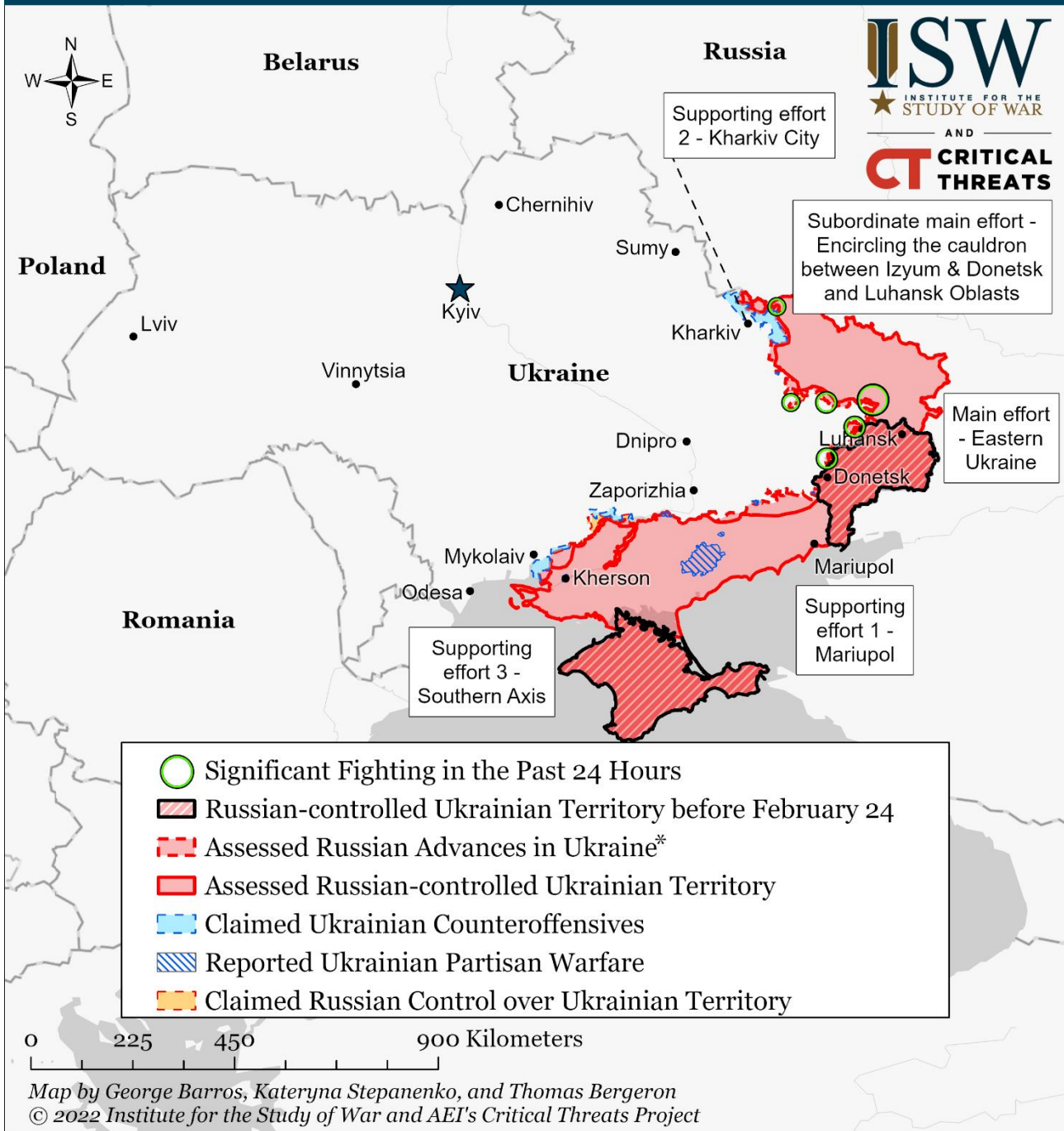
Staff previously reported that 12 total attacks on recruitment offices have happened since the beginning of the war, with five happening in the past few weeks alone.¹³ These attacks may represent growing domestic discontent with conscription and recruitment practices.

The UK Ministry of Defense reported that Russia has suffered a similar death toll within the first three months of the invasion of Ukraine as was experienced by the Soviet Union over the course of nine years in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The British Ministry of Defense stated that a combination of poor low-level tactics, poor air defense, lack of operational flexibility, and poor command methods have resulted in repeated mistakes and failures, which are continuing to be evident in Donbas. The report noted that the Russian public is sensitive to high casualty numbers, and assessed that as casualties suffered in Ukraine grow and become harder to conceal, public dissatisfaction will increase.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian nationalist figures (including veterans and military commentators) are increasingly criticizing the failures of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine and are calling for further mobilization that the Kremlin likely remains unwilling and unable to pursue in the short term.**
- **Russian forces around Izyum increased their tempo of air and artillery strikes and likely intend to attempt to resume stalled offensive operations in the coming days.**
- **Russian operations to encircle Severodonetsk made minor gains in the past 24 hours, driving north through Zolote. Fighting is ongoing in Lyman (north of Severodonetsk) as Russian forces attempt to cut off Ukrainian supply lines**
- **Russian forces will likely make further minor gains west of Popasna in the near future but are unlikely to be able to quickly seize Bakhmut.**
- **The Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv continues to threaten Russian positions and is forcing Russia to pull units from ongoing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine to shore up their defensive positions near Vovchansk.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 23, 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.

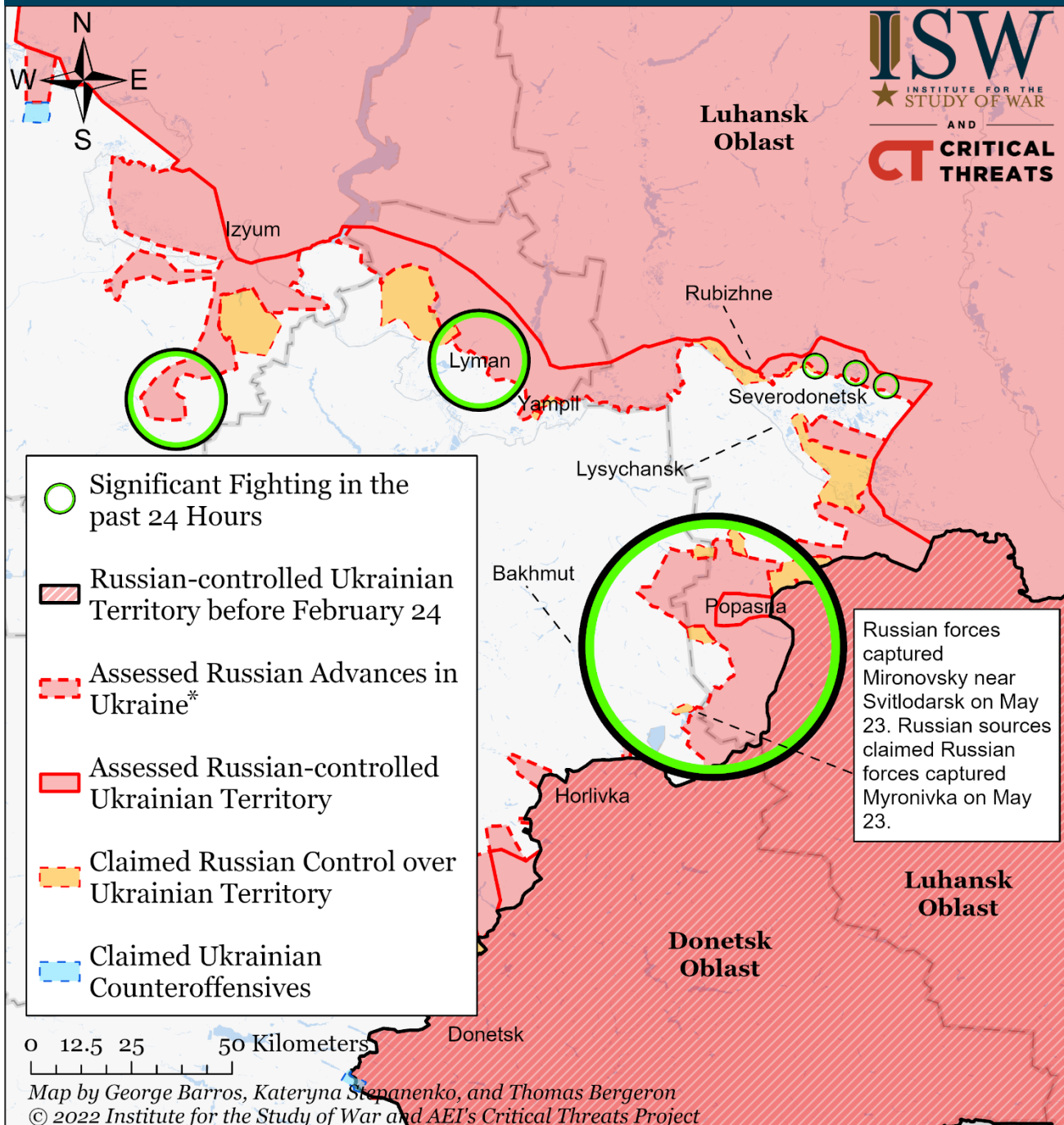
- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and three supporting efforts);
- Subordinate main effort—Encirclement of Ukrainian troops in the cauldron between Izyum and Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts
- Supporting effort 1—Mariupol;
- Supporting effort 2—Kharkiv City;
- Supporting effort 3—Southern 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 intensified air and artillery strikes southeast of Izyum on May 23 in preparation for intended resumed offensive operations towards Slovyansk. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that unspecified elements of Russia’s Western, Central, and Eastern Military Districts, along with the 11th Army Corps of the Baltic Fleet, are preparing to resume attacks toward Slovyansk.¹⁵ Russian forces conducted artillery strikes and reconnoitered Ukrainian positions southeast of Izyum around Dibrove, Virnopylyya, Bogorodichne, Husarivka, Chepil, Dolyna, Studenok, and Sviatorhirsk.¹⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian forces attempted an unsuccessful ground assault on Dovhenke, about 20 km southeast of Izyum.¹⁷ The Ukrainian General Staff additionally stated that Russian forces are strengthening the police-administrative regime in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast, likely to consolidate control of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that run south to Izyum against possible Ukrainian partisan actions.¹⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of May 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



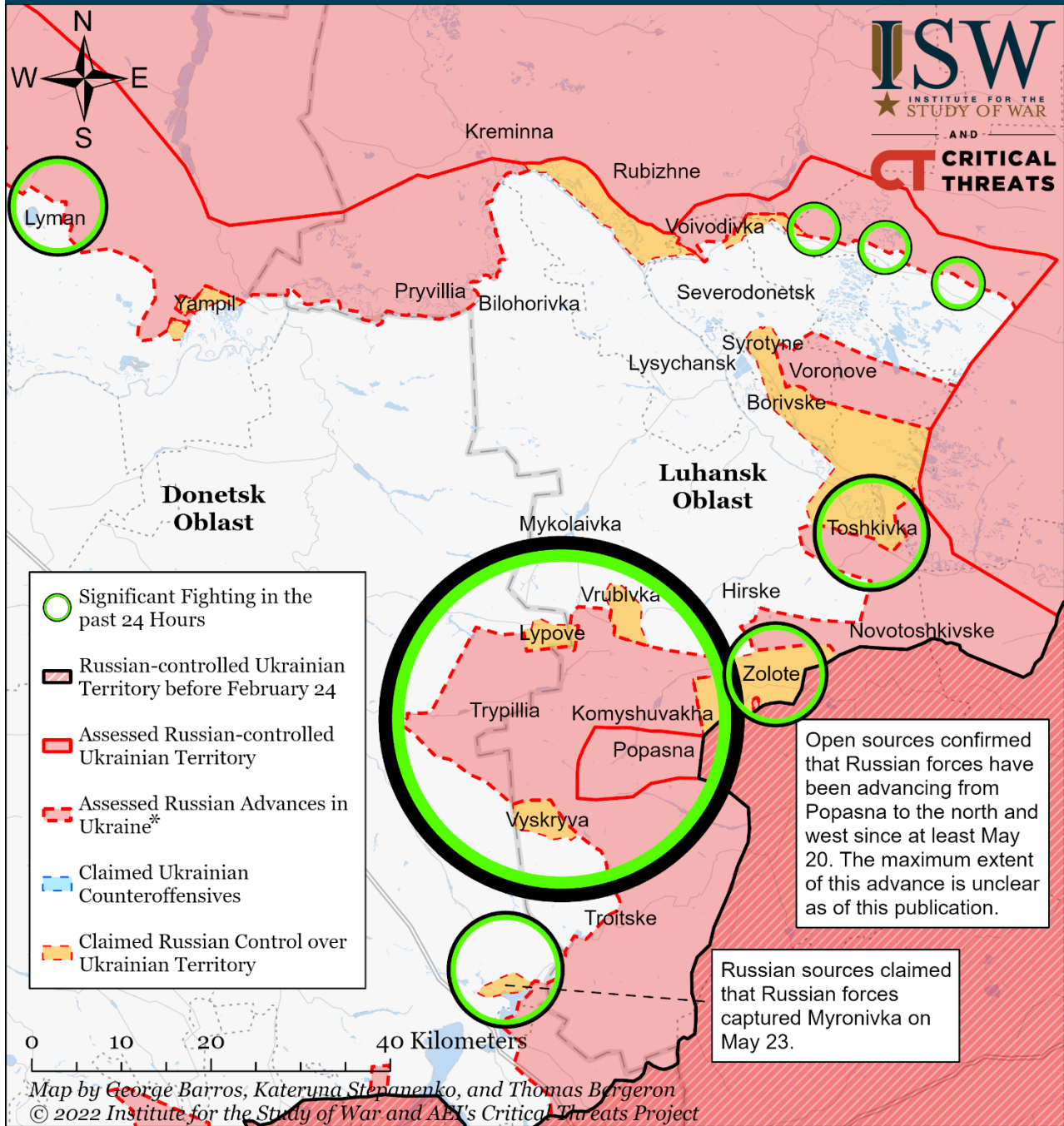
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: We refined our frontlines in Severodonetsk on May 22 based on observing new information. We slightly recessed assessed Russian control given that the Ukrainian General Staff stated on May 22 that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults against Oskolonivka, Oleksanrivka, Purdivka, Shchedryshcheve, and Smolyaninove, indicating that Ukrainian forces control these areas.

Russian forces continued ground assaults around Severodonetsk and made marginal gains to encircle the city on May 23.¹⁹ Russian sources claimed that Russian troops cleared the settlement of Shchedryshcheve, directly northeast of Severodonetsk, and are fighting on the outskirts of the city.²⁰ Russian forces reportedly stormed Zolote and took control of the entry points to the city, which would allow them to push northward and complete the encirclement of Severodonetsk from the south.²¹ The Ukrainian Defense Ministry reported that Russian forces are attempting to break through Ukrainian defenses around Popasna, specifically around Toshkivka, Komyshuvakha, Nyrkove, Vasylivka, Nova Kamyanka, and Myronivsky, in a likely attempt to push westward toward Bakhmut.²² Ukrainian forces reportedly withdrew westward from Volodymyrivka to Soledar, indicating that Russian forces are advancing westward from Popasna, as opposed to prioritizing a northward push toward Severodonetsk.²³ Russian forces additionally made gains near the Donetsk-Luhansk administrative border and took control of Mironovsky, southeast of Bakhmut.²⁴ The capture of Mironovsky will enable further attempts to drive toward Bakhmut from both the south and west. However, Russian forces are unlikely to be able to capture Bakhmut quickly (if at all) based on their past performance in urban terrain in eastern Ukraine.

Russian forces intensified offensive operations around Lyman and Avdiivka and made gains on May 23. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Russian forces have launched an assault on the northern part of Lyman and have taken at least partial control of the city as of May 23.²⁵ Russian forces additionally intensified artillery strikes against Avdiivka and are likely taking advantage of their previous capture of Novoselivka in order to advance on Avdiivka and gain highway access toward Slovyansk.²⁶

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Severodonetsk as of May 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Open sources confirmed that Russian forces have been advancing from Popasna to the north and west since at least May 20. The maximum extent of this advance is unclear as of this publication.

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Myronivka on May 23.

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

Note: Russian forces captured Mironovsky near Svitlodarsk on May 23. We recoded Russian claims in Troitske given the capture of Mironovsky. The confirmed capture of Mironovsky means that a Russian breakthrough from Troitske likely supported this advance. We coded Zolote, Luhansk Oblast, as Russian claims given Izvestia war journalist Denis Kulaga claimed that Russian forces control all of Zolote on May 23. Other pro-Russian bloggers claim that Russian forces have only taken control of the entrance of Zolote.

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

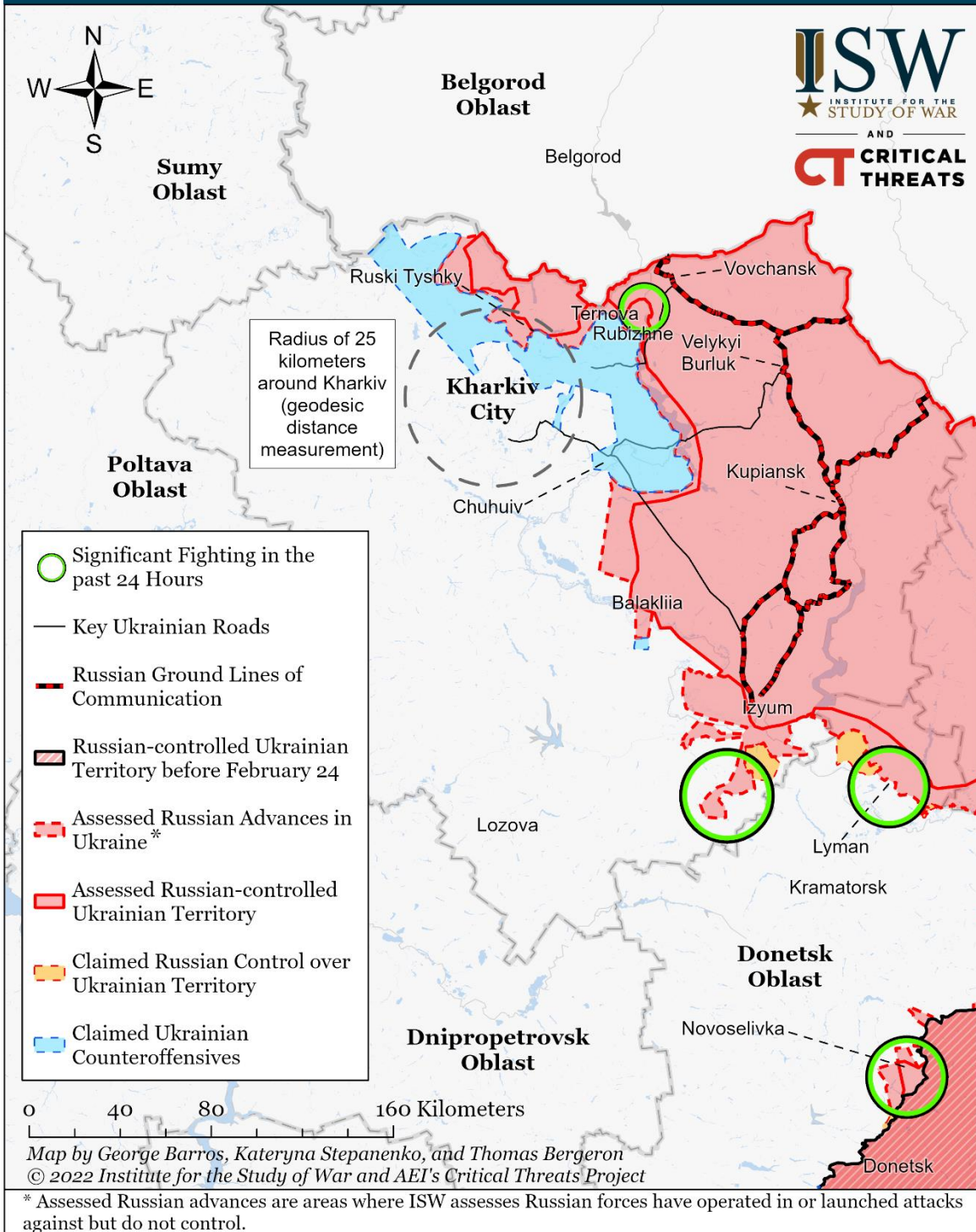
Russian defense officials stated that Russian and proxy forces continued to demine the Azovstal Steel Plant on May 23.²⁷ Russian military Telegram bloggers criticized a video of Russian servicemen reportedly carrying out ground assaults on Azovstal on May 22 and stated that they should have waited for the remaining Ukrainian forces to surrender.²⁸ Russian milbloggers said that Russian forces did not attempt further assaults on May 23, but suggested that Russian military commanders continue to disregard servicemen's lives in favor of the total capture of the Azovstal plant. ISW cannot independently confirm the number of remaining Ukrainian defenders in Azovstal. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin claimed that Ukrainian defenders who already surrendered are awaiting trials in detention centers in occupied Donetsk Oblast.²⁹

Russian national (as opposed to DNR proxy) occupation authorities continued to strengthen their bureaucratic control over Mariupol, signaling a shift away from administrative control by DNR forces. Mariupol Mayor's Advisor Petro Andryushenko reported that "volunteers" from Russia are assisting filtration efforts and Chechen units are patrolling highways from Mariupol into the Ukrainian-controlled areas of Zaporizhia Oblast.³⁰

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

Russian forces focused on maintaining their positions north of Kharkiv City on May 23.³¹ The Ukrainian Defense Ministry noted that unspecified elements of the Russian 6th and 41st Combined Arms Armies, Baltic Fleet, and (for the first time) the 1st and 2nd Army Corps are operating in the area to prevent Ukrainian troops from further advances.³² The 1st and 2nd Army Corps are the armed forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, respectively. The redeployment of DNR and LNR troops away from their previous positions conducting frontal assaults in eastern Ukraine to northern Kharkiv to hold defensive lines against the Ukrainian counteroffensive indicates Russia's prioritization of slowing the Ukrainian counteroffensive, at the cost of reinforcing Russian offensive operations in the east. A pro-Russian source reported that Russian forces are still fighting in Lytpsi and Rubizhne (in Kharkiv Oblast, not Luhansk Oblast), which is consistent with previous claims that Russian troops were able to regain some ground to the north of Kharkiv City.³³ Russian forces continued to shell Kharkiv City and its environs throughout May 23.³⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of May 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

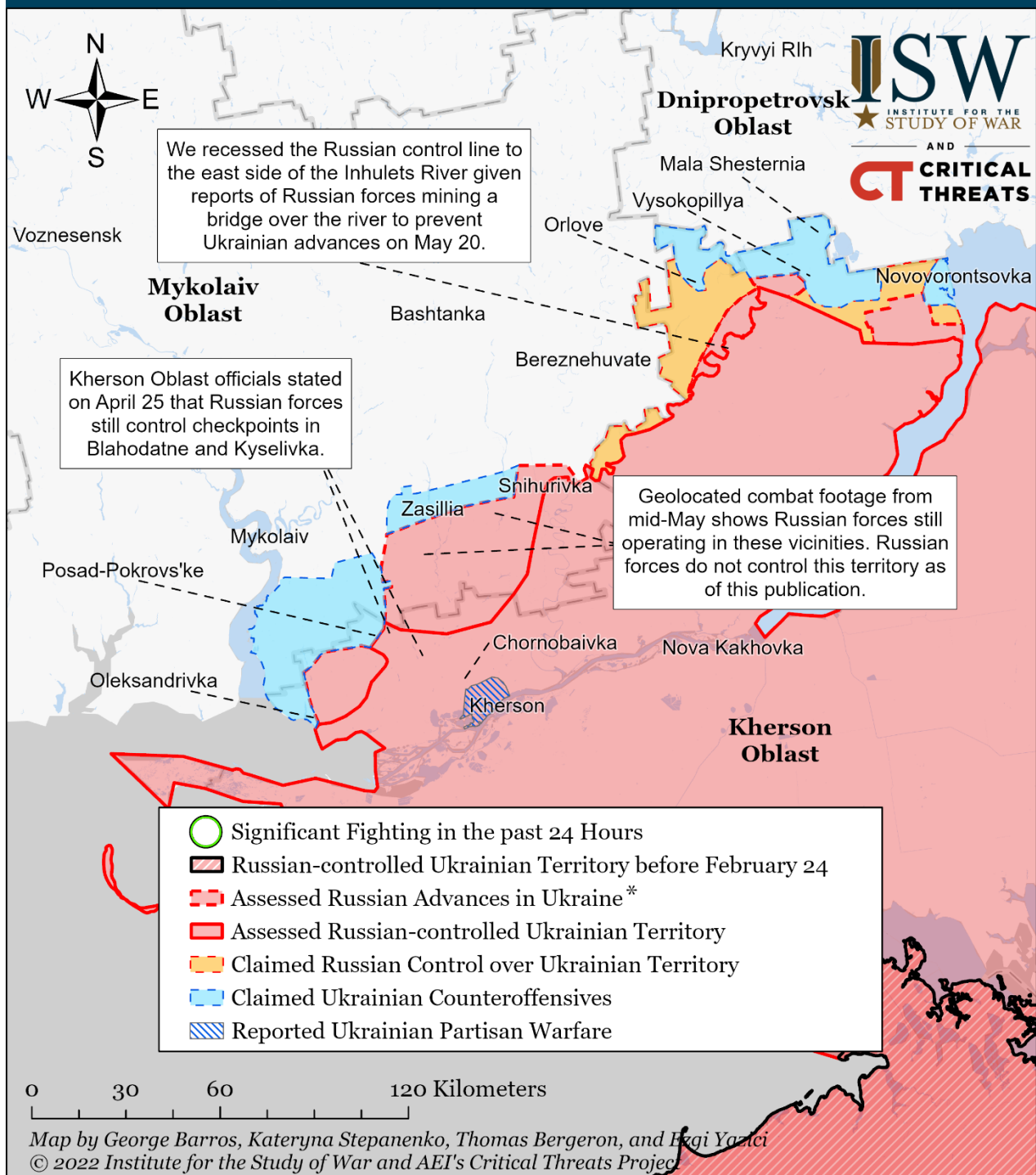


Note: We advanced Russian advances to the north of Lyman given the reported fighting for Lyman. We cannot verify reports that Russian forces have captured northern parts of the city and taken Ukrainian soldiers prisoner as of this publication. We will update our maps when we collect enough information to do so.

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

Russian forces continued to set conditions to establish permanent control and resume offensive operations in southern Ukraine on May 23. The Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration reported that Russian forces are accumulating troops in Vasylivka—approximately 80 km south of Zaporizhia City and east of the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar.³⁵ Russian forces likely seek to consolidate their control of the Zaporizhia NPP and mitigate the threat of Ukrainian counteroffensives in Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russia is deploying two additional S-400 anti-aircraft missile battalions to northwestern Crimea to reinforce air defenses against any possible Ukrainian counterattacks³⁶ The Ukrainian military also reported that Russian forces are fortifying their frontiers in Kherson and Mykolaiv oblasts.³⁷

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 23, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



We recessed the Russian control line to the east side of the Inhulets River given reports of Russian forces mining a bridge over the river to prevent Ukrainian advances on May 20.

Kherson Oblast officials stated on April 25 that Russian forces still control checkpoints in Blahodatne and Kyselivka.

Geolocated combat footage from mid-May shows Russian forces still operating in these vicinities. Russian forces do not control this territory as of this publication.

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

Note: We recoded Potomkyne in northern Kherson Oblast to Ukrainian counteroffensives given the Kherson Regional State Administration stated on May 23 that Russian forces fired upon Potomkyne, indicating that Russian forces are not present there.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces are likely reinforcing their grouping north of Kharkiv City to prevent further advances of the Ukrainian counteroffensive toward the Russian border. Russian forces may commit elements of the 1st Tank Army to Northern Kharkiv in the near future.
- 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-Lysychansk with the rest of Ukraine.
- Russian forces in Mariupol will likely shift their focus to occupational control of the city as the siege of Azovstal has concluded.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for Ukrainian counteroffensives and settling in for protracted operations in southern Ukraine.



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¹ <https://m-kalashnikov-dot-livejournal.com/4243623.html>

² <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-14>

³ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/putin%E2%80%99s-victory-day-speech-forgoes-opportunity-escalate-russia%E2%80%99s-invasion-ukraine>

⁴ <https://www.eastviewpress.com/on-the-eve-of-war-appeal-of-the-all-russian-officers-assembly-to-the-president-and-citizens-of-the-russian-federation/>

⁵ <https://iz-dot-ru/1337432/2022-05-20/shoigu-zaiavil-o-sozdanii-12-voinskikh-chastei-na-zapade-rossii>; <https://www.rosbalt-dot-ru/russia/2022/05/20/1958736.html>; <https://lenta-dot-ru/news/2022/05/20/6714263/>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323137383332680>

⁷ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/explainer-russian-conscription-reserve-and-mobilization>

⁸ <https://t.me/strelkovii/2575>

⁹ <https://kaliningradfirst-dot-ru/317343>

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¹¹ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-19>

¹² <https://t.me/bazabazon/11713>; <https://t.me/bazabazon/11699>

¹³ <https://armyinform-dot-com.ua/2022/05/19/u-rosiyi-za-ostannij-tyzhden-stalosya-5-pidpaliv-vijskkomativ/>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1528598748112330754/photo/1>

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¹⁶ <https://armyinform.com.ua/2022/05/23/vorog-namagayetsya-vyjty-na-administratyvnyj-kordon-luganskoyi-oblasti-rechnyk-mou/>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323526419960443>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323137383332680>

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¹⁹ <https://armyinform-dot-com.ua/2022/05/23/vorog-namagayetsya-vyjty-na-administratyvnyj-kordon-luganskoyi-oblasti-rechnyk-mou/>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2843>; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2834>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323526419960443>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323137383332680>

- ²⁰ <https://twitter.com/IntelCrab/status/1528459585941606402>; <https://t.me/swodki/101480>; <https://t.me/swodki/101482>
- ²¹ <https://t.me/readovkanews/34709>; <https://t.me/swodki/101789>
- ²² <https://armyinform dot com.ua/2022/05/23/protyvnyk-gotyetsya-zastosuvaty-pidrozdily-drugogo-eshelonu-ta-rezervy-vklyuchno-iz-taktychnymy-rakety-nymy-kompleksamy-tochka-u/>; https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1528617382536699904; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxO-Ga4uawU>; <https://t.me/swodki/101669>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323526419960443>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/323526419960443>; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1528593315129708544>; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1528430588658601984>; <https://t.me/stranaua/43594>; <https://t.me/stranaua/43596>; <https://t.me/russianonwars/744>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/34640>; https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1528628530552111104; <https://t.me/ChDambiev/17017>; <https://twitter.com/Militarylandnet/status/1528700962831011843>; <https://t.me/swodki/101518>
- ²³ <https://t.me/russianonwars/744>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/34640>
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- ²⁶ <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1528478654891806725>; https://t.me/pavlokyrylenko_donoda/3489; https://twitter.com/hochu_dodomu/status/1528600703329001475; <https://twitter.com/IntelCrab/status/1528578674861166595>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1528420607674793991>; <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/13107>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1528422588594196480>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1528431563578527745>; <https://t.me/swodki/101475>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/34640>; <https://t.me/swodki/101443>; <https://t.me/swodki/101490>
- ²⁷ https://t.me/mod_russia/16048; https://t.me/nm_dnr/8046; <https://t.me/millnr/8621>; <https://t.me/swodki/101477>; <https://t.me/swodki/101585>
- ²⁸ https://t.me/aleksandr_skif/2205; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/36631>
- ²⁹ https://t.me/miroshnik_r/7364; <https://www dot interfax.ru/world/842308>; <https://t.me/swodki/101541>
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