Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 20

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan
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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.

Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 20 that Russian forces mined the dam of the Kakhovka HPP and noted that the HPP holds over 18 million cubic meters of water, which would cause massive and rapid flooding of settlements along the Dnipro River, including Kherson City.¹ Zelensky emphasized that the flooding would impact hundreds of thousands of people.² Russian sources, however, continued to accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling the Kakhovka HPP and have widely circulated graphics depicting the flood path in the event of a dam breach.³ As ISW reported on October 19, Russian sources are likely setting information conditions for Russian forces to blow the dam after they withdraw from western Kherson Oblast and accuse Ukrainian forces of flooding the Dnipro River and surrounding settlements, partially in an attempt to cover their retreat further into eastern Kherson Oblast.⁴ Continued Russian preparation for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka HPP is also likely meant to distract from reports of Russian losses in Kherson Oblast.

Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances. Kherson City Telegram accounts claimed on October 20 that Russian forces disbanded and looted a fire station in Kherson City and ferried fire trucks, stolen civilian cars, and other miscellaneous household items across the Dnipro River to Hola Prystan.⁵ ISW cannot independently confirm those reports. The Ukrainian service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty also reported on October 20 that Russian forces are moving military equipment from the west bank to the east bank of the Dnipro River in the face of recent Ukrainian advances, and posted satellite imagery that shows a Russian cargo ferry traveling across the Dnipro River from Kozatske (west bank) to Nova Kakhovka (east bank).6 Radio *Liberty* noted that the ferry is fully loaded when it arrives at Nova Kakhovka and empty when it returns to Kozatske and suggested that this movement has been ongoing since early October. 7 Taken in tandem, these reports indicate that Russian troops are likely deliberately removing large amounts of personnel and equipment from the west bank of the Dnipro River. Russian forces have likely learned, at least in part, from their failures during the panicked Russian retreat from Kharkiv Oblast in the face of a previous Ukrainian counteroffensive. The militarily sensible thing would be to remove men and equipment in good order to avoid another devastating rout. Such a rout in Kherson could trap Russian forces and equipment on the west bank of the Dnipro River.

The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine, to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure. US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that "a relatively small number" of Iranian personnel are in Crimea to train Russian personnel in the use of unfamiliar Iranian-made drones.⁸ Kirby emphasized that "Tehran is now directly engaged on the ground and through the provision of weapons that are impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, that are killing civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure in Ukraine" and warned that Russia and Iran will continue to lie about their partnership. Russian officials

have continued to deny their purchase of Iranian drones, but the existence of the deal is increasingly common knowledge even within Russia. A member of the Russian Ministry of Defense Public Council, Ruslan Pukhov, believed he was not being recorded when he told a Russian television host live on air on October 20 that "we won't rock the boat too much, so I ask you not to [focus] too much on those Iranian [drones], like that classic story: 'you have an ass but no word for it.' We all know that they're Iranian, but the authorities are not admitting that." Iranian officials have also denied the sales despite the widespread Russian use of Iranian drones in Ukraine since mid-September, but Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei boasted on October 19 that "a few years ago, when pictures of [Iran's] advanced missiles & drones were published, they said they're photoshopped pictures! Now they say Iranian drones are dangerous [and ask] why do you sell them to so & so?" 10

Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow's help to upend the US-led global order. The European Union imposed additional sanctions on Iranian officials and the manufacturer of the Shahed-136 drones that Iran has sold to Russia for use in Ukraine on October 20.¹¹ Senior Iranian officials and state media frequently argue that Tehran must expand strategic relations with Russia and China to cooperate toward countering US global influence.¹² Iranian leaders may worry that a Russian failure in Ukraine would seriously disrupt this vision and possibly threaten Vladimir Putin's hold on power and, therefore, Iran's security. Iran could further expand its military support to Russia in the coming months.

The risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus into northern Ukraine remains low despite a prominent Ukrainian official's October 20 warning that the risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus is "growing." The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated that the risk of a renewed offensive from Russian forces against northern Ukraine is growing.¹³ Hromov stated that Russian forces may attack northwest Ukraine to disrupt Ukrainian supply lines from Western partner countries. Such a course of action remains unlikely in the coming months given that Russian forces lack the capability even to interdict Ukrainian supply lines from the west with a ground offensive. The nearest Ukrainian east-west rail line is 30 km from the Belarusian border, and the Pripet Marshes in northern Ukraine and Belarus make maneuver warfare across the international border in Volyn and Rivne oblasts exceptionally difficult. Ukraine's road and rail network has sufficient nodes with Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary that a Russian incursion from Belarus could not seriously degrade Ukrainian logistical lines without projecting deeper into Ukraine than Russians did during the Battle of Kyiv, when Russian forces were at their strongest. Those forces are now significantly degraded. A Russian milblogger reiterated on October 20 that the Russian force group in Belarus is too small to threaten Kyiv.¹⁴ White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby reiterated on October 20 that Belarus may concentrate manpower on the border to fix Ukrainian forces in northern Ukraine and prevent their deployment to the active area of operation in southern and eastern Ukraine, as ISW has assessed. 15

Key Takeaways

- Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP).
- Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances.

- The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.
- Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow's help to upend the US-led global order.
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- Russian sources continued to claim that Russian forces are consolidating limited regained positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast on October 20 despite Ukrainian reports that Ukraine has liberated all but 1.8% of Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian troops have advanced in northern Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast but Russian sources contradicted their own claims on control of Bakhmut. Russian forces are likely continuing to falsify claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine.
- Russian regional governments and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continue to blame each other for military administrative failures.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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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.

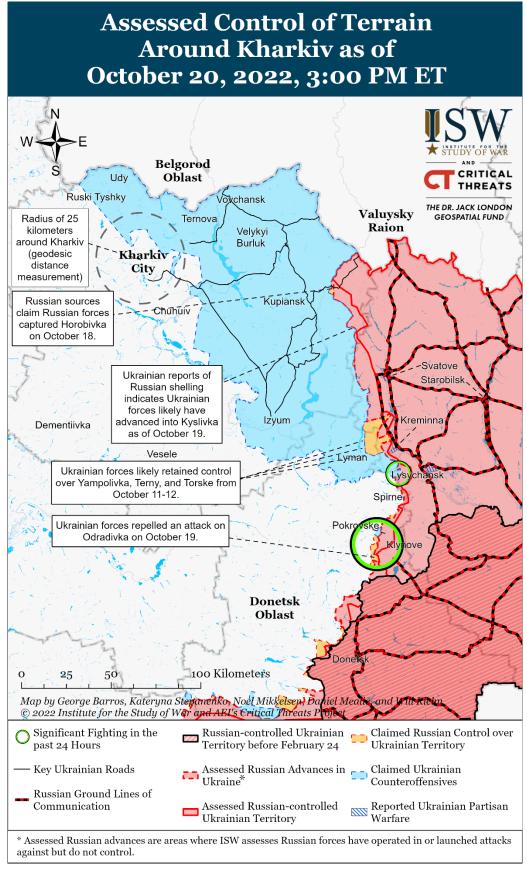
- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

<u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Eastern Ukraine: (Oskil River-Kreminna Line)

Russian sources continued to claim that Russian forces are consolidating limited positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast on October 20 that Russian forces allegedly regained over the last few days. Several Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian troops took control of a segment of the railway line in Horobivka, 16km northeast of Kupyansk. However, Ukrainian Kharkiv Oblast Head Oleh Synehubov noted that Ukrainian troops have liberated all but 1.8 percent (32 unspecified villages) of an unspecified area of Kharkiv Oblast, which suggests that unsubstantiated Russian claims of regained territory in this area likely reflect extremely limited gains compared to the recent sweeping Ukrainian counteroffensive that retook almost the entire oblast. ISW's maps currently depict about 3-4 percent of Kharkiv Oblast under Russian control or advances. ISW will update its maps as soon as it has sufficient data to further clarify the control of terrain.

Russian and Ukrainian forces likely continued fighting along the Svatove-Kreminna line on October 20. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported heavy fighting along the frontline in the directions of Kreminna and Svatove. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled a Russian attack near Bilohorivka, about 10km south of Kreminna in the vicinity of Lysychansk. Several Russian sources discussed continued Ukrainian attempts to cross the Zherebets River west of Kreminna around Nadiya, Stelmakhivka, Makiivka, and Yampolivka, each about 15km west of Kreminna.



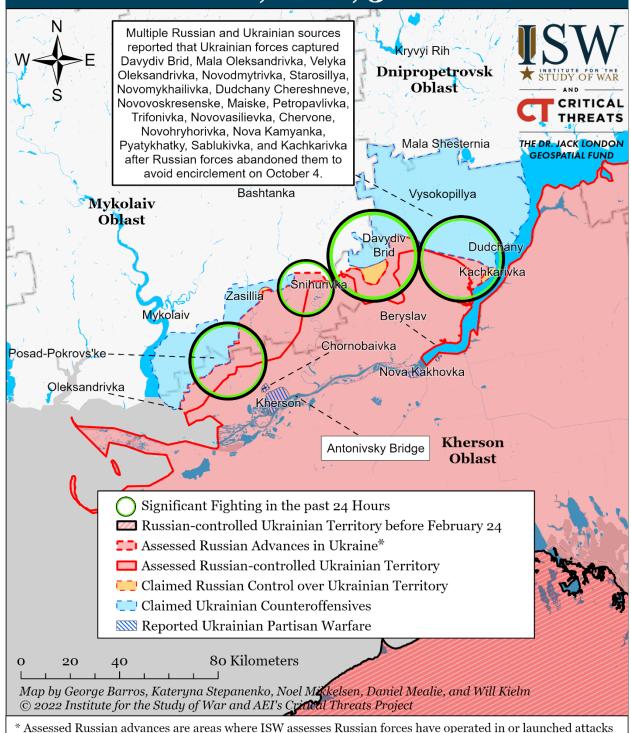
Southern Ukraine: (Kherson Oblast)

Ukrainian military officials offered limited insight into ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive actions in Kherson Oblast on October 20. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Ukrainian units are active along the entire frontline and that Russian troops are taking defensive measures, regrouping, engineering fortifications, and mining areas of projected Ukrainian advance. Deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, noted that Russia has concentrated up to 45 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the Kherson "direction" to defend against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives. Hromov additionally reported that Ukrainian troops improved their tactical positions around Blahodatne, about 40km north of Kherson City, but did not offer additional details.

Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian troops have advanced in northern Kherson Oblast. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) acknowledged on October 20 that Ukrainian forces penetrated Russian defenses around Sukhanove, about 30km north of Beryslav, and claimed Russian forces repelled the attack.²⁴ The Russian MoD also stated that Russian troops struck Piatykhatky, which lies 8km northwest of Sukhanove and 40km north of Beryslav, confirming that Ukrainian troops have taken control of the settlement.²⁵ Other Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops attempted to break through Russian defenses in that area toward Beryslav from the Nova Kamianka area.²⁶ ISW has not observed independent verification of these Russian claims.

Ukrainian forces additionally continued their ongoing interdiction campaign against Russian military assets and concentration areas in Kherson Oblast on October 20. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that Ukrainian strikes destroyed two Russian ammunition depots around Beryslav on October 19.²⁷ Social media footage and reports from residents of Nova Kakhovka showed explosions following Ukrainian strikes in the area on October 20.²⁸

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of October 20, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

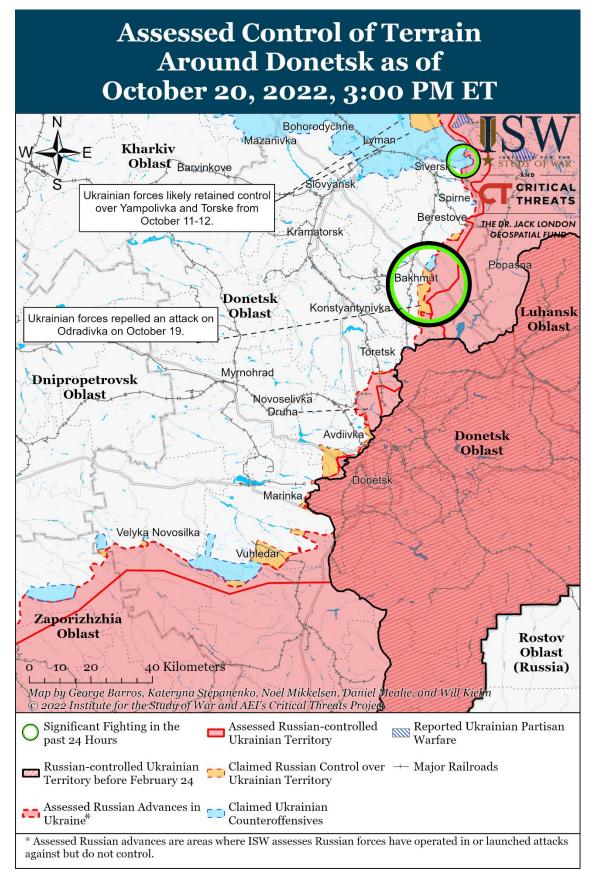


against but do not control.

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast on October 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut, northeast of Bakhmut near Bakhmutske (11km northeast of Bakhmut), southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Opytne (4km south of Bakhmut).²⁹ A Russian miblogger claimed on October 20 that Wagner units advanced near the southern outskirts of Bakhmut.30 The Russian milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces launched a counterattack near Ivanhrad (4km southeast of Bakhmut) to hold back advancing Wagner forces so that Ukrainian strike groups could reposition in the Bakhmut direction.³¹ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have also made minimal gains over the past five days in Soledar (12km northeast of Bakhmut).32 ISW cannot independently verify these Russian claims. Russian outlet RIA published a map on October 20 showing Ukrainian control over most of Bakhmut despite repeated claims made by numerous Russian sources that Russian forces are operating within Bakhmut itself, supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces are likely falsifying claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine.³³ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian ground attacks south of Avdiivka near Krasnohorivka (23km southwest of Avdiivka), Novomykhailivka (37km southwest of Avdiivka), Nevelske (16km southwest of Avdiivka), and Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).³⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also conducted assaults north of Avdiivka near Keramik (15km north of Avdiivka), Novobakhmutivka (15km northwest of Avdiivka), Niu-York (23km northeast of Avdiivka), and the Mayorsk Railway Station.³⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in Donetsk Oblast.³⁶



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

Russian forces continued to conduct routine artillery, air, and missile strikes west of Hulyaipole, and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv oblasts on October 20.³⁷ Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck Marhanets, Chervonohryhorivka, Mykolaiv City, Ochakiv, and Bereznehuvate.³⁸ Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces struck energy infrastructure in Kryvyi Rih Raion with S-300 missiles.³⁹ Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces conducted drone attacks in Mykolaiv Oblast and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 14 Russian drones and reported Ukrainian forces intercepted most of the drones.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 20 that Ukrainian forces struck and damaged up to 150 Russian personnel and 15 vehicles in Zaporizhia Oblast in the past few days.⁴¹

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

Russian regional governments and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continue to blame each other for military administrative failures. Russian MoD officials mobilized a Russian physical education teacher in Pskov Oblast despite the Pskov Oblast governor's previous statement that physical education teachers are exempt from mobilization.⁴² A local Pskov Russian Telegram channel commented on the conflict between the Pskov Oblast governor and local MoD-run military commissariat, noting that local military registration and enlistment offices pay little attention to what Russian governors want or say.⁴³ Family members of Russian servicemembers from Kursk Oblast complained to the local government about the lack of information about their family members fighting in Ukraine's Kharkiv Oblast.⁴⁴ Soldiers' relatives contacted Kursk Oblast government officials and stated neither the governor nor the military commissariat knows where their relatives' unit is currently deployed. Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit publicly deflected responsibility, stating that "all military commissariat and enlistment offices relate to the [MoD] and are not under the jurisdiction of the Kursk Oblast Administration."⁴⁵

Russian authorities continue mobilizing Russian men at least into November 2022 despite increasingly framing mobilization as complete. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russian leadership will continue its "first stage" of mobilization until November 25.46 Russian President Vladimir Putin previously stated on October 14 that mobilization would be over "within about two weeks" (around October 28).47 Putin claimed that Russia had already mobilized 220,000 people as of October 14. Magadan Oblast Governor Sergei Nosov announced that Magadan Oblast completed its mobilization on October 20.48 Malyar stated on October 20 that Russian forces have mobilized approximately 200,000 people, about two-thirds of the target of 300,000 as of October 20.49

The Russian military continues to face difficulties in procuring body armor for Russian forces. Russian Federation Council Senator Lyudmila Narusova complained of the almost 2,000-percent increase in Russian body armor prices, up to 135,000 rubles (almost \$2,200), since January 2022 and called on Russian antimonopoly authorities to investigate.⁵⁰ A Russian milblogger reported that the situation with Russian mobilized men having bad equipment is improving in terms of public attention and prioritization but that Russian troops are still receiving bad equipment. The milblogger argued that

Russian forces receiving body armor may not make a difference since Russian body armor issued to mobilized forces demonstrably does not protect against small arms.⁵¹

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

See topline text.

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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¹ https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rosijskij-teror-maye-prograti-ukrayina-j-usya-yevropa-mayut-78613

² https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rosijskij-teror-maye-prograti-ukrayina-j-usya-yevropa-mayut-78613

³https://t.me/rybar/40450; https://t.me/readovkanews/44878; https://t.me/readovkanews/44860

 $^{^4\} https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-19$

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⁹ https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1583107961647341569?s=20&t=sLU5noOwXjXrJUQcpP4I2w

¹⁰ https://twitter.com/khamenei ir/status/1582694255176298496?s=20&t=Ad-7cCRZfjZ9FwzVOt3vaw

¹¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/world/europe/eu-sanctions-iran-drones.html

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²⁰ https://t.me/mod russia/21017; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/29804; https://t.me/vysokygovorit/9754

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¹⁷ https://t.me/stranaua/70895; https://strana dot news/news/412276-v-kharkovskoj-oblasti-sozdali-tri-linii-oborony-deokkupatsija-prodolzhaetsja.html

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²¹ https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/videos/1254932568397236/; https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=692133685195254

²⁴ https://t.me/mod_russia/21017

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²⁷ https://t.me/Bratchuk Sergey/21094; https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=692133685195254

²⁸ https://t.me/hueviyherson/27698; https://t.me/hueviyherson/27701

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