Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 25, 2023

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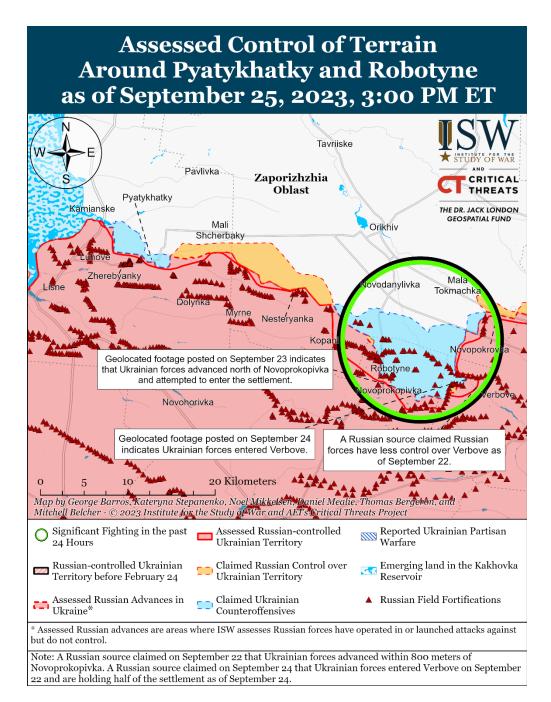
September 25, 2023, 5:50pm ET

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 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 1:30pm ET on September 25. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 26 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The tactical situation in Verbove remains unclear amid continued Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and offensive assaults in the Bakhmut direction, inflicting losses on Russian manpower and equipment and depleting Russian forces along the entire front line.[1] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces reached northern Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) but that Russian forces pushed them back to their original positions.[2] Russian sources have yet to directly address a claim from a source reportedly affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces that Ukrainian forces control half of Verbove as of September 24.[3]



The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported on September 25 that a precision Ukrainian strike on the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 22 killed 34 Russian officers, including BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov.[4] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported that the strike, which occurred during a meeting of senior BSF leadership, also wounded 105 Russian personnel.[5] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 23 that the strike seriously wounded the commander of the Russian 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet), Lieutenant General Oleg Tsekov, and the commander of the Russian grouping of forces in Zaporizhia Oblast, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk.[6] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces also reported that the Ukrainian strike on the *Minsk* landing ship in Sevastopol on September 13 killed 62 personnel, noting that many personnel were present as the *Minsk* was scheduled to go on combat duty on September 14.[7] ISW has yet to observe confirmation that these Ukrainian strikes killed Sokolov or any other high-ranking Russian commanders, although the Russian command would be able to easily disprove Ukrainian reporting if these reports are false. Sokolov's and other Russian officers' reported deaths would create significant disruptions in command and control in the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Khalino Airfield and a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Kursk Oblast during a series of drone strikes on September 24. Ukrainian media reported on September 24 that sources connected to the Ukrainian GUR stated that Ukrainian forces struck an FSB building and an oil refinery near the Khalino Airfield in Kursk Oblast.[8] Russian Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoyt confirmed that a Ukrainian drone struck an administrative building in the Central District of Kursk City.[9] Ukrainian news outlet *RBC-Ukraine*'s sources clarified on September 25 that Ukrainian forces struck the Khalino Airfield and killed an unspecified number of officers of the Russian 14th Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment (105th Guards Composite Aviation Division, 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army, Russia Aerospace [VSK] Forces), which is based at the airfield.[10] The Russian 14th Guards Fighting Aviation Regiment is equipped with Su-30SM aircraft.[11] Russian sources confirmed the strike on the Khalino Airfield and the death of an unspecified number of Russian servicemen.[12]

Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and missile strikes on the night of September 24-25 against Ukrainian port, grain, and military targets. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 12 Kalibr sea-launched cruise missiles from the Black Sea, two Onyx cruise missiles from the Sevastopol area, and 19 Shahed drones from Krasnodar Krai.[13] Ukrainian air defenses shot down 11 Kalibr missiles and all 19 drones.[14] Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces struck port and grain infrastructure in Odesa Oblast, and footage shows that Russian strikes damaged a hotel in Odesa City.[15] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian forces struck a Ukrainian MiG-29 fighter aircraft at the Dolhintsevo airfield in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[16] Moldovan government officials stated on September 25 that fragments of an S-300 missile fell in Chitcani (5km south of Tiraspol) in Transnistria and that the missile's origin and flight path have not been confirmed.[17]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on September 25 that US-provided Abrams tanks have arrived in Ukraine.[18] The *New York Times* reported that US officials stated that the US delivered an unspecified number of Abrams tanks to Ukraine on September 23 and that the Biden administration intends to send 31 Abrams in total.[19] *Politico* previously reported on August 31 that Ukraine would receive the first 10 of 31 Abrams tanks in mid-September.[20]

Russian military officials continue efforts to build out the Russian armed forces to suit the needs of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. Russian outlet *Izvestia*, citing sources in the Russian military, claimed on September 25 that the Russian armed forces are forming reconnaissance and assault brigades in combined arms armies and newly formed army corps and that these brigades are already actively recruiting.[21] *Izvestia* reported that the new units will be comprised of assault troops intended to break through layered defenses and reconnaissance troops that will conduct reconnaissance at "tactical depth," and noted that each brigade will receive tanks, light armored vehicles, artillery, and various drones.[22] *Izvestia* emphasized that these new brigades are meant to

overcome pre-prepared Ukrainian defensive positions, particularly in areas of Donbas, where Ukrainian forces have been expanding and equipping fortifications since Russia's first invasion in 2014. Colonel Valery Yuryev, chairman of the Russian Union of Paratroopers, told *Izvestia* that the war has stressed the "need to have specialized units for storming fortified areas" and that "separate assault units and formations are necessary."[23]

The Russian military has previously attempted to adapt to lessons learned in Ukraine by forming similar assault-focused company-sized units intended to target urban and fortified areas in the form of "Storm-Z" companies, which have been primarily active and mostly unsuccessful along the Donetsk City-Avdiivka frontline and on the Luhansk-Kharkiv Oblast front.[24] ISW has been reporting on ongoing Russian military reforms and the creation of new combined arms army and army corps level formations, and it remains unclear how the Russian force generation apparatus will be able to recruit, train, and staff brigade, army, or army-corps level formations considering the multitude of endemic mobilization issues the Russian army faces at this time.[25]

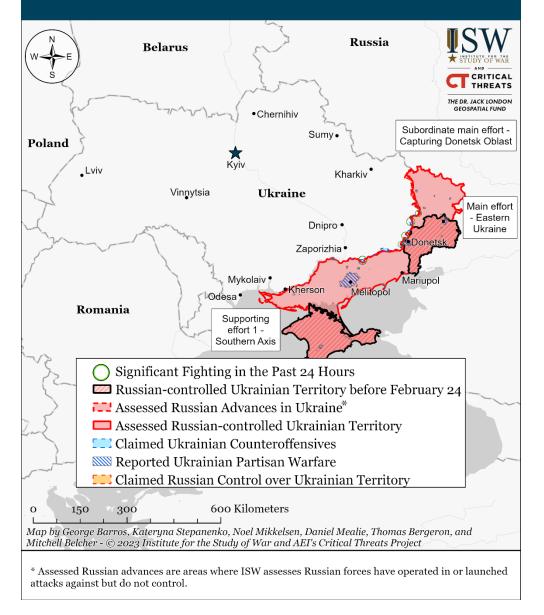
The Kremlin and the Armenian government continue to deflect blame onto one another over the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan amidst deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan delivered an address on September 24 in which he criticized Russia by stating that the Russian-led security structures of which Armenia is a part are ineffective and by questioning the motives of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh.[26] Pashinyan blamed Azerbaijan and Russian peacekeepers for the recent events in Nagorno-Karabakh, which Pashinyan labeled as "a policy of ethnic cleansing." The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded to Pashinyan's statement on September 25, blamed Pashinyan for avoiding personal responsibility for "failures in [Armenian] domestic and foreign policy," and heavily criticized Pashinvan's recent turn to the West.[27] Russian milbloggers have consistently focused on anti-Pashinyan protests in Yerevan since the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities accepted a Russian peacekeeper-mediated ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan on September 20.[28] ISW previously reported that the Kremlin reportedly distributed a manual on September 19 instructing Kremlin-affiliated media to blame the West and Pashinvan for recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.[29] The initial protests in Armenia following the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan appear to be skewing in the direction of the Kremlin's preferred narrative, although it is unclear if the Kremlin will retain strong Armenian support for Russia in the long-term following the inaction of Russian peacekeeping forces.

Key Takeaways:

- The tactical situation in Verbove remains unclear amid continued Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 25.
- The Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported on September 25 that a precision Ukrainian strike on the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea, on September 22 killed 34 Russian officers, including BSF Commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov
- Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Khalino Airfield and a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) building in Kursk Oblast during a series of drone strikes on September 24.

- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and missile strikes on the night of September 24-25 against Ukrainian port, grain, and military targets.
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confirmed on September 25 that USprovided Abrams tanks have arrived in Ukraine.
- Russian military officials continue efforts to build out the Russian armed forces to suit the needs of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin and the Armenian government continue to deflect blame onto one another over the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan amidst deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed gains.
- Russian officials continue to deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 25, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are wellcovered 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

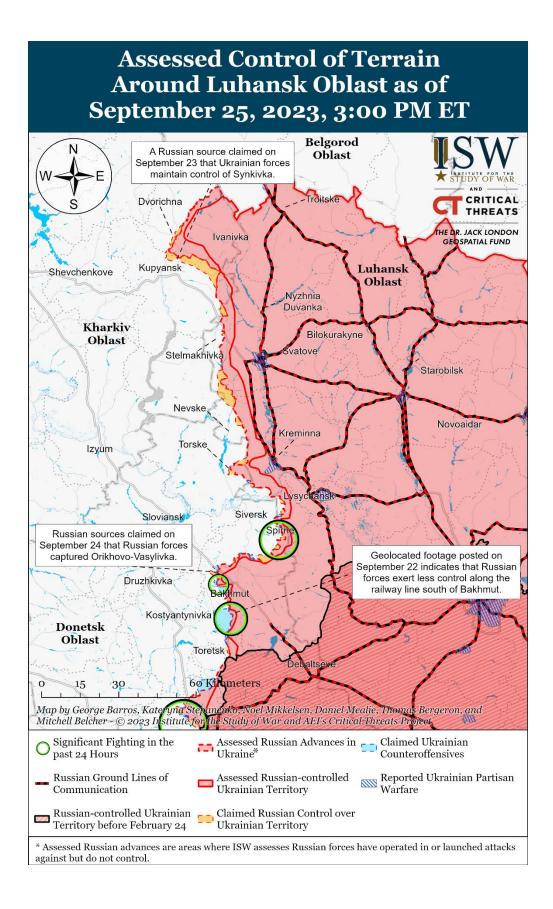
<u> Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine</u>

<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 did not conduct any ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces did not conduct offensive actions in either the Kupyansk or Lyman directions.[30] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that there were three combat engagements near Berestove, Donetsk Oblast (31km south of Kreminna) and in the general direction of Loskutivka (29km southeast of Kreminna) on September 24.[31]

The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces repelled Ukrainian assaults south of Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna) and that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled Ukrainian assaults near Spirne (24km south of Kreminna) and Berestove in Donetsk Oblast on September 25.[32]

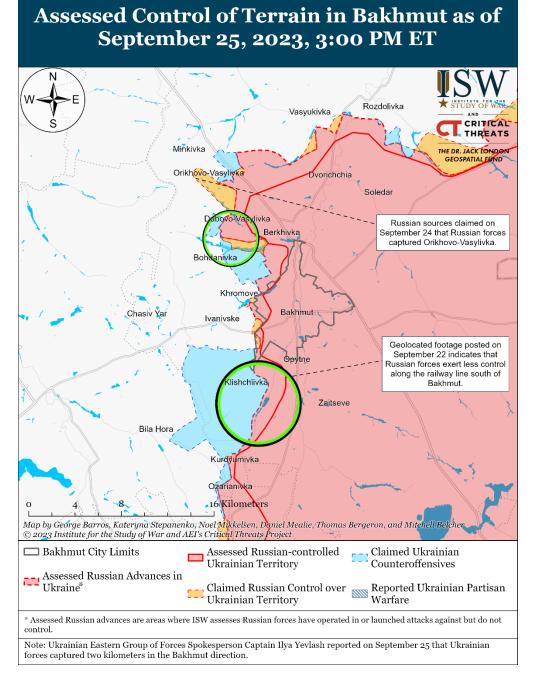
Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a strike on Russian logistics in a deep rear area of occupied Luhansk Oblast on September 25. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces struck an unspecified industrial facility in Sorokyne (13km from the international Ukrainian-Russian border).[33] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces launched three Storm Shadow cruise missiles at Sorokyne.[34]



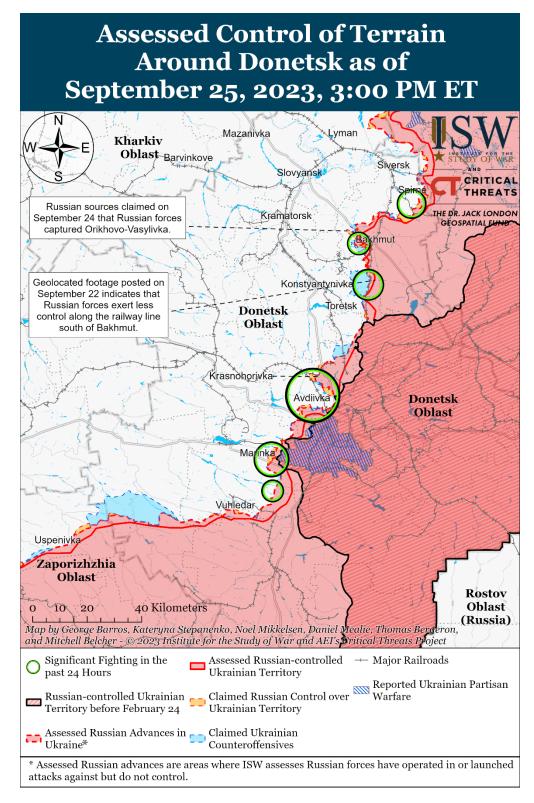
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions near Bakhmut on September 25 but did not make any confirmed gains. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces liberated an additional 2km of territory in the Bakhmut direction.[35] The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Mayorske (20km south of Bakhmut).[36] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces attempted to break through Russian defensive positions along the railway east of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[37] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut) after Russian forces reportedly captured the settlement, although ISW has still not seen visual confirmation that Russian forces have captured Orikhovo-Vasylivka.[38] A Russian milblogger noted that the front lines near Bakhmut have not changed recently.[39]

Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut on September 25 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Klishchiivka and east and southeast of Bohdanivka (7km northwest of Bakhmut).[40] Several Russian milbloggers claimed on September 24 and 25 that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces from their positions in Orikhovo-Vasylivka and that Russian forces now control the settlement.[41] One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are counterattacking near Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[43]

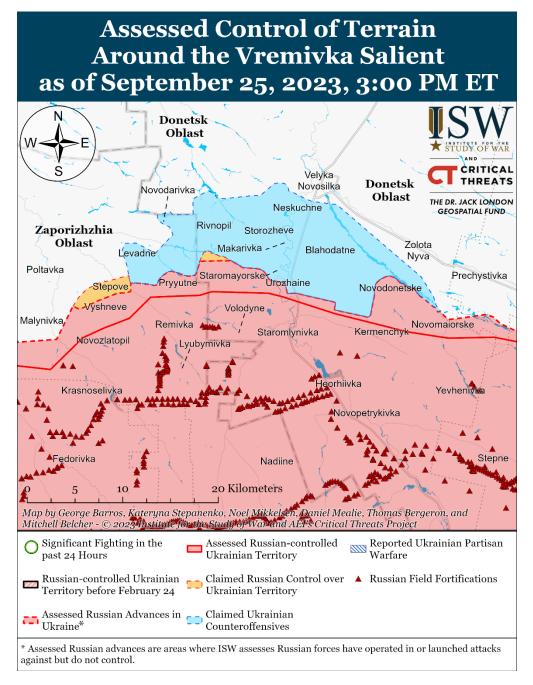


Russian forces continued unsuccessful ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Avdiivka and Marinka (on the western outskirt of Donetsk City) and unsuccessfully attempted to recapture lost positions near Novomykhailivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka).[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attacked near Marinka and on the southern approaches to Avdiivka but did not specify an outcome.[45]

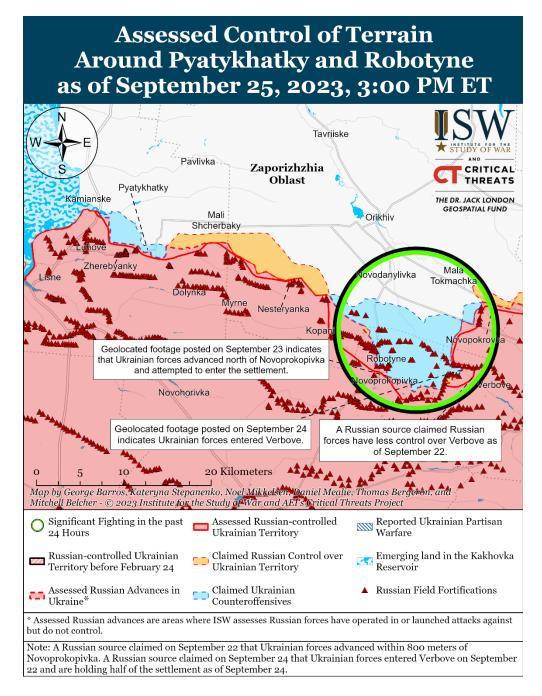


<u>Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not advance on September 25. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian infantry groups unsuccessfully attacked east of Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) and conducted reconnaissance-in-force operations near Pryyutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[46]

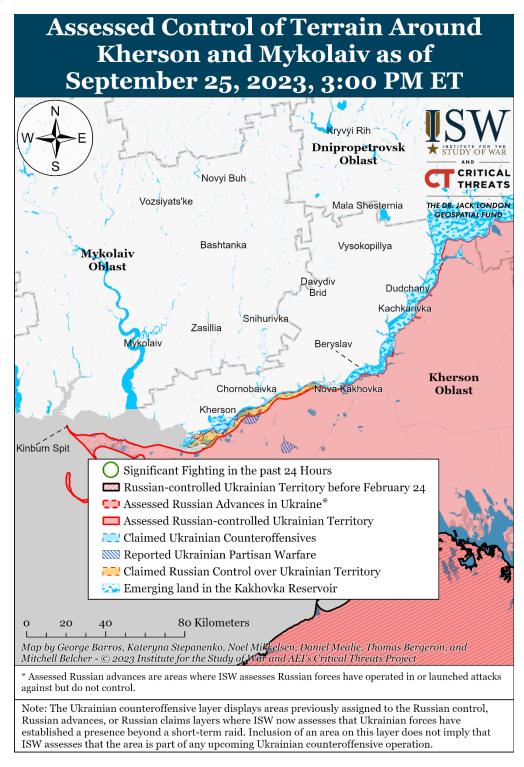


Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance on September 25. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces reached northern Verbove but that Russian forces pushed them back to their original positions.[47] Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Verbove, Novopokrovka (16km southeast of Orikhiv), Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), and Novoprokopivka.[48] Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 25. Ukrainian General Staff Spokesperson Pavlo Kovalchuk reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Mala Tokmachka (7km southeast of Orikhiv), Novodanylivka (6km south of Orikhiv), Robotyne, and Verbove.[49] A Russian source reportedly affiliated with the Russian VDV Forces claimed on September 24 that elements of the Russian 108th VDV Regiment (7th VDV Division) are operating against "superior" Ukrainian forces in the Zaporizhia direction without rotations or reinforcements.[50]



Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct operations on islands in the Dnipro River on September 25. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted active operations on islands in the Dnipro River delta and are attempting to land on the left (east) bank of the river.[51]

Russian opposition media outlet *Astra* reported on September 25 that Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev claimed that Russian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian missile near Sevastopol on September 23, but in reality, the missile actually hit the headquarters of the 758th Center for Black Sea Fleet Logistics and Technical Support.[52]



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

A report by Poland-based open-source intelligence organization Rochan Consulting found that Russia's Baltic Fleet has been substantially degraded due to the war in Ukraine. Rochan Consulting noted that the Baltic Sea Fleet has lost its ability to conduct large-scale amphibious offensive operations because its Ropucha-class landing ships and 336th Naval Infantry Brigade have been involved in combat in Ukraine.[53] The report stated that three of the Baltic Fleet's landing ships deployed to the Black Sea and are now unable to deploy back to their home ports in Baltiysk and that the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade has suffered extensive losses in combat in Ukraine, which substantially limits the Baltic Fleet's power projection capabilities in the Baltic.[54] ISW has previously observed the commitment of naval infantry assets of the Baltic, Pacific, and Northern Fleets to various axes in Ukraine, and the degradation of these elements is likely to further impede Russian naval capabilities in the Baltic, Arctic, and Pacific.[55]

<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)

Ukrainian partisan channel "Mariupol Sprotyv" reported on September 25 that Ukrainian partisans destroyed an electrical transformer installation near occupied Staryi Krym, Donetsk Oblast.[56]

Russian officials continue to deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration amplified a report on September 25 that the Russian Ministry of Culture sent 90 children from occupied Kherson Oblast to Moscow and St. Petersburg for an unspecified amount of time.[57] The Russian Ministry of Culture will reportedly send another group of children of an unspecified size to Russia from occupied Kherson Oblast in October.[58]

<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)

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on September 25 that territorial defense units in Mogilev Oblast held staff training and anti-sabotage and search exercises.[59] The Belarusian MoD announced that Belarusian territorial defense established a volunteer people's militia detachment in Vyazevsky, Osipovichy Raion, Mogilev Oblast.[60]

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.

^[1] https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid045TVTzqieDTXjcwsyzaMpzhzLxYTinYa EPwe5Wj2yQ6oz23B04qhSnwtaPMEywtFl

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[16] https://t.me/mod_russia/30795 ; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/98503 ; https://t.me/rybar/52338 ; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/53597 ; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/53626 ; https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/3378 ; https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/3420 ; https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/3388 ; https://t.me/milinfolive/107025

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[24] https://isw.pub/UkrWar040623; https://isw.pub/UkrWar071823

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